



Trapped with the Earl of Sin

Author: *Violet Hamers*

Category: Erotic, Romance, Historical

Description: "Careful, my lady, you don't want to see how dangerous a rake can be..."

With only two weeks until her sister's wedding, Susanna must ensure that this is indeed a love match. But the groom's best friend proves to be an irresistible distraction...

Earl Martin, the most insatiable rogue in London, cannot resist a challenge. So when a minx dares to insult him, he knows exactly how to put her in her place...

Only, the moment he tastes her lips, he starts craving for more. And now Martin will stop at nothing until he thoroughly corrupts her...

*If you like a realistic yet steamy depiction of the Regency and Victorian era, then *Trapped with the Earl of Sin* is the novel for you.

Total Pages (Source): 61

CHAPTER ONE

“Come on everyone, we must get a move on!”

The voice of Henry Creasey, the Marquess of Ryleigh, ricocheted through the house, making Susanna block her ears against all the chaos. The panic in Ryleigh House was overwhelming as her family prepared to depart for her sister’s much-anticipated wedding.

“Come on,” Henry continued. “We need to get to Standen Abbey now!”

“Wait, I do not think I have packed everything,” Mary yelled as the staff carried her trunks through the house to the carriage. “What about my hairbrush? Luke likes it when I have my hair long and wavy, which means I will need to brush it a lot.”

Susanna could not help but laugh at her sister’s insistence on being pretty for her fiancé, the Earl of Standen. “I am sure I have a hairbrush packed for you if you need to. You can always borrow mine.”

But she could quickly see that she could not get through to Mary. Her eyes had glazed over as the panic damn near consumed her whole. This shut up Susanna’s laughter. There was no way she was going to tease Mary in the midst of all of this. Her sister had to be really worried about getting wed after what happened before...

Susanna parted her lips, about to give Mary some words of wisdom—not that she had any words of wisdom to give—but nothing came out.

What could she say? How could she help Mary relax in the midst of all of this?

Mary passed by her “Mother, I am worried that I do not have everything that I need. Especially since the weather has been unpredictable recently. How can I be sure that I look absolutely perfect for my big day? I cannot risk anything going wrong.”

Susanna’s heart sank as she watched Mary exit the room. They could all get caught up in the excitement of going to stay at Standen Abbey, but there was always going to be a worry clinging to the air. A wedding for the Creasey family was always going to be problematic.

“Come on, Susanna,” her mother cried out. “It is time to leave. We must get going if we do not wish to be late.”

Susanna sucked in a sharp breath before she started walking. She knew that this visit was going to change her life forever, the lives of the whole family once Mary married, so she wanted just one more moment of everything being the same. But she could not wait here for too long. Standen Abbey awaited her.

The moment Susanna climbed into the carriage, and she spotted the nervous anticipation in her sister’s eyes, she reached out and held her hands to let Mary know that she was there for her, no matter what.

She might not be able to say the words out loud, not in front of their parents, but she wanted Mary to know that she would be her support. Whatever she needed, Susanna would do it.

Mary squeezed her hand to thank her, using the sort of silent communication that only sisters who had grown up close would be able to understand. Then the carriage started to rumble along the cobblestone drive, and they both knew that it was time. Time for all these changes to happen.

“The Abbey is beautiful,” Susanna declared excitedly as she ran her eyes all over the building in front of her. The red bricks seemed to jut royally into the sky, and the sides of the building seemed to stretch on forever. “Look at the gardens, they are beautiful, and I love the flowers.”

“It is beautiful,” Mary agreed. “I cannot wait to get inside and to see all of Standen Abbey. Luke has told me so much about it, I feel a little like I know it already. Oh, look, Luke and his family are waiting to greet us.”

“That is lovely,” Patricia agreed. “The Allen family must have very good manners. I am sure we will have a wonderful time staying with them.”

The carriage rolled to a stop in front of Standen Abbey, and the Creasey family began to disembark, greeted by a welcoming party from the Allen family.

“Welcome to Standen Abbey,” Luke said, his voice filled with genuine warmth. “We are so delighted to have you all here. This is my mother, Tabitha, Lady Standen.”

Henry smiled. “Well, my name is Henry, Lord Ryleigh, and this is my wife, Patricia. My daughters, Susanna and, of course, Mary.”

But Susanna held back a little, focusing on Luke to see how he reacted to Mary. His warm smile lit up his face. Susanna could see that he honestly did seem to have a deep care for her sister.

That was good.

That was a good start.

“We must show you to your rooms,” Tabitha said, “so you have time to refresh yourselves before dinner. We want you to get settled before you meet the other

people we already have staying here. My wonderful friend, Abigail Rayment, the Dowager Countess of St. Clair, and her son, Martin Rayment. I am sure you will love them.”

Susanna would be polite, but she had no interest in meeting other people. Her eyes would be on Luke the entire time. Did he know that? Was her sister's betrothed aware that he was going to be under scrutiny the entire time?

It was nothing personal. Susanna was not adamantly against him as a person because she did not know enough about him.

No, this was all for Mary's protection. For her sister's heart.

For now, though, she was looking forward to seeing her bedchambers while she was here. This estate was massive, there would be plenty of rooms for everyone to stay in, and she hoped that she would have a comfortable place to stay while she was here for the wedding.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

“Oh, Luke,” Mary declared as they headed inside. “It is wonderful to be here. Your home is even more beautiful than you described.”

Luke took her hands in his and kissed them gently. “I am glad you think so, Mary. I cannot wait to show you around.”

The hallway was adorned with elegant chandeliers, rich tapestries, and polished marble floors that echoed with their footsteps. It truly was the sort of home anyone would want to show off. But the Dowager Countess seemed surprisingly modest and sweet.

“This way, please,” Tabitha said, leading them up a sweeping staircase. “We have prepared our finest rooms for your stay.”

As they ascended the staircase, Susanna noticed the intricate woodwork on the banisters and the impressive portraits of ancestors that lined the walls.

This was a glimpse into Luke’s life and the future of Mary as well.

When they reached the second floor, Tabitha stopped in front of a pair of double doors. “Mary, this will be your room. We hope you find it to your liking.”

Mary stepped forward, her eyes wide with awe as she took in the spacious chamber. The room was beautifully furnished with a four-poster bed draped in rich fabrics, a vanity table, and large windows that offered a breathtaking view of the gardens below.

“It is perfect,” Mary said, her voice filled with genuine delight. “Thank you so much.”

Tabitha smiled warmly. “We’re glad you like it. And Susanna, your room is just next door.”

Susanna’s room was equally luxurious, with a similar view of the gardens and a cozy sitting area. The Allen family were very gracious hosts.

“Let us get ready for dinner,” Mary hissed to her excitedly as she slipped into her own room. “Then I will come for you.”

Susanna unpacked her belongings and hung them up before she picked a gown to wear to dinner. She decided on a royal blue gown that she had always been told brought out the color of her eyes, and she ran a brush through her long dark hair in preparation for what was to come.

Susanna took a deep breath as she admired her reflection in the mirror. Not that she was massively concerned with how she looked. She knew that she just needed strength to care for Mary.

Seeing her smile again was magnificent. Something that seemed impossible not so long ago, and Susanna desperately hoped that she stayed that happy.

A gentle knock on the door interrupted her thoughts. “Susanna, are you ready?” Mary’s voice called softly from the other side.

“Yes, coming!” Susanna replied, giving herself one last glance before opening the door.

Mary stood there, looking radiant in a soft pink gown that complemented her

complexion perfectly. Her hair was styled in loose waves, and a sense of calm had settled over her. She smiled warmly at Susanna. “You look beautiful.”

“As do you,” Susanna said, taking her sister’s hand. “Shall we go?”

Mary linked her arm with Susanna’s as they made their way to the grand staircase.

“Are you nervous about our first dinner here?” Susanna asked.

“Oh no.” Mary chuckled and shook her head. “The family has been so kind to me so far. I think it is going to be a lot of fun staying here.”

“And planning your wedding too.”

Mary let out a little squeal of excitement. “Lady Standen is very excited about the wedding. As long as the weather stays nice, we can pick a day for it and start planning.”

Susanna’s pulse pounded.

So far, everything seemed utterly wonderful, but she could not shake off the worry that things might go wrong. Just as they had done last time Mary was engaged.

But of course, she did not say that aloud. “I am sure it will be beautiful.”

Once they reached the dining table, it seemed like everyone was already waiting for them. Nerves started to zig-zag through Susanna as she spotted the other guests staying at Standen Abbey in preparation for the wedding.

“How lovely to have you,” Tabitha declared with a warm smile. “As you can see, we have some other guests here. Allow me to introduce you to Martin Rayment, the Earl

of St. Clair, and his mother Abigail Rayment, the Dowager Countess of St. Clair.”

“Nice to meet you,” Mary said giddily. “I am Lady Mary Creasey, and this is my sister Susanna.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

Susanna forced a smile on her face and tried to greet these people with the same enthusiasm as her sister, but it was as if her breath had caught in her throat and she could not utter a single word.

“Good evening, Lady Mary, Lady Susanna,” Abigail replied with a warm and inviting smile. “How lovely it is to meet you at last.”

Luckily, as they took their seats, Mary continued to talk, keeping the conversation flowing with Abigail, because Susanna needed a little while longer to take all of this in.

Although, strangely, she mostly found herself looking at the man she was sitting across from at the table. Martin Rayment.

He was taller, with a cheeky smile that made his dimples pop. She was also intrigued by his hazel eyes. Susanna had never seen eyes that color before, nor had she ever been in the presence of this man, despite all the Society events that she was forced to attend.

How had she never met him before?

Who on earth was he?

“Nice to meet you,” Martin declared smilingly. “I am sure you are thoroughly excited to see your sister get married. It will be a lot of fun.”

“Fun?” Susanna furrowed her brow, confused by this statement.

“Oh yes. Weddings are always glorious events.”

Susanna did not know what to say to that. She had never been to a wedding before. She did not like being made to look like a fool, which seemed what Martin wanted to do to her for reasons she could not understand.

They did not know one another, so why would he want to make her blush so brightly?

“Well, I am sure it will be lovely,” she replied with a one-shouldered shrug, trying to end this conversation before she felt even more foolish.

Martin narrowed his eyes on Susanna, which made her very uncomfortable, but in a strange way. In a way she oddly did not mind. The way that his eyes studied her while the rest of the table continued to talk happily, all having fun and getting along well, was unusually exciting.

“You do not seem like you are the most thrilled. Are you one of those women who do not like marriage?”

Susanna clutched her hand to her chest in shock and horror. “I am not against marriage. I am not saying anything like that...”

“But youaresaying something,” he teased. “And I am interested to know what.”

A heat burned in Susanna’s cheeks, and it made it even more humiliating that she knew Martin could see it. He wasnotthe sort of distraction that she needed while staying at Standen Abbey. Not when she had to examine Luke, to check that he was right for her sister. She did not have time for teasing and banter, she did not have time for a man like Martin, she had a very important job to do.

“I am saying nothing,” she shot back. “You do not know what you are talking about.”

But that only made Martin laugh. He seemed to see right through her in ways she was not ready for. As he leaned back in his seat, still looking at her, Susanna realized that he was going to be an issue that she had not planned for. Especially if he kept challenging everything that she said.

What on earth was she going to do?

“I see. And do you always say nothing?” he demanded. “Because I have met plenty of well-bred ladies who like to say nothing...”

He was trying to get a reaction out of her, Susanna was certain of that. It was almost as if he needed her to be his entertainment.

She did not wish to entertain any man, much less one she did not know. Yet, she could not stop herself from biting back.

It was as if had affected her in ways that she had not expected, and on their first meeting at that.

“Well, perhaps you have not met the right well-bred ladies, then,” Susanna retorted, lifting her chin defiantly. “I assure you, some of us have quite a lot to say.”

Martin’s eyes sparkled with amusement. “Ah, a lady with spirit. How refreshing.”

Susanna’s cheeks burned even hotter, but she refused to back down. “I am here to support my sister, Lord St. Clair. This is a significant event for her, and I intend to ensure everything goes smoothly. The wedding might be fun to you, but I am here to ensure she is alright at all times.”

He did not need to know the details of what had happened to Mary before, Susanna did not care if he simply assumed that she was overprotective.

Right now, she just needed him to back off.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

“I’m sure you will,” Martin declared with a smile that reached his eyes. “I cannot imagine anything going wrong under your watchful gaze. I shall have to warn my best friend that you are on the case.”

Susanna glanced over at Luke, who of course was staring at Mary with the right amount of adoration. But Susanna was not willing to let him off the hook just yet.

“I simply want to be sure that he is going to treat my sister well.”

Martin leaned in a little closer, still looking like he wanted to tease Susanna. “And I need to ensure that your sister treats my friend well.”

She was not sure how she did it, but Susanna just about managed to resist the urge to roll her eyes.

“My sister is just lovely, thank you very much.”

“I could say the same about Luke.”

For a moment, Susanna almost burst out laughing as they stared at one another. It seemed like they had come to a strange impasse.

This was not what she was expecting when she sat down to dinner tonight. She thought it would be a lovely, gracious affair with Lady Standen and her guests.

Little did she know that this man was going to be one of the guests.

Susanna smirked and jutted her chin confidently. “Well, I have to admit, my lord, that I am not too sure if you have a judgment that I can trust. I will have to keep an eye on Lord Standen myself.”

As Martin cocked an eyebrow, Susanna found her pulse racing, and she was not too sure why. It was something about the way that he looked at her. It was as if he could see the parts of her that she did not want anyone to see.

“Well then, I will have to keep a similar eye on your sister,” he shot back, knowingly antagonizing her. “Because I might not be able to trust you.”

Could anyone sense the burning tension between the two of them? It seemed to be radiating from Susanna, so it was a surprise that no one else seemed to be glaring at them.

Even Mary was not shooting her a worried look, thinking that she was about to ruin everything for her.

It seemed to be a strange, invisible thing that only they could see.

As Susanna met Martin’s eyes once more, she found herself staring at her nemesis. She was not sure why he had become this, but he had.

He made the first move to wind her up, and now he would have to face the consequences of that. Susanna was not an opponent to be messed with, and he would soon see that he should not have started this.

Whatever this was.

CHAPTER TWO

What is it about her?

Martin could not quite put his finger on what had him so intrigued by Lady Susanna Creasey, but he had not been able to keep his eyes off of her during dinner, and he found himself in the same position at the breakfast table as well. Whenever she was in the room with him, he could not seem to really see anyone else.

Unfortunately, it seemed that she was not looking his way.

Had he really done something to offend her last night?

He was teasing her, just as she was him. But now he felt a little bad as it hit him that he might have taken it a step too far. She seemed to enjoy the joking, but what if his instincts were off?

He had to find out.

“How are you feeling today, Lady Susanna?” he asked smilingly. He already knew that he was going to do whatever it took to get her attention.

“I am quite well, thank you very much.”

Was she always this proper? Martin had a feeling that there was so much more to Susanna that he just needed to break down her walls. Perhaps it was the way that she carried herself, and the fact that he was convinced she was hiding so much of herself, that had him so intrigued.

“That is good to hear. Are you comfortable at Standen Abbey?”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

She shot him a surprised glance. “Yes, it is quite lovely. I did not know that you were the host.”

Luckily, it seemed that everyone else was so intrigued by their own conversations that no one could hear her barbs.

“Well, Luke is my best friend and a wonderful man, as I am sure you have seen by now. But he is very wrapped up in your sister and his upcoming marriage, so I am simply checking on his behalf.”

Susanna glanced over at her sister, and Martin followed her gaze. There was no way of getting either of their attention right now, they truly were wrapped up in one another, displaying their love.

Since Martin thought it was utter madness for his friend, Luke, to get married, risking his heart and his livelihood, it was fun to have a distraction in the form of someone else. After all, he could not just tell Luke that he was about to make a fool of himself, so it was a good idea to concentrate on someone else.

“Well, you can tell Lord Standen that I am having a lovely time, thank you.”

Her icy shoulder made Martin smile. It was like she was challenging him, and he did not mind rising to the challenge.

“I am also having a nice stay.” Martin chuckled. “Thank you for asking.”

“Well, you are the one talking on behalf of the host, are you not?” Susanna cocked a

knowing eyebrow. “So it is not necessary for me to ask you.”

Martin leaned back in his chair and smirked. “You do not seem to have much time for me, Lady Susanna. Pray tell, have I done something to offend you?”

“Oh, you do not need to worry, Lord St. Clair, I do not think enough about you to have an opinion either way.”

Ooh, that was meant to sting, but Martin enjoyed it. She was giving him what she was giving him. It was fun. Ladies did not normally act this way. Especially when they came across as proper at first glance.

“That might be because we have not spent anywhere near enough time together. We could always change that.”

Susanna’s eyebrows rose in horror. “Oh, I do not think that is necessary.”

“Well, we are going to be spending a lot more time together, during all the wedding planning, and during the big day.”

“The way you talk about the wedding...” Susanna commented. “It is almost as if you do not think it is a good idea. Is it my sister that you do not like?”

Ooh, now that was a joke that Martin would not jump on. He sensed how protective Susanna was of Mary. She would not talk about this as a bit of fun.

“I think Mary is lovely.”

“But not good enough for your friend?”

“Well, you are keeping an eye on Luke, are you not?”

“Yes,” she agreed. “But that is not because I would ever assume him not to be good enough. I just want to be certain that Mary will have a nice life. Is that not what you want for Luke as well? To be married and happy?”

Martin decided to be honest here before Susanna truly got the wrong idea. “I do not think it is a good idea for anyone to get married. I cannot see any reason to get married at all. It is a waste of time.”

“Love?” Susanna gasped, stunned by his words. “Many people get married for love.”

Martin grinned, loving the debate. “Are you going to get married for love? When are you planning to do that?”

As she fell silent, Martin sensed that she might share some of his opinions. She simply did not want to let it out because it was not the right thing to do.

That only made Martin even more determined to find out the truth about her, to get her to admit how she really felt about everything.

“I have never seen any evidence of true love, so I cannot say I believe in it,” he said with a one-shouldered shrug. “Maybe this wedding will change my mind.”

Susanna glowered. “Do you know how jaded you sound when you say that? I do not think I can have a conversation with a man so against love when he is faced with it himself.”

“Yet, here you are, talking with me.”

As he laughed, he saw Susanna wrestle with herself. It seemed like she wanted to join in his laughter, but she refused to give him the satisfaction. Which, of course, only satisfied Martin more.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

“Perhaps I am trying to see if there is any intelligence in there,” she shot back.

“And what are your conclusions? Have you decided yet?”

She smirked at him. “I am still trying to work it out.”

“Well, we are going to be here for a while. I am happy for you to spend all the time you want working it through.”

Susanna shook her head like she could not quite believe Martin. But he could not help spotting the small smile playing on her lips. He knew now for sure that she enjoyed this game just as much as he did, even if she did not want to admit it to herself.

But they were going to have fun here, she would soon see that too.

Martin’s mother had seamlessly walked him into the drawing room after breakfast, where everyone was engaged in wedding plans. This was not particularly where Martin wanted to be, but the challenging, beautiful Lady Susanna was in the room, so he stayed just to watch her and try to figure out what he could do to get a reaction out of her again...

“So, what do you think?” Luke demanded, reminding Martin that there were in fact other people in the drawing room. Not just him and Susanna over the other side of the room. “Shall we have morning tea now that breakfast is over? Me and you, Mary and her sister, Susanna? I would like to get to know Mary and her family better.”

Martin’s heart skipped a beat. It appeared that Luke really had not heard his

conversation with Susanna. “Yes, that sounds like a great plan.”

He would much prefer to be in a room with just the younger people because the conversation could flow much more freely there. Also it would give him a chance to tease Susanna some more instead. Chatting to her at the dinner table had been the most fun he’d had at Standen Abbey thus far.

“I would like you to spend more time with Mary as well,” Luke continued. “So you can get to know her before everyone else arrives. I really do want to hear your opinion on my bride-to-be. Although I am sure you are going to love her because she is wonderful. I just want you to really see her before the house is packed out.”

Martin felt his stomach sink. The more people arrived at the house, the less fun this was going to be.

“Yes, let us do it now. I will go to the parlor and ensure we have some tea prepared.”

Luke nodded and headed off to find his future wife. As Martin backed out of the room, he caught sight of his mother eyeing him inquisitively.

“Where are you going?” she asked him curiously.

“I am going to spend time with Luke.”

“And his bride-to-be as well?”

“And her sister,” Martin admitted, hoping this would not lead to the typical conversation with her about his own future.

“I see... well, Lady Susanna seems like a very lovely lady. Now that Luke is getting married, I am sure you are thinking about your own future.”

“Oh, no,” he shot back rapidly. “I am not thinking about anything...”

“Well, you know I want you to be happy, and it would be lovely to have grandchildren.”

She did not seem to understand that Martin did not want that for himself. Every time he tried to express as much, she continued pestering him until Martin had to end the conversation abruptly. She did not seem to believe that he could be happy any other way. And yet Martin had no intention of another tiring discussion about an heir with his mother.

Martin had been happy for years. He was content to engage in short-term flings with women who did not want any commitment from him.

That was easy. No complications. Just pleasure.

“I know you would like that, but I will not talk about it now, I am expected in the parlor.”

He headed towards the parlor without giving the dowager any chance to reply. He was not going to get dragged into anything he did not want, just because she had caught wedding fever.

“So, who did you say is arriving today, Luke? There are so many new faces...”

Martin heard the voices drifting down the hallway, which suggested that everyone else was about to join him. He took a seat and smiled as he prepared himself for them to come. This was going to be his chance to get to know Mary, to ensure that everything was right.

But of course, his eyes could hardly stay on Mary when her sister entered the room

behind her. From the very first moment he had been introduced to Susanna, he had been constantly drawn towards her like there was an intense magnetic pull there.

But again, she did not meet his eyes.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

“Mary, have you met my best friend, Lord St. Clair, yet?”

“Oh, I think so,” Mary replied with a girlish giggle. “I was introduced to a few people last night. But it is nice to meet you again.”

“Yes, you too,” Martin replied, trying his hardest to take his eyes off Susanna for just a moment. “I am looking forward to getting to know you better.”

“And this is Lady Susanna, Mary’s sister.”

Martin’s smile widened. “Yes, I remember. Good to see you again, my lady.”

Everyone sat down as the maids brought in the tea for everyone. Luke thanked the staff profusely, which made Mary smile with sheer joy. It was nice to see the way that she looked at his friend, like he was special to her and the love of her life.

It was a little sickeningly sweet, he supposed.

“How has your morning been?” Susanna asked as they sipped their tea. “My lord?”

Luke furrowed his brow as he looked between Martin and Susanna, clearly having no idea what was going on.

But Martin knew. She was getting revenge for his comments at breakfast.

“I have had a lovely morning, thank you very much,” Martin replied with a smile. “I had an enlightening breakfast, before my mother dragged me into a conversation

about wedding planning.”

“I am sure she thought that you had a lot to bring to the conversation for a man who does not believe in love.”

Luke gasped in shock. “You told Lady Susanna that you do not believe in love? How could you say that on my wedding weekend?”

“I think my comments have been taken out of context,” Martin said, trying to reassure his panicked friend, but it seemed that Susanna had it out for him.

She smirked as she cocked her head to one side. “Oh, I do apologize. I never meant to take your comments out of context, please explain.”

Mary laughed a little too loudly, trying to draw attention back to her. “I do not think anyone needs to explain anything. I am sure it was meant as a joke.”

Martin saw her give Susanna a warning look. It seemed like they were going to have to curtail their banter for a while.

It was a shame, but Martin respected the bride. He did not want to upset her.

“Anyway, there is a lot that we need to talk about when it comes to the wedding,” Mary continued happily. “Because I am sure we will have good enough weather for our ceremony to take place very soon, and I am excited about it. I cannot wait to wear my dress.”

“Everyone is going to love your dress,” Susanna reassured her, clearly feeling guilty over the banter as well. “You will be the most beautiful bride anyone has ever seen.”

Her protective nature came flying out again.

Martin did not have a sibling, so he was not sure where this came from, but he found it incredibly interesting. It was another layer of Susanna that he wanted to unravel.

“I cannot wait to see you in your dress,” Luke agreed with a love-struck smile. Honestly, it was unnerving for Martin. He had never seen his friend so entranced by anyone before. “I am sure you will be radiant. My mother is excited as well. She is looking forward to seeing my bride.”

“My mother too,” Martin shot back dryly. “But we all know how she loves weddings.”

“Your mother seems very lovely, my lord,” Susanna declared, jumping on Martin’s throwaway comment, in a pointed tone as they all sipped their tea. “I actually just had a very lovely intellectual talk with her.”

“Oh, I am sure she thinks the same about you., my lady.”

She certainly seemed to thrive on sniping back at him, which was what kept him going. The next statement that came out of her mouth certainly suggested as much.

She rose to the challenge easily, jutting her chin confidently. “I have always found it strange how such wonderful women can have terrible children.”

Luke sucked in a sharp breath, but Martin chuckled. “Oh, I know,” he agreed. “It is rather curious, I have always thought the same thing.”

He was not offended. He knew that Susanna only said these things to get under his skin, and he would not let that happen. This was exactly what he wanted to happen, as soon as Luke mentioned the conversation over tea.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

“Perhaps it is hereditary from your father,” Susanna responded darkly, her eyes twinkling. “Was he a highwayman?”

“Yes, that would be an interesting study to complete,” Martin jumped back in. “I wonder if any scientist would ever partake in it.”

Susanna parted her lips, about to fire back some other retort, but she did not get a chance to say a word.

“So, for the wedding,” Mary cut in, looking like she desperately wanted to keep the conversation running smoothly. “I am thinking about carnations for the flowers.”

It was very funny, especially because he could feel Susanna’s eyes burning through him even as they discussed flowers and dresses. Much as she was the one who wanted to get under his skin, it seemed like she was the irritated one. How funny. It was honestly a little challenging for Martin to hold back his laughter.

Their eyes kept meeting while Mary and Luke talked, and Martin could not ignore the fizzle of excitement coursing through his body.

He wanted to continue their chat for as long as he possibly could. He did not want to leave this parlor because it was the most fun he’d had in a very long time. This afternoon tea could last as long as possible, as far as he was concerned. He was happy to not leave this room all afternoon if possible.

Unfortunately, that was not possible. Before Martin could even find the words to spark up his conversation with Susanna again, a footman entered the room, speaking

directly to Luke.

“My lord, more of your guests have arrived.”

“Ah,” Luke replied with a smile. “Wonderful. Come on, let us go and greet them.”

Martin was not in the mood to talk with others, but he would do it for his friend.

He was even more disappointed when he spotted who had actually arrived, because this was not someone he got along with well.

“Lord Edwin Allen,” he muttered to himself, unimpressed.

“Cousin, it is so good to see you.” Edwin embraced Luke enthusiastically. All Martin could hear was the insincerity in his tone. “And for your wedding as well. How thrilling!”

It was honestly always surprising to Martin to recall that Luke and Edwin were cousins. They could not have been more different if they tried. Luke was always genuine and kindhearted.

Edwin... was not.

Martin was yet to find a quality in him that he enjoyed. He could not exactly pinpoint what he did not like about Edwin, but the distaste was definitely there. It always had been.

“Lady Mary Creasey, how wonderful it is to see you too.”

From the back of the crowd, Martin could not help but notice that Edwin seemed very keen to greet Mary and to try and talk with her, but she seemed colder.

Not the way he had seen her be with Luke at all.

“Yes,” she replied awkwardly. “Thank you for coming.”

“And Lady Susanna. Always a delight.”

Susanna was much less subtle with her distaste. She shook Edwin’s hand and curtsied to him, but she also had an iciness about her.

She seemed relieved as Edwin stepped to the side to talk with everyone’s mother. He had a way of charming the older ladies, which was likely why he was always around.

And now they had to suffer the whole week with him in the build-up to the wedding.

Martin suddenly sensed eyes upon him, and he turned to see Susanna eyeing him. It seemed like she had picked up on his unimpressed expression as well.

They might not have outwardly agreed on a lot of things, but it seemed like a distaste for Edwin was potentially something that they could bond over...

Interesting.

CHAPTER THREE

“Everyone has been so wonderful,” Susanna commented happily to Mary as they walked through the hallways of the house. “So kind and welcoming. It really is building up to be a wonderful wedding.”

“I am so grateful that you are getting along with everyone,” Mary declared with a smile. “Lady Standen, in particular, has been kind.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

“I am even finding it impossible not to warm up to Luke. He really does seem to be a truly great match for you.”

Mary blushed. “I just knew that you would like him. He really is lovely, I cannot wait to marry him and spend the rest of my life with him. What do you think of his friend?”

“Lord St. Clair?” Susanna glowered. “He is the only person I do not like as much as the others.”

“Really?” Mary seemed surprised. “I thought he was a lot of fun. What is it about him that you do not like?”

“He is... rude,” Susanna finally declared, deciding on the right word for him. “It does not matter what I say, he is always challenging it.”

“Do you not think that he is just joking around with you and having fun?” Mary asked. “That is how it seems to me.”

Sometimes it did feel a little like that, but deep down, Susanna was sure that Martin simply did not like her at all.

“I am not too sure about that...”

“You must come with me anyway,” Mary said decisively. “We are going for a walk in the gardens.”

“We are?” Susanna did not mind, but she had to admit this had come as a bit of a surprise. “Any reason?”

“Do not look behind you,” Mary continued through gritted teeth. “But Edwin is behind us. He has been following us for a little while now—he is always trying to get me to go for a walk with him. He does not even seem to care that I am about to marry his cousin. He is still determined to continue his pursuit, it seems. I do not think anything will ever stop him. Even months of rejection...”

Susanna pursed her lips angrily. “I cannot believe that he is here. I did not know that Edwin was related to Luke.”

“Me neither,” Mary hissed back. “And I cannot seem to avoid him wherever I go. That loud, distinctive voice of his seems to follow me everywhere. I have never met a man like him before. One that simply cannot take no for an answer. I honestly wish that I had never turned to him for help in the first place back then. But I really did think that he wanted to assist me in getting answers...”

“Do not fret sister, you were only trying to find out more about your late betrothed. And he was the only one who could help you in your grief.”

It was not until they were out in the sunshine that Susanna finally risked looking over her shoulder. Much to her relief, there was no sign of them being followed by anyone. With a bit of luck, as soon as Mary had grabbed her arm, Edwin had backed off.

Not that he was one to take a well-executed hint. Susanna had seen him ignore many clear messages that were designed just for him. Lord Edwin only seemed to see what he wanted to see.

If only he could leave.

Everything would be so much easier if he was not here.

“I think we are safe now,” Susanna whispered. “But I suggest we take a good long walk anyway.” She liked the idea of having a moment alone with her sister, so she could check in on Mary again and change the subject before her sister worried about Edwin and his intentions. “So, how are the wedding plans coming along?”

With Mary and Luke’s mothers so heavily involved with wedding planning, and Martin’s mother offering her assistance as well, there was not much need for Susanna to help out. She thought it more important to keep an eye on the bride anyway.

“I think everything is going to be quite lovely,” Mary declared excitedly. “I cannot wait. I am sure you can see why I have fallen for Luke now—he is quite the gentleman. I might not have planned on falling for him, but he made it impossible not to.”

“Yes, I can see why,” Susanna replied cautiously.

Much as she truly did like Luke, she still worried for her sister. It absolutely terrified her to imagine her sister’s heart being broken again. Susanna did not think that Mary would be able to survive another heartbreak. But she could not say any of that, not without raining on Mary’s parade.

“I am sure he is looking forward to being your husband as well.”

“I keep thinking about our children, and what they will look like.” Mary giggled. “Is that a little wild?”

Susanna resisted the urge to recoil. She had never considered what her children might look like, but then again, she was not in love and about to get married. Perhaps that changed things.

Not that she would ever find out.

Susanna was still staunch in her plan not to fall in love after what happened to her sister. Even seeing Mary now with Luke had not changed her mind.

But again, it was not appropriate for her to say as much to a very loved-up Mary.

“I am sure it is very normal, considering you will be married soon,” she declared instead. “I am certain that most brides spend a lot of time thinking about their wedding night...”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

Mary looked like she had a few questions to ask about that topic, but Susanna was grateful when they were distracted. There was no chance she would be able to answer any of those questions. She had absolutely no idea. The only advice that Susanna would be able to offer her was stories that she had heard, and there was no telling what was accurate and what was not.

If Mary wanted some advice, she was going to have to go to someone else.

“Oh, look!” Mary suddenly declared with a lightness to her voice. “Luke is coming back from a horse ride. And he is not alone.”

Martin.

Susanna’s heart sank.

She had wanted to spend time with her sister, not her nemesis. She had been doing everything that she could to avoid Martin, but Mary was already making her way over to her husband-to-be.

“Luke, how are you, my dear?”

Because she did not wish to be rude, Susanna followed Mary, but every step was begrudging and heavy. If anyone was paying any attention, they would have been able to see the disdain in her eyes.

“We will come with you,” Mary called out happily, “to the stables while you drop off the horses. Then perhaps we can go for a walk.”

Much as this was a little better than having Edwin continue to follow her, Susanna was not keen on the walk either. But she was stuck, there was nothing that she could do.

Susanna forced a smile as she approached the stables with Mary. She could see the joy in her sister's eyes as she greeted Luke, who dismounted his horse with effortless grace.

Martin, following closely behind, gave Susanna a nod of acknowledgment that she returned with a curt nod herself.

"Mary, you look radiant," Luke said warmly, his eyes sparkling with genuine affection. "I hope your day has been pleasant."

"It has been lovely," Mary replied, glancing at Susanna with a smile. "We were just taking a walk to enjoy the gardens. You really do have the most wonderful home, Luke. There is always so much beauty to look at, no matter where I go."

"Wonderful," Luke said smilingly. "Then we must join you for your walk. That sounds lovely."

He took Mary's arm and instantly started on their journey, which of course left Susanna and Martin walking slightly away from the couple, to one side, a little awkwardly left with only one another's company.

"Are you enjoying the sunshine?" Martin asked in his typical teasing tone, which always left Susanna on edge, wondering what he was not saying. "It is a lovely day."

Why is it that even the simplest comment from him is enough to infuriate me?

"Yes, the weather today reminds me of the heath of Highbury."

She waited with bated breath to see if he would understand what she was referring to.

“Ah, so you enjoy the works of A Lady also?” Martin responded, proving that he knew exactly what Susanna was talking about. “And Emmanonetheless. I did not peg you as a reader of quality novels. Although I have to admit, I have always preferred Mansfield Park.”

“Is Emma too much of a strong character for you?” Susanna shot back, having heard that comment from men before. “You prefer the meeker Fanny Price?”

“Now you have gotten me all wrong,” Martin insisted, with his hand to his chest in mock horror. “I am not like that at all. I merely prefer the setting and description of Mansfield Park, that is all. It has nothing to do with the strength of character.”

But Susanna was not sure that she believed him one bit. “I am surprised you are not more of a Gulliver’s Travels reader. All men enjoy the novels by Jonathan Swift, right? I can only imagine that you have a lot to say about that work.”

“Oh, but my dear Lady Susanna, you must have noticed that I’m not like other men.” He smirked at her and she felt her cheeks flush.

The nerve of this man.

“I definitely have, My Lord. But I wouldn’t be so quick to take it as a compliment.”

“Being different is better than being like everyone else. Even if it’s in a bad way. I expect you, more than anyone, to agree with that.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?” Susanna was willing to pay any price just to see his confidence crumble. But every time she tried, all she managed was to feel even more irritated.

But before she had time to form a better retort, they both seemed to realize that within the heat of the conversation, they must have wandered away from Mary and Luke without noticing it. Although it was clear that the betrothed couple had not noticed either.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

Susanna and Martin had wandered close to the house and silently seemed to make the mutual decision that they would continue to walk until they reached the front door to the manor, where they would head inside and wait for Mary and Luke to return.

At least, Susanna assumed that was the plan, but before she could get much further, Martin held his arm out to halt her in her tracks.

Because Susanna was not expecting this, she lost her footing and tripped forward, falling against his arm a little too hard, knocking the air right out of her lungs.

But somehow, Martin was prepared, and he snapped into action. It was almost as if he expected this to happen. He enveloped her in a tight embrace and pulled her upright, pressing her close to him while she caught her breath once more.

It was only when Susanna glanced upright to perhaps call him out on his actions, because it was his strange behavior that had made her fall, that she realized just how close they were.

They were so near to one another, their faces almost touching, which knocked the air right out of her lungs.

“You should be more careful, My Lady. You wouldn’t want me to think that you did this on purpose, now, would you?”

Susanna forgot all the arguments that she was about to make because all she could see was him. His beautiful hazel eyes and all the emotions dancing on the flames of his gaze.

The heat that always surged between them seemed to intensify. It was so powerful that it actually left Susanna weak in the knees, and it most certainly did not help that Martin's eyes appeared to darken with desire as well.

"No," was all she managed to utter.

The passion that always made her argue with him seemed to become something new as she became acutely aware of his fingers brushing against her skin and his breath tickling her face.

Never had Susanna been so self-aware. Never has she been flooded by fizzling tingles like this. She truly did not know what to do with herself.

It was as if the rest of the world had simply vanished, and she and Martin were the only ones left in it. She could only see him, only feel him, and despite herself, she could not resist the magnetic pull that seemed to be drawing her closer to him.

I should tell him to let me go.

With her heart thundering against her ribcage, Susanna's eyes fluttered half closed as if she were about to kiss him. Her very first kiss, which she was supposed to save for her non-existent wedding day, was about to happen right here in front of Luke's home.

Talk you fool!

But before she could bring herself back to reality, Martin pulled her closer to him, taking her breath away, only to put her back on her feet a moment later. She shivered from the lack of his touch. But Martin didn't step away from her. He was still standing an inch away, just to torture her.

“Aren’t you thankful, Susanna?”

She could feel the rest of their party coming closer. Yet their voices were not enough to pull her out of her trance. All she could process was the unforgettable feeling of his firm chest pressed on her and the hand that felt like an iron grip around her waist.

“Th-Thank you, My Lord.” She whispered, breathlessly and she felt her knees weaken.

“Such a good girl.” He whispered.

And that was all she needed to snap back into reality. What had she just said? What had just happened to her? This man was dangerous. She felt her fury rising and her cheeks heating up.

“What do you think...” Susana’s attention was forcefully pulled away from the man standing in front of her when she heard voices close by. All she could hear was a snippet of conversation without seeing clearly who was talking.

“I hope this time, Lady Mary has better luck than her last betrothal.”

“Maybe it was not luck.” Susanna thought that she was already angry from the first comment. Until she recognized the person talking next.

Edwin!

“Maybe it’s deserved punishment.” Edwin finished his statement and Susanna felt a shiver run down her spine. Her bizarre interaction with Martin only minutes before, almost forgotten.

Poor Mary had been through so much that she most certainly did not need to go

through anything else. So she dismissed all the cutting retorts she had for the earl and only threw a glare in his way before looking around for her sister.

Edwin knew what Mary had been through as well. How could he be so cruel?

Then again, Susanna knew that this was a cruel man because of the way he had hung around their home ever since Duncan died, offering his assistance but doing nothing.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

By the time Mary realized what Edwin's true intentions were, he had already wasted far too much of her time.

Would he never let her go?

Susanna caught Martin's eyes, and he seemed to sense her discomfort. She needed to get out of there before Martin or, even worse, Edwin infuriated her further.

So the duke's company is better than Edwin now?

She needed to escape this earl's powerful presence. He was a distraction while she needed to focus on her sister. She needed to make sure that Mary would be happy. There was no way to be sure that she could control herself and behave like a lady was supposed to if someone was being nasty about her sister.

Especially if it was Edwin of all people.

Deserved punishment.

Those words continued to rattle around in her brain as they backed off as quietly as they could, trying not to make a sound that would alert anyone to their presence.

Deserved punishment.

What did that mean?

Duncan was brutally murdered. He suffered a lot in death. While Susanna did not

have all the details, that much she was aware of.

Edwin had told her family that Duncan owed money and was involved with bad people, which had led to his death. Was that his ‘deserved punishment?’

But Susanna was never fully convinced by those stories. Especially because there was never any evidence that Duncan had ever gotten involved with gambling.

No one seemed to be able to prove that.

Susanna might not have known Duncan for a long time, but she had never seen any reason why he would deserve to die. No one else had ever had a bad word to say about him either, which only made this statement a lot harder to process.

It did not matter how many times these words ran through Susanna’s mind, she did not know what to do with them. She did not know what to say.

“We should head back now.”

“But, my sister...” Susanna felt a hand on her waist guiding her towards the estate. The opposite direction from where she should be heading.

“She is with her future husband. You have nothing to fear. I will escort you back.”

And no matter how many times she protested, Martin’s hand stayed firmly on her waist.

CHAPTER FOUR

What the hell just happened?

Martin was in shock as he and Susanna backed away from the strange conversation happening just around the corner from them. Just a few minutes ago, all he could think about was Lady Susanna's seductive lips and the desperate need to taste them. Until the moment was ruined by none other than the man he despised. He had no idea what Edwin and his friend were talking about, but it had sickened him to his stomach. No wonder Mary reacted like he did when he arrived. She obviously saw right through him as well.

He had nastiness in his heart. A strange unpleasantness that affected his deep black soul.

"What did Edwin mean back there?" he asked curiously, needing the blanks filled in. "Do you know what he meant?"

Susanna glanced his way, looking at little glassy-eyed as if she had forgotten that he was seated right beside her. She swallowed hard before she gave him a response.

"My sister has been engaged before..."

"She has?"

Luke had not told Martin this. It left him a little uneasy. What had happened? How could Luke trust that this wedding was going to happen when another one had failed?

Martin's senses sharpened with irritation.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

“Yes,” Susanna whispered. “To Lord Duncan Thompson. She met him in one of her early Seasons, and they got along very well. It seemed to be an absolutely perfect match. Everyone was very happy.”

This caused Martin’s hackles to rise. He had been a little concerned that Luke was about to get his heart broken by Mary, but he had all but pushed those worries aside because she seemed to care for him just as much as he did her. But this statement put him back on edge all over again.

“Why did that not work out?” he asked thickly, unsure if he even wanted to know the details.

“Duncan was involved in a terribly unfortunate incident a week before their wedding.”

“Incident?” This was getting stranger by the moment, especially as Susanna sadly hung her head.

“He was actually murdered, just outside of his home.”

Martin sucked in a shocked breath.

Murdered?

Was that what Edwin meant when he said, “Maybe it is not luck, but deserved punishment.”

That truly sent an unwelcome chill down his spine.

“We do not know what happened. Even to this day,” Susanna continued. “Of course, the rumor mill has run rampant. Many things have been said, but most of them I know to be untrue.”

“So... do you have a theory as to what happened?”

Martin felt truly terrible even asking this, but he absolutely needed to have all the details he could get about this story before he processed it properly.

Did Luke know about this? Why had it never been discussed?

Susanna offered him a helpless one-shouldered shrug. “I cannot be sure. But I do know that Duncan was not involved in anything nefarious. I suppose the only assumption I can make is that bandits attacked him. Perhaps it was a robbery gone wrong or Duncan saw something that he should not have seen. But I do not have any evidence of that, and I guess I never will.”

Martin was starting to see everything through a new lens now. His heart bled a little for Mary. That had to be a horrible experience to go through, so actually it was very brave for her to be here, trying out love once more.

And if there was anyone in the world who could help her recover from heartache, it was Luke. His kind heart would go a long way to ensuring she had a happy life from here on out.

“And why do you think Edwin was talking about that?” Martin practically whispered because he was not too sure that he wanted the answer. “Just the gossip?”

Susanna scrunched up her face for a moment, showing her disgust before she

responded. “Edwin has actually been trying to court my sister for a very long time, but she has never shown any interest in him whatsoever. He does not seem to know how to accept rejection.”

“He has?”

Susanna nodded. “Yes, and he made that very obvious when Duncan, who was his closest friend, passed away. He offered to ‘help’ her, but was actually just using the time to make her fall in love with him...”

“Martin, there you are!” Before Martin could ask the hundreds of questions that were now floating through his mind, Luke cried out to them. “We were looking for you. I do not know how we got lost there. We were just thinking that it might be nice to have a picnic lunch by the lake. What do you say?”

The lake was a beautiful part of this estate, so it was no wonder Luke wanted to show it off to his fiancée. Martin would have much preferred to stay where he was with Susanna, so they could talk some more about everything he had just unexpectedly learned, but there was no way they could do that without raising suspicion.

Luckily, Susanna seemed to understand that too, as she smiled and agreed with Luke. “Yes, that sounds wonderful.”

Martin could tell that there was a tremor in her voice, he could still hear the anxiety there, but it seemed like it was hidden enough to remain out of Luke and Mary’s sight. Either that or they were far too wrapped up in one another to pick up on anything else.

Luke headed inside to ensure a picnic was packed for the little trip to the lake at the edge of the estate, while Martin took a step back to let the sisters talk. He could tell that it was Mary leading the discussion, seemingly talking about her lovely walk with

Luke, which gave Susanna the chance to nod along and not say much.

Martin wondered if her head was spinning just as much as his.

What did Luke think about his cousin's behavior? Did he even know about Edwin's intentions?

It was too much of a heavy subject for Martin to just bring up with him, but he was going to have to try and figure out just how in the know his best friend was."

I will have to get Susanna alone again.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

As impossible a challenge as that would be, he needed to know the rest of that story.

As soon as I can.

There definitely seemed to be much more to it, which was why Edwin was saying such terrible things in secret, hushed conversations.

Martin did not want to cause issues at Luke's home just before his wedding, but if he needed to, then that was exactly what he would do.

Once Luke reappeared with the food in his hands, Martin forced a smile on his face and pushed his worries to the back of his mind. For now.

But he could not ignore the heaviness that clung to him and Susanna as they walked in silence behind Luke and Mary. Edwin's words seemed to roll around them, reminding them that not everything was well here.

"Oh my," Mary gasped as soon as she spotted the lake, pulling Martin out of his thoughts. "This is quite beautiful, Luke. Even better than you said it was going to be."

Luke caught Martin's eyes, grinning happily, practically beaming from ear to ear as Mary enthusiastically moved closer to the water. Martin hoped and prayed that his best friend really did know everything that had happened, so this would not come as a surprise.

Luke did not need to be surprised before the big day.

This was going to be more challenging than he thought it would be, and now that Martin had new information, he felt far too responsible for all of this going well.

Judging by the way Susanna was wistfully staring at her sister, it seemed like she had the same weight pressing down on her shoulders.

They settled on the picnic blanket by the lake, the picturesque setting a stark contrast to the turmoil Martin felt inside. Luke spread out the food, an array of sandwiches, fruit, and pastries that looked as delightful as the view.

Mary clapped her hands in delight. “This is perfect, Luke. Absolutely perfect.”

Luke smiled warmly at her. “I am glad you like it. I thought it would be a nice change of pace. We need an escape from the wedding planning every now and again.”

As they began to eat, Mary started the conversation, talking about the wedding even if they were supposed to be having a break from it. “Susanna, did you see the flowers that Mother has picked out for the wedding? What do you think of them?”

Susanna nodded, looking like she was forcing a smile. “Yes, Mother showed me. I think they will be perfect.”

“Me too,” Mary declared as she beamed from ear to ear. “I just want everything to go well...”

That was a sentiment that Martin understood a little deeper now. He could not blame her for wanting a lovely day after all the pain that she had suffered in the past.

After they finished eating, Luke suggested a stroll around the lake. “It is too lovely a day to stay in one spot. Let us walk and enjoy the scenery.”

But that seemed to be an invitation for Mary only, which was a great relief to Martin.

He needed a moment to stop the pretense. Smiling at his friend with such a heavy heart was really challenging for him.

As the sun beamed down on their shoulders, and Luke led Mary to the water, Martin found himself staring a little wistfully at Susanna.

Much as he wanted to talk to her about what they had overheard, he knew that this was not the time. Luke and Mary were still potentially within earshot and not looking like they were about to move on anytime soon.

So he chose something much easier to talk about.

“They really do look happy,” he commented, nodding towards his friend and Susanna’s sister.

Susanna laughed awkwardly, looking shocked by his words. “Are you suggesting that there really might be something called love after all?”

He held up his hands in a playful surrendering gesture. “Perhaps you are right. Maybe they really are in love and I was too quick to judge their decision. Perhaps they really will be happy for the rest of their lives.”

“So, you agree with their decision to get married? I am stunned.” Susanna giggled once more. “I did not know it was possible to change your mind so quickly.”

“I never said that I have changed my mind completely. Do not get carried away with yourself, my lady.”

Susanna narrowed her eyes at Martin, and he braced himself, waiting for yet another

challenge from her, enjoying every single moment of it. “You have rather a high opinion of yourself, my lord. I do not think I have ever met anyone quite like you.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

Martin noticed the way her eyes flickered down to his lips as she said that, which made his heart pound a little faster.

Was she thinking about the moment they got a little close before? When it seemed like they might kiss? Because that moment was absolutely flooding his mind.

“I shall take that as a compliment,” he said, with a cheeky smile, “that you have never met anyone quite like me. I believe that is because there is no one else like me. I am one of a kind. Completely unique.”

She cocked a knowing eyebrow but did not say anything to deny the compliment.

Perhaps that was exactly how she meant it.

Mary and Luke started to walk back towards them before either of them could say another word. It always seemed like they were interrupted before their conversation got interesting, but that was alright. It just kept Martin on his toes and made him yearn for more.

He hoped Susanna felt the same way...

There was a knock on his bedchambers door as he straightened his bow tie for dinner, which had him curious. He had just left Luke and the others behind, so he could not imagine that his friend was coming to see him once more. There was no one else that Martin could envision coming to seek him out...

Unless...

No, of course, it was not going to be Susanna.

She probably wanted to talk to him as well, but she would not behave in such a risky manner. She was a Lady with a reputation to protect. Sure, they had almost crossed the line earlier, but that all happened by mistake. They were supposed to be with Luke and Mary the whole time.

There was no way that she would come to his bedchambers.

But he had to admit that he was rather excited by the idea. The thought of her sneaking away to get a moment alone with him, either to talk or to perhaps finally close the gap between them to kiss, he did not mind.

Being around Susanna was electrifying, and he truly could not get enough of her.

“Oh, Mother.”

His heart sank. This was not the visit that he wanted at all. If anything, with that glint in her eyes, he knew that his mother was only here to ruin his evening before it had even begun.

“Martin, I hope you do not mind my coming to talk to you, but I have been thinking a lot. The wedding has me worried about you.”

Martin resisted the urge to roll his eyes as she stepped uninvited into his room. This was exactly what he had been trying to avoid. “Oh, Mother, I do not need you to be worrying about me...”

“But you are five and twenty years of age now, and you have shown no signs of wanting to settle down...”

“Again, Mother? We are talking about this again? Plenty of gentlemen get married at a far more advanced age than mine,” he tried to remind her, but she was not hearing him.

“But perhaps this will change things,” she commented. “Seeing your best friend happy and married. It might make you yearn for the same, and there are going to be plenty of eligible women at the wedding who may well capture your attention at long last...”

Thank goodness she knew nothing about the almost kiss between him and Susanna. That would most certainly send her spiraling. She would likely have the two of them married off before Martin could even blink.

“I am quite happy with the way my life is...”

“You will not be happy forever when you struggle to find yourself a suitable wife because of your rakish reputation. Without a wife, you will not be able to have children, and then your life will not be fulfilling. A family will make you happy, I can promise you that.”

“You know that will not happen, Mother...”

“But, Martin, please just think about it...”

Martin forced a smile, trying to mask his frustration. “Mother, I understand your concerns, but I assure you, I am quite content with my life as it is right now. I do not know what I need to do to prove that to you.”

His mother’s eyes softened, but her determination did not waver. “I only want what is best for you, Martin. I want to see you settled and happy. A good match can bring so much joy. Me and your father had so many happy years before he was taken from

me.”

Martin sighed inwardly. He knew that his parents were happy, but he had also seen how much his father’s death ruined his mother for a long while. Surely it was not much of a surprise that he did not want the same for himself? Seeing her heartbreak had hardened his heart, and that was the way he wanted it to stay.

“I will consider your words, Mother. But for now, can we please focus on Luke and Mary? It is their special time, and I want to make sure everything goes perfectly for them. I do not wish to have all of these complications to deal with.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

She nodded reluctantly. “Very well, Martin. But promise me you will at least think about it. I just want you to keep an open mind for this wedding. It is going to be a lovely event, with an expansive guest list. I am sure there will be some incredibly interesting people there who you should take the time to talk to.” She cocked her head. “Promise me that you will at least try?”

“I promise I will, Mother,” Martin replied, hoping to placate her for the time being.

Satisfied, his mother gave him a small smile and patted his cheek affectionately. “Good. Now, let us go enjoy dinner. And do try to have a pleasant evening with the guests. They are all very pleasant people.”

With that, she left his chambers, leaving him to his thoughts. He adjusted his bow tie once more, his mind wandering back to Susanna. The mere idea of her sneaking away to see him made his heart race. He could not deny the growing attraction that he had for her, and the knowledge that she might feel the same was exhilarating.

But of course, he had to ensure that his mother never found out how he was feeling, or she would force something to happen between him and Susanna. Which was the last thing he wanted.

It was lust, desire, and the fun of arguing.

He did not want to overcomplicate things, and he was sure that she felt the same way. They both had enough to worry about, especially now after what they had heard Edwin say. That was likely to plague the both of them for a very long time.

CHAPTER FIVE

Susanna felt like she was an actress in a movie, simply playing a role, as she sat at the dinner table, eating with her family and all the guests at Standen Abbey. It was hard for her to focus and engage with the inane chatter going on around her, when she had so much on her mind. She did not know how to behave properly when her brain was so messy.

She kept trying to eat, but every time she brought food to her mouth, a queasiness overcame her, and she could not eat a thing. The more time that she had spent thinking about Edwin and his friend's comment while she was alone, the worse she felt about it.

"Lady Mary most certainly does seem to have the worst luck with her betrothed, does she not?"

"Hopefully, this one has a better fate."

"Maybe it is not luck, but deserved punishment. Fate is only cruel to those who deserve it, am I right?"

Why say those things? Were they just idle comments or something much more sinister? Knowing how fascinated Edwin seemed to be with Mary, Susanna could not be sure.

She could not allow Edwin to do anything to upset Mary.

She would stop at nothing to ensure he behaved himself.

Like there was a magnet drawing her eyes towards him, Susanna found herself meeting Martin's gaze. The only other person who had heard the same thing as her.

She hoped for some sympathy from him or something, but that was not what she got.

Martin shocked her by making a strange half-nodding gesture, angling his head towards the door as if he wanted her to leave the room.

Her heart began to thunder in her throat as she sat up a little straighter in her seat.

Now?

She furrowed her brow in confusion. Somehow, Martin seemed to sense what she was thinking because he nodded once.

Knowing that she would not be able to leave the table and return as if nothing had happened, she leaned in and whispered to her mother, “I am not feeling very well, Mother. I have a terrible headache, and it is making me feel very sick. Do you mind if I am excused? I think it best for me to return to my bedchambers.”

“Are you alright?” her mother asked, looking very concerned. She pressed her hand to her forehead to see how much she was burning up. “Yes, you do feel a little hot.”

“I will rest,” Susanna replied with a thin smile. “I am sure I will feel better in the morning.”

“Of course, dear,” her mother said softly, her concern evident. “Go and rest. I will check on you later.”

Susanna nodded, her heart still pounding. She rose from the table, feeling the weight of several pairs of eyes on her as she made her way towards the door. Her steps were steady, but inside she felt like she was walking on a tightrope.

She could not bring herself to look at Martin as she left the room because she was so

fearful of being caught out. Sneaking away to spend a moment with him alone, however innocent it might be, could be catastrophic for the pair of them. Yet, for some reason, she was willing to risk it.

It is for my sister.

Susanna tried to tell herself that she was making this dangerous move for Mary. She wanted to talk to Martin about what they had listened to earlier, because their conversation got interrupted, but deep down Susanna knew that there was more to it.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

She ached to get close to Martin again to see if the intense attraction still sizzled between them.

But where was she supposed to go?

Martin had indicated for her to leave the room, but he gave her no clue as to where she should go. There were staff members milling around in the hallways, which only added to her anxiety.

Susanna knew that she was going to have to find somewhere to wait that was out of sight, but where Martin could still find her. If he could find an excuse to leave the table that was. She was still not entirely convinced that he would be able to come and see her...

She walked, acting like she had purpose until she found a small alcove in the wall. It was most certainly not the most ideal hiding place, and she was very afraid that she might get caught, but Susanna could not think of a better place to be than this.

While waiting, for what she was sure would feel like an eternity, she tried to mentally plan what excuse she would use if she was found out. Nothing came to mind, there was truly no reason that she could think of to be where she was.

How long will I even wait here? How long before I cave and actually retire to my bedchambers?

But even if she did leave, she knew that she would not feel any better. She would not be able to switch off this worry...

Relief flooded her the moment she spotted Martin sneaking by her. He did not spot her until she stepped out and touched his arm to get his attention. She did not mean to make him jump, but that was the effect she accidentally had on him.

“Sorry, I...”

But Martin was too busy already trying to pull her into a room with him. A small storage room that did not give her much chance to put any distance between them. They were already too close for comfort, and she still did not know what this conversation would be about.

“I want you to finish telling me about Edwin,” he hissed quietly to her. “I need to know the full story.”

Susanna was not sure if she should be grateful that they were going to talk about Edwin, or disappointed that they were still pretending the almost kiss did not happen.

“Right, yes, I see.” She nodded and swallowed hard as she tried to recall where she had gotten to. That was not the easiest thing to do when Martin was within touching distance. “Well, as I said, Edwin has always shown my sister affection, and he has ignored her rejection. After Duncan was killed, he became insistent. Always coming to the house even though Mary was in deep mourning.”

“What made it stop?”

“I am not sure,” Susanna admitted. “I did not look into it, we were not too worried. Just grateful that he was leaving Mary alone. We did not think that we would ever see him again. I most certainly did not expect to come here and see him, but then I was not aware that he is Luke’s cousin.”

“I see.”

As Martin pondered on this, Susanna found herself studying his face a little too closely. The fact that he was a strikingly handsome man was really hitting her now and making her heart race. It was challenging to be in this tiny space with him, so close to her that she could feel the intensity of the heat radiating off his body. Every breath tickled her face.

“His comment about a deserved punishment... I found that really strange,” Susanna declared, just to try and fill the silence for a moment. “I did not like hearing it when Edwin was friends with Duncan. It seemed rather cruel. Particularly because he saw how upset Mary was after Duncan passed away.”

“Yes, I thought it was odd as well,” Martin admitted, much to Susanna’s relief. “But I do not want to get carried away with my thinking. I do not want to jump to conclusions and think the worst of Edwin—even though I have never thought very positive things about him—but I do think that this is something we should investigate more.”

Investigate?

This stunned Susanna to her very core. She was not sure how to respond to that.

“You think we should investigate Edwin?”

“Yes. You said that Duncan was murdered... well, I do not wish to accuse Edwin of such a heinous crime without evidence. Plus, much as I have no love for Edwin, I do not want to believe that he is capable of such things...”

“Murder?” Susanna gasped, needing to be sure that she and Martin were on the same page.

“Perhaps. I mean, someone has to have committed the crime, and Edwin, it appears,

had a motive. It is most certainly something to consider.”

Now that was a conclusion that Susanna had not wanted to consider. But hearing Martin vocalize it made it all the more real. It was something that she did not want to wrap her head around, but it seemed like it was something she was going to have to think about. Especially now that Mary was about to get married again.

“I do not think we should tell anyone about this,” she said hurriedly. “Unless we find out anything that we should actually tell others.”

“Oh yes, I agree with that.” Martin nodded enthusiastically. “I most certainly think that we should keep things from Luke and Mary. They are so happy planning their wedding. We do not want to upset them unless we absolutely have to. There is no need to ruin their joy.”

Footsteps caused Susanna and Martin to fall into an awkward silence. They had no idea who was walking by them, but it terrified them both. They automatically stepped closer to each other to hide, just in case anyone else entered this tiny storage room.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

It was not until the footsteps started to retreat that they realized they were chest to chest, their lips almost touching. They really were breathing one another in, which was utterly overwhelming.

Again, Susanna knew that she should move and put an end to this moment, but she also did not want to. The flames flickering in Martin's eyes and the desire that she could almost feel from him were overwhelming.

It took everything that she had not to rise on her tiptoes and kiss him. As her eyes fluttered shut, she felt that intense loss of control all over again. The draw to Martin was too intense. She was not sure that she could ignore it...

But just as she was about to soar high, the sound of the maids chattering passed the storage room and brought her back down to earth with a thump.

She could not kiss Martin. Even more so now. They had a mission that they needed to accomplish, and that was far more important than whatever was sizzling between them. It was not like Martin had expressed any real interest in courting her, so she should not even be considering this.

"I... I need to go now," she murmured as she staggered away from him. "I have to go to my bedchambers in case my mother starts looking for me. I said that I was sick, and Mother will be checking in on me eventually."

"Yes, of course," Martin replied thickly. "And I will need to return to the table. Everyone will be expecting me back in a moment."

They had said their goodbyes but did not break eye contact for a beat too long. Susanna was almost afraid to stop looking at Martin for fear that he might disappear, leaving her alone in this mess.

It was strange that she had come to rely on him so much when she did not like him at all, but he was the only other person who knew what was going on. He was the only other person who knew that they might be dealing with someone very dangerous here.

Eventually, much as she did not want to, Susanna had to break their stare because she had to be sensible.

She had to run.

Her heart was pounding, and it continued to thunder as she made her escape up the stairs. Anxiety zig-zagged through her stomach as she leapt into her bedchambers and closed the door behind her.

I need to help Mary, she told herself, over and over again. I need to do whatever I can... but it is not easy.

Martin was becoming quite the distraction, and she was not too sure what to do about him.

They had nearly kissed again. She had put her reputation on the line another time. It was as if she was becoming wilder and more unhinged by the minute, taking risks that she absolutely should not.

But how could she stop herself when she was drawn to him in a way that she could not seem to pull back from?

Knock, knock.

Panic shot through Susanna as she bolted upright. What was Martin doing? He was supposed to be heading back to the table, to act like nothing was wrong.

The longer he stayed away from the dinner table, the more suspicious his behavior was.

Susanna was almost too nervous to open the door because she did not want to make this wild situation any worse than it already was.

“Susanna?”

Relief crashed through her, followed by a flicker of unwelcome disappointment, as she realized that this was her mother.

She had come to check on her, just as she said she would.

“Oh, hello, Mother.”

Susanna forced a smile on her face as she opened the door.

“Oh dear, you truly do look unwell, Susanna. Do you need anything?”

It was a little insulting, since the sickness had been a lie, but perhaps she was not looking her best because of shock and her worry for Mary.

“Just sleep,” Susanna insisted. “Do not worry about me, please, I will be fine.”

“Of course, I will worry about you. What would we do without you, Susanna? You know that you are the rock of our family.”

Susanna smiled thinly. Much as she had always liked that position, it was starting to feel like a pressure that might crack her. Especially if she discovered that Edwin was up to something.

But she was not going to worry her mother about this. Not yet.

“Thank you, Mother,” Susanna replied, her voice wavering just enough to seem convincingly fatigued. “I appreciate your concern, but I promise, all I need is a good night’s rest.”

Her mother reached out, gently brushing a stray lock of hair from her forehead. “If you say so, dear. Just remember, you can always come to me if you need anything.”

“I will,” Susanna assured her. “Good night.”

With a final concerned glance, her mother nodded and left, closing the door softly behind her. Susanna let out a long breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. She needed a moment to compose herself, to gather her thoughts.

Tomorrow would be a new day, and it seemed like she was going to have a lot to deal with.

CHAPTER SIX

“Are you ready for this?” Luke asked Martin as he excitedly grabbed his coat. “I am sure we are going to have a lot of fun today, and I cannot wait to show Mary more of the local town. I have promised her a tour, and I am thrilled to finally fulfill that promise.”

Martin nodded slowly, accepting that he was really going to have to partake in this activity. Even if he was not sure if his heart was in it or not. After sharing a secret

moment with Susanna the night before, where she revealed the rest of Mary's past to him, he had not been able to shake off his worry for his friend. But he had promised Susanna that they would keep this between themselves until they knew more, and that was what he would do.

But he had been hoping that he would be able to start his search this morning, to investigate Edwin more, but now he had a trip into town to contend with. Luke needed him by his side as he took Mary out, and there was no reason not to agree to it.

Nothing that he could think of offhand anyway.

He could only hope that Susanna would be joining them, so he could have someone to talk to while escorting his friend around the town.

"Where is Mary?" he asked Luke warily as he spotted Edwin in the distance. He might have wanted to investigate Luke's cousin, but not right in front of Luke. "Is she excited to see the town today?"

"Oh yes, very much so. I am sure she is just waiting for her sister to be ready."

That filled Martin with relief. A little joy as well. He had to stifle his smile so Luke did not pick up on what he was feeling. He did not want anyone to get the wrong idea about himself and Susanna. Not Luke, and certainly not his mother. After their little chat, he had a feeling that she was going to be relentless at the wedding. Any woman he gave even a second of attention to would be the target of her affection.

"Ah, I believe that is them."

Thankfully, Edwin was now out of sight. He seemed to have walked into one of the rooms before Mary and Susanna appeared, so Martin could let out a breath of relief.

He turned his eyes to the women descending the stairs and was immediately stunned by how beautiful Susanna looked. She was always dressed well, and had her hair styled perfectly, but there was something even more special about the way she looked today. She seemed to be sparkling. Martin could not put his finger on what made her look that way, but he found it hard to take his eyes off her.

Susanna turned to look at him, almost as if she could sense his eyes on her, and the way her lips curled into a smile made his pulse race.

This was a little attraction that he was going to have to push down. He could not allow it to bloom and grow because it would not ever go anywhere. Not even for a little moment of fun.

It could not. Susanna was not a widow looking for a moment of fun, she was a lady who wanted love and marriage. She had made that much clear to him with her words.

“Good morning.” Mary beamed as she drew nearer to them. “How are you both?”

“We are very good,” Luke replied, shining with happiness. “How are you?”

As they conversed, Martin continued to keep his eyes on Susanna. She was biting her bottom lip, looking like she had information that she wanted to share with him, but he was going to have to be patient until he could get a moment alone with her to find out what.

Unfortunately, patience was not his strongest suit.

Eventually, Luke and Mary were ready to leave, so they headed to the carriage awaiting them outside the estate, to take them into town. Because Luke was so keen to sit beside his bride-to-be, that left Martin far closer to Susanna than he was ready for.

The seat was small, which made their legs brush against one another every single time the carriage bumped over any of the cobblestones ahead of them. The sensation of her knee near his made his heart hammer so hard against his ribcage that he feared it might burst free.

It had to be because this was forbidden, that was all he could think of. He was so drawn to Susanna because he knew that he could not have her. That was why he could not even look her way, because he was afraid that she might notice how attracted to her he was.

“Are you looking forward to seeing the town?” he asked, hoping to cover up how crazed he felt inside.

“Yes, I am sure it will be lovely,” Susanna replied stiffly.

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

Did she feel the same way? Was she struggling with all of this just as much as he was? It certainly seemed that way.

He could not tell for sure though, because Susanna was pointedly not looking his way either.

“Is there anything in particular you would like to see?”

Susanna shrugged. “I am sure whatever we do will be fun.”

“Yes, I am sure you are right.”

He could hardly wait until they arrived in the town, so he could escape this enclosed space where his thoughts were just jumbled and all over the place.

He wanted to be able to think straight again.

Thankfully, it did not take too long before they could climb out of the carriage once more. Martin ensured that he was out quickly, but he did reach out his hand to help Susanna climb out too because it was the gentlemanly thing to do. Although he was not quite ready for the flurry of excitement coursing through his veins.

When was he ever going to get used to this feeling?

“Right,” Luke declared as soon as his feet touched the ground. “Come with me, I have the perfect place to start our adventure today.”

Luke led the group to a small park to take their first walk. He and Mary walked ahead of Martin and Susanna, so he made the effort to hang back a little so they could finally talk.

It was all lovely enjoying the sunshine in this lovely greenery, but Martin could not focus.

“Is everything alright?” he asked Susanna quietly, leaning in closer to her. “You seem distracted today.”

“Yes, I am alright...” She kept her eyes focused on Mary and Luke, ensuring they were ahead enough for her to speak freely before she continued. “But I have been subtly asking around, trying to see if I can discover anything new about Edwin. It was not the easiest thing to do because I do not want to draw attention to myself. I do not want Edwin to find out that I have been asking questions, and I most certainly do not want anyone to think that I am interested in him...”

The idea was so ridiculous that Martin could not help letting out a little chuckle. At first, Susanna stared at him in horror, like she could not believe that he was finding this funny, but as soon as she seemed to realize why he was laughing, she joined in a little.

“I know, I know, it is insane to think that I would like him, but I am afraid of giving that impression.”

“But you asked around anyway?” Martin checked, trying to get the conversation back on track.

“I did, and I cannot discover anything new about him that I did not already know. But there are not many people with positive things to say about him. Most people just say very little, but I can tell by their faces that they are not impressed by him.”

“Well, that makes sense,” Martin agreed. “Because I have never been impressed by him. I have never had the best opinion of him. But I am still trying to work out if he is really capable of doing something so terrible. How insistent has he been with his pursuit of Mary? Is he still causing issues now?”

“Well, Mary will do anything that she can to not be left alone with him,” Susanna confirmed. “She tries her hardest not to even be close to him because she knows what he is like, even when there are other people around, but I have noticed him watching her a lot. It is a good job that Luke is his cousin. That might force him to behave...”

“Hmm.” Martin was not so convinced. He did not know if Edwin would be loyal to anyone. Especially if he was a desperate man, and from what he had heard, Edwin appeared to have some desperate tendencies. “I will ensure that I keep an eye on him always. I will also ask my own questions because it is unlikely that anyone will assume that I am interested in Edwin.”

Shock crossed Susanna’s face before she realized that he was joking. The giggle that escaped her mouth was a little too loud.

Mary whipped her head around and stared at them both in surprise. “What is so funny?” she demanded, eyeing them both in shock. As her eyes narrowed, Susanna recalled telling Mary that she did not like Martin at all.

No wonder she was so intrigued by the laughing.

“Just a silly joke,” Susanna quickly replied, her voice light and dismissive. “Nothing to worry about, Mary.”

Mary’s expression softened, but she still looked a bit puzzled. “Alright then, but do share next time! I could use a good laugh.”

“We will, I promise,” Martin added, trying to sound casual.

Mary nodded and turned back to her conversation with Luke, who seemed completely oblivious to the brief interruption.

Martin and Susanna shared a look, a silent understanding passing between them. They needed to be more careful, especially around Mary.

“We are going to have to continue digging deep,” Susanna agreed the moment Mary turned back to concentrate on her husband-to-be. “Because I am growing more concerned about Mary by the day. I am terribly worried that Edwin has done something, and that he cannot be trusted again. Mary has been through so much, I do not want her to suffer anymore.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

Martin could see how fiercely Susanna cared about her sister, which only drew him to her more. He loved seeing passion in other people, he was excited by anyone who could speak their mind and freely care enough to show it. Society ladies usually did not allow themselves to behave in such a way.

But then Susanna was not like anyone he had ever met before, which perhaps was why he could not stop his heart from skipping a beat.

“We will solve this,” he reassured her, just as determined. “We will figure out if Edwin is up to anything. Hopefully, we will find out that there is nothing to worry about. With a bit of luck, we will discover that he has recovered from his obsession with your sister, and then we can concentrate on the upcoming wedding.”

Susanna nodded, but she did not look like she believed that would be the outcome of this investigation. “I do hope so. I want Mary to be happy. I really do.”

As they continued to walk, Martin tried to think about their plan with Edwin and who he was going to talk to about him, but he continued to find himself distracted by the beautiful and strong woman beside him. She really was incredibly intriguing. He was not sure how he was going to ensure that he kept a respectable distance from her while they completed this mission. All he really wanted to do was feel her close to him again, to know that they could kiss at any given moment.

Even if that was not something they could really do.

Eventually, they reached a small café at the edge of the park. Luke suggested they stop for tea, and everyone agreed. They found a table outside, shaded by a large

umbrella. Martin sat next to Susanna, once again hyper-aware of her proximity.

“So, as I was saying,” Luke continued, obviously referring to a conversation that he had been having with Mary, but now bringing Martin and Susanna into it. “My cousin, Edwin, had invited these wealthy investors to his estate, hoping to secure their support for a business venture. He was determined to make a great impression. So, he went all out—hired the best chefs, imported the finest wines, and even arranged for a string quartet to play throughout the evening.”

Susanna and Martin exchanged glances, both eager to hear more. Martin, in particular, was keen to glean any insight into Edwin’s character.

“The only thing he had forgotten to do was plan what he was going to say.” Luke clutched his stomach and laughed. “It was a mess. A disaster. I imagine one of the worst investment meetings that anyone had ever gone to.”

Even as Mary joined in the laughter, Martin could see caution in her eyes. It left him a little more certain that Luke did not know a thing about the way Edwin had pursued her.

“Is he always that disorganized?” Susanna asked, a little coldly. It was clear that she wanted to know more, but that it was hard for her to keep her tone in check.

“He usually has a way of charming himself out of tricky situations. But not that time. It is safe to say that the business never got anywhere.”

Martin leaned back in his chair, absorbing Luke’s story with an air of casual interest, but inside, his mind was racing. This was precisely the kind of information he needed to better understand Edwin. Charm without substance, a penchant for grand gestures with little follow-up—these traits painted a picture of a man who relied on superficial impressions rather than genuine capability.

“He seems to have quite the knack for theatrics,” Martin remarked, aiming for a light tone. “But how does he handle failure? That must have been quite the blow to his ego.”

Luke shrugged, taking a sip of his tea. “Edwin has always been resilient, I will give him that. He bounced back quickly and started planning another venture almost immediately. It is like he never lets anything truly get to him. But,” he added with a chuckle, “sometimes I think he lives in his own world, where everything always works out just because he wills it to.”

Martin exchanged a meaningful look with Susanna. This insight was crucial. Edwin’s resilience, or perhaps his inability to accept failure, might drive him to more desperate measures. This could explain his relentless pursuit of Mary, seeing her as another challenge he needed to conquer to prove himself.

Eventually, they finished their tea and started a walk through the town, so Luke could show Mary where she would soon be living. They visited bookshops and flower stalls, bakeries and a lovely marketplace.

Mary looked utterly thrilled at the life that lay ahead of her, but now he was even more concerned that she might not like it there.

“That bit about Edwin was telling,” Susanna said quietly as they paused near a stall selling delicate hand-painted ceramics. “It aligns with everything we have suspected about his character. He does not seem to know when to give up.”

Martin nodded, his eyes scanning the surrounding crowd to ensure they were not being overheard. “Yes, and that worries me even more. If he is that determined, and he really did harm his best friend, then his cousin might also just be ‘something in the way.’”

Susanna's brow furrowed. "I agree. We are going to have to work really hard to find something on him."

They followed Luke as he excitedly showed Mary some jewelry he thought she might like, stopping talking for a moment because they might be overheard by the people they wanted to protect the most.

"Look at this one, Mary," Luke said, holding up a delicate silver necklace adorned with a sapphire pendant. "I think it would suit you perfectly."

Mary blushed, clearly pleased with Luke's choice. "It is beautiful," she murmured, allowing him to fasten it around her neck.

Strangely, it left Martin wondering if he should do something kind for Susanna. He never partook in romantic gestures, but he had the urge to do something nice for a change.

He wanted so badly to reach out for a necklace, but he could not. Just because he had the strange urge did not mean it was the right thing to do.

But as his eyes ran all over Susanna, he knew that her neck would look utterly ravishing with a chain around it.

What is happening to me?

Martin's thoughts were a whirlwind of confusion and desire as he watched Susanna admire the delicate ceramics. The notion of giving her a gift, something as simple yet meaningful as a necklace, gnawed at him.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

He had never been one for romantic gestures, preferring to keep his interactions with women casual and unburdened by deeper emotions. Yet, Susanna was different; she stirred feelings within him that he had not anticipated.

It had to be his mother. Her words were getting to him, nothing more.

Yet, as Susanna sensed his eyes upon her and she turned to give him a smile, Martin felt his stomach flutter. This was not a feeling that he could ever get used to, and he was not even sure what it meant.

All he knew for sure was that it would not be easy for them to continue on with this secret mission, just the two of him, but also he did not want it to end.

For everyone's sake.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Knock, knock.

The light tapping on the door to her bedchambers right after breakfast the following morning had Susanna's pulse racing. She did not know who it was going to be, and that had her worried.

Trying to seek out information about Edwin really did put her on edge. The more she had to think about him, the more nervous she became.

Martin had put a bee in her bonnet about the murder, and she had spent far too long

trying to work out if Edwin was really capable of that.

Knock, knock.

Now, she was thoroughly concerned that he had heard about her questions, and had come to her door. She was too scared to open the door. Her hand was actually shaking as she reached for the doorknob.

If there was any way that she could avoid opening this door, she would, but she knew he would just bash down the door if he wanted to.

Knock, knock.

Relief absolutely cascaded through her the moment she peeked out the door and found Mary standing on the other side.

“Oh, hello,” Susanna declared as she swung open the door fully. “Is everything alright?”

“Luke has just suggested that we go horse riding. Is that something you would like to do?”

Susanna pondered on this for only a moment. She was not sure she was in the mood to go horse riding, but she also did not want to be left alone in the house, with her sister gone. Truth be told, she knew that chances were Martin would also be riding, and she wanted to see him again. She wanted to see if he had made good on his promise and had discovered anything about Edwin through his own investigation.

She also wanted to see him because he was the only person she could talk to about any of this. He ensured that she felt so much less alone in this mess.

Their walk in town had solidified just how comfortable she felt discussing everything with him. When he was not teasing her and acting obnoxious as he tried to get under her skin, he was actually nice to talk to.

Although she had been on edge the whole time, expecting one of his sarcastic comments. A little part of her might have even been a little disappointed that she had not received anything like that from him. There were times when it was a little bit fun arguing with him.

The sizzling tension was unlike anything she had ever experienced before, and a part of her missed that...

“Sure, a ride around the estate sounds nice. I will have to put on my riding habit though...”

She suddenly noticed that Mary was already dressed for the activity and clearly raring to go. The smile plastered on her face was just another reminder that there was a lot riding on this investigation, and if anything went wrong, everything could be destroyed.

Mary could be destroyed.

It was a lot of pressure on Susanna’s shoulders. She was grateful not to be in this alone.

“Give me a moment,” she told her sister with a thin-lipped smile. “And I will meet you downstairs. I will be quick.”

Once Mary was gone, Susanna closed the door to her bedchambers and rested her head wearily against the wood, trying to catch her breath once more. This was so hard, harder than she thought it was going to be. Her time at Standen Abbey had

started to mess with her mind, the moment she saw Edwin appear.

Just because he had not caused any trouble yet, did not mean he would behave the whole time. Susanna was certain of that.

Susanna took a deep breath, steeling herself for the day ahead. She changed into her riding attire, a simple but elegant outfit that allowed for both comfort and mobility.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

As she laced up her boots, her thoughts kept drifting back to Martin and their shared determination to uncover the truth about Edwin. Thank goodness he cared about Luke just as much as she did Mary.

As Susanna descended the stairs, she sought out Mary. Luke was standing right beside her, of course. They had almost been inseparable in the run-up to the wedding. But he was not the only one waiting in riding gear. Martin was there too, as was Edwin.

Was this really happening?

Was Edwin about to come riding with them?

Susanna was not sure if she should be worried about this or pleased because it was an opportunity to see where his head was. She might be given a better chance to understand what his plan was—if there was anything to worry about, of course...

Susanna caught Martin's eye and spotted the same bubble of confusion flowing through his gaze.

What on earth were they going to do?

"Ah, there you are," Luke declared, looking blissfully happy. "I like your riding gear, Susanna. Shall we go to the stables?"

Susanna nodded and followed the crowd. Martin was close to her, but she could not speak to him. There were many things she wanted to say to him, but she was afraid of

being overheard.

Especially because Edwin seemed far too close to the pair of them for her liking. His presence felt creepy, he was causing the hairs on the back of her neck to stand on edge.

“I cannot recall the last time I went riding with you, my lord.” Edwin chuckled as he tried to act overly friendly. “It must have been while we were children.”

“Hmm, perhaps,” Martin agreed. Somehow, he managed to sound like he was not irritated by Edwin’s presence, which surprised Susanna. “I cannot remember myself.”

“You are just so very busy these days, from what I hear. Too busy to even participate in the Seasons and Society events.”

Martin gritted his teeth. Susanna was starting to see what he looked like when he was actually annoyed. “That is simply not my scene.”

“And how do you think you will ever find a lady to marry with that attitude?”

“Have you managed to find someone yet?”

Uh oh.

Panic seized Susanna in a vice-like grip.

She did not think it was the best idea for Martin to outright challenge Edwin like that. They had not even climbed onto the horses yet.

Edwin frowned. A redness stained his cheeks as he automatically glanced Mary’s way. It seemed like he could not even hide his feelings when he had to.

“I have not yet been lucky enough to find a lady I find captivating enough to marry,” Edwin admitted in a self-pitying manner that disgusted Susanna. She was not buying it at all. “But I am sure it will not take me long to find the one. Especially if I attend all the dances that I am expected to. If I continue to accept every invite that comes my way, I am sure to find her.”

Not long... I am sure it will not take me long...

What was that supposed to mean?

It was not the most incriminating comment he could have made, but it certainly put Susanna on edge. It seemed like he was trying to get a rise out of Martin, but it was her skin he had managed to get under. She did not like this. Not one bit.

“I am sure whoever you find will be a very lucky lady,” Martin responded. It seemed like he had decided against getting into this battle of wills with Edwin. Arguing with him was only going to push him further away and perhaps prevent them from talking again. “Especially if she sees your dance moves.”

“Hey! My dance teacher used to tell me that I was the best in the class.” Edwin chuckled good-naturedly. “I am the perfect gentleman on the dance floor. Just ask Mary, I have danced with her a number of times over the years.”

Thankfully, Martin did not bring Mary into the conversation, which came as a big relief to Susanna. Since she was clearly having a nice time with Luke, there was no need to distract them. Especially because it would be giving Edwin exactly what he seemed to want... Mary’s attention.

Susanna could not tell if Edwin was upset or annoyed by this. He hid his expressions well, which was not helpful for Susanna. She wanted him to give hersomething.

“Well, it seems that it is time to choose our horses,” Martin declared, changing the subject rapidly. “This should be a lot of fun.”

“Oh my!” Susanna mouthed to Martin as soon as Edwin took a step ahead of them. He seemed just as alarmed as she was.

“I know,” he agreed. “What was that about?”

Unfortunately, they could not take the time to dissect everything that had just been said, because Luke was already showing his guests the horses and asking which one they wanted to ride.

Susanna made sure to choose the friendliest-looking white horse, which Luke informed her was named Snowflake. She was a good rider, on horses she knew well, but she was always a little uncertain with new creatures. She feared being thrown off and injured.

But with her sister and Martin around her, even Luke, she knew that she would be cared for if the worst happened. Although, of course, she hoped it would not. That would not be helpful in the lead-up to her sister's wedding.

It did not take long for Susanna to start to relax on the horse. She had chosen well, this was a beast that she could get along well with. But her horse was not as fast as everyone else's. She could not seem to keep up with Mary and Luke, and it seemed like Edwin was absolutely determined to stay at their side.

She did not know if it was a good thing that Martin stayed back with her. She did not want to be alone, but she was also worried about leaving Edwin like that. Especially after he had just made such odd comments.

“What do you think about that?” Martin asked her as they trotted. “That was a little strange, do you not think?”

“It most certainly makes me want to investigate him further,” Susanna admitted. “But I do not know how.”

“Do you think perhaps we should try and find out what he might be hiding... in his bedchambers or something?”

Susanna stared at him in shock. “Are you suggesting that we really spy on him like that? What if we get caught?”

He gave her a knowing smirk, as if he was used to breaking the rules like that. She knew that her heart should not skip a few beats, but it did regardless. “I will ensure that we do not get caught, no matter what.”

She cocked an eyebrow. Perhaps she should be happier with the calmer talk that they were having, but that small part of her wanted to ignite that cheeky flame in him again. “Are you telling me that you are a master criminal?”

“Have you not heard of my reputation?” He chuckled. “I am a bad man.”

“Well, I suppose we need you to be a bad man,” she responded. “If we are going to find out what Edwin is up to. If he is up to anything at all... I do have to keep reminding myself that he might not be. It is hard not to let my imagination get the better of me.”

“Ooh, how I would love to see inside your imagination.” Martin laughed. “I bet it is very fun inside your mind.”

What did he mean by that?

Susanna wanted to ask him about that, but she was not sure she was quite ready for the answer. Martin often liked to knock her off kilter, and she did not need that when

she was already doing her best to keep her balance on this horse.

One thing at a time.

That was the only way to take this...

The ride continued, the rhythmic clip-clop of hooves and the gentle sway of the horses providing a semblance of calm. The group moved along a scenic path that wound through the estate's lush grounds.

Mary and Luke rode ahead, their laughter floating back to Susanna and Martin, who followed at a more leisurely pace. Edwin's presence loomed just ahead, his gaze occasionally flicking back towards them, his expression inscrutable.

As they approached a clearing, Luke called out, "Let's take a break here. The view is quite lovely, and we can let the horses rest for a bit."

They all dismounted, the horses whickering softly as they were led to graze nearby. The clearing offered a panoramic view of the estate, the rolling hills and manicured gardens stretching out before them. It was a picturesque scene, but Susanna's mind was too preoccupied to fully appreciate it.

Martin sidled up to her as they stood at the edge of the clearing, his voice low. "As soon as we get a chance to, we shall search Edwin's quarters. I will keep an eye out for the perfect moment."

Susanna nodded, her heart thudding in her chest. "Alright. But we have to be extremely careful."

"We will be," Martin assured her. His eyes held a seriousness that was both reassuring and unsettling. "If he is hiding something, then we need to find it before

the wedding. We cannot leave this for too much longer.”

All of a sudden, their conversation was interrupted by Luke, who had wandered over with Mary. “What are you two conspiring about over here?” he asked with a grin.

“Just admiring the view,” Martin replied smoothly, his demeanor shifting back to one of casual friendliness.

Luke chuckled. “It is a fine view, indeed.” He glanced at Mary, who was busily arranging the wildflowers they had picked earlier. Did he even notice Edwin standing far too close to her? “Shall we head back soon? We have a full day ahead of us.”

“Yes, I think we should.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

As they prepared to mount their horses again, Edwin approached Susanna, his expression disarmingly friendly. “You seem quite the accomplished rider, Lady Susanna. Do you often go riding?”

Susanna forced a polite smile, her nerves tingling at his proximity. “Whenever I get the chance. It is a wonderful way to clear one’s mind.”

What was happening here? Edwin never bothered to talk to her, even when he was pursuing Mary. It put her on edge.

But as she glanced at Martin, he nodded encouragingly.

“Indeed,” Edwin agreed, his eyes lingering on her for a moment longer than necessary. “There is something about the open air and the freedom of riding that allows one to think more clearly.”

There was nothing directly threatening about the way he spoke to her, but she most certainly felt uncomfortable in his presence.

Thankfully, that was all Edwin had to say. He turned away from Susanna. Leaving her stewing in a pit of confusion.

What on earth was going on? This situation only seemed to get weirder by the minute, and the wedding had not even taken place yet. There was still so much to do.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Seeing Edwin head out to the clay shooting range with Luke was the one opportunity that Martin had been looking for. He had spent the last couple of days waiting for Edwin to be away from his bedchambers so he and Susanna could finally sneak in there, to see if there was any evidence that they needed to be worried about.

So now that he had seen Edwin heading out for an activity that would likely take him a while, he knew that he needed to find Susanna right away. Martin could not risk doing this alone, he knew that Susanna would not be impressed if he attempted this without her.

The only problem was he did not know where she was.

He raced around Standen Abbey, trying to find her, but it seemed like she was nowhere. He was even more worried when he found Mary with Luke's mother, sharing tea in the drawing room. Because they were having such an in-depth conversation, he did not feel like he could interject to ask where Susanna might be. He had to keep looking for her alone...

Relief absolutely flooded him the moment he spotted her.

Susanna was sitting in the library, by the window so the sunlight bathed her in a golden glow, with a book in her hand, her eyes fixed firmly on the page in front of her.

"What are you reading?" Martin asked as he drew nearer to her. He almost forgot what he had come in here for.

Susanna grinned as she turned the book cover his way. "I thought I would give Mansfield Park another try. Someone told me that it was better than Emma, and I wanted to see if that was true."

“And? Are you starting to agree with this obviously very intelligent person?”

“Oh no.” She chuckled. “I still think Emma is a much better main character.”

But the way that her cheeks shone pink as she put the book down suggested that perhaps she really was starting to come around to his way of thinking, after all. He liked that. He always appreciated it when people listened to his opinion and were willing to open their minds.

“So, is everything alright?” Susanna asked inquisitively. “You look like you have something on your mind.”

Martin silently cursed himself. He really had gotten so distracted by her beauty. “Yes! There is something I want to talk to you about. Edwin. He is currently out clay shooting with Luke, which gives us the perfect opportunity to spy on him.”

All the color drained from Susanna’s cheeks. “Are we going to sneak into his bedchambers? Now?”

Martin nodded. “Yes, I think that this is something we need to do. If there is anything to be found, it will be in his room.”

Susanna’s nerves were plastered all over her face, but she nodded in agreement and rose to her feet. “Right, then this is the time to do it. Let us go right now. Let us do this.”

They walked quickly together through the hallways of Standen Abbey, trying not to be seen by anyone. There were staff members all over the place, but luckily no one seemed to pay them much attention. Martin could only hope that continued while they followed through with this wild plan.

“Is anyone looking at us?” Susanna hissed as they drew nearer to the room. “Do you think we will get away with this?”

Martin glanced around, and he had to admit that so far it seemed like everything was going to plan. Not that there was much of a plan in mind.

“We are going to be fine,” he did his best to reassure her. “We do not need to be in this room for long.”

Or so he hoped.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

If there was nothing to be found, then they would be in and out. They would have nothing else to go on because perhaps there was nothing to worry about. That was the best-case scenario.

But if there was something to be found... well, there was no telling what would happen then.

“Right,” Martin hissed as they reached the door that he knew was Edwin’s. “It is time. Slip in through that door now.”

Once they crossed that threshold, there would be no turning back.

“What are we searching for?” Susanna gasped desperately as soon as they closed the door behind them. “Perhaps we should have made a better plan.”

There was no time to waste, so Martin offered Susanna a one-shouldered shrug before he started to look around. This was a well-kept simple room, which he hoped would work in their favor.

“I am not sure what we are looking for,” he told Susanna. “But I am sure that once we see it, we will know.”

He bent down to search under the bed, but there was nothing there other than a discarded shirt. As he glanced back up, he spotted Susanna snapping into action and opening the drawers to see what Edwin had hidden inside.

“There is a lot of papers here,” she murmured. “Do you think any of this will be

useful?”

“Perhaps. See what you can find.”

Martin’s eyes darted everywhere. He really did wish that he knew what he was looking for. He realized he did not know Edwin well enough at all to understand what he might be seeking out. What might be strange or unique here.

He stepped towards the closet, knowing that he would hate it if someone invaded his privacy like this. But he also knew what he needed to do, for Luke’s sake.

“Oh my!” Before Martin reached the closet, he turned to see what Susanna was shocked by. “There is a letter here.”

Martin took the letter from Susanna’s hands to see what she was talking about. Certain phrases written in the unsent letter jumped out at him.

It is unpleasant to see the woman who should be mine in the arms of another man...I cannot believe that she believes he is the man who will make her happy...I just need to show her that I am the one for her.

“What do we do with this?” Susanna gasped in horror. “Should we take this letter and show it to Mary and Luke? Make them see that Edwin still has feelings for her?”

Martin was not totally sure what to do. On the one hand, he truly did want Luke to see that Edwin could not be trusted. But he was worried about doing something rash and pushing too quickly before they knew enough. Just in case there was more.

“I do not know,” he finally responded. “Let us just keep looking a little more. See if we can find something else to really make this make sense. We want a full picture, to show Luke and Mary how dangerous he can be.”

Susanna swallowed hard and nodded. "Alright, I will continue looking through these papers. See if I can find anything... maybe even something linking him to what he may have done to Duncan."

It was clear that was hard for her to say, but they really did need to consider that Edwin could have been involved. Even if that was terrifying.

Martin instantly went back to the closet, because his gut was now telling him that there was something there. Something he truly needed to see. He tugged on the door, cringing as it creaked because every single noise worried him.

Clothes hung down, just as he expected, but Martin was not here to see trousers and suit jackets. He wanted to know what was hiding behind all of this. If he was going to hide something himself, then this was likely where he would put it.

There were some items tucked away behind everything else, but nothing that caught Martin's attention. Not at first anyway. He carefully rifled through, doing his best not to disturb everything too much. He did not want to leave any evidence that he and Susanna had been in the room. He did not know how eagle-eyed Edwin was.

Judging by the discarded shirt on the floor, he was not the tidiest man, but Martin was not about to leave anything to chance.

Especially not with those words from those letters floating through his mind. A man who will make her happy. Should be mine. I am the one for her.

It was terrifying.

Those words might be the innocent ramblings of a man who harbored feelings for a woman who simply did not feel the same way if they had not come from Edwin. There was just something about him that had always made Martin uncomfortable, and

now he was starting to see why.

It was because he had a nefarious side, Martin was now more sure of it than ever.

Wait...

What was that?

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

In the midst of everything, Martin's hand landed on something cold and metallic, which caused his blood to freeze. He did not know what it was, but as he pulled back to tug the item into the light, his fears were confirmed.

"What is that?" Susanna demanded, seemingly sensing that Martin had found something important. "Oh my goodness, is that...?"

She clapped her hands to her mouth in horror as Martin met her eyes. He nodded, confirming her worries. "Yes, it is. A gun."

Why would Edwin need a gun when he was attending his cousin's wedding? It made Martin fear now that he and Luke had gone out clay shooting. Surely there would be no danger there, but it was still unnerving. It made everything seem much more disreputable.

"I do not understand. What is happening here?" Susanna asked, her voice trembling with worry. "I cannot believe this. Who is Edwin, and what is he capable of? Now I am truly starting to panic that he has done something in the past."

They were so close to one another that Martin could feel the hammering of her heart. Much as this had wound him up, the effect it'd had on Susanna was off the scale. He wished that he could do something to calm her down, but he did not know what she needed.

Well, it seemed like she just needed all of this to be over.

"We cannot take the gun from the room," she whispered anxiously. "Edwin will most

certainly know that it is missing. But we also cannot leave it behind. It might be dangerous in his hands. Plus, Mary and Luke might not believe us without us showing them. What are we going to do? This is hard. Harder than I thought it was going to be. I did not think we would discover something so bad.”

This was worse than the letter.

Martin knew even less what to do.

He racked his brain, willing the answer to just come to him already, but it did not. This was an impossible situation. There was no right move here, nothing that would not cause endless amounts of trouble.

“Wait, what is that?” Susanna grabbed onto his arm, panic shooting through her like lightning. Her eyes widened as the color drained from her cheeks. “Do you hear that? Is it footsteps?”

As soon as she said that, Martin could hear it too. There really were footsteps, and they seemed to be headed in the direction of Edwin’s room. He was supposed to be out clay shooting, they were supposed to have much more time than this, but now it seemed like they were about to be caught.

In a moment of thoughtless worry, Martin grabbed hold of Susanna and tugged her into the closet with him. It was most certainly not the best plan, especially since he still had the gun clutched between his fingers, but he had not been given time to think things through.

Susanna edged fearfully closer to him and held her breath as they both heard the door to Edwin’s bedchambers opening.

It truly was him, and now there was a very big chance that they were going to get

caught.

This could get really ugly.

Martin and Susanna stood in the dark, cramped closet, their breaths shallow and hearts pounding in sync. Martin's grip on the cold metal of the gun tightened as he strained to listen to the movements outside.

"What a disaster," the person outside muttered in a voice that was distinctly Edwin's. "I cannot seem to get this right, however hard I try."

"What do we do?" Susanna's voice was barely a whisper, her panic evident. "What does he mean?"

Martin shook his head slightly, indicating they should remain silent. He knew they had to wait for the right moment to make their move, but he wasn't sure what that moment would be. The gun in his hand felt like a ticking time bomb.

Edwin's footsteps grew louder, closer, until Martin could see the faint outline of his figure through the slats of the closet door. Edwin paused right in front of the closet, and for a horrifying moment, Martin thought they were discovered.

But then, Edwin moved away, and they heard the sound of papers rustling. It seemed he was searching for something in his drawers, unaware of the intruders in his room.

Martin's mind raced. They needed to get out of there with the evidence they'd found, but doing so without being seen was going to be a challenge. He turned to Susanna, his eyes pleading for her to stay calm.

Suddenly, Edwin's booming voice broke the silence. "Where is it?" he muttered to himself, frustration evident in his tone. "I know I left it here. It cannot have gotten

far.”

Martin and Susanna exchanged a glance. Whatever Edwin was looking for, it was clear he was agitated. Martin’s mind went to the letter they’d found. Could it be that Edwin was searching for that very letter?

Was he finally trying to send it?

Much as they could not allow that toxic letter to go anywhere, they also did not want it to be discovered that it was missing. This was a messy situation that Martin never expected to find himself in.

He was supposed to be gone much longer than this. What happened with the clay shooting?

Martin’s heart hammered in his chest as he tried to piece together the situation. Edwin was clearly frustrated, his search becoming more frantic by the second. Susanna’s hand clutched Martin’s arm, her grip tight with fear.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

As he glanced down at Susanna, all he wanted to do was protect her from the mess that he had brought her into. He was the one who thought that now was the perfect time for the investigation, and clearly he was wrong.

He would not allow anything to happen to Susanna because of his silly choices.

CHAPTER NINE

This is a nightmare!

Susanna did not know that it was possible to be so afraid. She had never been so shaky in her whole life. This was not supposed to happen. She was not supposed to get caught investigating Edwin. The idea that everything was about to fall apart right in front of her very eyes was absolutely terrifying. She did not know what she should do.

Thank goodness Martin was in the closet with her.

She clung to him far harder than she would have if they were in public. She needed him, needed his comfort to survive this. Every single sound of Edwin moving about his bedchambers made her so anxious that she could hardly catch her breath. And then she was far too scared to breathe because she did not wish to get caught.

Thank goodness the gun was in Martin's hand right now. At least Susanna was safe in the knowledge that Edwin could not get hold of it. Unless he swung the door of the closet open and everything got crazy. That was an outcome that Susanna did not even want to think about.

Susanna caught Martin staring down at her with concern plastered across his face. He seemed far more worried about her than Edwin, which Susanna found terribly confusing. How could he not be as petrified as her that everything was about to come crashing down around them?

Suddenly they heard a sound right outside the closet door, which made Susanna jump. It took every ounce of willpower she had not to let out a sound. Her heart was absolutely hammering against her rib cage, she could hardly hear a thing aside from the racing of her pulse and her ragged breaths.

It took her calming down a little to realize that she had practically leapt into Martin's arms. That might have been embarrassing were she not more afraid of the man outside.

Martin simply held her, and Susanna had to admit that the sensation of his arms around her was comforting. He was warm and clearly very strong. There was a lovely unexpected sensation of joy creeping through her veins. Perhaps this was the knowledge that all of this was wrong, and not what she should be doing at all.

“Ah! Here it is. Edwin, you need to be more careful with your stuff!” he continued to talk to himself outside the closet, but it seemed like his words were more positive now. “You do not want to keep losing things. Your important things. You need all of this, remember?”

It also helped that the footsteps seemed to move away from the closet. It seemed that Edwin was not about to open the door to reveal them any time soon.

Relief absolutely flooded Susanna as the door to the bedchambers opened once more, and it sounded like the footsteps were leaving the room before the door clicked shut and silence followed.

Much as it seemed like they were safe now, Susanna was still far too afraid to move. She was scared to leave the closet in case this was a test and Edwin was waiting for them. It seemed like Martin felt the same way because he did not move either. He continued to hold on to her until the silence had filled the room for quite some time. During that time, Susanna had grown comfortable in his arms.

But then he pulled back just a little, not that there was much room to edge away from her, and he placed the gun back down.

What on earth were they going to do with that gun? How were they going to make Mary and Luke understand how troubling all of this was? They could not move it from the room, not when Edwin was already talking to himself about losing things.

They could not do anything that would alert Edwin to what they were doing.

Especially after her strange moment with him as they were horse riding.

But what were they going to do?

Susanna parted her lips, about to ask all of these questions, but there was something in Martin's eyes that stopped her. It was a look she had seen a couple of times before, every time she got far too close to this man, but there was something about this time that stopped her in her tracks.

In the enclosed space of the closet, it almost felt like anything could happen. Like this was a separate space from the rest of the world where normal rules did not apply. She was supposed to keep away from this man for so many reasons, her brain knew that, but her body yearned for him. She could not seem to help herself.

Before Susanna even knew what she was doing, she found herself edging a little closer to him. They had not yet exchanged any words, and that made it even better.

Without speaking about it, they did not need to let rational thought get in their way. It was not like she needed to ask Martin if he was caught up in this heady lust himself. She could see the flames dancing in his gaze. He did not seem to be the best at keeping his emotions hidden.

Susanna had to admit, she liked that about him.

She enjoyed the clarity she felt around him. Most gentlemen did everything that they could to disguise their emotions, leaving the ladies in their lives constantly confused and guessing until their intentions were made clear by asking for courtship. But Martin was not like that.

Truth be told, he was not like any man she had ever met before.

A passionate shudder tore down her spine as he reached out and gently cupped her cheek. The way he seemed to ignite flames in her skin with the mere touch of his hand was utterly intoxicating. She could not help but drown in a deep, intoxicating desire.

Susanna desperately hoped that nothing would get in the way and ruin this moment before it could really become something this time. This was almost like an experiment that she could not wait to partake in.

Was she crazy?

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

She certainly felt a little crazy, but in the best way possible.

The moment she felt Martin's breath tickling her lips, she knew there was no turning back, and Susanna was glad. In this little space, all she wanted to do was devour this man. The closer his lips edged towards hers, the stronger the intense anticipation became.

Then it happened.

The brush of his lips against hers nearly knocked her off her feet entirely.

She knew it would feel electric to have him kissing her, she had already gathered that much because of the powerful chemical reaction between them, but she was not expecting it to be quite so intense and overwhelming. Her heart thundered so hard against her ribcage that it was actually a little painful, but that did not stop her. She rose up on her tiptoes and crashed her lips to his once more. But harder this time and with far more passion.

If Susanna was going to explore this, then she was really going to explore it.

His tongue snaked between her lips, which was a surprising but very pleasant sensation. She matched his movements, following his lead, and the deeper the kiss got, the more she enjoyed it, the more she wanted it. She had butterflies flapping violently in the pit of her stomach, every fiber of her being ached for more. She craved every part of this man... even the parts of him she had not even thought of until this very moment.

Martin leaned into Susanna, pressing her up against the back of the closet. He hitched her leg up so her foot pressed against the wall behind her, and he wedged himself between her thighs. Susanna let out a gasp of pure delight as she started to feel him. All of him. It was very clear that he wanted this to go further too, that he was just as caught up in the passion and pleasure as she was. That only intensified Susanna's addiction at that moment.

She was flushed, burning up with desire, and actually ached for this man—who she spent half her time plotting with, and the other half arguing—to fully devour her here and now. In the most dangerous place at Standen Abbey. In Edwin's closet.

An inadvertent moan spilled out of her mouth as she lost track of Martin's hands. He seemed to be all over her, it was as if he knew her body even better than she knew it, and he wanted her to learn everything there was to know about herself. Susanna craved his teachings. She knew for sure that he would open up her mind and make her experience sensations she had never known until this very moment.

Susanna's mind raced at the speed of light. The more she got caught up in the heat of the moment, the wilder she felt, the more her brain started to kick in. Unfortunately, it was giving her endless warnings that she did not really want to hear. But maybe she had to hear them, perhaps ruining herself in this closet was not the wisest idea.

As much as she wanted to ignore the voice of reason, Susanna couldn't entirely push it away. Her body was on fire with desire, but her mind knew the dangers they were courting.

"No," she suddenly blurted out as the thoughts got too much for her. "No, we must not..."

Thankfully, Martin respected her demands. He stepped back from her the moment she asked him to, but Susanna was struck by how breathless and flustered he was. That

was honestly how she felt too. This could have gone far, way too far, and now that the heat was subsiding within her, she realized what a terrible mistake that was. She could have ruined herself entirely for this man, just for a heated moment here.

They needed to stay focused on what they were supposed to be doing here.

But Susanna was so flustered that she could not even recall what they had discovered in Edwin's room. All she wanted to do was escape. She needed to breathe easier and to get her thoughts in order once more. So she hurriedly smoothed down her clothing and hair, before she met Martin's eyes once more.

Seeing the confusion in his gaze did not help her at all.

"I... I have to go," she murmured as she finally braved opening the closet door. Thankfully, there was no one on the other side of it. "I have to..."

But Martin did not even question her. Even as she raced to the door and snuck out of the room before anyone could spot her in there. The dangerous situation she had just put herself in crystallized and intensified within her. She could not believe she had done that. Had she lost her mind?

She no longer wanted to head back to the library, there was no way she could concentrate on a book now. She needed to be alone in her bedchambers so she could gather herself. Susanna did not want anyone to see her in this flustered state.

Susanna rushed down the dimly lit corridors of Standen Abbey, her thoughts a chaotic whirlwind. She needed to regain her composure before she could face anyone, especially Martin. The intensity of their moment in the closet had been overwhelming, and the realization of how close she had come to crossing a line left her shaken.

That was not supposed to happen.

That was never supposed to happen.

Not really.

She had thought about it, of course she had. But that did not mean she ever thought it would happen. She was supposed to have more self-restraint than that. She was supposed to be better.

“Susanna, there you are.”

Her stomach sank along with her heart as she hardly managed to get far at all. But this was her sister, and if Mary needed her, then everything else would be pushed aside. Even the mess she had just made of her own life.

“I have some good news, Susanna,” Mary declared as she drew close enough to her. “There is a dance tonight. A ball at a nearby manor, and we are attending. Is that not exciting? I cannot wait. But I need you to help me pick out my gown.”

A dance?

That was the last thing that Susanna needed, especially while she was feeling this way, but Mary’s expectant eyes overriden that. This was the lead-up to her wedding, and Susanna wanted to do whatever she could to help. Even if that meant pushing her own needs to one side. Even if it meant she would not get a moment to gather herself.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

“Of course,” she replied through gritted teeth. “I will help you. I am sure it will be a lot of fun.”

Mary’s eyes sparkled with excitement as she grabbed Susanna’s hand and led her towards her room. “Thank you, Susanna! I knew I could count on you. This ball is going to be perfect, and we need to make sure we look our best.”

As they entered Mary’s room, the space was already a flurry of activity. Dresses were laid out on the bed, and various accessories were scattered across the vanity. Mary immediately began to sort through the gowns, holding up different options and asking for Susanna’s opinion.

“This one, or this one?” Mary asked, holding up a pale blue dress and a rich emerald green gown.

Susanna forced a smile and pointed to the green dress. “The green one, definitely. It complements your eyes beautifully.”

Mary beamed. “I thought so too! Now, what about you? What will you wear?”

Susanna hesitated. The idea of dressing up and attending a ball felt overwhelming, given everything that had just happened. But she could not disappoint Mary. She glanced at the selection of dresses and chose a simple yet elegant lavender gown. “I can wear this one.”

“You will look beautiful in it!” Mary exclaimed. “It has been far too long since we have been to a ball together. I am so excited. I cannot wait to look lovely and twirl

around on the dance floor in Luke's arms. I have not yet had the chance to dance with him since we met at the opera."

Susanna tried to match Mary's enthusiasm, but she could not seem to manage it. It was before Duncan's death, the last time they went to a ball, and Susanna could not help but worry that something tragic might happen again.

Knowing that Edwin had a gun in his closet... that was the most terrifying thing of all.

CHAPTER TEN

"What on earth just happened?" Martin muttered to himself as he watched Susanna race away from him.

He was taken aback and a little amused that she could end things so sharply when they were going so well. He had never felt that way kissing someone before, and truth be told, it overwhelmed him. He had not wanted the kiss to end, he had been so thrilled he would have happily thrown all of Society's rules out the window to be with that woman, because she really excited him. He wanted to know how she would really feel.

Perhaps this was not something she had ever experienced before. It was unlikely, since she was a lady who had her life guided by Society's rules and expectations, but she was still wild and carefree. She most certainly craved him as much as he did her, he could tell by the passion of the kiss. But she had stopped herself just in time.

It was exactly as he suspected. Their chemistry was phenomenal. He could not get enough of it.

It had to be Susanna who pulled away because there was not a chance in hell he

would have been able to do it.

Martin sighed to himself and followed Susanna out of the closet and out of the room as well. It was not until he had neared his bedchambers that he realized he had forgotten the gun and the letter.

He had left them behind in Edwin's room. He had been undecided about what he should do about everything, but his distraction had made the choice for him. There was no way that he could go back and collect those items. He had already risked everything, he could not do it again.

Especially because Edwin was in and out of the house. He was not committed enough to clay shooting to remain out there for the rest of the afternoon.

Hopefully, that meant Edwin would not realize that anyone had been in his bedchambers, but that also left Martin and Susanna without any evidence to present to Luke and Mary. They were going to have to find other ways to let them know that they should be worried.

By the time Martin reached his own room, he was not sure how to feel. He did not know if he should be elated by the kiss, especially when it was so thrilling, or deflated because it had been cut short. He was not sure when he would be able to steal another moment alone with Susanna to see how she was feeling, and that frustrated him.

All he wanted was to spend more time with her. To monopolize all of her time, because he thoroughly enjoyed the way it felt to have her eyes on him.

He was growing increasingly addicted to being around Susanna. He did not know how he was supposed to manage his feelings because he had never felt them before.

Martin had been surprised by the news of the surprise ball, but now that he was here, he presumed this was a typical sort of activity in the lead-up to a wedding.

Everyone else seemed to be having the best time, dancing and laughing along with one another, so he was going to have to find it in himself to enjoy his time as well. Even if he was a little on edge after everything that had happened throughout the day.

Truth be told, he could have used the evening to be alone, to organize his feelings, but instead, he had to do this, so he might as well make the best of it.

He caught sight of Susanna, who was dancing with yet another gentleman, and jealousy coiled within him. It was a nasty, snake-like feeling that crept through his veins which he could not stop, however much he wanted to. It did not even help that Susanna looked bored with every man who had dragged her onto the dance floor. He did not want any of them touching her. There was an intensely possessive side of him that wanted to claim her as his own.

He never wanted to claim someone as his own. What on earth was wrong with him?

Before he could dig too deeply into that trail of thought, someone brushed by him, bringing him back to reality with a thump. It was Edwin, which immediately made Martin's hackles rise. Especially when he saw him heading in Mary's direction. It quickly became obvious that he was asking her to dance, and Mary was left with very little choice but to agree. If she refused, then she risked causing a scene, which would not be good for anyone. She would then run the risk of being gossiped about as if she were a rude person.

From what Martin had seen, that was not her personality at all.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

As they headed towards the dance floor, with Mary keeping a stoic expression on her face, Martin knew that he could not hold back any longer. He could not be on the sidelines anymore. Without even a moment of hesitation, he strode towards Susanna because there was no one else he wanted to dance with.

“May I have your hand for this dance?” he asked her in a pointed tone, with his hand outstretched towards her.

Susanna initially looked a little unsure, which was understandable because of everything that had occurred earlier. She likely wanted to keep her distance so she could sort through her feelings too, but when he nodded his head towards Mary, and she saw what was happening, she immediately agreed.

“Yes, I would love to dance with you.”

It was not until they were on the dance floor themselves that the nerves started to cling to Martin a little. How were they going to handle this?

“What happened?” Susanna asked curiously as Martin rested his hands on her hips.

But Martin could not help but notice that she shivered a little as soon as he touched her, which made his lips quirk up a little. It was good to know that he could still have that effect on her. She most certainly had a very powerful effect on him.

Could she see it though?

He could not tell.

“I just saw Edwin make a beeline for Mary, and she seemed compelled to agree to the dance.”

“She will be hating every moment of this,” Susanna murmured as the music started to play. “Poor Mary.”

The point of this dance was to keep an eye on Edwin, to try and work out what he was up to, but Martin found himself distracted once more. Being this close to Susanna was always going to get his attention, there did not seem to be anything that he could do about that.

Especially after their heated moment in the closet...

“Have you been enjoying the ball?” he asked mildly, but the question sounded a little accusatory as it fell out of his mouth. Like he was back to challenging her.

Susanna stiffened. “I have had an alright time, thank you very much.”

Martin cocked his head curiously. “Well, you have not looked like you have been having the best time. I have not seen you smile once.”

Susanna narrowed her eyes at him. “Have you been watching me? Looking out for a smile?”

“I am always looking out for your smile. It lights up the whole room.”

Martin loved the way this seemed to knock her off kilter. It was clear that Susanna was not quite sure what to make of his flirty remark.

“I... well, I am having a nice time now.”

“It is good to know that I am the one you can have fun with.”

At least it was not awkward between them. Martin would have hated that. He had grown close to Susanna during their time at Standen Abbey, and not just because they were working together to figure out what Edwin was up to, but because he felt like he could talk to her about absolutely anything. Even, in a very roundabout way, how he was feeling.

He would have hated for their shared moment in the closet, where they threw caution to the wind, to ruin that. Much as he enjoyed kissing her, he did not want to lose their connection in the process. Otherwise, the lead-up to the wedding might drive him crazy.

“Well, I have not yet seen you on the dance floor at all,” Susanna commented with a cocked eyebrow. “Why is that?”

Martin chuckled. “So, you have been watching me too. That is very interesting.”

He held on to her a little tighter, wishing they did not have any eyes upon them. He would have loved to have pulled her closer to him so he could properly hold her again.

The sensation of this beautiful woman in his arms was utterly intoxicating.

Martin and Susanna swayed to the music, lost in their own little world despite the throngs of people around them. The warmth of her body against his made his heart race, and he fought to keep his thoughts focused.

He had to remember why they were here, the danger that Edwin posed, and the potential fallout of their investigation. But with Susanna so close, it was a difficult task.

Susanna's gaze softened as she looked up at him. "You are avoiding my question. Why have you not danced until now? I am sure that there are plenty of ladies here who would be overjoyed to be in your arms."

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

Martin sighed, glancing briefly towards Edwin and Mary, who were now entwined in a rather awkward dance. “To be honest, I was trying to keep an eye on things. Make sure nothing out of the ordinary happened.”

Susanna nodded, following his gaze. “You mean, keep an eye on Edwin.”

“Exactly,” Martin replied. “He might not be in the middle of anything nefarious right now, but it is worrying to know what he has in his room.”

Susanna’s expression turned thoughtful. “We just do not know how dangerous he really is.”

They danced in silence for a few moments, both lost in their thoughts. The music was slow and melodic, a perfect milieu for their conversation. Martin found himself studying Susanna’s features, the delicate curve of her lips, the way her eyes sparkled under the ballroom lights. He could not help but feel a pang of longing.

“What are we going to do about Edwin?” Susanna asked quietly, her voice barely above a whisper.

Martin tightened his grip on her waist. “We keep watching. We gather evidence. And when the time is right, we expose him.”

“It will be scary to expose him,” Susanna agreed. “But I know you are right. It is what we have to do.”

The music began to swell, signaling the end of the dance. Martin reluctantly loosened

his grip on Susanna, but it seemed that she was not done yet.

“Oh, look.” All of a sudden, Susanna turned her attention back to her sister and her unwelcome dance partner. “It looks like Edwin is trying to say something serious to Mary, but she is not impressed. What do you think it could be?”

It was hard to worry about the words coming out of Edwin’s mouth when they knew he had a gun hidden in his closet. He could cause far more damage with that, which was something they needed to avoid at all costs.

Martin scanned the room to try and see if Luke was watching his bride-to-be too, so he could bring this up to him later, but unfortunately, Luke was deep in a conversation of his own. He was laughing with the hosts of the ball over drinks.

What am I going to do? How can I make Luke see Edwin for who he really is?

Would Luke turn on his cousin? Would he refuse to hear what Martin had to say because Edwin was family?

“If I was not so repulsed by him, I would hope that Edwin would ask me for a dance too...”

“No,” Martin snapped, before he could even think about the words flying out of his mouth.

Susanna stared at him in horror. “Only to see what he would say to me...”

But Martin was still shaking his head. “I would not want that man to get anywhere near you.”

“Why not?” she half-whispered back. It was almost as if she knew the answer but

needed to hear him say it out loud.

The only problem was that Martin did not think he had the courage to actually tell her out loud where his heart lay. As soon as he said something like that, he risked everything, especially the walls that he had put up around himself.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, Martin was not entirely sure how to view this.

The music came to an end. In the eyes of polite Society, that meant they needed to separate so as not to raise suspicion about their closeness.

The last thing that Martin wanted was to be the center of a gossip storm because then, words would get to his mother. Then she would really pressure him and Susanna to do something that was only meant to be a bit of fun.

After all, once Luke and Mary got married, it was unlikely that they would ever see one another again. Their paths had never crossed before, and there was no real reason that they should cross again.

A thought that caused him to feel actual pain in his chest.

Martin released Susanna's hand as the music faded, stepping back with a mix of reluctance and necessity. He watched her face, searching for any sign of understanding, of shared feeling, but her expression was unreadable. Polite Society demanded their separation, but his heart yearned to stay close to her.

I do not want him to touch you, Martin thought hopelessly as she walked away from him, thinking the words that he could not say aloud. Because right now, even if I do not have the right to feel this way, I feel like you are mine...

But of course, he would never say those words out loud, so he returned sadly to the

refreshments table, determined to stay there for the rest of the night. He did not want to dance with anyone else, there was no point.

After having Susanna in his arms, no one else would feel as good.

He would do much better as a wallflower, keeping an eye on Edwin at all times to make sure he did nothing to cause alarm.

At least for tonight anyway...

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Anervousness settled in the pit of Susanna's stomach as she stood outside her sister's bedchambers, waiting for her to open the door. Susanna had kept herself awake all night long after the ball that took place the previous evening, tossing and turning under the bedsheets as she tried to figure out what her next move should be.

Things had gotten so strange and complicated with Martin, she was terrified that whatever she did next would be yet another wrong move, muddying things even further.

"Good morning, Susanna," Mary greeted happily as soon as she opened her door, smoothing down her day dress. "Is everything alright? You look like something is troubling you."

Susanna bit her bottom lip and nodded. "Do you think that we could talk for a moment before we head down to breakfast?"

"Of course. Please, take a seat," Mary offered. "You know that you can talk to me about anything."

But that did not calm down the intense racing of Susanna's heart as she tried to find the right words. She might have rehearsed this conversation a million times in her head, but now that she was here, about to talk, everything had escaped her mind.

“I... I do not know where to begin,” she admitted.

Susanna could not meet Mary’s eyes as she finally started talking. She just knew that this was a sensitive subject that had the potential to upset her sister, but she also desperately needed to know the answer.

“Go on,” Mary urged her gently. “Whatever it is, you know that you can talk to me about it.”

But Susanna still sucked in a sharp breath before she continued. “Well, I guess I am just wondering how you managed to do it... you know, fall in love again after everything that has happened.”

The silence in the air was so thick that Susanna could hardly breathe. For a beat too long, it truly did feel like she had said the wrong thing. But just because Mary did not talk about Duncan any longer, it surely did not mean that he was never on her mind.

Relief flooded Susanna when Mary finally answered her. “Of course, it has been hard for me. I would have to have no heart at all to find this easy. Losing Duncan in such a violent way was truly terrible.” She threw her hands in the air as she spoke. “I mean, that was the man that I thought I was going to marry and spend the rest of my life with. I did not think I would ever look at another man for as long as I lived. Of course, you know better than anyone how that grief affected me.”

Susanna swallowed hard as she nodded. “Yes, I know. And that was an experience I never wish to go through again, Mary. I felt utterly hopeless seeing you so low, and knowing that there was nothing that I could do to pull you from that dark place... it was devastating.”

Mary nodded understandingly. “I know. I never wish to feel that way again either, which is why I was inwardly resistant when I first met Luke. I did not want to let him

in at all.” She smiled, almost to herself, which Susanna found very touching. “But he managed to capture my heart anyway, despite all of my resistance. He managed to make me see that I do deserve a second chance at life and love after all. I truly do not know what I would do without him now. This might not be the life I thought that I would end up living, but I am still happy that this is the life that shall be mine.”

“I see.”

It was truly a lot for Susanna to process. She could almost feel the cogs in her brain turning as she tried to take all of this in. She did not know what she was expecting her sister to say, but this was a lot to process.

“What I am trying to tell you, Susanna,” Mary declared happily, “is to live your life with no regrets. You cannot always predict what is going to happen next. Life can be funny in that way. It is also far too short to worry about living it for other people. You need to concentrate on living it for yourself, and doing whatever makes you happy. Who are the people that you admire the most, Susanna? I believe, like me, you admire those who are happy. Trust me, Susanna. Love is worth it, regardless.”

Susanna had actually always looked up to her sister, but hearing Mary be so wise made her admire her even more. Perhaps this conversation had not answered all the questions that she still had floating through her mind with regard to Martin, but it was nice to know that happiness was the end goal. Even after heartbreak.

She just had to figure out now if this intense lust could lead to any kind of happiness. It was confusing, being around Martin and not knowing if she hated him, or wanted more, but she was going to have to figure it out.

“Come on,” Mary urged as she offered her sister her arm. “Let us go down for breakfast, I am sure that everyone will be waiting for us. We do not wish for them to wonder where we are.”

Susanna smiled and took her sister's proffered arm. She even half listened to her as they made their way to the breakfast table, but truth be told, her mind was racing. Fear had gripped her, reminding her of all the reasons why she was so afraid to let anyone into her heart.

Mary might have found a way to recover from what had happened in her past, but Susanna could not help but still struggle with it. She feared she would not be strong enough to suffer such a fate, and then continue on with life afterwards.

Maybe that is a problem for another day, Susanna told herself as the faces of the other guests greeted her, I most certainly have some other things to worry about now.

Edwin's face was a stark reminder of that. Especially as he seemed to be glowering at everyone while they talked and ate. How did no one else seem to pick up on that unpleasant expression on his face?

Well, there was one person who always noticed, and as he caught her eyes, Susanna felt her heart leap up into her throat.

Did Martin know that she could not stop thinking about him? That he had been on her mind all night long?

And how did he feel about her?

"You girls must be very excited about the dance tonight," Luke's mother interjected, pulling Susanna out of her thoughts.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

Another dance? Already? Had she been paying so little attention that she had missed out on more plans?

“The Wesson family are known for their extravagant balls. I cannot wait for you to meet them, I am sure you will enjoy their company very much.”

Mary’s eyes shone with so much excitement that Susanna did not dare mention that she had been unaware of the dance. She kept her lips tightly shut, even as the conversation around her spiraled into excitement over all the details.

“I am sure you have quite the gown picked out for the evening,” Martin teased. Susanna could tell that he could sense her surprise at the mention of the dance, even if no one else could. “I cannot wait to see what you will wear.”

Susanna narrowed her eyes at him. It did not seem to matter what happened between them, he would always resort to teasing her. It was a safety net, she supposed, to know that he was never going to treat her any differently, but it was also a little unnerving. If she breathed in deep enough, it was almost as if she could inhale him deeply and still sense his body pressed up against hers.

A sizzle of excitement tore down her spine as the memory took hold.

If he was going to treat her in the same way, then she could certainly do the same thing to him.

“You should be excited,” she declared, using the same tone. “Because I am quite sure my gown will blow you away. You will be surprised at just how beautiful it is.”

Laughter danced in Martin's eyes. "Well, I was looking forward to dancing at the ball tonight, but now I am really looking forward to it. I cannot wait to be the first name on your dance card."

Susanna cocked a knowing eyebrow. "What on earth made you think that you are going to be on my dance card at all?"

Martin leaned in slightly, his voice lowering to a teasing murmur. "I have a feeling you will not be able to resist, Susanna. Besides, I shall make sure to ask you before anyone else has the chance."

Susanna felt a rush of warmth at his words, but she maintained her composed exterior. "You seem awfully confident, Martin. But I suppose we will see tonight."

It was honestly a little surprising that everyone else continued to engage in their own conversations, as if they could not sense the heat burning between her and Martin. Susanna could not understand how no one had picked up on the intensity of the energy surging between them at all times. But every time she glanced around the table just to be sure, no one seemed to be interested in them at all.

Well, aside from Martin's mother, perhaps. There did seem to be a couple of curious looks coming from her, which was... interesting.

At least that meant Susanna's little secret was safe, for the time being. She was not about to be forced into any life-changing decisions just yet, which was wonderful because she could only give Martin a bit of her attention. Edwin and his potentially diabolical behavior needed so much more.

Pastel pink was not a color that Susanna would normally choose to wear, but since she had made comments about the fabulousness of her gown over the breakfast table, she felt like she had to deliver something a little bit different, to prove Martin wrong.

And to impress him a little as well, there was no denying that was a part of her wish. She could not wait to see how his eyes widened when he saw her in this dress.

The sweetheart neckline allowed her to wear a beautiful diamond around her neck, and the lace covering the bodice was a lovely, intricate design. The way that the skirts cascaded around her feet was going to make it a little challenging to dance, but she would do her best. She had been trained to dance in all kinds of gowns, after all.

Susanna twisted her head from side to side to check out the braids in the complicated-looking chignon the handmaid had styled for her. The gems decorating her hair shone when they caught the light, which Susanna enjoyed. That felt like a really nice touch.

She did not wish to stand out among the crowds tonight, this was Mary's time to garner all the attention, since she was the bride-to-be, but she did want to catch his eyes. The man she had almost destroyed her reputation for...

At least things were still normal between them, and he had not decided to ice her out. Right now, Martin was the only person who knew about Edwin and her fears, and Susanna was not sure what she would do without him. She may have teased him about not dancing with him, but of course she would, so they could discuss any strange goings on that they might have spotted throughout the evening.

And more than that, so she could feel his strong, masculine hands on her body once more...

But not in an inappropriate way, of course. Not in public.

In fact, it might be better if they did not touch one another inappropriately again...

Knock, knock.

Just as her mind was about to wander into dangerous territory, taking her down a path she didn't want to go to tonight for fear of fantasies becoming reality, Mary knocked on her door to hurry her along. The carriages were already outside waiting and of course, they did not wish to be late.

“Oh my!” Mary exclaimed in shock. “That is a beautifully fancy dress. It suits you very much.”

A heat burned in Susanna's cheeks. If her sister had reacted with such surprise, then surely Martin would as well. It was just a shame that they could not spend the whole night together, dancing. She did not wish to dance with another man tonight, and she did not wish to see him in the arms of another lady either.

What on earth was happening to her?

“Thank you, Mary,” Susanna replied, a shy smile tugging at her lips. “I thought I would try something a little different tonight.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

Mary's eyes sparkled with approval as she gently adjusted a stray lock of Susanna's hair. "You look stunning. I very much like that color on you. I am sure that you will have all eyes on you tonight."

"Oh, I do not need all eyes..."

"Just the eyes of someone in particular," Mary declared with a wink.

Panic shot through Susanna. Had Mary found out her secret? She swallowed hard, trying to maintain her composure. "I... I do not know what you mean."

Mary laughed softly, a knowing glint in her eyes. "Oh, Susanna, you cannot hide your feelings from me. It is obvious that there is someone special you are hoping to impress tonight. And if it is who I think it is, then from what I can tell, he is already quite taken with you. I am sure that he will not know what to say because you look so lovely."

Susanna's heart raced. Could Mary really know about her and Martin?

"I suppose we shall see," she said, attempting a nonchalant tone because the last thing she wanted to do was give anything away. "Shall we go?"

As they descended the grand staircase, the anticipation building in Susanna's chest was almost overwhelming.

The carriages waited outside, their polished surfaces gleaming in the fading light of day. The soft murmurs and laughter drifted through the open door, setting the scene

for an evening of elegance and intrigue.

And an evening where Susanna would have to keep one eye on Martin, without alerting her sister to what she was doing, and the other on Edwin.

It was certainly going to be another interesting night. One that could lead to anything. Susanna just hoped and prayed that she was ready for it, whatever came her way.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Martin had to admit, Luke's mother had not been lying. This most certainly was a fancy occasion. It seemed like the Wessons felt like they had something to prove when they planned this event. It truly seemed like they wanted to overshadow everyone else throwing events in the local area.

Martin was not sure that he could ever envision himself in that position, caring enough about what other people were doing to want to compete with them. It all seemed incredibly pointless to him. A waste of time.

But here he was, ready for another interesting night.

He might not have spent a lot of time at this sort of event normally, but then he did not usually have Susanna to share this time with him.

Speaking of whom... where was she?

Martin scanned the crowd, his eyes darting past the elegantly dressed guests and elaborate decorations. The ballroom was a sea of vibrant colors and animated faces, but there was only one person he was truly interested in seeing.

Susanna, Susanna, Susanna, Susanna. Oh my!

His heart skipped a beat the moment he spotted Susanna. She was not lying at breakfast, she really did have a stunning, eye-catching gown on. It was one who had all eyes upon her because she looked so ravishing in it, and she did not even seem to realize it.

Martin was always surprised by how coy and shy she was, how little she seemed to see her own beauty. Perhaps that was one of the many things that lured him in.

Susanna seemed to sense his eyes on her, more than anyone else's, and she turned to face him before descending the stairs with her family. He could hardly breathe as an intense desire gripped him. It was going to be incredibly hard for him to behave himself when she looked like that.

"My goodness," Luke commented beside him, reminding him that he was not alone in his anxious wait. "She looks absolutely wonderful. I must be the luckiest man alive."

Martin knew Luke was talking about his bride-to-be, but he found himself nodding along, unable to take his eyes off of Susanna. The feeling was so intense that for a brief moment, he actually considered telling Luke how he felt, to see if his friend approved of his feelings.

But he shut himself up at the very last second, reminding himself that Susanna did not seem like the sort of person who would be too happy having everyone talking about her behind her back. She had her walls up as it was because of everything that her family had been through, and he wanted to respect her privacy.

Plus, they did not know where this was going to lead, so it was probably for the best that no one knew.

The more people who knew about this, the more complicated it could become.

Martin never went out of his way to make things complicated, and he did not wish to start now.

“Come on,” Luke urged excitedly. “Let us go and ask the ladies to dance before anyone else does.”

Martin had been planning on waiting until a little later on in the evening before he asked Susanna to dance, despite making the joke about wanting to be the first name on her dance card. He had wanted to hold back and play it cool, but he could not explain that to Luke, so he followed behind him and offered Susanna his hand.

Thankfully, she readily accepted it, looking pleased to have him as the first man to hold her.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

He only wished that he could be the only man to hold her tonight.

“How are you?” Martin asked her the moment they were close together on the dance floor and the music was playing in the background. He hoped now that they could actually chat without worrying that anyone else could overhear them.

“Yes, I am quite fine,” Susanna replied blandly, not really picking up on his hidden meaning.

“No, I mean how are you after everything that happened before?”

Susanna’s eyes widened. “Oh, I see. I understand what you are getting at now.” An intense redness burned in her cheeks. It made Martin smile to see her embarrassed. “Yes, I am fine. It was... interesting in Edwin’s room. I am surprised at everything that happened.”

“Me too.” Martin nodded emphatically. “I am shocked at what we found as well.”

The gun seemed to float in the air between them. An invisible weight that was crushing them because neither of them knew what to do with it. It was unnerving to know that there was someone among them who could potentially be dangerous, and they had no idea how or when he would react.

“It is still in Edwin’s room,” Martin confessed. “I did not take it with me.”

“That is probably for the best,” Susanna reassured him. “We do not want Edwin to know that we are on to him.”

“I do not like the idea that he still has access to it,” Martin continued, his voice low and tense. “But you are right. We have to be cautious.”

Susanna nodded, her eyes scanning the room briefly as if she expected Edwin to be watching them. “We need to figure out our next steps carefully. We cannot let him suspect anything. Not until we have more evidence or a plan to confront him.”

Martin’s grip tightened slightly on her waist as they danced. “I agree. But we must be vigilant. If Edwin is as dangerous as we suspect, we cannot afford to make a wrong move.”

Even as they looked his way now, Edwin was smiling and outwardly happy, but Martin could not shake off the worries that there was something going on behind that man’s eyes.

“We need to keep an eye on him,” Martin hissed at Susanna. “Even more so now. The closer that we get to the day of the wedding, the more vigilant we need to be. If Edwin is going to act and do something crazy, then we need to be aware.”

Susanna’s grip tightened on him. “Do you think he will try and hurt someone?”

Martin would have loved to be able to reassure Susanna, but there was no telling what Edwin was going to do. A man with a gun was always a worry. A man writing letters to his friends about still being in love with Mary, despite her engagement to another man, was troubling too. Especially if he considered what could have happened to Duncan...

“I do not know what he is capable of,” Martin confessed. “But I do know that I am not going to take my eyes off him the whole time.”

Susanna nodded in agreement. “Then I will do the same thing.”

The seriousness of her face made Martin want to chuckle a little. He could not resist shooting a little teasing comment her way, just to try and lighten the mood a little. He did not want their whole dance to be ruined because of Edwin's little plans.

“And if we should happen to end up in the closet again...”

He laughed as Susanna's face flushed beetroot-red. “I cannot believe you just said that. I cannot see any way that we will end up in the closet again...”

But as she made that retort, Martin could not help but notice that her face fell a little, almost as if she were disappointed by the idea of not being able to get him alone again. Since he felt exactly the same way about her, this caused a stirring in the pit of his stomach. It was so tempting to try and pull her somewhere now, maybe outside in the gardens so they could sneak off for a walk alone, to see what might happen between them...

But as quickly as that idea flooded his mind, he pushed it to the side. The closer they got to one another, the more at risk their hearts were when all of this was over. He had to remember that this was only going to be a temporary thing, so he needed to be careful. For both of their sakes.

It was a shame though, because he was pretty sure that he could see the same hunger in her eyes that he was feeling. He was quite sure if they found themselves alone, she would respond very happily if he leaned in to kiss her.

But as the music came to a stark end, he knew that there were far too many eyes around this room, and that members of the ton very much enjoyed their gossip. If he did not want to be talked into something that he was not ready for, then he needed to separate from Susanna before either of them ended up in trouble.

“Thank you for the dance,” Susanna replied smilingly as they stepped away from one

another. “That was very fun.”

“It is a shame that you will have to spend the rest of the night dancing with gentlemen who do not excite you in the same way that I do.”

Susanna smirked, looking like she was enjoying the teasing. “I could say the same about you. If you do end up dancing with any other women.”

He did not want to be in the arms of anyone else. He did not want to look into the eyes of another woman tonight, and he was sure that Susanna could feel that. But they had no choice but to pull apart from one another and go their separate ways.

It was only when his mother reached out to him that he was shaken from his thoughts.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

“Martin, come and stand with me for a while,” his mother commented, with a knowing smile playing on her lips. “I think we have some things to talk about.”

“We do?” Martin groaned inwardly. This was not a conversation he wanted to have.

“I would like to know more about Lady Susanna.” He already knew that was going to happen, but hearing his mother’s words made his heart sink regardless. “There certainly seemed to be something buzzing between the pair of you on the dance floor just then.”

Martin rolled his eyes. “She is the sister of the bride. It is my duty to ask her to dance. I would do it for anyone.”

But his argument was not strong. If Martin could hear that, then he was sure that his mother could hear it as well. That was only going to make her a lot more relentless. If she thought that there was even a chance of Martin marrying Susanna, then she would never let it go.

Yet, even knowing that, Martin could not take his eyes off Susanna as she stood by the refreshments table, talking with her sister. There was a magnetic pull dragging his eyes her way, making it impossible for him to act normally. Even with his mother’s eyes upon him, judging him and watching his face as he stared at her.

“Interesting,” his mother commented, making him sigh. “Well, I think she is a very lovely, suitable young lady, if that means anything to you.”

“Mother,” he began carefully, “I appreciate your opinion, but it is not as simple as

that.”

His mother raised an eyebrow, her knowing smile never faltering. “Oh? And why is that, Martin? You are not already spoken for, are you?”

“No, of course not,” he replied quickly, feeling the heat rise in his cheeks. “It is just... Susanna and I... we are here for the wedding. Nothing more. We are here to ensure that Luke and Mary have a nice time.”

“And that is all? Because, Martin, it did not look like that was all. I have never seen you look at another woman that way in all my life.”

A thick ball of emotion lodged itself in Martin’s throat. “I am sure.”

But of course, his mother could see right through him. “If that is what you want to say, then so be it. But if something were to happen, just know that you have my full support.”

Martin nodded, grateful for her understanding but still feeling the weight of the situation bearing down on him. “Thank you, Mother. That means a lot to me.”

She walked away from him, leaving him stewing in his thoughts. He did not know what he was going to do now. He had not wanted anything to become obvious to other people, but of course, his mother had picked up on it anyway. He was definitely going to have trouble with her now.

How was he going to keep his eye on Edwin when his mother was going to be relentless now? Watching his every move? Especially when he was with Susanna?

Martin took a deep breath and tried to compose himself. The night was far from over, and he needed to stay focused. The music swelled around him as he moved through

the crowd, nodding politely to acquaintances and making small talk with distant relatives. His mind, however, was always on Susanna and the dangerous secret they shared.

He knew that he was going to have to get closer to Edwin, even if he did not want to, because that man was just about the only person who could provide him with the distraction that he so desperately needed.

Edwin had been mingling with the guests, seemingly carefree, but Martin knew better. There was something lurking beneath that polished exterior, something dangerous.

Spotting Edwin near the refreshments table with Luke at his side, Martin seized the opportunity. He moved closer to them and struck up a casual conversation in the hope that he might glean some new information.

All while being discrete in front of Luke, of course.

“Edwin, Luke,” Martin greeted them warmly, picking up a glass of champagne from a passing waiter. “How are you two enjoying the evening?”

“Martin,” Luke said with a broad smile. “It has been a wonderful night so far. Edwin here was just telling me about his latest business venture. Fascinating stuff, really.”

“Oh, do tell,” Martin encouraged, turning his attention to Edwin. He needed to keep the conversation light and friendly, but also find a way to dig deeper.

Edwin smiled, though it did not quite reach his eyes. Truth be told, he did not seem too pleased to have Martin join them. “Nothing too exciting, I am afraid. Just some investments I have been making. You know how it is, always looking for the next opportunity.”

“Of course,” Martin replied, nodding. “What sort of investments, if you do not mind my asking?”

“A bit of this and that,” Edwin said vaguely, his eyes darting around the room. “I have been focusing on expanding into some new markets. There is a lot of potential out there if you know where to look.”

Martin sensed that Edwin was being deliberately evasive. Were there really any investments? Was he trying to get Luke mixed up in something dangerous?

Martin knew that he was going to have to stick around for this conversation for as long as he could, just in case he picked on something that he might consider a deserved punishment for his friend.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“... a

nd that is when she told me that I could not ever set foot in her store again. It was utter madness! I could not even believe what I was hearing.”

As everyone around Susanna laughed at the anecdote Luke was telling them, she tried to join in as best she could, but truth be told, she could not take her eyes off Martin. The atmosphere between them had shifted this evening, she could feel it. They were more drawn to one another than ever before.

Unfortunately, they had already shared one dance, so she could not sneak off with him for another moment alone to figure out what was brewing between them.

Much as she kept trying to convince herself that was only because of the mission they were on together, she knew it was also because of the kiss. She could almost feel him wanting to kiss her again, just as she did him. When they were dancing together, she was surprised that both of them had managed to resist.

She did not know how much longer she could keep going with these complicated feelings swirling inside of her.

“I am sure I might have done the same thing,” Edwin boomed, putting himself right in the middle of the conversation once more. He had been doing this all evening. Every time Luke spoke, he made sure to join in, to make it clear that he did not intend to leave his cousin’s side. At least, that was how it seemed to Susanna. “I would not like any rabble-rousers in my store as well. You have always been this way, Cousin. You might have a sweet-looking face, but you are one for secret trouble.”

Susanna's eyes widened as she watched Edwin take Luke's glass from him, before making a quiet comment about heading to the bar. This was certainly suspicious because there were lots of people in their little group, and Edwin did not offer anyone else a drink.

Only Luke.

She saw Martin looking taken aback as well.

This was exactly the sort of thing that they needed to be aware of, this was just what Martin had been talking about earlier. If Edwin was going to do something dangerous to Luke, then this might be the sort of place that he would do it. He could quite easily slip something into Luke's drink, and no one would know.

If this man really was capable of murdering his best friend in a sick attempt to get closer to Mary, then there was no telling what he would do to his cousin.

He might even poison him.

Panic reverberated through Susanna. She knew that she needed to act. If she was going to protect Luke and ensure Mary did not end up losing another person that she was in love with, then she had to do something. But what? How could she prevent something terrible from happening?

As she caught Martin's eyes, she could see that he was struggling to figure out a solution to this problem as well. But unfortunately, he did not look like he had any ideas either. He was stunned, and his brain might have been whirring at the speed of light, but he had nothing either.

Time was ticking down.

This was becoming increasingly desperate by the minute.

Something needed to happen, but Susanna was worried that she would not be able to act fast enough.

Everyone else might have been calm, but they had no idea what was going on. They could easily lose themselves in the conversation without panicking about Edwin, because none of them had any idea of what he was hiding in his bedchambers. What he might be doing to Luke's drink right at this very moment...

Eventually, Susanna spotted Edwin with two glasses clutched between his fingers, returning to the group. She was not sure if that truly was a smug smile playing on his lips, but it certainly felt that way. Her heart leapt up into her throat, and she felt like she could not breathe, her whole body trembling with fear. The closer he got to the group, the more frightened she felt.

If she was not careful, her heart was going to absolutely explode with terror.

"Here you are, Luke." Edwin handed the drink to Luke and watched him intently. It was almost as if he was waiting for the moment that the glass touched his lips, which only amped up Susanna's anxiety.

He was definitely up to something.

Luke had not yet stopped talking, so he was not trying to drink. That gave Susanna a little moment to try and gather her thoughts, to work out what her next move was going to be. She did not even think to see if Martin had any plans because without being able to talk to him, she could only rely on herself.

Uh oh.

Now Luke was lifting the glass to his lips. It seemed to be happening in slow motion, and Susanna knew that it was now or never. She had to act, she had to do something drastic.

In a state of panic, Susanna lurched forward. The only thing she could think of was to knock the drink out of his hand, so it spilled everywhere. Then, if there was poison in it, it would not affect anyone.

“Oh my goodness!”

Luke gasped loudly as Susanna’s tumble knocked his glass sideways, spilling the drink everywhere. It was a real mess—it went all over the wall behind him. Even the glass tumbled to the floor because she had bumped into him so hard. It did not shatter, but the scene caused everyone to stare at Susanna.

Uh oh.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

She acted without thinking, trying to save Luke's life, but now with everyone staring at her, she did not know how to justify it. She caught Martin's eyes as a heat burned in her face.

"Have you had a few too many to drink?" Martin chuckled, instantly trying to make this situation much more humorous. Thankfully, others joined in his laughter, defusing the tension. "My goodness, Susanna, I think it might be time to retire for the night."

It was not the best excuse, but Susanna did not have anything else. She did not have any other reason for her actions, so she smiled thinly and nodded. "Yes, I think you might be right about that. It may well be best for me to get some sleep. I do apologize, Luke, I did not mean to cause you any issues."

But Luke did not respond. He looked far too shocked to say anything to her, which was understandable. Susanna had truly acted out of character, and she was still doing so. She was not one to have too much to drink, and she was sure that Luke already knew that. But he could not argue with her.

"I will come with you," Mary declared without a second thought as she linked their arms. "To make sure you are alright."

"Oh no, you do not need to do that..." Susanna tried to insist, but Mary would not hear it.

Susanna glanced over her shoulder, shooting Martin one last look to ensure that he was extra careful now that she was being taken out of the equation. She did not really

want to go to bed just yet, but she also could not stay. Not after that silly debacle.

“Are you alright, Susanna?” Mary asked once they were out in the hallway. “Have you really had too much to drink?”

For a moment, Susanna considered telling Mary everything so she could be warned as well. But she had promised Martin that they would wait until they had irrefutable evidence that Edwin was up to something. Much as she was sure that was a poisoned drink. It was probably not enough.

“I do not think I had too much to drink,” she confessed to her sister, because Mary knew her well enough to see that she was not intoxicated. “I think I am just clumsy. Perhaps because I am a little tired. It has been a busy time, with a lot of social events. I definitely think it is a good idea for me to return to bed. But, Mary, you do not have to come with me. I do not wish to cut your evening short. You have been having such a wonderful time with Luke. I am sure you are dying to go back in there.”

“I have had a lovely time,” Mary confessed. “But I am also a little tired. You are right, we have done nothing but dance and socialize. I am trying to make sure that I get plenty of sleep before the wedding. I want to look my best.”

“Oh, you do not need to worry about that. You are always beautiful, Mary. That will be no different on your wedding day.”

But Susanna could already tell that she was not about to change her sister’s mind. Mary was not about to leave Susanna to return to Luke’s estate alone. So the women left the ball and climbed into the carriage together to go back to Luke’s home.

“Did you have fun tonight?” Mary asked her as the carriage rumbled along the cobblestone road. “It looked like you were having a lot of fun.”

“It did?” Susanna asked in surprise. “Really?”

“Oh yes. Especially when you were dancing with Martin. You always look like you are having fun with Martin.”

Susanna swallowed hard, recalling their conversation earlier. It truly did seem like Mary had seen right through her. “Have you not heard me complaining about Martin and his teasing?”

“I have heard everything that you have said about him,” Mary declared with a cheeky smile. “And I see you around him too.”

Susanna sighed. It truly was getting increasingly difficult to hide the effect that Martin had on her. If Mary had spotted it, then it would not be long until everyone else saw it too. Then how would she explain their closeness and secretive conversations? They would have to keep their distance then, and it would be even harder for them to take Edwin down.

“Mary, has Edwin caused you any problems?” Susanna asked impulsively as the carriage drew closer to the estate, changing the subject to something that she really wanted to talk about. “Has he said anything worrisome to you?”

Much to Susanna’s relief and surprise, Mary shook her head. “If I am being honest with you, Susanna, he had not been problematic at all. I am sure that he has seen how happy Luke and I are together, and he has finally taken the hint. He does not even seem to want to be around me at all—he is too busy spending time with his family, which is nice. It is a relief to know that Luke and I will be able to get married with his blessing. I much prefer Edwin when he is not obsessing over me.”

Susanna wished that she could smile along with Mary, but she did not think that Edwin would give up that easily. Susanna was even more convinced that Edwin had

nefarious plans involving Luke. It was agony to not be in the ball, keeping control of everything going on around her. But she hoped that she could trust Martin to keep Luke safe.

“Soon, I will be a wife,” Mary commented as the carriage finally came to a halt. “And then I will not need to worry about a thing. I will be able to look forward to my days as a wife and eventually a mother. I will have none of these silly, petty troubles any longer. Life will be perfect. This is something that I have been waiting for, for far too long.”

“I know,” Susanna agreed. “And I believe you have finally found it.”

“Do you really think so?”

Susanna forced a smile, trying to share in her sister’s excitement. “Yes, Mary, you deserve all the happiness in the world. I am sure your life with Luke will be everything that you have dreamed of.”

“I think so too,” Mary sighed contentedly. “And I cannot wait for all of that to get started on our wedding day.”

Susanna knew the responsibility weighed on her to ensure that happened. That nothing got in the way. Hopefully, once Luke and Mary had said their vows, Edwin would have to get over his feelings for Mary. He would have to move on.

A weariness overcame Susanna as they stepped out of the carriage and walked into the house together. Perhaps it was better that she had left the ball when she did, or she might have ended up asleep on her feet. It was not like she could share another dance with Martin anyway, and she had been struggling to decline dance requests from others. Now she was very much looking forward to crashing into her bed, and sleeping off the day.

Then she would be able to face whatever dramas the morning had for them head-on.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

“I am going to retire for the night,” Mary said, stifling a yawn. “It has been a long day, and I want to be well-rested for tomorrow. You should get some sleep too. You truly do look a little weary. But please, come to me if you need anything, alright?”

“I will,” Susanna promised, though she knew sleep would be hard to come by with so much on her mind. “Goodnight, Mary.”

“Goodnight, Susanna.”

As Mary disappeared up the stairs, Susanna lingered in the foyer, her thoughts drifting back to Martin and Edwin. She could not shake the feeling that something was brewing tonight, and it made her uneasy not to be there.

Maybe I foiled Edwin’s plan. Perhaps Edwin will have nothing else...

But the thought offered little comfort. Edwin was cunning and determined; she doubted he would be deterred so easily.

Deciding she needed some fresh air to clear her mind, Susanna stepped out onto the terrace. The night was calm, the cool breeze a welcome relief from the stuffiness of the ballroom. She gazed out at the moonlit garden, trying to gather her thoughts and plan her next move.

Her mind drifted to Martin, still at the ball, likely keeping a watchful eye on Edwin. She trusted him, but the uncertainty gnawed at her.

The last few days were so much easier when she was beside him, and now without

him there, it was as if a part of her was missing.

Even if it was unlikely that he would dance with another woman tonight, she still hated to be without him, which was a troublesome feeling. Because soon enough, they would go their separate ways, and she would have to get used to life without him.

Which felt like a very strange concept now.

How on earth was she going to cope?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Luke, it has been such a long time since we took a horse ride to the cliffs. We should go in the morning! Reminisce about the good old days when we were always out having precarious adventures.”

Those words had stuck with Martin all night long. Hearing Edwin speak them after Susanna had knocked the drink off Luke’s hands was bone-chilling because Martin feared this might be yet another attempt to do something dreadful.

Every time he tried to imagine himself being wrong and paranoid, every time he tried to picture Edwin as a good person, he simply could not do it. He knew deep in his heart that his best friend was in trouble, and he was utterly determined to put a stop to it, no matter what happened.

Which was why he found himself seeking out Susanna after breakfast. He had not been seated near her today, so there was no way he could talk to her over the table. But time was ticking by, and he had to locate her quickly before there was an ‘accident’ at the cliffs, which meant Luke and Mary could not get married.

“Susanna!” Finally, he located her, just as she was about to set foot in the library, which truly seemed to be her favorite spot. “I need your help. I need your help right now.”

Her eyes widened. She seemed to instantly understand why he needed her so badly, which was a relief. If the panic was already written all over his face, then he would not be expected to explain too much.

“We must go to the stables right away. We are needed for a horse ride up to the cliffs.”

“The cliffs?” she gasped in horror. “Luke is headed to the cliffs? I assume Mary has not been invited along on this ride?”

Martin shook his head. “It was planned after you left the ball last night, so I am sure Luke has not had a chance to extend an invitation.”

Susanna pursed her lips and nodded determinedly. “Do not worry, I shall get Mary to come with us right away.”

A small smile played on Martin’s lips. It was always amazing to see Susanna snapping into action like this. “Great, then I shall meet you at the stables. We will get there at the same time as Edwin and Luke, and simply invite ourselves along on their little outing.”

“Right away. That sounds good to me.”

Martin could not help but notice that Susanna’s eyes lingered on him a moment too long. Probably because he could not take his eyes off her beautiful face either.

The urgency of the situation hung between them, but for a brief moment, the shared

glance conveyed more than words could. They were allies in this fight, bound by their mutual concern for Luke and Mary.

Susanna nodded again, more resolutely this time. "I am going to get my sister fired up for a horse ride. See you shortly."

Martin watched her hurry off, his heart pounding with a mix of anxiety and admiration. He turned and made his way to the stables, his mind racing with potential scenarios. He needed to be prepared for anything Edwin might have planned.

He paced around the stables, his nerves tightening with every passing second. The earthy smell of hay and the soft nickers of the horses did little to calm his anxiety. Martin ran his fingers through his hair, trying to collect his thoughts as he waited for the others to arrive.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

Finally, he heard the sound of footsteps approaching. He turned to see Susanna leading Mary towards the stables, both of them laughing, acting casual as they strolled. But Martin knew that this was just an act. He could almost sense the intensity of the stress balled up in Susanna's shoulders.

"Oh, hello, Martin," Mary declared as she waved towards him. "Thank you for the invite. It is the perfect day for a horse ride, and I am looking forward to seeing the cliffs. I have not yet been lucky enough to explore that area of this town."

"Shall we saddle the horses?" Martin asked with a smile. "Get ready for when Edwin and Luke arrive?"

The women nodded and quickly saddled the horses, working in silent coordination. Just as they finished, Martin heard voices approaching. Edwin and Luke were on their way.

"Quickly, climb up," Martin hissed at Susanna, just out of Mary's earshot.

The three of them mounted their horses and positioned themselves as if they had been there for a while, casually preparing for a ride.

Edwin and Luke arrived, looking surprised to see them. Edwin's eyes narrowed slightly, a flicker of something unreadable passing through his expression.

"Well, this is unexpected," Edwin said smoothly, though his tone held a hint of annoyance. "I did not realize we were going to have company on our ride."

Martin forced a smile. “We thought it would be a lovely day for a ride and decided to join you. The more, the merrier, right?”

Luke looked pleased to see them, his usual warm smile spreading across his face. “Of course! It will be great to have everyone along. Let us get going, shall we? Mary, I am so grateful that you are here too. I think you will love the cliffs.”

Edwin’s smile was tight, but he nodded in agreement. “Yes, alright. Let us go.”

As they rode towards the cliffs, Martin kept a close eye on Edwin. He noticed the subtle tension in Edwin’s posture, the way his eyes flicked towards Luke with a calculating gaze. Martin’s resolve hardened. He would not let Edwin out of his sight no matter what happened. This horse ride had only convinced him further that his paranoia was right.

The path to the cliffs was steep and narrow, with sharp turns and loose gravel. Martin rode next to Luke, engaging him in light conversation to keep the mood relaxed. Susanna and Mary rode behind them, keeping a watchful eye as well.

As they neared the top of the cliffs, Martin’s anxiety grew. The cliffs were a dangerous place, with steep drops and treacherous footing. He needed to be ready for anything.

They soon reached the top, and the view was breathtaking. The ocean stretched out before them, waves crashing against the rocks far below. Edwin dismounted first, followed by Luke and the others.

“It is beautiful here,” Edwin said, his voice carrying a hint of something sharp and unpleasant. “Perfect place for some quiet reflection.”

Martin’s heart pounded in his chest. He needed to stay close to Luke. “Indeed. I have

always thought that this was a lovely spot.”

“It makes me very excited that I will be getting married soon,” Luke declared as he reached out his hand to Mary. As she laced her fingers through his, Martin could not help but watch Edwin’s face fall. It was very obvious that things had fallen apart for him. Whatever his plan was, they had ruined it... thank goodness. “I do hope the weather stays as beautiful for our special day.”

“I think our mothers will ensure that we have the perfect weather for our wedding vows.” Mary laughed, seemingly completely unaware of the danger that she was standing in the way of. “They want the day to be perfect for all of us. I cannot wait for it.”

As Edwin took a step back from the couple, looking like a man who could not stand to be in the orbit of their love, Martin allowed his eyes to wander a little. He found himself staring at Susanna, who looked utterly stunning with the wind blowing through her beautiful hair. Martin’s heart pounded as heat surged through his body. He had never felt this way when he looked at a woman before. There was something powerful and intense about just being around her.

What am I going to do?

Every fiber of his being desperately wanted to reach out and wrap her up in his arms. He could not help himself, he wanted to stake his claim on her so no one else could ever touch her again.

Martin craved her, wanted her, needed her so badly that it was almost painful.

It killed him that he was not free to hold her hand in the same way that Luke was with Mary.

“Well, I suppose we have done all that we came here to do,” Edwin declared as he threw his hands in the air in frustration. “Should we perhaps make our way back home?”

Martin furrowed his brow in confusion. Had Edwin simply given up on the pretense that this was a trip to reminisce? He looked like he was becoming increasingly desperate, which of course was troubling. The more desperate a man was, the more dangerous and erratic he could become.

“Are you not enjoying the view?” Mary chuckled, completely unaware of Edwin’s inner turmoil. “This truly is one of the loveliest places that I have ever been. I do not know if I will ever want to leave here. With the sun high up in the sky like it is, it is stunning.”

No one else spotted Edwin rolling his eyes, but Martin saw it. “Yes, but we have a lot to do, do we not?” he snapped back. “I cannot believe you are here neglecting the wedding planning. Do you not think that people might be looking for you?”

Susanna stared at Edwin with disgust. At least she was not impressed with his behavior, it meant that Martin was not imagining things that were not there. Unfortunately, they seemed to be the only ones to pick up on his attitude. Mary and Luke were too lost in one another, as usual. It was almost as if the rest of the world had simply vanished into nothingness because they could not take their eyes off one another.

Susanna stepped forward, her voice calm yet firm. “Edwin, the wedding planning is well under control. A little time to enjoy the view won’t hurt anyone. Let us not spoil a beautiful morning with unnecessary worries.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

Martin appreciated her quick thinking, but he could see the frustration bubbling beneath Edwin's facade. They had foiled his plan, whatever it had been, and he was clearly not happy about it.

"Well, if everyone insists," Edwin said, his tone barely masking his irritation. "But let us not linger too long. We do have responsibilities to attend to."

Mary, still oblivious to the tension, squeezed Luke's hand and smiled. "Just a few more moments. It's not every day we get to enjoy such a view."

"Yes," Luke agreed. "And I thought you wanted to relive our childhood up here. Do you not recall how we used to spend all hours of the day fooling around up here?"

Luke's words seemed to cut through Edwin's irritation, if only for a moment. He smiled, a genuine if fleeting smile, and nodded. "Of course, Luke. How could I forget those days?"

Luke's face lit up with nostalgia. "Remember the time we tried to build that makeshift raft and sail it down the river? We were so convinced it would work, and we ended up soaked and shivering all the way home."

Edwin chuckled, surprising Martin, especially as the sound was unexpectedly warm. "Yes, and we blamed it on a sudden storm so we would not get in trouble."

Mary laughed, her eyes sparkling. "I cannot believe you two managed to get away with so much. It is a wonder you did not get into more trouble."

Luke continued, his voice animated with the joy of reminiscing. “And the time we decided to camp out in the old barn? We scared ourselves silly with ghost stories and ended up running back to the house in the middle of the night.”

Edwin’s smile faltered slightly, but he forced it back into place. “We were always getting into some kind of mischief. Thank goodness we did not cause more damage.”

As Luke and Edwin continued to exchange stories, Martin watched Edwin closely. The mask of irritation had slipped, replaced by a flicker of something more genuine—regret, perhaps, or longing. It was hard to tell, but it gave Martin a sliver of hope. Maybe, just maybe, Edwin was not entirely lost to whatever dark plans he harbored.

Was it possible?

Could they get through to Edwin and change his mind before anything crazy happened?

He may have harmed his best friend, but this was family. Luke was someone that Edwin had grown up with. Someone who he had always been close to. Someone who had basically been a brother to him.

Surely, his heart would not allow him to do something truly heinous.

“What do you think?” he muttered to Susanna as soon as he was close enough to her.

But her hardened expression shocked him. “I do not buy it. Any of it. I have seen how manipulative Edwin can be. I saw what he did to my sister in her grief. This is all just an act.”

Oh!

Maybe she was right.

Perhaps Martin had allowed himself to be fooled. He shook that off and stood up a little straighter, determined not to be tricked again.

“Maybe we really should make our way back now,” Edwin declared in a sickly-sweet voice that was not going to fool Martin again. “Because we do not want anyone to worry about us.”

“I suppose you are right,” Luke eventually agreed as he tugged Mary a little closer to him. “We do not wish to be away from the house for too long. Our mothers will start looking for us, and who knows how they will react when they cannot find us. I dread to think.”

Mary giggled, her cheeks shining pink with joy. “The closer we get to the big day, the more we are going to be needed, I suppose. But we must come back here at some point. I truly do adore this view. I would love to perhaps come and spend some time here once we have said our vows.”

Edwin had turned a funny shade of green. He looked like he might throw up at any given moment, so Martin stepped in to hurry things along. The quicker they got away from Edwin, the safer they would be.

“Well, let us get going then,” he declared with a bright smile. “So we can fulfill the duties that await us.”

Edwin was bringing a storm cloud back with him, he truly did not seem impressed at all. It was obvious that his mission had been thwarted, at which Martin was truly relieved. All of his plans were going to be thwarted because Martin was not going to let Edwin out of his sight. Not even for a second.

Well, not while he was around Luke anyway.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

That was strange.

Susanna had not enjoyed any moment of that horse ride, because Edwin was acting odd the whole time. She could see why Martin had freaked out so much, and why he had insisted that they all go for a ride with the cousins.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

Thank goodness they had gone along because Edwin had true darkness in his eyes that troubled her. Even when he was putting on an act for Luke.

He had honestly looked like a murderer more than Susanna had ever seen before. He made her feel so cold and uncomfortable, which was a sensation that she never wanted to go through again.

Edwin did not hang around in the stables long. He left the horse he had ridden with one of the stable boys and stormed inside before he had to spend yet another second with Luke and Mary. That was a relief because it meant Luke was safe for a little while longer.

Susanna did not need to worry as Mary and Luke took a little walk around the gardens, wanting to steal a few more moments alone before their day was flooded with wedding preparations.

“Well?” she hissed the moment she could speak to Martin alone. “What did you think about that?”

Martin frowned and shook his head. “Edwin was not behaving like a normal person. I truly am worried about what he is going to do. I might have seen regret in his eyes for a second when we were at the cliffs, but that had long gone by the time we got back here.”

“Well, we thwarted his plan today, so we should be proud of that.” Susanna stepped a little closer to Martin. “Whatever Edwin was going to do, he could not do it. Luke is alive and well. Safe to see another day. Honestly, at this point, it will be a relief to

have the wedding over. Edwin will have to leave Mary alone then.”

“Do you think he will?” Martin asked her with a one-shouldered shrug. “It worries me that he will never leave them alone. I have never seen obsession like it.”

Susanna shook her head sadly. She did not like to think of Mary dealing with the Edwin issue forever. She did not deserve that. “But soon enough, we will be able to warn Luke and Mary about this behavior. Then they will be able to take precautions of their own.”

Martin sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I hope you are right, Susanna. I hope they manage to get rid of his threat before anything terrible happens to them. I hope we help them find a way to rid their lives of him completely.”

All of a sudden, Susanna became acutely aware that everyone else had gone. All the stable boys had left, and there were only horses surrounding them. It seemed like Martin recognized the same thing as they were drawn to one another like they were being controlled by magnets.

Much as they both knew that their work was not done yet, and they still needed to keep an eye on Edwin, they also could not take this moment for granted. It was so rare that they could be wholly themselves around one another like this. Susanna was not going to let this moment slip by her...

An intense heat tore through her body as she could feel Martin’s breath tickling her lips. Everything about this was so wrong, but it felt so right. The twinkle in his eyes made her heart race. The nearer he got to her, the harder her heart pounded.

She shivered as his lips drew ever closer to her. The anticipation flooded her veins, causing her knees to weaken.

This was not wise... a part of her knew that she should stop this before it got too far...

But that was not what happened.

Instead, she rose on her tiptoes and finally closed the gap between them. They did not need distance, not anymore—what they really needed was to taste one another's lips.

But Martin did not finish the connection, not right away. He rested his forehead on hers and stared into her eyes. Ragged breaths came tumbling out of her mouth as she spotted the intensity of the flames dancing in his eyes. It seemed, at least at this moment, that Martin wanted her just as badly as she did him.

All of a sudden, his finger hooked underneath her chin, and everything intensified. Susanna became so dizzy with desire that she did not even know if she was breathing any longer. It had never felt like this before, the lust had never been so powerful.

Then his lips edged towards her. Just a little bit at first, almost as if he was testing the waters, but the passion soon got the better of him, and he crashed against Susanna, claiming her with his mouth. The butterflies that had been flapping in the pit of her stomach exploded into the size of birds. Susanna held on to Martin, needing him to remain close to her. This was the best feeling she had ever experienced in her life.

“Oh my,” Susanna gasped as they finally broke apart, but only because they needed some air for just a moment.

Martin was not done with her yet. He kissed her again, this time much deeper and more passionately. His tongue massaged Susanna's, his body pressed against her, and she lost her damn mind. Her legs had turned to jelly already, her pulse raced, all because of this amazing man.

“Martin, what are we doing here?”

But he did not even answer her. He was too busy caving to temptation and tugging up her skirts. It seemed like he quite seriously wanted her naked, and as utterly terrifying as that was, Susanna did not mind. She certainly allowed him to hitch her skirts up around her waist as he fell to his knees, tugging at her undergarments with his teeth.

“Oh, Susanna,” Martin moaned, his words vibrating against her thighs. “Your scent is intoxicating.”

Susanna could not hold herself up any longer, not with his mouth so close to her core and those intense words floating through her body. She stumbled backwards, bringing Martin with her, until she hit the stable wall behind her.

She did not have anywhere else to go once she was pressed up against the wall. He took full advantage of the moment, cupping her behind in his hands and trailing kisses along the hypersensitive skin of her thighs.

Just as her eyes fluttered shut, the feel of his fingers lightly grazing her core caused her hips to buck with desire. She had never been touched there, never been felt in such a way, and her whole body reacted to the feeling.

An inadvertent groan fell out of her mouth. Susanna knew that she was losing control of herself, she could feel any rationality falling away. This was a mistake, she knew that it was absolutely going to destroy her reputation, but at that moment, she did not care.

She never wanted this to end.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

“Do you like that?” Martin’s whisper filled her up. “Does it feel good?”

“That feels utterly phenomenal...”

But Susanna could not say more. She did not have a chance because Martin had knocked the air out of her lungs by tracing his tongue along her soaking-wet core.

Susanna gasped. This was all happening so quickly, yet somehow not fast enough. The sensation of his hot breaths along with his tongue caused her to shake uncontrollably. She had imagined what it might be like to really feel him, but this was off the scale. Even her fantasies could not have imagined this.

“Oh my, Martin,” she gasped as she tossed her head back in desire.

Her head smacked against the wall behind her, but that did nothing to stop the passion flooding her veins. If anything, the dizziness only intensified how incredible all of this felt. The heat burned upwards, setting her heart on fire.

Every time she shuddered, and her body convulsed, her heart thundered against her ribcage. Her legs had turned to jelly, she was not sure how to keep herself upright any longer.

Unfortunately, the wall gave her nothing to hold on to. She was terrified that she might tumble to the ground and destroy this beautiful moment. That was the last thing that she wanted to do. She could not stand losing all of this.

However wrong it was, she wanted to stay here forever.

Martin plunged his tongue deep inside her, tasting parts of her that she did not know could be tasted by another person. He had become a madman on a mission, and that stole all the air from her lungs. Susanna was certain that he was utterly determined to push her over the edge. She was hopeless, helpless, completely at his mercy, and that was so thrilling that she could not contain herself.

A pressure of pleasure began to build within Susanna as she knotted her fingers in Martin's hair, tugging every time it felt good. He did not seem to mind her clinging to him, and even if he did, his moans simply vibrated through her, dousing her whole body in intense flames.

His tongue picked up speed. It seemed to be everywhere, all over her body. Susanna could no longer keep track of what he was doing to her, but she simply did not care.

It was all just so wonderful.

Her toes curled as the burning hot bliss danced through her. She felt herself rise upwards a little, but thankfully not out of Martin's reach. Truly, she never wanted this phenomenal sensation to end. She loved the idea of sitting atop this bliss for the rest of her life, no matter what the rest of the world wanted from her...

And then she fell.

Susanna screamed loudly. She fell hard as the waves of pleasure cascaded through her, hitting her like a powerful tsunami. It zapped all the energy out of her, she could no longer keep herself upright.

It felt like she was sinking deeper under the waters of heaven, and she wanted them to drown her. As Susanna lost herself in this, she knew that however dangerous this was, she wanted to remain here forever.

Even Martin could no longer hold her upright. Susanna slumped downwards, panting desperately against the wall as she tried her hardest to regain any semblance of self-control. The dizziness was so intense that even her vision had blurred. But she could still see him.

Susanna reached out and cupped Martin's cheek in her hand, loving the way that he smiled at her. He might have had a sharp tongue when he was teasing her, but he caressed her softly with the same tongue when it mattered.

Eventually, Martin rose to his feet, and he pressed his lips to hers, kissing her softly. There was something so sweet and romantic about the kiss, it made Susanna's heart thunder with feelings. The rational part of her mind knew that she could not really have feelings for this man because it would only end in disaster, but how could she close her heart off completely after that unexpected, magical experience?

That was far more than just kissing. They had really overstepped the line now. Susanna's reputation could truly be in ruin, but in the heat of the moment, she did not care. Nothing mattered, other than this man in her arms. The man who she was working with to save the day.

"There is something very special about you, Susanna," Martin declared smilingly as he brushed a stray strand of hair out of her face. That was a stark reminder that Susanna was going to have to take care of her appearance before she left the stables, or someone might guess what they had been up to. "Very special, indeed. You are unlike any woman I have ever met before."

Susanna parted her lips, wanting to respond to Martin, but truth be told, she did not know what she was supposed to say. Since she found it difficult to tell if he was joking or not at the best of times, she most certainly could not be sure now. Was he teasing her? Trying to make her react and embarrass herself?

For that reason alone, she ended up saying nothing. But that did not stop Martin from continuing with his little speech.

“In fact, darling Susanna, one might even dare to say that I am falling for you.”

Falling for me?

Susanna was gobsmacked. She could not believe those words had just left Martin’s mouth.

Now she was utterly certain that he had to be teasing her, and that was a terrible feeling. Knowing that he could make such throwaway comments when it came to matters of the heart was horrifying. The heat that Susanna had been drowning in before had just been doused in an iciness she could not stand.

“I... I need to go,” she muttered almost under her breath as she backed away from Martin, desperately needing to put some distance between them now. “I have to... to help with the wedding, and... I am sure Mary is looking for me. I am sure she needs me...”

There was nothing else she could say. She could hardly stand to look at Martin any longer because his words had affected her deeper than she wanted. Thinking about him falling for her was a lot. She could hardly bear it. Susanna needed to race inside, she needed to lock herself away in her bedchambers, she needed some time alone to process everything that had just happened before it swallowed her up whole.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

Tears pricked her eyes as she gathered herself, grabbing her undergarments as she went. Humiliation burned within her. She could hardly breathe as she raced away from the stables, needing to get as far away from Martin as humanly possible. She could not stand to even see him any longer after that.

Why would Martin do such a thing? Why would he play with me in such a way?

He had already let her know that he did not really believe in love and that he found the idea of marriage laughable. Susanna had not wanted to put her heart on the line either, because of what she had witnessed with Mary after Duncan's death, but it still did not feel good to have her heart stomped on in such a way.

I will not be able to face him again, she thought sadly to herself as she headed inside and made her way to her bedchambers. That might truly have ruined everything. What on earth are we going to do now?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

In fact, darling Susanna, one might even dare to say that I am falling for you.

Those words had stuck in her mind ever since Martin had said them to her. They might as well have been her mantra over the last few days. Which had not helped her every time she had been forced to be around Martin.

Much as Susanna had done everything that she could to avoid him, there were times when they simply had to look one another in the eyes. It was as if that magnetic force kept pulling them back together, even if they did not want that.

“Susanna, are you even listening to me?” Mary demanded, snapping Susanna back to the present moment. She was supposed to be helping with the flower arrangements to be placed in the center of all the tables, but clearly, she had not been doing a good enough job. “My goodness, what is with you, Susanna? I cannot seem to get any conversation out of you at the moment.”

“Sorry,” Susanna murmured as she attempted to get back to work. “I guess I am tired.”

“No, I believe it is more than that,” Mary mused as she rested her hands on her hips. “There is something on your mind, I can see it. Something that you are not really sharing with me.”

Susanna shook her head, but she could feel a heat burning in her cheeks. She did not want to give herself away, but she could not seem to stop her blood from burning up. It did not help that she was keeping too many secrets from her sister. “I do not know what you are talking about.”

Mary narrowed her eyes, studying her sister’s flushed face. “Oh, come on, Susanna. I know you better than that. You have been acting strange ever since we went riding.”

Susanna tried to focus on the delicate roses and peonies in her hands, but her mind was still stuck on Martin’s words. She placed a sprig of baby’s breath into the arrangement, hoping it would hide her trembling fingers.

“I am fine, really.”

Mary did not seem to be buying it. She stepped closer, her voice softening. “Is it Martin?”

Susanna’s head snapped up, her eyes wide with surprise. “What do you mean?”

“Well,” Mary began, glancing around to make sure they were alone and no one could overhear them. “I do notice things, you know, and I have noticed the way you two look at each other. And the way you avoid him too... It is not hard to see that something is going on. I have tried to talk to you about it a few times, but you have been resistant. I did not want to push you... but if he is causing you issues, then I need to know. I will not stand for it.”

Panic flared in Susanna’s chest. She had not realized they were so obvious and that Mary was just waiting for her to say something.

“It is nothing, Mary. Just... complications.”

Mary placed a hand on her sister’s arm, her expression earnest. “You can talk to me, you know. If something is happening, or if he did something?—”

“No, no,” Susanna interrupted quickly. “He did not do anything wrong. It is just... confusing. He said something to me, and I cannot stop thinking about it.”

Mary’s eyes softened with understanding. “You care about him, am I right? You might even... like him... I have thought that for a while now because I have never seen a man get under your skin in the same way that Martin does.”

Susanna bristled. She never intended to like anyone. Especially not after seeing how hurt love had left Mary... but then Susanna could also see how happy love made her sister now. It was all so very confusing and hardly any wonder that she felt like her head was spinning all the time.

Eventually, she sighed, feeling the weight of her emotions pressing down on her. “I think I do. But it is more than that. It is like... he sees me in a way no one else does. And I am not sure how to handle it. I do not want to like him. I have been actively trying not to like him, but I cannot seem to stop myself.”

Mary smiled gently. “Love can be scary, especially when it is unexpected. But maybe it is time to face it head-on. Talk to him, Susanna. You might be surprised by what you find.”

Susanna bit her lip, considering her sister’s words. Could she really be brave enough to confront her feelings? To risk her heart? The thought made her stomach twist with anxiety, but there was also a flicker of hope.

“Maybe you are right,” she said finally, her voice barely above a whisper. “Maybe I do need to talk to him.”

Mary gave her a reassuring squeeze. “You will figure it out. And whatever happens, I am here for you. If you need any help or advice, I will do what I can to assist you.”

Susanna managed a small smile. “Thank you, Mary. I needed that. But please, do not say anything to anyone else.”

“Of course, I will not say a word. You can trust me.”

As they returned to their work, Susanna’s mind was no longer solely on the flower arrangements. She could not stop thinking about Martin and the possibilities that lay ahead. For the first time in days, she felt a glimmer of clarity amidst the confusion...

Unfortunately, all of that seemed to float away the moment she laid eyes on Martin. It was as if he left her speechless and completely unable to talk. Every single time she tried to plan out the conversation in her mind, she found herself left with a blank emptiness when she met his gaze.

She kept fearing again and again that he did not mean his words, and that it was just another way for him to tease her. There was no way that Susanna could bear the idea of being made a fool of.

It was already going to be hard enough to get through this wedding with all the drama that Edwin might cause, without being utterly humiliated as well. So she continued to tiptoe around Martin, trying to avoid him as much as she could, so she did not have to say a thing.

Susanna threw herself into wedding-based activities in an attempt to distract herself from the ever-growing complicated feelings that were blooming inside her. Since Martin seemed to be focused on Edwin, she knew that Luke was cared for, and she did not need to cross paths with him very much.

She was probably letting Mary down by not talking to Martin, and herself as well, but she simply could not make herself do it. She kept telling herself that it was pointless

because once the wedding was over, they would not need to talk or see one another again. So she could forget that all of this had ever happened. It was easier for her that way, to keep her heart safe.

“Well, it is nice to see you being such a wonderful sister,” a voice declared, shattering the silence in the drawing room that had been accompanying Susanna’s thoughts. “I am sure Mary is very happy to have your assistance.”

Nerves fluttered through Susanna as she found herself smiling at Martin’s mother. She was a lovely woman, one who Susanna enjoyed talking with when the chance arrived. But the fact that they were alone for the first time ever, and with the fears she had about Martin, she was not sure.

“T-thank you,” Susanna stammered. “I am just trying to do what I can to help out.”

Her heart pounded as the lady took a seat opposite her. Was this just a chance conversation? Or was there more to it? Was she about to have to answer some very difficult questions? She sat up a little straighter in the chair, trying to brace herself for the worst.

“Does this make you excited for your own wedding, one day?”

“Oh.” Susanna furrowed her brow. That was not what she expected to be asked. “I suppose so. I am not too sure.”

Abigail laughed at her. “Oh dear, you remind me of my son. He has never seemed keen on the idea of marriage either, although I am not sure why.” She smiled to herself as she tapped her fingers together. “I think it is wonderful to have love in your life. It makes the days brighter and more worthwhile. A woman as beautiful as you should have no trouble finding a husband. Someone who will love you forever and treat you well.”

Susanna swallowed hard. What on earth was she supposed to say to that?

“Yes... I am sure it is lovely. It sounds very nice.”

Nice? That was such a small word to use, but at this moment, Susanna did not know how it would feel to be truly loved.

“Perhaps you just need to find the right person,” Abigail continued, sounding innocent enough, but Susanna could sense that there was more underneath her words. “Maybe, just like my Martin, you need to find the love of your life. Then you will see that I am right.” She smiled, almost to herself. “There is something about weddings that simply makes you feel romance in the air, have you not noticed that? It is all I can feel.”

Susanna forced a polite smile, her mind racing as she tried to decipher the true intent behind the lady’s words. Was she merely making conversation, or was there a hidden message? The ambiguity made Susanna uneasy.

“Yes, I suppose weddings do have a way of bringing out those feelings in people,” Susanna replied carefully. “They remind us of the possibilities that love can bring.”

The lady’s eyes twinkled, and she leaned forward slightly, as if sharing a secret. “Do you believe in destiny, Susanna? In the idea that some people are meant to find each other?”

Susanna hesitated. “I think it’s a lovely thought, though I’m not sure if life always works out that way.”

“Ah, ever the pragmatist,” the lady said with a chuckle. “But sometimes, my dear, pragmatism must give way to faith. Especially in matters of the heart.”

Before Susanna could respond, there was a knock on the door, and Mary entered, her face flushed with excitement. “Susanna, there you are! We need your help with the seating arrangements. It is turning into quite the puzzle.”

Relief washed over Susanna as she stood up, grateful for the interruption. “Of course, Mary. I shall be right there.” She turned to the lady with a gracious smile. “Thank you for the lovely chat.”

The lady nodded, her eyes still holding that mysterious glint. “Any time, dear. Remember what I said.”

As Susanna followed Mary out of the drawing room, she could not shake the feeling that the conversation was more than just idle chatter. Did Martin’s mother know something? Was she hinting at something specific? And why did the mention of destiny and love make her feel so unsettled? Had Martin been open and honest with her about his feelings for Susanna? And did that mean he was not teasing her with his comments about falling for her, after all?

If that was the case, then what on earth was she going to do?

“What was that about?” Mary asked curiously as they walked.

Susanna hesitated, not quite sure how to explain the conversation without revealing too much. “Oh, just a little talk about weddings and love. Martin’s mother has some interesting views on destiny, and I think she is getting very caught up in the romance here.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

Mary chuckled, her eyes twinkling with amusement. “Yes, she does tend to wax poetic about those things. Did she mention how she met Martin’s father at a ball and knew instantly he was the one?”

Susanna smiled, feeling a bit lighter. “No, she did not get to that part. But she did say something about how weddings bring out feelings of romance in the air.”

“They certainly do,” Mary agreed, her smile widening. “I think that is why everyone loves them so much.”

Susanna paused for a moment before she asked a dangerous question. “Is that how you felt about Luke when you first saw him? Was it love at first sight?”

Mary shook her head. “Oh no, because I was not planning on falling in love again. But I did think that he was very handsome.”

Susanna smiled at Mary’s candid response. “Handsome enough to make you reconsider?”

Mary laughed, a melodic sound that seemed to brighten the room. “Exactly. I did not want to admit it at first, but he grew on me quickly. It was his kindness and his way of making me feel special that won me over.”

Susanna nodded, understanding more than she let on. “It is amazing how love can sneak up on you like that.”

“Indeed,” Mary agreed, her eyes softening with affection as she glanced at Luke, who

was still busy with some final wedding details. “I am grateful every day for the chance to be with him.”

Susanna’s heart warmed at her sister’s happiness. If only she could find such certainty in her own feelings.

“Right, let us get these seating arrangements completed,” she declared, determined to change the subject before she got caught up in her emotions. “And whatever else you need help with. We can talk about fate and destiny once you have said those vows and committed yourself to Luke forever.”

In the hustle of wedding preparations, Susanna tried to push the thoughts aside, focusing instead on the task at hand. But as she helped Mary with the seating arrangements, her mind kept drifting back to Martin, and the complex tangle of emotions that surrounded him. No matter how hard she tried to ignore it, the feeling that something significant was looming on the horizon persisted.

After all, she could not ignore these intense, overwhelming feelings forever.

She could not deny the truth to herself any longer. She had feelings for Martin, feelings that scared her because they were so unexpected and so intense. And the more she tried to suppress them, the stronger they seemed to grow. The more they seemed to consume her whole.

Everyone was right, she did need to talk with him to straighten this all out. But how could she do that? Where would she begin? Could she really afford to open her heart, knowing the risks involved? Or was it safer to keep her distance, to protect herself from the potential heartache? Could she live with herself if she did not do a thing?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Martin could not shake off this terrible dejected feeling. It had been consuming him for days now, ever since he said the silly words that sent Susanna spiraling. She had hardly even looked his way since. It was as if she could not stand to meet his eyes, even for a second.

In fact, darling Susanna, one might even dare to say that I am falling for you.

He might have meant it in the heat of the moment, and truth be told, he was quite sure that he truly did feel that way for Susanna. But he never would have said it if he knew that she would basically vanish from his life.

They might have still been staying under the same roof, but they might as well have been on other sides of the country for all the good it was doing them.

It did not help that time was running out. Once the wedding was over, there would be no reason for them to spend time together any longer. There would be no need for them to converse. It would all be over.

But what could Martin do without pushing Susanna further away?

“I am so thrilled,” Luke declared, pulling Martin from his morose thoughts. “Tomorrow is the day I shall become a husband at long last.”

As he clinked his glass in a cheers gesture with everyone in the group, Martin forced himself to join in. But it was terribly challenging for him to get in the party spirit. If it were not for Edwin, and his need to keep an eye on him, he might have made an excuse to avoid these impromptu drinks. Just to give himself the much-needed time to get his head in order for the following day.

He and Susanna would not be able to avoid one another at the wedding ceremony, so he was going to have to keep his feelings locked away then. The last thing he wanted

to do was cause a scene at Luke and Mary's wedding.

"Are you not thinking about running?" Edwin teased in a tone of voice that Martin could only deem nasty. Although he seemed to be the only one because Luke laughed with intense mirth. "I have a carriage waiting outside if you wish to disappear into the sunset. I am sure Lady Mary will be fine without you..."

"Oh, you are so silly, Edwin." Luke chuckled while patting his cousin on the back. "You always find a way to make me laugh, but I can assure you that I do not need a carriage. I will not be running anywhere. I cannot wait to be a married man, and even if Mary will be alright without me, I will certainly not be alright without her."

How did Luke not notice the way that Edwin shot him a glare? He really was not looking for the warning signs as Martin was.

"In fact, Edwin, I think it is time we all get a drink so we can celebrate what will happen tomorrow. It is going to be amazing."

"I will get the drinks," Martin cut in quickly. "I will sort out beverages for all of us, so we can celebrate. Do not worry, Luke."

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

He moved swiftly to the bar, his mind racing. Luke's obliviousness to Edwin's intentions left Martin feeling more anxious than ever. He had known Edwin long enough to recognize the malice that lurked behind his seemingly playful jests. Edwin's jealousy and bitterness had always simmered beneath the surface, and now, with the wedding so close, it seemed to be more obvious than ever.

As Martin ordered the drinks, he tried to strategize his next move. How was he supposed to keep Edwin away from Luke without being obvious?

Since Luke was completely fooled by his cousin, it seemed impossible.

With the drinks in hand, Martin made his way back to the group, a forced smile plastered on his face. He handed out the drinks, keeping a close watch over Edwin, who accepted his glass with a suspiciously polite nod. Still, Martin was wary. Very wary.

"To Luke and Mary!" Edwin toasted, raising his glass high. The group echoed his cheer, clinking their glasses together. Martin took a small sip, his eyes never leaving Edwin. He needed to stay vigilant. "The wedding is happening in the morning, and then he will be tied down forever."

A thick ball of worry lodged itself in the base of Martin's throat. He did not like that statement at all, it put him on edge. Even if Edwin did not get the chance to do something nefarious at this party, Martin was not convinced that he would let it go. There was still plenty of time to act badly, even when everyone went to sleep.

"To Luke and Mary!" someone else said, triggering a cheer from everyone else. "To

their special day in the morning.”

“To Luke!”

“To Mary!”

“To the wedding!”

Martin tried his hardest to join in, but it was not the easiest thing for him to fake. His mood was sinking increasingly lower by the minute. Even as Luke patted him on the back, he could not smile.

Not when Edwin was sneering more obviously now.

That man had a gun in his bedchambers.

If Edwin did not want Luke to make it to the morning, then who knew what he might do?

Well, all that meant was that Martin would not be getting any sleep. He did not mind attending the wedding exhausted as long as Luke got there alive. If it meant he had to sit outside Luke’s bedchambers all night long to ensure Edwin could not get inside, then that was exactly what he would do.

Edwin was not going to win.

He was not going to outwit Martin. He had picked the wrong enemy here, which he was about to find out.

Martin paced up and down outside of Luke’s bedchambers, his heart racing with each passing second. He was growing weary, but increasingly aware that something could

still happen. The way that Edwin had looked tonight, it had unnerved Martin too much. The more he drank, the darker his eyes became. The angrier he had appeared.

Martin jumped every single time he heard a noise. There were too many people here, too much going on. Even at this very late hour. The preparations for the wedding were still underway, which left Martin with the silence he so desperately needed.

How was anyone sleeping in this mess?

He paused for a moment, trying to steady his breathing. The dimly lit hallway felt stifling, and he could feel the tension in his muscles refusing to relent. Martin glanced at the heavy wooden door of Luke's bedchambers, contemplating whether he should knock and check if his friend was alright. But what would he say? What if Luke was already asleep, oblivious to the turmoil outside his door?

He was alright anyway, Martin knew it. He had been outside these doors ever since Luke went to bed.

A sudden creak from down the hall made Martin flinch. He cursed under his breath, his nerves frayed. Every footstep, however light, had him on edge. He could not stand any of it.

The more he paced, the more he allowed his thoughts to wander, and Martin's thoughts kept circling back to Edwin. He had always been intense, but tonight, there was something different in his demeanor, something threatening. The way Edwin's eyes had burned with an unspoken fury, the way his lips had curled into a sneer as he watched Luke as he drank and talked about his upcoming wedding ceremony—it all hinted at something sinister.

He wrung his hands anxiously, thinking about the gun Edwin had hidden away in his closet.

That damn gun.

The dinging of the clock, alerting him to the next hour, only put Martin more on edge. It was now three am, a terrible late hour that seemed to amplify every small sound, every faint rustle or distant whisper. Martin rubbed his temples, trying to fend off the throbbing headache that was forming.

Another creak echoed through the hallway, this time closer. Martin's heart leaped into his throat as he turned to face the direction of the noise. He squinted into the dim light, straining to make out any movement in the shadows. Anything that he might need to act on...

Just as Martin's hand curled into a fist, a figure emerged from the darkness. It was a servant, a young woman carrying a tray with a pitcher and cups.

"Sir," she finally whispered, bowing her head slightly, "I did not mean to startle you. I am just bringing water for the guests."

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

Martin exhaled, forcing himself to relax. “It is fine,” he said, though his voice was tight. “Just... be careful.”

“Do you need anything?” she asked him cautiously. “Perhaps guidance to your bedchambers?”

Martin gritted his teeth. “I do not need a thing,” he practically growled. “Thank you very much.”

The servant nodded and hurried past him, disappearing into one of the adjacent rooms. Martin resumed his pacing, his thoughts now racing even faster. Half of him hoped that he was just being paranoid and that this would turn out to be nothing. But the other half of him just wanted Edwin to do whatever it was he had planned, so he did not need to remain in this horrible anticipation any longer.

What was that?

This sound was different.

Martin could not put his finger on what had troubled him, but his heart began to race. It sped so quickly all the tiredness that had been fogging up his brain. He felt more alert than he had ever been before.

Those footsteps were hard and heavy. It seemed like they belonged to someone who had spent the evening getting intoxicated. Martin’s heart raced in his throat as he stood to attention, trying to see who this person was before anything else could happen.

Is it...?

It was pitch black, but this was definitely the silhouette of a tall gentleman, one who needed to lean against the wall to keep himself standing upright. Martin tried his hardest to swallow back all his fear as the person, who was clearly unaware that he was being watched, continued to stumble towards him.

The man was mumbling as well. Talking under his breath. While Martin could not pick out any of the words the man was saying, he knew that voice all too well.

The moment was here.

“Edwin?”

The man’s head snapped up, blinking furiously as he tried to work out who was in front of him.

“M-Martin, what are you doing?” Edwin stammered. “I am just...”

But it did not matter what he was about to say. Martin’s eyes darted downwards, and he saw the item clutched tightly between Edwin’s fingers.

The gun.

“What are you doing with that?” Martin demanded, fury lacing his tone. “Why are you here near Luke’s bedchambers?”

Edwin did his best to tuck the gun behind his back and to hide the weapon as if that was going to make it any better. But Martin did not care, it was far too late for that now. Edwin’s intentions were clear, and there was no way that he could wriggle his way out of this.

Hopefully, Edwin understood that, and he would not do anything stupid.

Martin's heart pounded as he took a step closer, his eyes locked on Edwin. The dim moonlight from a nearby window cast an eerie glow, highlighting the tension in Edwin's face. Edwin's hand trembled as he tried to hide the gun, but Martin's unwavering gaze made it clear that the attempt was futile.

"Answer me, Edwin," Martin pressed, his voice low and controlled. "What are you planning to do with that gun?"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"I... I am just taking a walk," Edwin stammered, causing Martin to roll his eyes in frustration. "I am a little drunk. I had far too much to drink tonight, and I am trying to sober up. You know, because the wedding is tomorrow morning."

"And you need a gun for that?"

"I am just carrying this for my own protection. You never know what nefarious people might be loitering around at night."

"Well, you are the only person I can see walking around with a weapon," Martin snapped. He was tired and impatient with this man, and could not stand his disgusting attitude. "So I do not think that there is anything I need to worry about aside from you."

"Well... well..." Edwin staggered backwards, but Martin was not going to let him go anywhere. "You are also loitering around. Is that not suspicious? Should I not be worried about whatever you are here to do to Luke? Are you jealous of him? Do you want to harm him? Perhaps you do not wish to see him married because you are worried about losing your drinking buddy. Yeah, I bet that is it..."

If Edwin wanted to try and prod Martin, then he could certainly do the same thing. Maybe if he irritated Edwin enough, he could force him to confess. He was going to have to let all his suspicions out to see how Edwin reacted. Luckily, his eyes had adjusted to the darkness now, so he could see much more of the man's expression.

"I am not the one who is clearly in love with Mary," he growled. "I am not the one who has shown to everyone around him that he has an utter obsession with the bride-to-be. That is you, Edwin. It is utterly pathetic to see you trailing after her like a little, lost puppy."

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

Edwin's jaw slackened. He had clearly never had anyone confront him in such a manner. "I... I do not know what you are talking about."

"I will go further," Martin continued, stepping closer to Edwin. He wanted the man to feel like he was cornered. "Since there are some secrets that you think you might have hidden, but you have not. Because I can see right through you." He jabbed his finger into Edwin's chest. "I know that you have been so in love with Mary over the years that it utterly infuriated you to see her falling in love with your best friend. You could not stand the idea of them getting married, could you? It ate at you. I can just imagine what it was like for you. Seeing Duncan with Mary, watching them fall in love... it angered you so much, you could not stand it. You wanted him dead, you needed him dead, you could not stand to see him living the life that you have always wanted to live."

Edwin seemed gobsmacked by this. It was written all over his face. Martin knew that he was on to something because Edwin had no response.

"Is that what you are going to do to your own cousin as well?" Martin continued, raising his voice a little in the hope that someone might hear him. The more people who overheard his confession, the better. "Do you intend to kill the boy you grew up alongside? The person you have been close to for your whole life? Are you going to take that gun and kill Luke in the hope that Mary will finally look at you?"

Edwin shook his head, but Martin was not done.

"She did not look at you once when Duncan died. She did not show you any attention. She did not respond to the countless times you tried to show your interest,

she did not like all your visits to her home...”

“You do not know anything about my visits to see Mary,” Edwin growled. He could not control himself, the anger was clearly bubbling up inside of him. “She did like all of my visits. She was always polite and sweet to me. Mary is always polite and sweet...”

“Which does not mean that she has any affection for you!” Martin insisted. “Because that is how she treats everyone. You should not read too much into it. Especially now that Mary has very clearly moved on after Duncan’s death, and not with you. With your cousin. With Luke, who she clearly loves very much.”

“But she... she just did not know that I wish to be her husband. As soon as she knows...”

Martin clucked his tongue and angrily shook his head. “You are utterly delusional, Edwin. I have never met anyone as delusional as you. You cannot honestly believe that Mary will ever look your way. Do you truly think you are so discrete that she did not know what you were doing? Edwin, of course she knew what you were doing. Of course she knew that you were interested in her. She just did not want you.”

Perhaps the way that he said those words in such a blunt manner was a little harsh, but someone needed to speak so clearly so Edwin would finally get it. Martin needed him to accept the words he was saying, so he would finally back off.

“She did not want you...”

Edwin looked like he was going to be sick. He bent double, clutching his stomach. Martin could hear a string of curse words coming out of his mouth, but none of it was making much sense. It was as if he was in the process of losing his mind, and Martin was the only one to witness it. But he did not feel any kind of sympathy for Edwin,

not at all. If Martin had not stopped him in his tracks, there was no telling what Edwin would have done to his own cousin.

“She does want me,” Edwin finally muttered. “You have no idea what you are talking about. She just does not know it yet, that is all. She does not know a thing. But I can change that, I can prove it to you. All we need to do is go to her bedchambers now. Wake her up and then I will finally confess my love and change everything.” He nodded to himself as if he wanted to encourage himself to go forward with such a mental plan. “Yes, perhaps that is better. I do not need to do anything with this gun. I can see that now, it is clear.”

“What on earth are you talking about, Edwin?” Martin asked in disgust and horror. “Of course, you cannot go and wake her up. It is the middle of the night, the night before her wedding.”

“Yes, and the wedding is exactly what I need to stop.”

Edwin turned on his heels and stalked off. Well, as fast as he could move in his intoxicated state.

Martin was not going to let Edwin anywhere near Mary, he would never allow that, but the man still had his gun clutched between his fingers. When Mary inevitably rejected him, if he got that close to her, then there was no way he could have a weapon with him.

“Edwin, do not be ridiculous,” Martin snapped as he followed Edwin down the hallway. He was becoming increasingly convinced that others would join them soon, so he would not be alone as he witnessed Edwin finally confessing all. He had not denied anything that Martin had accused him of, but he also had not confessed. “You cannot seriously think that Mary wants to hear from you right now. She will be in her nightwear, she will be sleeping, she will not want to be disturbed by you.”

“But she needs to know how I feel,” Edwin shot back. “I cannot let her marry Luke without letting her know that she and I can be perfect together. I am sure it will change her mind about everything if she knows how I feel about her.”

“And how do you think she will feel, knowing that you killed Duncan?”

Edwin halted, but only for a moment. He did not give Martin the answer that he so desperately needed.

“Come on, Edwin, let us talk about what you did. Let us talk about how you murdered a man who was supposed to be your best friend. The man who Mary thought that she was going to spend the rest of her life with. I think it is time for you to be honest about what you did and why you did it.”

“Shut up,” Edwin murmured. “You need to shut up, Martin. You do not know what you are talking about.”

“Oh, I think I know exactly what I am talking about. And I think it is time that you finally get it all off your chest.”

Edwin finally spun around to look at Martin, with flames of anger in his eyes. “I am not going to talk to you about anything. There is only one person I wish to talk with right now, and she is lying in her bed. She is waiting for me, and I do not wish to keep her waiting any longer. She needs to know exactly how I feel.”

Martin stepped forward and grabbed Edwin’s arm before he could get away. “No, you are not going to talk to anyone. The best thing you can do right now is go to bed.”

“You do not know anything about me, Martin. I have told you to leave me alone. You need to stay out of this. It has nothing to do with you.”

“Luke is my best friend. Unlike you, I actually care about my friend, and I will not allow anything to happen to him.”

“Duncan did not know what he had. He did not appreciate Mary,” Edwin scoffed. “Luke is the same. He has not got a clue. If I were lucky enough to be with Mary, then I would ensure that she felt like a princess every single day of her life. I would treat her as she should be treated. I would give her the best life. She at least deserves to know that I can do that for her.”

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

Martin stepped back a little as the power of Edwin's obsession struck him hard. It did not seem to matter what he had said to him, Edwin had not heard a word. He did not want to hear it because it did not fit in with his own little fantasies. This was a man who truly believed that Mary belonged to him.

All Martin wanted was a confession from him, but now he was utterly terrified as the man's desires flickered right through him. He felt ice cold, and a little helpless too. He truly did wish that there was someone else around, anyone, to assist him with this utter madness.

"Edwin, please," Martin started, trying a different tactic. He thought that being calm might make Edwin calm down a little. "Please just take a moment to think about what you are doing, and how you are feeling. Please, do not do anything rash. Think about Mary for a moment, and how she will take this. This will not be good news to her."

All of a sudden, Edwin flicked the gun up once more, this time into Martin's face.

"I am thinking about Mary. I am always thinking about Mary. You do not understand at all. In fact, you have been nothing but a problem to me. I think it might be you who has been in the way the whole time. Perhaps it is you who I need to get rid of."

With that, before Martin could get yet another word out, Edwin did the worst thing that he could—he squeezed the trigger.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

What is that noise?

Susanna had not been sleeping well as it was. She could not shut off her worries that the wedding was in the morning and that Edwin had still not managed to pull off any of his hare-brained plans. Every time she almost drifted off to sleep, images of terrible events occurring flooded her mind and snapped her awake once more.

What if tonight was the night he decided to act out? Before it was too late?

Susanna wished that there was more she could do, but without proof that something was going on, she was left hopeless.

As she sat up in her bed, and blinked a few times, she started to hear something outside.

“I am thinking about Mary. I am always thinking about Mary. You do not understand at all. In fact, you have been nothing but a problem to me. I think it might be you who has been in the way the whole time. Perhaps it is you who I need to get rid of.”

Her blood ran cold.

She knew that terrifying voice all too well. It was Edwin, outside of Mary's bedchambers, talking about her sister as if he was going to do something to her. It did not matter how utterly scared Susanna was, she knew that she needed to act, and she knew that she needed to do something right now.

Much as she hated the idea of him harming Luke, it crushed her to think that he might do something to Mary. She could not stand it...

What is happening?

But as she pushed the door open, an even more petrifying sight caught her eye.

Edwin had his gun with him, and it was pointed at Martin.

Susanna feared she might throw up.

She rapidly looked between them both, not quite sure what she should do. But as it turned out, she did not need to think. She acted on instinct. As soon as Edwin's finger pulled that trigger, she leapt in front of Martin in an attempt to save him.

Edwin was not going to hurt him either, not a chance!

The deafening sound of the gunshot reverberated through the hallway. Susanna felt a searing pain in her arm as the bullet tore through her flesh. She collapsed to the ground, her vision blurring as she struggled to stay conscious. Martin screamed and lunged forward, knocking Edwin backwards and out of the way.

"Susanna! No!" Martin's voice was filled with panic as he cradled her in his arms. "Edwin, what the hell have you done? What is wrong with you?"

Edwin stood frozen, his face a mask of shock and horror. "I did not mean to... I just wanted to scare him," he stammered, backing away. "This is not how it was supposed to go. I thought... I thought I would be able to convince Luke to leave Mary. I did not actually mean to harm him. I never would have done such a thing. You know I never would have done such a thing... I could not... I would not... I am not that sort of person..."

Martin, his face twisted with rage and desperation, glared at Edwin for only a moment, before he refocused his attention on Susanna. "You tried to kill me, and you almost killed Susanna! That was you. Of course, you could do such a thing."

"But I did not... I would not?—"

“You would, and you have. You admitted what you did to Duncan...”

Even though Susanna already suspected this, hearing Martin’s confident accusation chilled her to the bone.

Edwin had confessed to what he had done?

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

“I would not have hurt Luke...” Edwin did not even deny it. He just tried to change the subject.

“How could you do this, Edwin? And all the lies. You have done nothing but lie. You wanted to hurt Luke. That is what all of this was about. I found you outside his room with your gun.”

Susanna’s breathing was shallow and labored, but she forced herself to focus. “Martin,” she whispered, “call for help. Please.”

Doors to other rooms started to open. The gunshot had alerted others to Edwin’s diabolical plan, and they all started to filter out into the hallway. Susanna did what she could to keep her eyes open, but it was not easy. Not when every fiber of her being resisted that.

“Susanna, what happened?” It was Mary’s voice that screeched through her brain. “Oh my goodness, who did this to you?”

“E-Edwin,” Susanna hissed. She had no idea where he was, but she needed everyone to know that he was the issue. He was the one who had done this. “He... he is still in love with you, Mary. He has been trying to kill Luke. Martin and I... we have been trying to stop him. We could not let you or Luke get hurt.”

“Shh, it is alright,” Mary whispered. Susanna was not sure if Mary was taking on board what she was saying, she seemed to be just trying to calm her down. “It is alright, Susanna. It seems like the bullet only just scraped your arm. It is a flesh wound, I am sure you are going to be just fine. But we will get the physician here to

check on you.”

“Edwin,” Susanna whispered. “Where is he? What has happened to him?”

Susanna watched as Mary’s eyes darted around the hallway, searching for any sign of Edwin. The tension in the air was palpable, and the gathered crowd began to murmur in fear and confusion.

“We need Luke,” Mary declared. “Can someone please get him? Martin, can you go and see where Edwin went? I assume he ran off while we were distracted. I will try and stem the bleeding here. Oh, and can someone get the physician here?”

“I am sorry,” Susanna whispered as she felt the consciousness slipping away from her once more. “This is the night before your wedding. I did not want anything bad to happen...”

“Do not worry about the wedding, Susanna. I am worried about you.”

Susanna swallowed hard. She needed her sister to really understand what was happening here. “But you should worry about Edwin. He is a scary man. I think he killed Duncan.”

“What do you mean?” Mary whispered. “Edwin would not have killed Duncan—they were the best of friends...”

“He killed him, for you, Mary. He thought that you would pick him. He still thinks you would pick him. He stabbed him, he did all those terrible things to him. We thought it was bandits, but it was him.”

“She is right,” Martin cut in. “He admitted it to me.”

Mary's face turned pale as Susanna's words sank in. Finally, she seemed to understand. But still, her focus was on Susanna, because that was how kind and sweet she was.

"Susanna, stay with me," Mary pleaded, her voice trembling. "Do not close your eyes. Help is on the way. "

In the midst of her confusion, Susanna felt a small smile creeping up her lips. "I was not sure about Luke when we first came here. I was worried that he might not be the right man for you, but now that I have gotten to know him properly, I can see that he is perfect for you. I cannot wait until you get married. I believe you will be perfect together."

Mary squeezed Susanna's hands. "That means the world to me, Susanna. Thank you. But please, do not think about anything right now. Just keep yourself awake for me."

But Susanna could not do it. She wanted to apologize again but could not find the words.

It was too late.

With that, the blackness claimed Susanna. She could not fight it any longer. At least she knew that everything had been taken care of. There was nothing else that she needed to do...

The darkness around Susanna was suffocating, a thick, oppressive void that swallowed her whole. She ran through an endless maze of twisted hallways, her heart pounding in her chest like a war drum. Every turn she took, every door she opened, led to another identical hallway, and always,always, she could hear Edwin's footsteps echoing behind her. No matter how fast she ran, the sound of his pursuit never faded.

The walls seemed to close in on her, the air growing thicker and harder to breathe. Panic clawed at her throat, making her gasp for breath. She turned another corner and found herself in a dimly lit room, the shadows playing tricks on her eyes. She stumbled, her legs heavy with exhaustion, and her mind raced with a singular, desperate thought—I have to get away.

“Susanna...” Edwin’s voice slithered through the darkness, sending a shiver down her spine. It was a voice filled with menace, dripping with malice. “You cannot hide from me. Just like your sister. You will never be able to escape me.”

She pushed herself harder, her feet pounding against the cold, unforgiving floor. The hallway seemed endless, a never-ending stretch of fear and desperation. She glanced over her shoulder and saw him. Edwin, his face twisted into a grotesque mask of anger and obsession. He moved with an unnatural grace, closing the distance between them with terrifying speed.

“No!” she screamed, the sound echoing around her, mocking her terror. “Leave me alone!”

But Edwin’s laughter filled the space, a dark, chilling sound that made her blood run cold. “You cannot escape, Susanna. You have always been in my way. Always. You and Martin. The pair of you need to die. Why do you think I brought a gun with me?”

She felt a sharp pain in her arm, a reminder of the gunshot that had brought her here. Her body ached with every step, but she could not stop. She would not stop. She had to get away from him. She turned another corner, only to find herself in a dead end. The walls loomed high above her, unscalable and merciless.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

“No,” she whispered, her voice trembling with fear. “This cannot be happening.”

Edwin’s footsteps grew louder, closer. She pressed herself against the wall, her breath coming in ragged gasps. There was no escape. She was trapped. Her eyes darted around, searching for any possible way out, but there was none. The walls closed in, suffocating her with their cold indifference.

“Game over, Susanna,” Edwin’s voice was right behind her now, dripping with satisfaction. “You have lost.”

She turned to face him, her body trembling with fear and exhaustion. “Why, Edwin? Why are you doing this?”

His eyes gleamed with a twisted light. “Because Mary is mine. And you will not stop me from having her. Ever. You tried... you even tried back when I was coming to visit your home, and it is time for you to realize that you will never win.”

He lunged at her, and she screamed, throwing her hands up to protect herself. But just as his hands closed around her throat, the world around her shattered.

Susanna jolted awake, her body drenched in sweat, her heart racing. She was back in the room, the physician and Mary hovering over her, their faces etched with concern.

“Susanna, it is alright. You are safe now.” Mary’s voice was soothing, her hand warm on Susanna’s forehead. “You are going to be fine. It is just a flesh wound, just as I said earlier.”

The dream still clung to her, a dark, lingering presence that refused to fade. She could still feel Edwin's grip on her, hear his laughter echoing in her mind.

"He was chasing me," she whispered, her voice shaky. "I could not get away."

Mary's eyes were filled with sympathy and determination. "You are safe now, Susanna. We will not let him hurt you again. I promise."

Susanna nodded, but the fear still gnawed at her insides. Edwin was still out there, and the nightmare had felt all too real. She knew she had to be strong, not just for herself, but for Mary and everyone she loved. They had to stop Edwin, once and for all. And this time, she would not let him catch her.

"Martin is going to find Edwin, and we are going to put an end to this. I am sure we have nothing to worry about."

But that did not ease Susanna's worries. She was concerned about Martin too. He was the one Edwin was shooting at. It seemed like he had started targeting Luke, but it was Martin who the bullet was supposed to hit.

What if another bullet hit Martin and she was not there to save him this time?

"Come on," Mary declared as she tucked her hands underneath Susanna. "The physician is going to help me get you into bed now."

With gentle care, Mary and the physician lifted Susanna and guided her to the bed. Each movement sent sharp pains through her arm, but she gritted her teeth and bore it. Once she was settled, the physician checked her bandages, ensuring they were secure and clean.

"You need rest," the physician said firmly. "Sleep will help you heal faster. That is

just a flesh wound, as your sister thought, but it will not heal without proper rest.”

Susanna wanted to argue, to insist she stay awake and help plan what to do next, but her body betrayed her. Exhaustion pulled at her, and she could barely keep her eyes open. She looked at Mary, who sat beside her, holding her hand.

“Please be careful, Mary,” she murmured. “Edwin is truly the most dangerous man that I have ever met. He will not stop until he gets what he wants. I do not want you anywhere near him. I do not want him to hurt you.”

“We will be careful,” Mary assured her. “You just focus on getting better. We need you strong. Remember, it is going to be my wedding soon, and I need you there with me. I need you to be there as Luke and I say our vows.”

Susanna wanted to smile. She could not wait for the wedding now. She could not wait to celebrate her sister’s love.

Mary deserved this more than anyone in the world, and Susanna was not about to let her down. She would make sure that she recovered. She would do whatever it was that Mary needed her to do. If that meant recovering from a gunshot wound, then that was no problem. Anything for Mary.

“I will be there,” Susanna murmured, her eyelids heavy. “I promise you, Mary, I will be there for you.”

As she drifted off, the remnants of the nightmare still lingered, but Mary’s presence was a comfort. She let herself sink into the darkness, hoping for a dreamless sleep this time.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Martin tore through the hallways, his mind a whirlwind of panic and determination. Edwin had to be stopped. The thought of him out there, armed and dangerous, filled him with dread. He could not let Edwin hurt anyone else, he could not let Edwin do any more damage. He had already acted like a crazy person in his attempt to stop the wedding from taking place. There was no telling what he would do next.

As he rounded a corner, he nearly collided with Luke, who was hurrying towards him, his face etched with concern. “Martin! What’s going on? I heard that there was a gunshot.”

“Luke, thank God!” Martin gasped, grabbing Luke’s arm to steady himself. “It is Edwin. He has lost it. He tried to shoot me, but Susanna... she took the bullet.”

“She did what?”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

Martin could not allow the emotion to overwhelm him, otherwise it would swallow him up whole. He had to push thoughts of Susanna to the side for the moment. He had to be confident that Mary could care for her.

He had to keep strong.

He needed to do the right thing.

“She is hurt,” he continued. “But I think she will be fine. We have to find Edwin. Now. Before he can shoot anyone else.”

Luke’s eyes widened in shock and then hardened with resolve. “Where is he?”

“Last I saw, he ran off down this way,” Martin replied, already moving again, with Luke at his side. “But I am not sure where he has gone.”

As they sprinted through the winding corridors of the mansion, Martin filled Luke in on the situation after what felt like a lifetime of holding it all inside.

“Edwin has been obsessed with Mary for years now...”

“As in he loves her?”

“Right,” Martin gasped. “He thought if he could get rid of you, he would have a chance with her. He has been planning this for a while.”

“He wanted to hurt me?”

Martin could understand why Luke was so shocked, but he was not done yet. “Well, he confessed to killing Duncan to clear the way. Susanna and I... we have been trying to stop him from hurting you, but tonight he has gone too far... He came to your room with a gun and then charged towards Mary’s bedchambers as well...”

“That is insane,” Luke said, shaking his head in disbelief. “We need to end this before he hurts anyone else. I always knew that Edwin was a little dodgy and involved in strange things, but I did not think he was dangerous like this.”

Martin nodded, his jaw set. “He is armed and dangerous. We have to be careful. If he did that to Duncan, there is no telling what he will do to anyone else. He already fired that gun once...”

“I will not let him fire it again,” Luke declared grimly. “He will not be allowed to do this again. It is all far too much.”

They reached the end of the hallway and burst through a set of double doors that led out into the garden. The cool night air hit them like a slap, and they paused for a moment, scanning the grounds.

“There!” Luke pointed towards the old shed near the edge of the woods, where a shadowy figure was slipping inside. “I can see him.”

Without a word, they both ran towards the shed, their footsteps pounding against the grass. As they approached, Martin could feel his heart racing. They had to be smart about this. Edwin was desperate and unpredictable, and now he had Luke by his side—the man Edwin wanted to target the most.

They reached the shed and paused outside, catching their breath. Martin motioned for Luke to stay quiet as he carefully pushed the door open, peering inside. The interior was dark, but he could make out Edwin’s silhouette pacing back and forth.

“Edwin,” Martin called out, his voice steady despite the fear gnawing at him. “It is over. You need to come out. You cannot keep behaving like this. Everyone knows what you are doing now. This has to come to an end.”

Edwin whirled around, his face contorted with rage and desperation. “Stay back!” he shouted, brandishing the gun. “You do not understand! This was supposed to be different. Mary was supposed to be mine. Tonight was going to be the night that I made her mine.”

Martin stepped inside, his hands raised in a placating gesture. “Edwin, think about what you are doing. You have already hurt Susanna. Do not make this worse.”

“You do not get it!” Edwin’s voice cracked, his eyes wild. “I did everything for her. I got rid of Duncan because he was in the way. He was the one stopping me and Mary from being together, and now you and Luke... you are the ones stopping her from seeing that we belong together.”

“Edwin, you are wrong,” Luke said, stepping behind Martin. “Mary does not want this. She does not want you. Hurting us is not going to change that.”

“Shut up!” Edwin screamed, waving the gun erratically. He did not even seem surprised to see his cousin joining the fray. “You do not know anything!”

“Edwin, please...”

“Luke, I am sorry. I know that you are my cousin, but that changes nothing. You do not deserve Mary—no one does. She is supposed to be mine. She has always been mine.”

Martin glanced at Luke, then back at Edwin. They had to get the gun away from him and fast.

“Edwin, listen to me,” Martin said softly. “You are not thinking clearly. Put the gun down, and we can talk about this. We can help you.”

For a moment, Edwin seemed to waver, his grip on the gun loosening. But then his eyes hardened again. “No. No more talking. This ends now.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

“What if we could get Mary here?” Luke interjected, making Martin panic. “Then she can tell you herself how she feels.”

“But she is upset right now, because of what happened to Susanna.”

Luke threw his hands in the air in frustration. “Well, it is now or never, Edwin. If you do not take this one chance, then you will never get to speak with her.”

Edwin hesitated, the gun shaking in his hand. The desperation in his eyes was palpable, and Martin seized the moment.

“Edwin, please,” Martin urged. “Make the right decision. Put the gun down, and we will get Mary here.”

For a brief, fragile moment, Edwin’s resolve seemed to crack. He looked at Martin, then at Luke, uncertainty flashing across his face. But just as quickly, his expression hardened again, and he tightened his grip on the gun.

“Fine,” Edwin said, his voice trembling with a mix of fear and determination. “Bring her here. But if you try anything, if you try to deceive me, I will not hesitate. I am not putting the gun down until I see her face.”

“Alright, alright,” Martin said, keeping his voice calm and soothing. “Just stay here. Luke will bring Mary to you.”

He was not sure about this plan, he did not think it the wisest idea, but if anyone was leaving this shed, it would be Luke. Martin could not leave him alone with this crazed

idiot.

“Do not be long,” Edwin sneered. “I do not know how long I can stand to look at Martin’s face.”

Martin glanced at Luke, who nodded imperceptibly. He backed out of the shed, before presumably making his way back to the house.

Martin could hear his own heartbeat in the tense silence that followed. He kept his gaze fixed on Edwin, trying to project a calm he did not entirely feel. The gun, still aimed at him, was a constant reminder of the peril they were all in.

“Edwin,” Martin began softly. “I know that you are hurting. But this is not the way. You have to believe me, none of this will bring you closer to Mary. She needs to see that you can be reasonable, that you can be trusted.”

Edwin’s eyes flickered with a mix of anger and pain. “Reasonable? Trusted? After everything that I have done for her, she still does not see. How could she be with someone like Luke when I... I am the one who truly loves her.”

“Love is not about control, Edwin,” Martin replied, taking a cautious step closer. “It is about respect and understanding. If you truly love Mary, you have to let her make her own choices.”

Edwin shook his head violently, the gun wavering. “No! You do not understand! She would have chosen me if it were not for all of you standing in the way.”

Martin took a deep breath, forcing himself to stay calm. There was no point in trying to drag this man out of his delusion anymore. “Edwin, we can find a way to fix this. But you have to trust me.”

“I will never trust you...”

The door to the shed creaked open before Martin could say anything else, and Mary stepped inside.

Martin sucked in a sharp breath.

“Mary,” Edwin breathed, his voice softening. “I have done everything for you. All of this... it was for you.”

Mary took a deep breath, stepping forward slightly. “Edwin, I know you think that you love me, but this is not the way. Hurting people, threatening them... it is not love. It is not right.”

Edwin’s face twisted in pain, his grip on the gun wavering. “But you do not understand, Mary. I had to. They were all in the way. Duncan, Luke, Martin... even your sister. They were all stopping us from being together. They do not understand our love...”

Mary shook her head, tears welling up in her eyes. “No, Edwin. They were not in the way. There was nothing to be in the way of. As I tried to make very clear to you when you used to obsessively visit my home, I am not, and will never be, interested in you. You need to accept that and let me be happy. Do you not want that for me? Do you not want me to be happy?”

For a moment, it seemed like Mary’s words might reach him. Edwin’s eyes softened, and his hand started to lower the gun. But then something shifted in his expression, and he raised it again, his face contorted with anguish.

“I cannot!” he shouted, tears streaming down his face. “I cannot lose you, Mary! If I can’t have you, then no one else can have you. Especially no one.”

Before Martin could react, Edwin twisted the gun around, aiming it at Luke. Time seemed to slow as Martin lunged forward, his body moving on instinct. He collided with Edwin, grappling for the gun. They struggled, the shed filling with the sounds of their desperate fight.

The time for talking was over. He needed to end this, once and for all.

“Martin!” Luke shouted, rushing to help.

Together, they managed to wrestle the gun from Edwin’s hand, sending it skidding across the floor.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

Edwin let out a roar of frustration and threw a wild punch at Martin, catching him in the jaw. Martin staggered back but kept his footing, returning the blow with a punch to Edwin's midsection. Luke joined in, and together they overpowered Edwin, forcing him to the ground.

Breathing heavily, Martin pinned Edwin's arms while Luke retrieved the gun.

"It is over, Edwin," Martin said, his voice firm. "You are not going to hurt anyone else. Finally, you are going to listen to me, and you are going to hear what I have to say. You cannot do this any longer. Mary will never be yours."

The sound of approaching footsteps signaled the arrival of the others. Within moments, several of Luke's house guests appeared, helping to secure Edwin and ensure he could not escape. Martin stood up, his body aching from the struggle, but relief flooding through him.

"We did it," he said, looking at Luke. "It really is over."

Luke nodded, his expression grim but determined. "We are going to have to get the constables here, after what he has done. He needs to be arrested."

Martin stood in the doorway of the shed, catching his breath after the fight with Edwin. The adrenaline was beginning to wear off, leaving him exhausted and aching. Beside him, Luke held the gun they had wrestled from Edwin's hand and had Mary tucked under his other arm, his expression grim but resolute.

"We will wait here for the chief constable," Luke said, glancing at Martin. "You go

check on Susanna. She needs you.”

Martin hesitated for a moment, torn between his duty to ensure Edwin was properly dealt with and his overwhelming concern for Susanna. But Luke’s steady gaze reassured him.

“Go,” Luke repeated firmly. “We’ve got this.”

“We do,” Mary agreed with a grateful whisper. “There is nothing that man can do to me now. The constable will take him away, and I will finally be able to live my life without him.”

Martin smiled and nodded once before turning and making his way back to the manor house. It was a relief to know that Edwin was captured and no longer going to cause any trouble, but the relief could not come for him fully just yet.

As he hurried through the hallways, his mind raced with thoughts of Susanna. The image of her throwing herself in front of him to take the bullet was seared into his memory. He needed to see her, to make sure she was truly alright. He still could not believe that she had done such a thing. He was truly in shock and awe of what a wonderful person she was.

The emotions that he had been trying his hardest to push down came barreling to the surface.

He could not contain himself any longer.

He reached Susanna’s room and gently pushed the door open. The soft light of a bedside lamp cast a warm glow over the room. The physician was just finishing checking her bandages and nodded to Martin as he entered.

“She is stable,” the physician said quietly. “The wound is not serious, but she needs rest. I have talked to her sister about this, but it is best that everyone knows.”

Martin thanked the physician, who then excused himself, leaving the room in a hushed silence. He approached the bed, his heart aching at the sight of Susanna lying there, her face pale and drawn, her arm wrapped in clean white bandages. She was muttering softly in her sleep, and as he leaned closer, he realized she was saying his name.

“Martin,” she whispered, her voice barely audible. “Martin...”

Another surge of emotion welled up in him, a mix of relief, gratitude, and something deeper that he could not quite name. He reached out and gently took her hand, careful not to disturb her rest. Her fingers instinctively curled around his, and he felt a warmth spread through him at the simple touch.

“Susanna,” he whispered, his voice thick with emotion. “I am here. You are safe.” He was not sure that she could hear him, but he continued to explain nonetheless. “Edwin has been caught. There is nothing to worry about any longer. He will not cause us any more issues. We are all safe now. The wedding can still go ahead tomorrow... if everyone is not too tired for that. I mean, it has certainly been a very long night.”

She shifted slightly, her brow furrowing as if she was struggling against the remnants of a nightmare. “Martin,” she repeated, a hint of distress in her tone.

He squeezed her hand gently, hoping to soothe her. “It is alright, Susanna. I am here. Edwin will not hurt you anymore. I can promise you that much.”

Her face relaxed a little, and she seemed to settle into a deeper, more peaceful sleep. Martin sat by her side, his eyes never leaving her face. He could still hear the echo of Edwin’s words, the madness in his eyes, but those thoughts were drowned out by the

sight of Susanna safe and alive.

Time seemed to stand still as he sat there, the world outside fading away. All that mattered was Susanna and the quiet connection between them. He thought about everything they had been through, the danger they had faced, and the bond that had grown stronger because of it. He knew that his heart had been opening up to Susanna, that he had been feeling all kinds of things for her, but that had never been as apparent as it was right now.

He truly was falling for her.

He did not want the wedding to be the last time that he saw her.

He wanted their connection to continue to bloom and grow forever.

Much to his surprise, he wanted love.

He gently brushed a stray lock of hair from her forehead, his touch light and tender. "I will be right here when you wake up," he murmured. "I promise. I am not going anywhere."

How much did he mean that?

He meant it more than anything that he had ever thought before, but that still scared him. The idea of being in love was one of the most terrifying things in the world, and he had never thought that he would feel that way. But Susanna had made him see that there was much more to him. That he could have more if he really wanted it. And the way that she had jumped in front of the bullet for him let him know that she felt the same way too.

Now he could not wait for her to wake up so they could finally discuss their feelings, so he could say everything that he had been too afraid to say before. He could finally tell her that he had fallen in love with her and that he truly wanted to be with her forever... if that was what she wanted too.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Susanna's eyes fluttered open, the haze of pain and confusion gradually giving way to the dim light of the room. The first thing she saw was the ceiling, unfamiliar and oppressive.

She blinked, trying to orient herself, her thoughts sluggish and fragmented. Slowly, she became aware of a dull, throbbing pain in her arm.

She shifted slightly, wincing as the pain intensified, and turned her head. The sight of Martin sitting beside her bed, his face etched with worry and exhaustion, filled her vision. Relief washed over her, mingled with confusion. What had happened? The memories came rushing back—the sound of a gunshot, Edwin's crazed eyes, and the

searing pain as she leapt in front of Martin.

“Martin,” she whispered, her voice hoarse and weak.

Martin’s head snapped up, and his eyes filled with a mix of relief and concern. “Susanna, thank God,” he said, his voice trembling slightly. “You are awake at long last. How are you?”

Susanna tried to smile, but it felt more like a grimace as she worried about everyone else first and foremost. “What... what happened? Is everyone alright?”

Martin reached out, gently taking her hand. “You were shot, but the bullet only grazed your arm. You are going to be fine, Susanna. The physician said you were very lucky.”

Susanna nodded slowly, the pain in her arm throbbing in time with her heartbeat. “Edwin... where is he?”

Martin’s expression darkened. “He has been arrested and locked away for his crimes. He will no longer be able to hurt anyone else.”

Susanna let out a shaky breath, relief mingling with lingering fear. “Thank goodness. I was so afraid... But this means Mary can continue to live her life. She does not need to be worried any longer.”

“That is right.” Martin squeezed her hand reassuringly. “It is over now. Edwin can’t hurt you, or anyone else, ever again.”

Tears welled up in Susanna’s eyes, and she blinked them away, not wanting to appear weak. “I was so scared, Martin. I thought... I thought I might lose you.”

Martin leaned closer, his eyes softening. “You saved my life, Susanna. I do not know how to thank you.”

A tear slid down her cheek, and she managed a weak smile. “You do not have to thank me. I could not let him hurt you. I could not bear the thought of losing anyone... but when I saw the gun pointed at you, it made me feel ill. I could not stand it.”

Martin wiped the tear away with his thumb, his touch gentle. “You are so brave, Susanna. You did something incredible. Everyone is impressed with you.”

Susanna closed her eyes for a moment, letting his words wash over her. She felt a deep sense of relief, but also a gnawing worry for what the future might hold. “What about Mary and Luke? Are they alright too?”

“They are fine,” Martin assured her. “Mary was worried sick about you, but she is alright. Luke... he’s still in shock, I think. But they’re both safe. We are all safe, thanks to you.”

“And what about the wedding?”

Martin smiled at her. “You know that Mary wants the wedding to be perfect, and it will not be perfect without you. She will wait until you get better.”

Susanna’s eyes widened, a mix of relief and guilt washing over her. “She is delaying the wedding because of me?”

Martin squeezed her hand gently. “Mary loves you, Susanna. She wants you to be there with her on her special day. Besides, after everything that happened, everyone could use a little time to recover.”

Susanna nodded, feeling a lump form in her throat. “I just do not want to be the reason for any more delays or problems. Not after everything that they have been through.”

Martin’s smile was warm and reassuring. “You are not a problem, Susanna. You are family. And family looks out for each other.”

Tears welled up in her eyes again, but this time they were tears of gratitude and love. “Thank you, Martin. I do not know what I would do without you.”

“You don’t have to find out,” he said softly. “I am here, and I am not going anywhere.”

Susanna closed her eyes for a moment, letting his words soothe her. She felt a sense of peace, knowing that Martin was by her side. The events of the night had been terrifying, but they had also shown her the strength of the bonds she shared with those she loved.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

“Can you stay with me for a while?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Of course,” Martin replied, pulling a chair closer to the bed. “I will be right here.”

“Martin,” she said softly, looking into his eyes. “I... I am so grateful that you are here. You always seem to be right here when I need you the most.”

He smiled, a genuine, heartfelt smile that made her heart ache. “I would not be anywhere else. You are important to me, Susanna. More than you know.”

Susanna felt a warmth spread through her, banishing the last remnants of fear and pain. “And you to me, Martin. You mean so much to me.”

Martin leaned closer, his forehead resting gently against hers. “We will get through this together, Susanna. We will heal, and we will move forward. But right now, you need to rest. The physician said you need to take it easy.”

She parted her lips, about to say something terrifying. Something she did not think that she would ever say to anyone.

“Martin,” she whispered, her voice trembling. “There is something I need to tell you. Something I have been holding back for so long, and after everything that has happened, I cannot keep it to myself any longer.”

Martin’s expression shifted, a mix of curiosity and concern playing across his features. “What is it, Susanna? You can tell me anything.”

She took a deep breath, feeling her heart pound in her chest. The words she was about to say were the most important she had ever spoken.

“I love you, Martin. I have loved you for a long time,” she gasped out desperately, a weight lifting from her chest. “I thought I could keep it to myself, that it would be enough to just be near you, to be your friend. But when I saw that gun pointed at you, I realized that I could not bear the thought of a world without you in it. I love you, and I needed you to know.”

For a moment, there was silence, the weight of her confession hanging in the air. Susanna could feel her pulse quickening, the fear of rejection almost overwhelming. But then, Martin’s hand tightened around hers, and he leaned in closer, his eyes locked on hers.

“Susanna,” he said softly, his voice filled with emotion. “I have loved you too. I was always too afraid to say anything, afraid it would complicate things, that it would ruin our friendship. But seeing you risk your life for me, it made me realize how precious you are to me. I love you, Susanna. More than words can express.”

This time, she knew he was not teasing. She could see the genuine emotion in his eyes as they both expressed feelings they did not think they would be able to.

He was being careful with her heart now, and she would do the same for him.

It might not have been easy for either of them to get to this place, but the danger that Edwin had presented forced them into it.

Perhaps that was for the best, even if it was horrifying at the time. Otherwise, they might never have had the courage to speak their truth.

Tears streamed down her cheeks, but this time they were tears of joy. “Martin,” she

whispered, her voice breaking. “I never dared to hope that you might feel the same way.”

He brushed a strand of hair away from her face, his touch tender and loving. “I do, Susanna. And I promise you, I will be by your side, always. We will face whatever comes our way together.”

Susanna’s heart swelled with happiness, the pain and fear of the past few days melting away in the warmth of Martin’s love. She closed her eyes, savoring the moment, feeling a sense of completeness she had never known before.

“Rest now,” Martin said gently, kissing her forehead. “We have all the time in the world to talk about this, to build our future together. But for now, you need to heal. I will be right here, watching over you. I am not going to go anywhere, I can promise you that.”

With a contented sigh, Susanna let herself drift off to a peaceful sleep, her hand still clasped in Martin’s, knowing that no matter what challenges lay ahead, they would face them together, bound by a love that had been tested and proven true.

The next few days passed in a blur of rest and recovery. Susanna was tended to by the physician and doted on by Mary, who refused to leave her side for long. Martin visited frequently, bringing news and keeping her spirits up with his gentle humor and unwavering support.

One evening, as Susanna sat up in bed, she was surprised to see Luke enter her bedchambers, especially at this late hour. His usual jovial expression was tempered with concern, but he smiled warmly at her.

“How are you feeling, Susanna?” he asked, taking a seat beside her bed.

“Better, thank you,” she replied. “I am sorry for all the trouble I have caused.”

Luke shook his head, his expression serious. “You have nothing to apologize for. If anything, we should be thanking you. You saved Martin’s life and helped us stop Edwin before he could do any more harm.”

Susanna looked down, feeling a mix of emotions. “I just did what I had to do.”

“And we are all grateful for it,” Luke said firmly. “I just wanted to let you know that it is not all for nothing.”

Susanna sat up a little straighter in her bed. “What do you mean?”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

“He has been officially sentenced for his crimes, and evidence of what he did to Duncan has been discovered. Without you, I do not know if that would have been solved. I do not know what would have happened to me.” Luke met her eyes. “How can I repay you?”

Susanna smiled. “Just be good to my sister. That is all I need from you.”

Luke’s eyes softened, and he nodded. “You have my word, Susanna. Mary means the world to me, and I will do everything in my power to make her happy.”

Susanna’s heart warmed at his sincerity. “Thank you, Luke. That means a lot to me.”

As Luke backed out of the room, she quickly realized that she had yet another visitor. One who was always welcome.

“Martin!” she declared with a smile. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Luke slipped out of the room rapidly, leaving the two of them alone.

“I had the urge to come and check on you. To see how you are this evening.”

She nodded happily. “Well, I am doing much better these days, as I am sure you can tell.”

He perched on her bed beside her. “I most certainly can.”

Ooh, was that fire in his eyes? The flickering of a flame which of course set

Susanna's body alight?

She edged a little closer to him as her body began to burn with desire. Was there a meaning behind this late-night visit, now that she was improving?

They were content with one another now, safe in the knowledge that they were in love, so why not explore one another a little further? There was no harm to be done and a lot of fun that could be had...

"Come here," she murmured as she grabbed hold of him. "Come closer."

Luckily, Martin did not need to be asked twice. He rolled on top of her, the weight of his body pressing down on her as their lips collided once more. Thank goodness... Susanna had been craving this for far too long.

The sensation of Martin's body pressed against her as she sank deeper into the sheets was everything. There was a lot of this broad, muscular man, so Susanna could feel every inch of him as their tongues invaded one another's mouths.

But merely kissing did not last forever. It was not long until Martin's eager fingers started to push her nightdress around her waist. She had felt his fingers sliding under her clothing before, but this time it almost caused a scream to escape her lips. Susanna had to bite her bottom lip hard to stop the noise from bursting free and waking up everyone. The last thing she needed was for this moment to be interrupted—it was utterly glorious.

Dizziness overcame her in heady lust as his lips started to kiss the exposed skin of her throat, and her trembling fingers tried to unbutton the shirt this gorgeous man was wearing. She had not yet seen all of his body, and she could not wait to know what he looked like.

As the material seemed to simply melt away, Susanna was lucky enough to be able to run her hands all over his abs and muscles. The feel of his wonderful body left her utterly breathless and blown away.

“Oh, Martin,” she moaned while touching him because Martin was not leaving her body untouched.

He had started to caress her core, massaging her most intimate place. Her toes curled instantly as she succumbed to the dizziness. How did this man always know just how to touch her? How to make her feel so many things all at once? He really was a phenomenal person, and the way her core tightened with desire... Susanna could feel herself slowly slipping away.

“Martin, do not stop.”

He plunged his fingers deeper inside her, holding on to her while he caressed her. Susanna arched her back and rolled her hips, grinding hungrily against his hand even more. She needed this intense pleasure, she craved more of this—every part of her ached for him.

Although Susanna was not quite sure how this happened, it was not long before Martin was completely nude too. Finally, she could reach out and run her hands all over his thick, throbbing erection. Susanna surprised even herself with this confidence as she curled her hand around him for the very first time, but there was something about Martin that made her feel free.

This made her head spin. She immediately knew that she wanted more, so much more.

“I need you,” she murmured, writhing underneath him, trying to pull him towards her. “I want you, Martin. I cannot take it any longer. I need to be with you, for real.”

He let out a deep, guttural groan that seemed to come from his most primal parts. Susanna loved that sound; she wanted to hear it endlessly. She crashed her lips to his, lacing her tongue around his as he finally rose onto his hands while he angled himself perfectly.

The dark, hooded desire dancing in his eyes caused a flush to spread through her entire body. It was almost as if her blood had started to bubble and boil within her, heating her innermost core. The unspoken loving words flowed like lava between them. Susanna wished that she could express everything aloud, but this man had stolen her breath in the same way that he had stolen her desire.

Eventually, just as Susanna was about to scream with frustration, Martin caved and gave her everything that she wanted. He thrust deep inside her, filling her up in the most phenomenal way possible. Susanna held on to Martin, clinging to his back, so he could not move for a moment while she adjusted to this beautiful brand new sensation. His heavy, ragged breaths fell into her ears, which allowed her to bask in his pleasure for a moment...

But then she was ready for more, so she released her grip on him and started to buck and writhe underneath him, connecting to him even deeper. Martin rested his forehead on hers in the way that Susanna loved the most. She adored looking into his eyes like this. It was so wonderful—the best thing that had ever happened to her.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

While they were thrusting against one another, that look of desire and love was even more intense and powerful. Susanna absorbed every moment of it. She clung to it, committing it to memory forever.

But she could only do this for so long. The pleasurable pressure started to build quickly, surprising Susanna. Martin's thrusts were hitting all the right spots, causing an explosion of sensations.

Susanna crashed her lips to his once more when she knew that she could not contain herself any longer. Her whole body had frozen as this man took her to the peak of the mountain, building up the bliss within her by the minute. Susanna was surprised that this was so different from the last time that they were together, when he had worshipped her with his tongue. Having him inside her was brand new, and she adored it.

And then she fell.

She tumbled over the edge into the abyss of pleasure, drowning in the tsunami of joy that overcame her. Susanna could no longer contain herself; she could not keep her blissful noises from exploding free. The orgasm caused her to cry out as it absolutely shattered through her. No number of kisses from Martin could keep her quiet now.

But he loved it. She could feel just how much he adored it. He held her carefully and loved her tenderly, drawing out her pleasure as long as he possibly could. It rolled over her in endless waves, permeating every single part of her. Susanna felt wonderful.

“Oh my goodness, that feels so good,” she finally just about managed to gasp out. “I never want this to end.”

But he was not done with her yet. He still needed her, and this was the moment that Susanna finally felt like she was in control of the situation. As she watched Martin’s face crumble with vulnerable pleasure, a sense of confidence washed over her.

She met each thrust, loving every moment of it. Martin moaned, half in agony, half in ecstasy. It made her feel beautiful and powerful to have this effect on him, to know that she was the one setting him alight this way.

As Martin’s body stiffened with tension, Susanna picked up the pace, grinding against him as deeply as she could until she started to feel him tremble and shudder all over. Watching him crumble underneath her, feeling his body shift and change all because of her, was glorious.

Was pleasure building up in Susanna too? Again? She had no idea if that was even possible. But the more she thrust against him, driving him to the edge of desire, the more she felt herself tumble once more. The burning hot bliss was coming for her yet again, and there was nothing that she could do about it.

The next time Susanna tipped over the edge and lost herself once more, she was not alone. Martin lost himself at the same time. Crying out with pleasure at the same time with this man, clinging to one another, was an even more powerful and overwhelming experience than anything else she had ever been through before. She craved every part of it.

Collapsing into his arms and falling against his chest to listen to his racing heartbeat, Susanna could not stop the smile from spreading across her face. This really was the happiest day of her life. She could not wait to see what happened next...

EPILOGUE

The morning sun streamed through the window, bathing the room in a beautiful, golden light. Susanna sat before the vanity, her heart fluttering with a mix of excitement and nerves.

Today was the day.

Mary and Luke were finally having their rescheduled wedding. Only, it was not just their wedding—it was hers and Martin's too. They had decided to join in a double ceremony, making the day even more special.

Susanna glanced at her reflection, the white gown cascading around her in soft folds. Mary's laughter drifted in from the adjoining room, and Susanna smiled, feeling a surge of affection for her sister. The door opened, and Mary entered, radiant in her own gown, her eyes sparkling with joy.

"Susanna, you look beautiful," Mary said, crossing the room to take her sister's hands in hers.

"So do you," Susanna replied, her voice thick with emotion. "I cannot believe this day is finally here."

Mary squeezed her hands gently. "Neither can I. After everything that we have been through, it feels like a dream."

They stood there for a moment, simply holding hands and absorbing the magnitude of the day. Their lives had been turned upside down, but here they were, stronger and happier than ever.

They were both proof that love could be found in even the darkest of places, even

when it was not expected.

Knock, knock.

“Girls,” their mother called through the door. “Are you ready? The wedding awaits.”

Mary and Susanna exchanged a glance, then nodded. “Ready,” they said in unison.

The garden was a sea of flowers and happy faces as they made their way down the aisle. The scent of roses filled the air, mingling with the sweet sounds of a string quartet. Susanna could see familiar faces—friends and family—smiling and wiping away tears of joy.

So many people knew what they had been through, and how hard it was to get here. But somehow, they had survived it all. They had survived Edwin.

Thank goodness.

Martin stood at the altar, his gaze fixed on her as he looked incredibly handsome in his suit. Susanna’s heart skipped a beat as their eyes met, and she saw the depth of his love and commitment. Luke stood beside him, equally radiant, his focus entirely on Mary.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:04 am

I used to dislike and distrust them both.

That idea was laughable now. How could she have anything negative on her mind when it came to these wonderful men?

As they reached the altar, Susanna felt a surge of warmth and happiness. This was their moment, a celebration not just of love, but of resilience and hope.

The officiant began the ceremony, his voice a soothing melody to calm the emotions swirling within her.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to witness the union of these two couples, who have chosen to share this special day together. Their love has been tested and proven true, and today we celebrate the beginning of their journey as married couples.”

Mary and Luke went first, exchanging vows that brought tears to Susanna’s eyes. They spoke of love and partnership, of standing by each other through thick and thin. Their words were so sweet, she just knew they would be this happy and in love forever.

When it was their turn, Susanna looked into Martin’s eyes, feeling a deep connection that words could scarcely capture.

“Martin,” she began, her voice trembling slightly. “From the moment we met, you have been my rock, my confidante, and my greatest love. I promise to stand by you, to support you, and to love you with all my heart. Together, we can face anything.”

Martin's eyes glistened with unshed tears as he took her hands in his. "Susanna, you are my heart and soul. Your bravery and kindness inspire me every day. I promise to cherish you, to protect you, and to love you unconditionally. Today, I become not just your husband, but your partner in all things."

The officiant smiled warmly. "By the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife."

Martin leaned in, his lips meeting hers in a kiss that was both tender and passionate. It felt like the culmination of everything they had been through—the fear, the pain, the love, and the hope. As they pulled apart, Susanna saw the same emotions reflected in Mary and Luke's eyes.

She really was the luckiest woman alive to have made it here.

A place that she never thought she would be.

The celebration that followed the beautiful wedding ceremony was filled with laughter, music, and dancing. Susanna moved from table to table, sharing her joy with the guests, basking in their well wishes, and grinning the whole time.

This really did feel like the first day of the rest of her life, and she could not wait to experience it all.

Catching Abigail's eyes and seeing how delighted she was for the couple only made Susanna smile wider.

Perhaps their little conversation about fate and destiny had been accurate, after all. Susanna certainly felt like all of this was supposed to happen. She could not imagine living her life in any other way now.

It was going to be with him. The man who challenged and delighted her in equal

measures. Hewas the one.

As the sun set, casting a golden glow over the festivities, Susanna found a quiet moment with Martin. They stood at the edge of the garden, looking out over the scene before them. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her close.

“Thank you for sharing this day with me,” Susanna said softly, resting her head against his chest.

“Thank you for making it unforgettable,” he replied, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “I love you, Susanna. Always.”

“I love you too, Martin,” she whispered, feeling a sense of completeness that she had never felt before.

At that moment, surrounded by their loved ones and the beauty of the day, Susanna knew that their future was bright. No matter what challenges lay ahead, they would face them together, bound by a love that had been tested and proven true.

And as they watched the stars begin to twinkle in the twilight sky, she felt a deep, abiding peace. This was just the beginning of their journey, and it was a journey she could not wait to embark on, hand in hand with the man she loved.

The End?