



A Brooding Christmas Promise (Christmas Matches of Worth #2)

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Category: Historical

Description: This is just an agreement, Charlotte... a Christmas pact, nothing more.

Samuel Crestwood, the Marquess of Crestwood, has spent years hidden behind a cold, guarded exterior. His marriage to Charlotte Millerton was meant to be practical—a contract without the complications of love.

Charlotte, strong and independent, expected only stability from this arrangement. She knew affection wasn't part of the bargain. But as Christmas brings warmth and unexpected closeness between them, a spark of trust grows.

When an old secret surfaces, their fragile bond is threatened. In this season of forgiveness, they must face their true feelings, or risk losing everything before love even has a chance.

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Charlotte took a hold of her sister's hand and pressed it. "I am so happy for you. You look beautiful." Her throat closed up for a moment though she fought to smile. "I know that father would have been delighted at this day."

Her sister, Amelia, smiled back at her though there were tears dampening her eyes. "I know he would have been. He thought as well of Hesterway as I do."

Charlotte took in a deep breath and forced herself to set aside the sorrowful memories of the past. Her sister had been waiting for over a year to marry the Earl of Hesterway and now, finally, she had been able to do so. "You must promise to visit very soon."

"Oh but we are going to London for Christmas, did not Hesterway tell you?"

A slight frown danced between Charlotte's eyebrows. "No, he did not."

"Yes, we are to go to London for Christmas and though it will be the little Season, we should very much like you to join us there." The smile on her sister's face dimmed just a little. "I have not yet spoken to Lady Barcsay but I presume she will permit you. Given the way she clearly despises the both of us, I should think that she would be glad to have some freedom!"

Charlotte winced but said nothing. Their father had remarried only two years before he had passed away unexpectedly and, during their mourning period, it had become perfectly clear both to Charlotte and to her sister that Lady Barcsay had no interest in her stepdaughters whatsoever. Slowly but surely, she had begun to withdraw, choosing to dine separately and thereafter, to sit alone in her own private parlor than in their company. For a time, Charlotte had thought that it had been because of her

grief but the increasingly caustic remarks and sharp looks had convinced both Charlotte and Amelia that Lady Barcsay did not like them in the least – not that Lady Barcsay let anyone from society know of that, however! During the wedding, she had been nothing but gracious and kind, smiling, laughing and putting her arm around both Charlotte and Amelia at different times, as though she truly did love and care for them. It had taken all of Charlotte's strength not to pull away, especially when the harsh things Lady Barcsay had said to her only the previous day had come floating back to her.

“Will you fare well?”

Charlotte looked back into her sister's face, having become lost in thought for a time. “What do you mean?”

Amelia bit her lip, then spread out her hands. “I am a little concerned, leaving you at home with Lady Barcsay, especially since our brother is still away on the continent.” Thomas, their elder brother, had gone to the continent a little before their father's illness and, despite his desire to return home, had accepted his father's requirements of remaining where he was and bringing the work there to a close. Even news of Lord Barcsay's passing had kept him there, telling both Charlotte and Amelia through letters that he was determined to bring to an end all that was held there, simply so that he might return to England and never again leave. His absence had been difficult to endure – even more so for Miss Hannah Montague, his betrothed.

“But you are married as of today and you need not concern yourself with thoughts of me,” Charlotte answered, quickly. “You must concentrate solely on being the wife of Lord Hesterway. I shall be perfectly contented, I assure you and our brother stated that he will come home very soon – and be wed almost immediately thereafter.”

Her sister's expression did not change, telling Charlotte that she did not believe her. “Everything is going to change, is it not? The stipulations of the will dictate that you

are to transfer all your belongings to a modest dwelling and reside there with our stepmother, a necessity that shall take effect upon our brother's nuptials!

That in itself will be a trial. For me, it is a little easier, given that I am wed now and must move all of my things to Lord Hesterway's estate but for you..." Tears filled her eyes and she grasped Charlotte's hand. "Would you be inclined to dwell in my abode?"

The desire to say yes was very strong indeed but with a sheer force of will, Charlotte shook her head. "No, I cannot. You must live with your husband and I will be perfectly contented in Haynes Manor." The main estate had moved now to Charlotte and Amelia's eldest brother, the new Lord Barcsay and his soon-to-be wife and thus, both Charlotte and her stepmother would settle into the Dower house instead, which was only five miles between the two houses. "I must hope that I too will marry sometime soon."

Amelia let out a small sigh. "Indeed. You have missed the last two Seasons given that first, our father was unwell and, thereafter, because of our mourning period but there is nothing to prevent you from doing so now."

"Though I may be considered something of a spinster!" Charlotte exclaimed, though her sister laughed but shook her head quickly. "The little Season will be a good beginning, at least. I should very much like to accept but –"

"There you are."

Charlotte lifted her head to see their stepmother coming to approach them, though neither Charlotte nor Amelia rose from their seats to greet her. Lady Barcsay kept a smile pinned to her lips even if her green eyes held no warmth.

"I have just been informed by Lord Hesterway that you wish to take Charlotte with

you to London for Christmas time,” she said, her tone a little clipped. “I should not like you to go, however, for otherwise I shall be quite alone.”

With a quick glance to her sister, Charlotte shrugged. “I should not say that. You will have my brother and his wife near you for Christmas.”

Lady Barcsay’s jaw tightened, her eyes flashing. “I do not think that you have any right to refuse me.”

“I think, Lady Barcsay, that you will find that by Christmas time, Charlotte will be of age to decide things for herself, will she not?” Amelia’s tone was amiable but there was a hint of steel within her words. “I do not think that you can refuse her simply because of your determinations.”

Lady Barcsay drew herself up to her full height, her arms folding over her chest. “I was not going to tell you this today but given that you insist on being inconsiderate and selfish, I shall do so regardless.” She took in a breath and Charlotte’s stomach clenched, suddenly concerned with whatever it was her stepmother was going to say. “Within your father’s will there is a statement where he desired you to remain unwed and, instead, to be my companion. You will not be permitted, therefore, to engage yourself to any gentleman, or to marry either. There is no need for you to go to London then, is there, for you will not be able to pursue any gentlemen or let any gentlemen pursue you! I do hope that you understand, Charlotte. It is clear to me that your father was very concerned for my welfare and wanted to make certain that I was cared for.”

Charlotte did not say anything for some time, not quite certain how she ought to respond. Instinctively, she fought back against the idea, throwing herself away from it and refusing to take it in. How could her father have done such a thing? How could he have made such a statement without even discussing it with her? Had he not thought of her future? Had he not considered what she herself might want?

“I think that Charlotte has every right to see where that statement is written, do you not?” Amelia interrupted the silence which had grown between both Charlotte and Lady Barcsay, her hand now on Charlotte’s, squeezing it tightly. “You cannot say such a thing and expect her to simply believe it.”

This did not make Lady Barcsay flinch. Instead, she merely shrugged. “Very well. I shall have it procured and then you shall read it yourself, Charlotte.”

The confidence in her voice made Charlotte’s spirits sink very low indeed, crumpling into a ball and then burning up into smoke and ashes. Her father had, then, determined that Charlotte would give up any hope of a future in order to look after her stepmother, even though Lady Barcsay had very little requirement for such a thing.

“I do not understand why my father would do that,” she said, aware of the tremble in her voice. “He knew that I was looking forward to the Season.”

“And also knew that you were more than likely, on your way to becoming a spinster. After all, it is not as though any gentlemen pursued you with any great eagerness during your debut, was it?”

The biting remark made Charlotte wince inwardly, aware that the truth was in it all the same.

“He cared for me,” Lady Barcsay continued, her voice softening just a little though Charlotte caught the flickering smile in the corners of her mouth, a smile which said that she knew very well what she was doing and just how much it pained Charlotte to hear it. “It was clear to me that he loved me and even now, with his passing, there comes that same awareness of all that he felt for me.” She sighed and put one hand to her heart, looking away for a moment. “I am to be cared for, at his command, for the rest of my days.”

“No.” Amelia shook her head, speaking before Charlotte could even think of what to say. “You cannot insist that Charlotte follows what our father has said for her to do, even if you think that it is what ought to happen. I will not permit it.”

Lady Barcsay lifted one eyebrow. “You think that she will defy her father’s requirement of her?”

Charlotte closed her eyes, feeling her heart wrench. On one hand, she was free to make her own choice but on the other, the weight of responsibility to do as her father had wished her to do sat down heavily upon her shoulders.

“I do not know what society will think should they hear that the daughter of the late Lord Barcsay refused to do as was asked of her,” Lady Barcsay continued, her tone now holding a good deal of foreboding, a warning that she would be the one to spread such a story, should Charlotte refuse. “It is her duty.”

“Enough.” Charlotte broke through her stepmother’s words, her voice rasping with emotion. “Now is not the time for any such conversation. We are at Amelia’s wedding and it is to be a joyous occasion. Any sort of discussion can take place at another time.”

“Charlotte, no! You cannot be thinking of doing what she asks!” Amelia, ignoring Charlotte’s suggestion that they bring the conversation to an end, continued on fervently. “You deserve to have your chance at a home and a family of your own. I know that father cared deeply for all of us but he cannot have been thinking clearly when he made that statement. Besides which, even if he was, it is not a command, nor a dictate. You can still choose not to do so.”

Lady Barcsay snorted. “And what shame that choice would bring! Which gentlemen would look at you should you make that decision and should all the ton know of it?”

“Please!” Her vision suddenly blurred with tears, Charlotte rose from her chair and, not even looking where she was going, stumbled past her stepmother and made her way out of the drawing room at once. Wiping her eyes and forcing a smile so that those who walked past her would not see her upset, Charlotte made her way to her bedchamber and hurried inside.

Closing the door, she rushed to her bed and threw herself down upon it, her tears now flowing freely. She had known that her father cared deeply for his new wife but she had never imagined that he would ever do something like this! To give up all that she had hoped for herself, to give up her own life in order to be the companion to someone who did not care for her in the least... it took everything away from her.

Her heart broke apart and Charlotte began to sob. She did not hear her sister come in but soon, Amelia sat down beside her on the bed, offering her what comfort she could but it did not dull the pain.

She was now fated to reside in a state of perpetual spinsterhood, for the present and all times to come; and with that grim reality, all her hopes and dreams were utterly shattered, with naught but despair in place of any prospect for restoration.

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‘ My dear sister,’ Charlotte read silently, her heart beginning to quicken with a fierce hope and expectation. ‘I do hope that you will come to London for the Christmas Season. I am already expecting your arrival, even though it is still some months away! I have missed your company desperately and have thought of you every day. I cannot bear to think of you alone in the house with our stepmother. I cannot imagine what you are enduring and thus, with that in mind, I must beg of you to come to stay with us. I have already written to our brother to inform him of my invitation to you and I am sure that he will write to you very soon. Do say that you will come, my dear? You are of age now to make your own decision and though I am certain that Lady Barcsay will inform you that you are to remain with her, remember that you are free to make your own choice. Besides, it is not as though you will be abandoning her, is it? A few weeks away from the Dower house will do you good, I am sure of it, and we will be able to spend many happy moments together. Will that not please your heart? Will you not find joy and hope in that? Write to me very soon and tell me that you are coming. Yours, your most affectionate sister.’

Charlotte let out a slow breath as she folded up the letter again and then pressed it to her heart. Ever since Amelia had wed, Charlotte had felt an ever-increasing sense of loneliness. To bring a little respite to that, to find herself in a home filled with love and warmth and happiness would bring her a great relief, she was certain.

Though, of course, she still had Lady Barcsay to contend with.

Closing her eyes, Charlotte took in a long breath and tried to find the courage which she would need to inform her stepmother about such a thing. To go to London for Christmas would be no small thing, for it would mean leaving her stepmother alone here in the Dower house, though, of course, there were other family members that she

could choose to go and join if she wished. Charlotte was not her only family.

“I want to go,” she murmured aloud, turning back to her writing desk and, picking up a fresh piece of paper, laying it down on the table and smoothing it with one hand. These last few months had been nothing but difficult, had offered her naught but sorrow and frustration and the chance of escaping it for even a short while was not something that Charlotte could refuse.

‘ Amelia, how glad I am to hear from you,’ she wrote, her quill scratching across the paper in a hasty fashion, as though she were afraid that her stepmother would come into the room without warning and would somehow know what she was writing. “ I cannot say more at present but be assured that I have every intention of making my way to London for Christmas. Thank you for your kind invitation. I shall count the days until we are in each other’s company again!’

Before she could change her mind or lose herself in her thoughts, worrying about what she ought to do, Charlotte signed the letter, folded it and then rang the bell while she waited for the wax to warm itself through. Sealing it closed, she addressed it and, just as that was finished, the door opened and a footman came in. She studied him for a moment before ascertaining that indeed, this was one of the servants that she trusted. Many of them would tell everything that Charlotte had been doing to her stepmother, who would then go on to question her and, at the same time, find fault with her for what she had either done or had failed to do.

“Have this sent immediately,” she directed. “At this very moment, do you understand?”

The footman nodded, took the letter from her without a word and then made his way from the room – and Charlotte let out a long, slow breath, closing her eyes as she leaned back into her chair.

Now all I have to do is inform my stepmother that I will be going to London for Christmas.

A wry smile tipped her lips and though it lingered, a sadness entered her heart and began to pull it down towards the depths. Living with her stepmother had been a dull, painful existence where even taking a breath on some days seemed to cause difficulty. It was as though Lady Barcsay did not want her to be in this very house with her though, whenever Charlotte stepped out of it even to go on a short errand, the lady became very angry indeed and demanded to know what Charlotte had been doing – often times insisting on accompanying her the next time she stepped out. Charlotte did not understand it, for it seemed to her that Lady Barcsay appeared to enjoy making her life a miserable existence, seemed to relish the fact that Charlotte had been directed by her late father's hopes, to live in this way. There were times when Charlotte had thought to simply state that she would not be doing such a thing any longer, that she would take herself to her brother's house now that he was back or, even better, to London to find herself a match but then the words of her father came back to her – written words which she had read herself – and her thoughts had crumpled into a heap and faded away.

“Charlotte?”

The door to Charlotte's supposedly private parlor flew open and Lady Barcsay strode in, her hands to her hips as she glared at her.

“What letters are you writing?”

Charlotte blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“I saw one of the footmen depart and demanded to know where he was going. It seems that you directed him to take your letter to be posted at once, without even a single flicker of hesitation! Is there a reason to that?”

There is but I need not express it to you. “I am merely keeping up with my correspondence,” she said, turning back to her writing table and taking out another piece of paper. “Do excuse me.”

Her stepmother did not move but, instead, came directly beside Charlotte’s writing desk, her hand, in a tight fist, slamming down on the table and making Charlotte jump. “How dare you speak to me with such disrespect? You do not ask me to leave your presence!”

“Yes, I do.” Charlotte, irritated and fatigued, looked up at her stepmother. “And I ask you again to excuse me, for I have some further letters I should like to send.” She chose her words carefully, refusing to give Lady Barcsay any reason to rail at her though it was difficult not to lose her temper. This was how her daily life was, a constant struggle against all that Lady Barcsay said and did.

Her stepmother leaned forward, her eyes narrowing. “To whom are you writing?”

Charlotte closed her eyes, blocking out the sight of her stepmother’s furious expression. “To many people. Now, if – ”

“You are the most impolite, inconsiderate creature!” Lady Barcsay cried, her face going scarlet. “How dare you refuse to answer me? What is it that I must say in order to have you speak to me civilly?”

“I am not speaking unkindly in any way. However, some of these affairs are my own.”

Lady Barcsay laughed harshly, one finger coming out to shake in front of Charlotte’s face. “You are meant to be my companion, meant to be a support to me and all you do is leech my strength from me. You enjoy causing me pain, do you not? I think your father would be ashamed, should he see you as you are now.”

Anger flared hot in Charlotte's chest and she could not hold herself back. She had done nothing wrong and yet her stepmother was insisting that she was the one causing pain and suffering? Using her father in an attempt to make her feel even smaller and more belittled than she was already fired Charlotte's upset all the more and, in a sudden show of strength, she pushed herself to her feet, the chair's feet scraping on the floor behind her.

"I am going to go to London for Christmas," she said, the words rushing out of her now. "I have accepted the invitation and expect to go to spend time with my sister at the very beginning of December. I have no expectation of when I shall return but I shall certainly be away for some weeks."

Lady Barcsay's eyes narrowed into dark slits, her face going scarlet. "You have no right to do such a thing. You have no right at all!"

"Yes, I do." Charlotte drew herself up, folding her arms over her chest in the hope of filling herself with confidence. "I am of age. Therefore, that is what I have decided."

"And you would leave me here alone?" Lady Barcsay pressed one finger hard into Charlotte's chest, words spitting out of her mouth. "You spiteful, inconsiderate, selfish, arrogant little –"

"Might I suggest that you step back from my sister, Lady Barcsay?"

Lady Barcsay let out a shriek of surprise and Charlotte caught her breath, only to turn and then run into her brother's arms, overwhelmed with relief upon seeing him.

"Thomas, whatever are you doing here?" she whispered, tears beginning to splash onto her cheeks. "I did not think that you would be coming to call."

Her brother held her tightly for a few moments and then released her. "I received

Amelia's letter yesterday and thought I would come to make certain that all is well," he said, quietly, before sending an angry look towards Lady Barcsay. "But now I see that my sister is being treated poorly, that she is being spoken to cruelly simply because she has decided to go to London for the Christmas Season? I presume that is why you thought to call her such names?"

"I... I did not mean..." Lady Barcsay went a trifle paler than before, moving back from Charlotte and her brother, her hands raised as though in defense of herself. "I became upset at the thought of being alone at Christmas time."

Thomas stood tall, his presence filling the room. "That does not mean that you have any right to speak to Charlotte in such a way, especially when she has given up a great deal already. You ought to be encouraging her to have some time with her sister, ought to be glad to see her enjoy herself in that way."

"Of course." Lady Barcsay suddenly seemed very humble, her eyes downcast, her head lowering just a little. "Forgive me, Charlotte. I did not mean to say such things."

Charlotte cast a glance to her brother, seeing his scowl darkening. It was just as obvious to him as it was to her, it seemed, that there was nothing genuine in what her stepmother said. The only reason she spoke so was because Thomas was the new Viscount and could, very easily, reduce Lady Barcsay's circumstances, should he so wish to. That was a great fear, Charlotte knew, having heard Lady Barcsay say that very thing to a friend who had come to call – though her stepmother did not know that she had overheard her. It was one of the many reasons that Charlotte disliked her stepmother so greatly, for the falseness and the pretense was more than her heart could bear at times.

"You have decided to go to London then, yes?" Thomas' tone warmed as he looked to Charlotte, now ignoring Lady Barcsay entirely. "I am glad to hear it. I was afraid that your remarkable sense of duty would prevent you from doing so."

Charlotte smiled. "I have decided to go, indeed. I would very much like to see Amelia again."

"Though you must not forget your commitment!"

Looking again to her stepmother, Charlotte caught the flash of anger in her eyes, aware that she was dampening down her true emotions in front of Thomas. "I have no intention of stepping away from that commitment."

"You cannot decide you have given it up," Lady Barcsay stated, firmly. "You cannot simply turn your back on me."

Thomas took a step forward and instantly, Lady Barcsay fell silent. "I wish I had witnessed this will with my own eyes," he uttered, his tone filled with bitterness. "I find it most difficult to credit that our father would ever have uttered such sentiments."

Lady Barcsay lifted her chin. "It is hardly my fault that the mail coach the will was in came under attack and that the will was lost in the dark and the discontent of that," she answered, a little too sharply. "Besides, your sister saw those words and read them carefully."

Charlotte glanced to her brother and gave him the smallest nod, seeing his frown only deepen. There was something about this situation that unsettled him and, were she honest, Charlotte would admit that she too felt the same. Nonetheless, she had already decided to do as her father had asked of her, regardless of her feelings on the matter. It was her duty, just as it had been her brother's duty to care for their father's holdings on the continent. He had not returned until his duty was complete and she, in the same way, would not return to her own freedom until her duty came to an end.

Thomas snorted, his lip curling. "Whether or not father wrote those words, I stand by

the fact that it was not an order and not a demand. Charlotte, if you should choose to find yourself in a happy and settled situation, then I will not think the worse of you.” He held up one hand, palm out towards Lady Barcsay, silencing her before she had even begun to splutter. “However, it is good that you are to go to London. I am pleased to hear that. And you, Lady Barcsay, I was to invite you to spend your Christmas with Hannah and me but given how you have treated Charlotte, I am not in mind to extend that invitation any longer.”

“It was a mere moment of anger and upset,” Lady Barcsay answered, her tone a little wheedling. “Pray, forgive me for it.”

Thomas looked to Charlotte who simply smiled briefly and then looked away, leaving the decision with him. He sighed, rubbed one hand over his eyes and then shook his head. “I shall extend the invitation to you, Lady Barcsay, because it is what my father would have wanted me to do. However, I must warn you, if there is any further... moments where you feel the urge to take out your anger upon my sister, then that shall not sit well with me. I do hope I make myself clear?”

“Very clear indeed.” A red spot rose in Lady Barcsay’s cheeks and Charlotte was quite certain her teeth were clenched but, all the same, she remained perfectly composed.

“Now,” Thomas smiled, looking down at Charlotte. “Come, Charlotte, let us take tea together and you can tell me all your news.” He threw a glance to Lady Barcsay. “And I do mean all. ”

Charlotte slipped her arm through her brother’s and walked with him to the door. “You will not change her, you know,” she murmured, as Thomas smiled sadly. “She is afraid you will take some of her yearly income away or remove some of the servants, that is all. There is no genuine thought of change.”

“But I can protect you as best I can,” he told her, opening the door so they might walk through together. “And I am going to make certain that this Christmas, you have time simply to enjoy yourself, just as you always should have been permitted to do.” He patted her hand lightly. “Charlotte, if you should find yourself falling in love with a gentleman, I want you to know that you have my blessing to proceed.”

Charlotte gave him a wry smile. “I hardly think that such a thing will happen, Thomas,” she answered, though he chuckled at her determined response. “And besides that, I have a duty to our stepmother.”

“It is not something demanded of you,” he reminded her, quickly. “If you should find a desire to remove this mantle of responsibility from yourself and instead find yourself happy, then I would be glad to see it, as would Amelia.” He nudged her lightly. “Do promise me that you will consider it?”

Keeping her gaze away from him, Charlotte shrugged, feeling that sense of responsibility to all that her father had asked of her and knowing that she could not turn from it. “I will consider it,” she answered, a little unwillingly. But I shall not turn from my duty.

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Samuel poured himself another brandy and then flung himself back down in his chair by the fire. The invitation from Lord Trenton rested, open, on the chair next to him where he had set it and his eyes turned to it again.

I do not want to go to London.

He closed his eyes. But nor do I want to remain here, alone.

That had been the greatest trouble for him of late. He had spent the last couple of years at his estate – not refusing company, of course – but not giving any thought to making his way to London, particularly not at this time of year. It held too many painful memories, too many sorrowful thoughts, and Samuel did not want to return to it.

And yet, the notion of staying here at his estate for yet another Christmas alone was not a pleasant one.

Sighing, Samuel took a sip of his brandy and closed his eyes, telling himself that he did not need to read the invitation again. Lord Trenton was his dear friend, had come to call and stay on a few occasions over the last couple of years and had always encouraged Samuel to return to society but had never pressed him to do so. What was he to do now with this invitation when part of him desired to attend simply so that he might be in company again while the other part of him wished to continue to hide himself away.

“If it had not been for her, then I would not be in this position.” Muttering to himself, Samuel pushed one hand through his hair, his heart squeezing painfully. Lady Maria

was the source of all this pain, the reason that he suffered so. Had she been true to him, as he had been to her, then none of this would have happened. Even though he pushed them away, even though he gritted his teeth and forced his mind away from such thoughts, they lingered all the same until, without warning, the memories came flooding back.

“I want to marry you, Maria.” Samuel’s heart felt as though it was so full of love, it might break apart, such was the joy and the happiness within him. “I have already spoken with your father and he has given me his consent.” Taking her hand in his, wishing desperately that they were alone, Samuel pressed her fingers gently. “I am desperately in love with you, Maria. I cannot think of anything but you, my mind and my heart are consumed with love for you.” Keeping his voice low but speaking with as much fervency as he dared, Samuel moved a little closer to her, wondering what it would be like when he would finally be able to steal a kiss from the lady he had come to love so passionately. “I will give you all of my heart, all of myself. We can build a life together, build a family together, make a home together. It is the only thing that I want.” HE closed his eyes for a moment, struggling to keep his composure. This moment meant so much to him for it was to be the moment that would change his life forever. “To know that you love me just as I love you has meant so much to me. I did not think that I would ever be blessed with such a gift and yet, here you are, offering it to me. And such is the wonder, such is the joy in that, Maria, that my only answer, the only thing I can give in return is to offer you my hand.” A whoosh of breath came out from his chest as he pressed her hand again. “My darling. Will you accept the offer of my hand?”

Lady Maria did not answer him immediately, as he had expected. The terrace was quiet, with only two others present, standing near the doorway rather than near them but surely, Samuel considered, it could not be their presence that made the lady hesitate?

“You are most kind.” Lady Maria closed her eyes, a slight tremble in her frame. “Of course, I shall accept. I –”

“You will?” Samuel made to step forward, only for Lady Maria’s hand to go to his chest, holding him back from her. “Forgive me.” Beaming from ear to ear, Samuel settled his hand over hers as it sat on his chest. “I do not think that I have ever been as happy as I am at this moment. I cannot imagine what joy awaits us! I am sure that –”

A sob broke from Lady Maria’s throat.

Samuel’s smile froze in place. “Maria?” He glanced to the other two guests standing near but neither of them looked at them, perhaps too lost in their own conversation as to overhear Lady Maria’s upset. “Whatever is the matter? Has the thought of matrimony overwhelmed you? I know that it is the hope of every young lady and mayhap –”

“I cannot marry you.”

Blinking rapidly, the air pulling from his lungs, Samuel stared back at the lady, waiting for her to explain, waiting for her to say something... but she did not. Instead, all that happened was that yet more tears fell from her eyes, leaving Samuel nothing but confused and uncertain.

“You just accepted me,” he murmured, after a few moments. “But now you say that you cannot? I do not understand.”

Another sob broke from her lips but this time, she stifled it by one hand pressing hard to her mouth. Lifting her gaze to his, tears spilling in her eyes, she gave him a short, sharp shake of the head.

“You cannot marry me.” Samuel’s heart began to twist painfully, his whole being

turning icy cold. “Why? I do not understand. You must explain yourself, Maria, please.” He tried to speak calmly but the upset in his chest began to fill his voice, her eyes darting to his and then away again as a single tear fell to her cheek. Samuel, resolving not to say anything more as he waited for her to speak, took his hand from hers and clenched it into a fist, forcing himself to wait. It felt like hours had passed until, managing to compose herself, Lady Maria finally spoke.

“I – I am sorry,” she whispered, her eyes closing tightly as she shuddered visibly. “I cannot marry you, not when my heart belongs to another.”

It was as though the floor had opened up and swallowed Samuel whole. Everything he knew, everything he believed, everything he had built the last few months upon evaporated in an instant, his foundation crumbling.

“I have not been truthful with you – or with anyone,” she continued, each word difficult for her to speak, such was her upset. “Father would never permit me to marry him but I cannot help my heart. He wants to elope and I... I wish to do so.”

“Elope?” Samuel repeated the word, dizziness beginning to attack him as he stumbled back from her, feeling the cool wall behind him, supporting him as he stared at the lady he loved, the lady he now realized he did not know in the least. “What do you mean?”

She shook her head, wordlessly as Samuel pressed one hand hard to his forehead. How could it be? He had been so sure of his love for her, so certain that she returned it – for she had said those very words – but now, it seemed, that had been nothing but a lie.

“How could you do this?” A trembling fury swept over him, stealing away his shock. “How could you pretend?”

“Because my father would not permit me to court him,” came the answer, her eyes now brimming with tears as she looked back at him, coming a little closer as though, somehow, she might be able to convince him of her goodness in all of this. “I cannot help my heart, Samuel! I thought that... I thought I might be able to force my heart to forget him by looking to you instead. I am very fond of you, truly, but – ”

Samuel sliced his hand through the air between them. “Do not even try to pretend that there is any sort of good in this. You may be kind-hearted towards me but that is not what you said to me. You told me, clearly, that you were in love with me, just as I was with you, that your heart was full of nothing but affection and now I discover that this was nothing but a lie?”

Lady Maria closed her eyes, one hand at her mouth as she sobbed.

“How could you do this?” The anger began to fade, leaving nothing but pain, a dark, sharp, stinging pain that grew in intensity with every second that passed. “I thought I had everything and now I have nothing. Nothing aside from the whispers and the gossip that the ton will spread amongst society until I have only shame and mortification left to claim as my own.”

With a sniff, Lady Maria opened her eyes again and looked at him. “I should not have kept up the pretence. I wanted to do just as my father expected but my heart would not permit me.” She sniffed lightly and pulled out her handkerchief, though her gloves were already damp and stained with tears. “I know I do not deserve to ask this, but if you ever cared for me at all, then might you keep this to yourself for even one more day?”

What she was asking him hit Samuel so hard, he lurched to the other side, his eyes going wide.

“I know that I do not deserve this kindness, not after what I have done,” she said

again, coming closer to him though her nearness was the very last thing that Samuel wanted. “But please, keep your silence for even one day more.”

“So that you can be taken to Scotland by the gentleman you care for,” Samuel rasped, as Lady Maria nodded, her eyes now wide and staring, fearful that he would refuse. Samuel shook his head, scrubbed one hand down his face and then looked away, hearing her sob. The pain within it tore at his heart, confusing him heavily for surely he ought not to feel any sort of compassion towards her but, instead, ought there not to be only upset and anger?

“It will give me time to prepare to leave London, I suppose,” he muttered, turning bodily away from her. “I do not want to linger in society when they hear that you have eloped with a gentleman that is not I.”

Lady Maria put both hands over her face and let out an enormous sob which, unfortunately, attracted the attention of the two guests nearby. Samuel, sensing that there might well soon be whispers already spoken of about this moment if he did not do something, quickly took Lady Maria’s hand and, though he wanted nothing more than to stride away from her and leave her to her tears, he quickly led her back to the front of the terrace, turning his back to the other two guests in the hope that they might realize that he did not want their company.

“You must compose yourself, else we shall never escape this evening without the ton noticing that something is amiss.” He quickly removed her hand from his arm. “And I shall have to play the fool until we can both take our leave.”

“You are not a fool.”

Her whispered words did nothing to soothe his heart and Samuel scowled, shaking his head and turning his face away from her. “Oh yes, I am,” he answered her, firmly. “And I am certain that everyone within society shall think it of me also, once it is

known that the lady I wished to betroth myself to has eloped with another.”

There came a long and heavy silence, punctuated only by the small sniffs from Lady Maria. Samuel gripped the edge of the terrace with both hands, feeling such a wide mix of emotions, he could not separate one from the other. What was he to do? His heart was already torn into pieces, he was sure, but he would have to wear a mask and disguise all that he felt for the rest of the evening, for tomorrow and for as many days thereafter as it took for him to leave London. There would be far too many whispers, too many sidelong glances and perhaps even words in the society newspaper about what had happened for him to accept without concern. No, he would have to leave London... and remain away for some time.

“I want you to know that I am sorry.”

Samuel stiffened. “Your apology makes very little difference to me, Maria,” he said, harshly. “You have broken me completely.” Hearing her sob once more, Samuel remained unmoved, wanting her to understand exactly what it was she had done. “I am in a thousand pieces and I do not think that I will ever be restored again, not for as long as I live.”

“But I am restored,” Samuel muttered to himself, as the memory came to an end. It was not a complete healing, of course, for he was still constantly attacked by the memory of what had happened, feeling the pain of her deceit breaking upon him over and over again – but he did not still love her. In that regard, he had been restored. His heart had not broken into a million pieces and remained that way. Instead, he had been putting it back together, piece by piece, until it was entirely his own and held no-one else within it.

And never shall again.

With a scowl, Samuel lifted the brandy glass to his lips and took a long sip. Yes, he considered, he could go to London for the Christmas Season but with no intention nor expectation of pursuing any sort of young lady. The thought of matrimony was now something dark, something he did not want to contemplate but that did not mean that he could not enjoy London, did it? He would simply have to make it clear to society that he had no interest in such a thing and pray that, thereafter, they would accept him just as he stated.

There might still be whispers and rumours about what happened.

Throwing back his brandy, Samuel's scowl deepened. He had not endured much given that he had practically run from London the very same day as Lady Maria's elopement had been discovered but he had heard that there had been many of them and that they had endured for some time.

"Then I either suffer them or I remain here," he told himself, setting his brandy glass down. With a sigh, he picked up the invitation again and read it through, feeling a slight tug of interest which he wanted very much to ignore. Seeing that he could not, Samuel set it back down, leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

I am going to London.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:31 am

“My dear Charlotte!”

Charlotte looked up, then rose to her feet as a warm smile spread across her face. “Lord Hesterway, how good to see you.”

The gentleman took her hand and bowed over it, his happiness evident in his kind expression. “We are family now, so I insist that you are no longer as formal. I can either be Hesterway or Charles to you.”

Charlotte smiled. “Charles, then. I thank you for your invitation – and your insistence – that I join you for Christmas. It was very kind of you.”

Lord Hesterway waved one hand as though to dismiss her words, then sat down in a chair opposite both Charlotte and Amelia. “It was the very least I could do. I am glad to see that my letters to your stepmother had the desired effect!”

“And my letters to you also,” Amelia murmured, taking Charlotte’s hand for a moment. “I did not think that you were going to join us, given your reluctance at first.”

Charlotte looked away, still feeling a tug of guilt. “Lady Barcsay did make it very clear to me that I was to remain with her. She reminded me repeatedly about my father’s desire for my presence to stay with her, though our brother made it very plain that she was to spend all of the festive period with them.” She gave Amelia a small smile. “Our brother was also most insistent.”

“Thomas has always been good that way,” Amelia answered. “He and I have

exchanged letters about your present circumstances. We do not think that you should feel obliged to cling to them.”

“And yet, I do.” Charlotte held up one hand, silencing her sister. “I know that you will insist that I need not do as he demanded but the guilt which swarms me whenever I feel like stepping away from our stepmother and pursuing my own life is something which I cannot bear.”

Her sister’s lips pulled flat. “No doubt that is something that she has been very good in placing upon you also. I presume that you have seen that part of father’s will, however?”

Charlotte nodded. “Our stepmother had it sent to us from the solicitors and I read it clearly. It was a separate missive, something which had only been written very recently before our father’s sad passing, but it was signed with his signature and held his seal.” She closed her eyes for a moment, recalling just how much her spirits had sunk when she had read those words. “It was obvious to me then that our father was very clear in his decision.”

“So you have come to London just to enjoy the time with us then, rather than seek out a gentleman for yourself?”

Charlotte nodded, ignoring the way that her heart leapt with a sudden, furious hope. “Yes, that is all that I have come for. I want to enjoy Christmas here in London with you both, that is all. I shall enjoy society’s company, of course, but I cannot permit myself to have any interest in any gentleman whatsoever.” She smiled as she spoke though she kept her tears within. It was not something she had become used to as yet, this idea of being a spinster. Her heart desperately wanted to have the freedom that her sister and her brother had been offered but, as the youngest of the three siblings, it seemed that she was not to be given it. “Now, what is it that we are to do this evening? I hear that there is some wonderful occasion but as yet, Amelia has not told

me what it is to be!”

Amelia reached for her teacup but much to Charlotte’s relief, did not say anything further about Charlotte’s present situation but instead, followed her lead in changing the conversation. “We are to attend the Earl of Trenton’s soiree – or is it a ball? I do not know what it is but it is one of the finest occasions of the little Season and something that, it is said, is looked forward to every year by the ton .” A note of excitement came into Amelia’s voice as she set her teacup down, her expression becoming a little more animated. “It is an evening of sparkling entertainment, with each room holding entertainments and an orchestra in the ballroom for those who wish to dance!”

“Goodness! That gentleman must be very wealthy indeed to put on such a wonderful event.” Charlotte felt her own heart lift in anticipation. “I do hope that one of the gowns I have brought will be suitable?” Doubt suddenly filled her thoughts and she looked down at her hands, afraid now that she would appear unfashionable and mayhap a little frumpy. “I am afraid that our stepmother was not inclined to permit me any spending on new gowns.”

“It is just as well that I have already purchased some for you,” Amelia replied, smiling warmly as Charlotte’s face lit up, happiness and appreciation pouring through her. “You and I are much the same size and so, in anticipation of your arrival, I made certain you had an entirely new wardrobe.”

Charlotte pressed her sister’s hands, her doubt flying away in a single moment. “I am very grateful indeed, Amelia, I thank you.”

“But of course.” Amelia shared a look with her husband who smiled and nodded, clearly just as contented as Amelia was to be able to offer such a thing. “You are my very dear sister and I want to make certain that this Christmas time, you have nothing but happiness.” Her smile began to fade. “I cannot imagine that these last few months

have been easy.”

“But that is not important now,” Charlotte answered, refusing to let herself think back to the difficult circumstances she had endured over the last few months. Her stepmother had never been a kind-hearted soul and despite her insistence that Charlotte do as her late father had demanded, she had never shown any happiness over it. “I am here now and that is all that matters.”

“Indeed.” Amelia took in a deep breath, smiled and then picked up her tea again. “And tonight shall be the most wonderful evening, I am quite sure.”

“An excellent way to begin your time in London,” Lord Hesterway said, with a smile. “Have no doubt, Charlotte, these next few weeks are going to be the most enjoyable of your life.”

“My goodness gracious!” Charlotte could not help her exclamation as she stepped into the ballroom, taking in the beauty of the room itself. There were mirrors on almost every wall, candelabras filled with a great many candles spreading out their golden glow. The walls were festooned with garlands of ivy and holly berries and in the corner, Charlotte saw a mistletoe bough placed in both an obvious and somewhat discreet position. She smiled to herself, trying to push aside the flicker of excitement in her chest. Any gentleman dancing with a lady might choose to stop underneath that bough and steal a kiss in exchange for one of the mistletoe berries, so she was quite sure that almost every unattached gentleman present would be eager to do so! Giving a slight shake, she reminded herself that such a thing would not happen to her given that she was not acquainted with many people present.

“It is most extraordinary, is it not?” Amelia smiled and took her arm, leading her forward. “And would you look at the floor? Is it not beautiful?”

Charlotte's breath caught in her throat as she gazed down at the intricately designed floor of the ballroom. The polished wood gleamed under the warm glow of the candlelight, reflecting the soft hues of the silks and satins worn by the evening's

guests. In the centre of the room, a beautifully painted circle showcased a coat of arms, undoubtedly belonging to their esteemed host. Surrounding it were delicate motifs of holly and ivy, meticulously detailed, evoking the richness of the season. The craftsmanship was exquisite, drawing Charlotte's eye for several moments as she admired the artistry that adorned the space where they would soon dance and mingle.

"I must say, how sad it will be to dance upon such artwork," she murmured, as Amelia chuckled. "It seems much too beautiful to just step on while dancing."

"But dance we must!" Amelia answered, smiling. "I do hope that you will dance despite your decision not to let any gentleman pursue you. There can be nothing wrong with enjoying yourself, surely?"

Considering, Charlotte eventually nodded. "I can see no difficulty, I suppose so yes, I shall dance, if I am asked." She offered her sister a slightly rueful smile. "Aside from our host, I am not at all acquainted with any of the other guests!"

"Oh, that is not so," her sister replied, chuckling. "There are many that you are already acquainted with, though you mayhap may not remember them given that it was some years ago. But you need not fear, I will introduce you to as many as possible so you will feel yourself just as much at home here as you are at the Dower house."

"I do not feel at home there at all, so this shall be a welcome change," Charlotte answered, with a small, wry smile. "Thank you, Amelia, for all your kindnesses. This

will be the most wonderful Christmas, I am sure.”

Amelia smiled and pulled her close for a moment. “But of course.”

“Ah. I did wonder if I would see you here.”

Charlotte stopped sharply as both she and Amelia looked back at a lady who appeared familiar but whose name Charlotte could not remember.

“You do not seem to recall me, given your silence.” The way the lady’s lip curled made Charlotte’s heart sink, suddenly realizing why there was such a sense of familiarity. “My sister wrote to inform me that you would be present in London during the little Season, Miss Charlotte, pardon me I should say Miss Millerton, and thus charged me to make certain that you remembered what your father required of you.”

Charlotte lifted her chin. “Lady Foster, is it not?”

The lady chuckled, her eyes just as sharp as Lady Barcsay’s could be. “You recall me, then? Yes, I am sister to your stepmother. The last time I saw you both was at my sister’s wedding.”

Amelia cleared her throat, catching the lady’s attention and drawing it away from Charlotte. “You did not attend my father’s funeral.”

“No, I did not.” No explanation was given for this, making Charlotte frown. “But how fortunate that I am here in London now, while you yourself are also, Miss Millerton.” Again, her eyes went to Charlotte’s face though there was no warmth there. “I will be able to inform my sister of your behaviour and I will be as present as I can be to make certain you remember your requirement to my sister rather than to yourself.”

“I have no need for such a thing,” Charlotte answered, quickly. “You may mean well, Lady Foster, but I can assure you that I do not need to be reminded.”

Lady Foster did not accept this, giving Charlotte a quick shake of her head. “I am afraid that I have no interest in whether you believe that you have no requirement for such a thing or not, Miss Millerton! That is my intention and I shall stick with it.” She leaned forward, her eyes narrowing all the more. “Do not think that you will be able to push me from my task by mere words, my sister has already informed me of your selfishness, your stubborn nature and your discontent. You will find me as your shadow, Miss Millerton.” She rose to her full height, her lips pursed. “Good evening to you both.”

The moment the lady stepped away, Charlotte dropped her head and closed her eyes, all of the happiness she had once felt now evaporating away.

“I cannot quite believe her audacity!” Amelia, indignant, began to lead Charlotte in the opposite direction from Lady Foster, taking quick, hasty steps. “How dare she think that she can come and follow you around as though you are a debutante with a need for a chaperone?”

“It is our stepmother’s intentions that troubles me,” Charlotte sighed, heavily. “She clearly desires that I do just as I have said and is, mayhap, a little unhappy with the fact that I decided to come to London against her wishes.”

Amelia snorted. “A little unhappy? I think that she is greatly frustrated and, given that you defied her – though I do not see it that way, given that you are of age – she has now made certain that you will still have an awareness of her presence! No doubt she wished to attend London herself but could not, given that our brother and his wife expect her to join them for the festive season.”

“But what am I to do?” Charlotte asked, her thoughts still heavy, the evening no

longer holding as much joy nor as much anticipation as it had before. “If Lady Foster is here to practically stand guard over me, then I shall not have any happiness whatsoever!”

Amelia turned to face her, grasped Charlotte’s wrist and, after a moment, hurried forward. Charlotte had no choice but to follow her, walking with her sister to the side of the ballroom where there were less people present and a little less light with it. Amelia released her, took in a deep breath and gazed into Charlotte’s face, clearly waiting for her to catch her breath and calm herself. It was something Amelia had always done and, even now, though it took a few moments for Charlotte to quieten her heart and whirling thoughts, they steadied all the same.

“You are not to let either our stepmother or her sister bring any sort of darkness to what is going to be a wonderful Christmas,” she said, firmly. “I promise you that we will not always be in her company and, if we must, then we can be just as determined as she is.”

Charlotte blinked. “What do you mean by that?”

“We can find out whether or not she is to be present at various occasions,” Amelia said, firmly, bringing Charlotte’s heart a little relief. “I believe that she is wed to a Viscount – from what I recall – but I am wed to an Earl and thus, our standing is not quite similar enough for us to always be at the same occasions. I can assure you, my dear sister, that Lady Foster will not have as much of a presence in your life as she might wish to have. Those here in London who are my friends will listen to me about this matter and make certain Lady Foster is not invited, should it come to that.” She took a breath, clearly determined. “Lady Foster calls herself your shadow but she will be nothing more than a cloud which passes for a moment and then fades away.” Her sister lifted her chin, a small smile catching the edge of her lips. “And if I must, I will throw my own events and make certain she is not invited. We cannot let her succeed, Charlotte. Do you hear me? You must be strong in this, refusing to let her capture a

hold of your Christmas and make it into the dull, miserable affair she clearly wishes – all on behalf of her sister, I might add! You have already given up enough. Are you certain that you wish to give up even this?”

Charlotte closed her eyes, took in a breath and then let it out slowly. Opening her eyes – and catching sight of a gentleman who, his eyes flickering with interest, merely inclined his head and then stepped away – felt herself blush furiously, wondering just how much he had overheard. “Thank you, Amelia,” she said, making sure to keep her voice low and quiet. “You are quite right. I ought not to have let her words take such a hold of me.”

Amelia smiled, released her hands and then, stepping beside her again, looped her hand through Charlotte’s arm. “Very good. Now, ignore her entirely, I beg you, and let us go in search of some more fine company. I will introduce you to everyone I can think of and you will be dancing very soon, I am sure.”

Charlotte forced a smile, still dampening down her concern over Lady Foster’s presence. Amelia was right, of course, for she was not about to permit one lady’s determination to ruin what was meant to be a very pleasant time here in London! Try as she might, however, Charlotte felt herself a little nervous still as she resisted the desire to look over her shoulder, wondering if Lady Foster was following after her even here in the ballroom. It was only when Amelia began to introduce her to a group of gentlemen and ladies that Charlotte was finally forced to put all of that away from her mind and instead, offer greetings to them all.

This Christmas might not have been what she anticipated, what with the arrival of Lady Foster, but Charlotte had to make the best of it regardless. She only prayed she could.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:31 am

I do not wish to be here. Samuel scowled to himself as he made his way through the throng of guests only then to turn sharply and make for the side of the ballroom, eagerly seeking out the shadows. It was only because his very dear friend had thrown this wonderful occasion that Samuel had consented to be present, though within moments of stepping inside, he had wanted to take his leave again. Christmas was, to him, a rather dull affair for, without family to share it with, he had spent the last three years alone. Yes, there had been invitations to various events on Christmas day itself, but Samuel had always chosen not to attend. Instead, he had let himself sink slowly into discontent and drunkenness, trying to push aside the dark memories which always haunted him.

At least she will not be here this Season.

Samuel let out a long breath and clasped his hands behind his back, meandering slowly rather than pushing his way through. He had no desire to stop and speak with anyone at present, his stomach clenching as unpleasant memories returned to him. It had been three years since he had last enjoyed a wonderful Christmas, only for that happiness to be swallowed up entirely in one single, broken moment. Time and again, Samuel had attempted to set it aside, had told himself that he did not want to think of her or all that had happened, but the memories refused to leave. It was as though they delighted in tormenting him, were pleased to bring him pain. That was why he despised these occasions, why he did not like conversing with anyone nor wished to step out to dance. The last time he had done so, it had brought him nothing but a broken heart. Why should he risk such a thing again?

Two ladies, one walking quickly, her hand on the other's wrist, hurried forward, making to stand at the side of the room, close to the shadows there where Samuel

himself walked. A little frustrated, Samuel slowed his steps all the more, wondering if he ought to walk around them, practically pressing himself against the wall as he did so, or if he should step a little further into the ballroom and, in doing so, make his presence known. He certainly did not want to do the latter for that could well bring him a good deal of attention especially given that he was a Marquess and held such a strong title. The ton knew that he was still not connected with any young lady and would, as they had always done, attempt to thrust daughters, sisters or nieces under his nose in the hope of him noticing one of them.

The thought turned his stomach. None of them wished to know his character, none would truly care for him. His title and fortune were all that mattered.

Though she knew me, came the sudden thought, and still, she turned her back on me.

Heaviness settled on him again and Samuel rubbed one hand over his face. Coming to a stop, he sighed and clicked his tongue but neither lady took notice, with one gazing fervently into the other's eyes.

“You are not to let either our stepmother or her sister bring any sort of darkness to what is going to be a wonderful Christmas.”

Despite his frustration, Samuel's ears pricked up. The first lady was speaking very fervently indeed though clearly, she had no awareness of his presence. He considered them both, stepping back a little more into the shadows. They must be sisters, he considered, a little surprised with just how ardent the lady's voice was. Something must have happened to make her speak so and the other lady, Samuel saw, was looking a little afraid.

His heart twisted as a frown settled over his brow. To know that a young lady was upset or frightened because of another did not sit well with him though, he reminded himself, he had no reason to stand and listen to this.

“I promise you that we will not always be in her company and, if we must, then we can be just as determined as she is.”

The other lady hesitated and Samuel, telling himself to move forward and to ignore the rest of the conversation, attempted to do so, only for her to speak and command his attention again.

“What do you mean by that?”

I should take my leave, for I am being beyond rude at present, Samuel berated himself, silently. This has nothing to do with me.

“We can find out whether or not she is to be present at various occasions,” the first lady replied as Samuel ducked his head and began to move forward, stepping slowly and carefully so that his itching ears would be satisfied while, at the same time, trying to hide himself in the shadows. There was not a large space for him to push into, no large gap between them but he could not bring himself to walk into the ballroom a little more. Keeping his head lowered, he moved carefully, praying that neither of the ladies would notice him. Perhaps, in their fervency and the depth of their conversation, they would not see him.

“I believe that she is wed to a Viscount – from what I recall – but I am wed to an Earl and thus, our standing is not quite similar enough for us to always be at the same occasions. I can assure you, my dear sister, that Lady Foster will not have as much of a presence in your life as she might wish to have. Those here in London who are my friends will listen to me about this matter and make certain Lady Foster is not invited, should it come to that. Lady Foster calls herself your shadow but she will be nothing more than a cloud which passes for a moment and then fades away. And if I must, I will throw my own events and make certain she is not invited. We cannot let her succeed, Charlotte. Do you hear me? You must be strong in this, refusing to let her capture a hold of your Christmas and make it into the dull, miserable affair she

clearly wishes – all on behalf of her sister, I might add! You have already given up enough. Are you certain that you wish to give up even this?”

Samuel lifted his head and, just as he did so, the second lady, the one to whom the question was being asked, looked directly at him. Shame infused him, burning up through his core, into his chest and face and quickly, he turned his head away and moved forward. He stumbled slightly in his haste, his mortification increasing all the more but finally, he was away from them both.

Lady Foster, he mused, the name coming to him with a sense of familiarity. It soon came to him. Lord Foster was one of the gentlemen Samuel had played cards with recently, one who had been rather raucous and much too imbibed to play sensibly. Samuel had been forced to take a vow from the fellow rather than have the coin given to him there and then, which had been most frustrating. To his mind, a gentleman ought not to play cards if he did not have the money with him at the time!

“Ah, there you are. I did wonder if you would be hiding in the card room this evening but I can see that you have not made your way there as yet!”

Samuel scowled. “Do keep your voice down, my friend. I am attempting to be as inconspicuous as possible.”

Thomas, the Earl of Trenton and Samuel’s very dear friend, lifted an eyebrow. “You are attempting to be inconspicuous at one of the most auspicious events of the festive Season?” His eyes twinkled. “The auspicious event that I have thrown?”

With a chuckle, Samuel looked away from his friend and instead, let his gaze travel about the room. “You have done very well, Trenton. I am impressed as is, it seems, almost every other member of the ton ! I have heard many a person marveling over this or that.” Smiling, he put one hand on Lord Trenton’s shoulder for a moment. “Thank you for the invitation. You know that I do not mean to be rude in my

manner.”

His friend nodded. “Of course not.”

Samuel took his hand away. “You well understand why I am not inclined towards being dragged into unwanted company and conversation.” He threw a quick glance to his friend before pulling his gaze away again. “No doubt someone will either speak of or mention things that I do not wish to speak of.”

“And by that, you mean Maria.”

Samuel closed his eyes, wincing inwardly. “Yes, Maria.”

Lord Trenton cleared his throat. “Forgive me. I did not think... ”

“It has been a long time, yes.” Samuel shook his head. “Three years have passed and still, I cannot think of it without pain.”

With a small nod, Lord Trenton spread out his hands. “If there was something I could do to help you, then you know that I would. All you need to do is say the word and –
”

“You need not take on any blame, my friend.” Samuel interrupted but did so gently.

“Yes, she was your cousin but that does not mean that you bear any responsibility.”

“Even though I was the one who introduced you, encouraged you and the like?” A small snort escaped him. “Had I known that her intentions were not pure, then I would never have done so.”

“I know. But it is not your fault.” Samuel offered a wry smile. “It is probably good for me to be here in society again. I simply do not feel that as yet.” He shook his

head. "I fear gossip. I have endured enough of that, I can assure you."

Lord Trenton tilted his head. "Why did you come back to London? When I told you that I would be here for the little Season and thereafter, suggested you come to join in the festivities, I did not get the impression from you that you had any real intention of doing so."

Knowing that there was no good in pretending, Samuel chose instead to be honest. Lord Trenton knew him well enough to be able to ascertain when he was lying, that much was certain!

"In truth, I had not thought about coming to London again," he began, "but the thought of spending more time alone at the estate was not a particularly pleasant one. I felt as though I had endured enough solitude – though it has been my own choice to be alone, of course."

"I understand."

"But I also wish for you to understand that I have no intention of seeking out another lady. I will make it plain in amongst the ton also, if I have to! I have already determined that I shall not marry."

Lord Trenton's eyes flared. "Ever? You intend to remain alone for the rest of your life?"

Samuel shook his head. "I must produce the heir, I know that, but I will not marry any time soon. This pain within me must depart completely and then I shall enjoy a time when I am simply in my own company and quite contented with it. Thereafter, I may consider marriage."

"But that could be years!"

“Yes.” Samuel shrugged. “It could be but that is my determination. I have vowed to myself that I shall not let myself be caught by any young lady. When the time comes, it shall be for my own sake and at my own consideration. I shall never permit myself to feel anything for another young lady again. Not for as long as I live.” He held up one hand, seeing the way that his friend opened his mouth to speak. “You need not argue with me. I have resolved upon my course.”

Lord Trenton’s lips tugged to one side.

“And yes, I know that there will be speculation about my return to London but I fully intend to make certain that all of the ton know of it.”

“There will be gossip!” Lord Trenton exclaimed, his eyes sharp for a moment. “Can you endure it?”

Samuel rubbed one hand over his face. “I have endured enough gossip for a lifetime,” Samuel muttered, feeling the urge to retreat back into the shadows again. “I cannot bear any more whispers.”

His friend’s expression grew sympathetic. “I do not think that you are able to avoid such a thing, unfortunately. You know as well as I what the ton is like though, I am sure, they will begin to whisper about something – or someone else – soon enough. You must simply permit them to talk about you for a short while, I think.”

“Considering what I have just overheard, you may be right.” Samuel, seeing his friend’s eyebrows lift in obvious curiosity, chuckled. “I am afraid that I heard something I was not meant to, some difficulty between one young lady and a Lady Foster? You will recall the gentleman, I am sure.”

Lord Trenton’s frown was immediate. “Lord Foster? Yes, I know him. He demanded that I place the most ridiculous amount of money on a game of cards which, of

course, I refused.”

Samuel chuckled ruefully. “I played cards with him only last week, I think, when I had just begun to re-enter society. He was not an amiable fellow in the least.”

“No, he is not.”

“And it sounds as though his wife might be much the same,” Samuel continued, his interest still a little piqued. “I should not have lingered to listen, however. I should probably find the young lady in question and apologise for lingering.”

“Do you know their names?”

Samuel shook his head.

“Then I say, forget about it. There is no need for you to do anything of the sort. Besides, given the fact that I can see three young ladies coming toward you with a calculating gleam in every eye, I think that you may find yourself a little... overcome with company.”

Samuel turned sharply, only to wish he had not done so as smiles wreathed themselves across every face, perhaps thinking that he had turned to look at them out of hope or expectation. Inwardly groaning, Samuel had no other choice but to turn his attention to them all fully, bowing as they came near and silently praying that he would recall their names, had he already been introduced – even if it had been some years ago now.

“Good evening, Lord Crestwood,” the first lady said, bobbing a curtsy after she had unlinked herself from her fellow companions. “It has been some time since we have been in each other’s company, has it not?”

“Lady Norah, good evening,” Samuel said quickly, relieved that he had remembered the lady’s name. “I did not think for a moment that you would remember me, since I have been absent from London for so long.”

The lady trilled a laugh, reached out one hand and let her fingers rest on his arm for just a moment. “Oh goodness, Lord Crestwood, you cannot think that I would forget you! Your absence from society has been noticed by many, though I am sorry for what drove you away from us.”

A heavy weight dropped down into Samuel’s stomach and though he forced a smile, he did not feel even a single iota of happiness. Within barely a minute of conversation, the lady had brought the subject about to his absence from London, to the ending of his engagement. He looked to Lord Trenton who, after a small smile, merely shrugged as though to say that this was all that Samuel could expect – and would have to become used to – and, sighing inwardly, Samuel forced himself back to the conversation, resigning himself to becoming part of the local gossip for the next few days at least.

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“Now.” Amelia sat down next to Charlotte and beamed at her. “At the last ball, you did not dance more than two dances. I think that this evening, you should attempt to step out a good deal more than the last time!”

Charlotte flushed, laughed and shook her head. “My dear sister, I hardly think that such a thing is a necessary requirement for my presence here in London. I very much enjoyed the ball at Lord Trenton’s abode but I did not need to dance all of the dances in order to have a most enjoyable time!”

Her sister’s eyes twinkled. “But you will enjoy yourself all the more if you dance them all, I am sure,” she said, with a chuckle. “Imagine being swept around the floor for the waltz, for example! That would be quite wonderful, would it not?”

“I have not often danced the waltz,” Charlotte admitted, with a small smile. “I know that you wish me to have the very best of times here in London for the Christmas Season and I assure you, there is nothing that you need concern yourself with. I have been here less than a sennight and already, I have had a more enjoyable time than I have ever had, I am sure!”

Amelia’s smile slowly faded and she took Charlotte’s hand for a moment. “Are you sure that you will do as our stepmother demands?”

Charlotte let out a slow breath, wishing that Amelia would simply accept her decision and would not press her on it. “Amelia, it was not our stepmother who demanded anything, remember? Our father insisted and therefore, I have decided to accept his parting wishes. Indeed, you will tell me that I do not need to and I quite agree with you there, of course. But that does not mean that I will not do it regardless.”

Amelia sighed and shook her head. “There were so many gentlemen who were admiring you at Lord Trenton’s ball. I am sure that, with only a few more minutes of conversation, you would find that many would wish to call on you.”

The thought did make Charlotte’s heart skip with a sudden excitement but she dampened it down quickly, reminding herself of her requirements. “Did you see that gentleman listening to our conversation, however?” she asked, changing the conversation quickly. “I thought him very rude indeed!”

“Listening to us?” her sister repeated, her eyes widening. “Goodness, that was very impolite!”

“I do not know who he was but yes, he was certainly listening,” Charlotte continued, with a shake of her head. “The way he looked at me told me that he knew full well that he had been listening when he ought not to have done so but there was also an unashamed look in his eye. I am glad that when I caught his attention, he hurried away, however.”

Her sister shook her head. “Goodness, how improper a gentleman he sounds! If you see him at this ball, then you must point him out to me, just to see if we are already acquainted.” The twinkle came back into her eye. “And if we are, I have every intention of making it quite clear to him just what I think of such behaviour!”

Charlotte laughed and was about to say more, only for there to come a knock at the door. Amelia called for the footman to come and he did at once, holding a calling card. Amelia took it, only for her brow to furrow and her eyes to flash.

“Who is it?”

“Lady Foster.” Amelia handed the calling card to Charlotte, her jaw set tight. “How dare she think that she can come to call?”

A knot tied itself in Charlotte's stomach. "No doubt she has come to remind me that she will be continuing to watch me, no matter where I am in public," she muttered, closing her eyes tightly. "Even now, this is what she seeks to remind me of."

"And we will not permit her," Amelia stated, getting to her feet and taking Charlotte with her. Handing the card back to the footman, she directed him back to the door. "Please inform Lady Foster that your mistress has gone out for the afternoon."

Seeing what her sister meant to do, Charlotte chimed in quickly. "For a walk to St James's Park."

Amelia threw a look at her. "St James's Park? In this weather?"

Charlotte nodded, and within a few moments, the footman was dismissed. "I am sure we will only be able to do this once, but Lady Foster, being informed about such a thing, might then decide to take a walk through St James's Park herself, albeit in the cold and the drizzle."

A small smile tilted the edge of her sister's lips. "And thus, she will find herself frozen to the bone and irritated with it," she said slowly, as Charlotte nodded, a sense of guilt prodding at her heart which she quickly ignored. "My dear sister, you are more devious than I had ever expected!"

"Mayhap but I have decided that, after what you said to me, I am not about to let Lady Foster make this a difficult Season for me," Charlotte stated, firmly. "If she wishes to come against me, if she wishes to state that she will do all she can to make certain that I cling to my promise to her sister, then she will find herself in more difficulty than she has mayhap expected."

Amelia grinned her agreement. "Wonderful. Now, shall we take tea together? Or would you like to go out in town as we first thought?"

Charlotte considered, then sat back down on the couch with a small, contented sigh. “I think I should like to stay indoors, where it is warm, where the tea is gently steaming and where the cook’s honey cakes are quite marvelous,” she said, making Amelia laugh with delight, only to then go and ring the bell. “And let us hope that Lady Foster enjoys her walk in the cold!”

The ball was in full swing and Charlotte, given that she was of age now to no longer require a chaperone, chose to step away from her sister for a time and walk around the ballroom alone. Being alone was not something that she found overly difficult, for it was something that she had become used to these last few months, living with her stepmother in the Dower house. There was something very different about being here alone, however, rather than merely wandering through a large house all on her own! Now and again, someone smiled at her, a gentleman nodded towards her and Charlotte returned each of the gestures but did not stop to speak. For the moment, she was quite contented merely to walk.

I wish I could be seeking out a match.

The thought came to her unbidden and Charlotte frowned, telling herself that she did not need to think of such things. She had already made her decision and, thus, she had no need to think of any gentleman, nor look with longing around the ballroom.

And yet, all the same, that longing remains.

A lump caught in her throat as Charlotte dropped her gaze to the floor for a few moments, trying to keep her composure. She had done her utmost not to let herself think of such things and yet, despite that, they came back to her mind time and again. Perhaps it was simply because she was now here in London, in a place that was filled with gentlemen who were all, as yet, unattached, that she felt that longing grow.

“I do not know why father said such a thing,” she murmured to herself, lifting her gaze again and blinking quickly so as to push her threatening tears back. “Why would he think I should not want to have a happy future for myself? Or was it simply because he thought I would never be anything more than a spinster?”

That last thought sent more tears to her eyes and Charlotte blinked furiously, forcing them back as quickly as she could. She did not want to let such thoughts upset her, not when she was in the midst of another beautiful Christmas ball. She could enjoy the little Season without the thought of what falling in love might be like, could she not?

“How dare you?”

Charlotte blinked in surprise, taking a step back.

“You were not out in the park, as you said. How dare you lie to me?”

“Lady Foster.” The initial shock left her feeling a little weak though, after a moment, she gathered herself. “I do not know what you are talking about.”

“You were not in the park, as you said,” the lady repeated, her features screwed up with anger, venom in every word. “What sort of audacity does it take for a young lady to treat her elder in such a way?”

Charlotte’s hands curled into fists, aware that there would be those around her who might well overhear this interaction and begin to think poorly of her. “I do not think that I forced you to take a walk in the park this afternoon, Lady Foster. Therefore, I do not know what it is that you are upset about.”

The lady’s face went an immediate dark shade of red, her lips pinched as she drew herself up to her full height, standing a little taller than Charlotte herself. “You know

very well that I came to call, only to be informed that your sister as well as yourself had both stepped out to the park. That was a lie, was it not? You sent me out to that park, in the cold and the wind, while, no doubt, you laughed at my foolishness!"

Swallowing tightly and trying to keep a hold of both her anger and her embarrassment at being spoken to in such a way, Charlotte took in a breath and then took a step back. "I do not think that I have done anything wrong, Lady Foster. I did not force you to come to the park. You chose to do so, clearly attempting to follow after myself and my sister for your own reasons."

"You lied to me, I am sure of it!"

"Let me make something very clear." Fighting for a strength that Charlotte wasn't certain she would be able to find and hold on to, she lifted her chin. "I have no interest in spending any time in your company. I have no desire to let you come anywhere near me. I am aware of your intentions and I can assure you, I have no interest in letting you pursue me as you intend. I am here in London to enjoy the Christmas season and that is exactly what I intend to do. Do not think for a moment that you will be welcomed into my sister's house or company, Lady Foster! Do not think that we will be willing to hear what you have to say, that we will be contented to engage you in conversation. I can assure you, that shall never be. Now, do excuse me."

Making to step away, Charlotte gasped as a strong hand caught her arm and hauled her back, with Lady Foster's face now scarlet, her lips curled back in a fierce snarl. "How dare you? I feel pity for my sister being forced to live with someone such as you but given that —"

"Ah, do excuse me for interrupting but I believe it is our turn to dance!"

A gentleman broke directly between Charlotte and Lady Foster, forcing the lady to

drop Charlotte's arm. He did not so much as glance at Lady Foster but instead, turned his smiling face to Charlotte, though there was a severity in his gaze which told her that he had heard and seen all that had taken place – and was not pleased with it.

“Our dance?”

His smile remained. “Yes, our dance. The waltz, remember?” A quiet chuckle came from him though his gaze remained steady and severe. “No doubt you have had so many dances – and so many gentlemen seeking you out – you have forgotten which person you are to dance with next!”

“I – yes, of course.” Seeing what he was doing and finding herself rather grateful, Charlotte accepted his arm and began to walk with him, away from Lady Foster. “I thank you.”

The gentleman's expression altered from a false happiness to a frown. “Pray, forgive my interruption, but I found it most displeasing to witness what was occurring.”

“You are very kind,” Charlotte answered, glancing at him, only for a rush of recognition to wash over her. “Wait a moment, you are –” She stopped short, unable to say that he was the very same gentleman whom she had caught listening to her as she had spoken to her sister at the previous ball.

“I am the Marquess of Crestwood, if that is what you were going to say,” the gentleman answered, leading her to the floor. “I know that we are not properly acquainted and for that, I am sorry but I thought it would be best to intervene. We shall let everyone believe that we have been introduced though, so no scandal arises.”

“I am grateful,” Charlotte answered, though she found herself suddenly nervous, realizing that she was now to dance the waltz with a gentleman she had not been properly introduced to, as well as the fact that she had not yet danced the waltz in

some time. “We do not need to dance, however. I am sure that you would prefer to step out with someone else.”

The gentleman only smiled, continued to lead her to the dance floor and, after a moment, stepped back so that he might bow. “I am more than contented to dance with you,” he said, lifting his head from his bow, his dark brown hair falling forward over his forehead for a moment. “Besides, if Lady Foster should look and see that we have not stepped out together, then what would she think?”

“I suppose that is true enough,” Charlotte answered, a little nervous still. “I should probably inform you that I am Miss Charlotte Millerton. My father was the late Viscount Barcsay.”

“Ah.” Lord Crestwood nodded. “I am a little acquainted with your brother, as we were at Eton together. A pleasure to meet you, Miss Millerton. Now, shall we?”

There was no time for her to speak, no time for her to protest. Lord Crestwood stepped forward, took her in his arms and began the waltz, sweeping her around the floor in the most expert manner.

Charlotte could barely catch her breath. Her feet, thankfully, seemed to move of their own accord, recalling each and every step without any great difficulty which Charlotte was truly grateful for. The worry she had felt, the anxiety which had caught her stomach, now quickly faded as she let herself break free of the tension which had held her, settling now into the dance – and into Lord Crestwood’s arms.

Glancing at him, Charlotte let herself take him in for a moment, a little surprised at how easy this dance had become and how contented she was in it. Lord Crestwood was a well-built gentleman, certainly, with strength in his frame which she herself could feel as he held her. His dark hair seemed a little at odds with the light blue of his eyes, and though he was not smiling at present, there did appear to be a softness

about his expression which, to Charlotte's mind, spoke of kindness. Indeed, he was certainly considerate, given the way that he had stepped in between Lady Foster and herself! Not very many gentlemen would have done such a thing, she considered, and for that, she was more than grateful.

"You dance very well, Miss Millerton," Lord Crestwood murmured, as the dance continued. "Have you been in London for long?"

"Only a little over a sennight," she answered, a little breathlessly given how she was being whirled around the floor. "I am staying with my sister and her husband for the Christmas season. Lord and Lady Hesterway?"

"Ah!" Lord Crestwood grinned, his eyes alight which, Charlotte had to admit, did make him appear very handsome indeed. "Lord Hesterway I know very well. He is a good fellow which, of course, must make your sister an excellent lady, I am sure."

Charlotte smiled at the compliment. "Indeed, she is."

"Then I hope that this difficulty with Lady Foster does not impinge upon your time here in London." The music began to slow and Lord Crestwood with it. "I know a little of Lord and Lady Foster, I confess."

"Do you?" Charlotte looked back at him surprised, just as Lord Crestwood came to a stop, ready to release her. "Then..." She frowned for a moment, a little surprised at the question which had sprung to her lips. Dare she ask him such a thing when they were not even properly acquainted?

"Yes, Miss Millerton?" Lord Crestwood rose from his bow, a slightly enquiring look on his face. "Is there something that I can help you with in this regard?"

"It is a slightly strange situation, the one I find myself in," Charlotte began, taking his

arm when it was offered to her, grateful that he was willing to continue the conversation, at least. “I do not know Lady Foster in any way whatsoever, nor her husband either though we have been introduced.”

“I see.”

Charlotte pressed her lips together for a moment, her heart jumping as she chose her next few words carefully. “I know that you overheard a little of what my sister and I were saying at Lord Trenton’s ball,” she continued, seeing him duck his head, heat instantly in his cheeks. “I do not hold anything against you for that – it is a ballroom, filled with guests and sometimes, it is unavoidable.”

“Though it was impolite of me to linger,” he stated, surprising her. “I should not have done so. Forgive me for that.”

Liking him all the more, Charlotte smiled. “But of course. Thank you for acknowledging that.”

He smiled back at her and much to her frustration, Charlotte’s heart leapt up though she quietened it just as quickly. “Now, what was it you were to ask me about Lord and Lady Foster?”

Charlotte’s smile dropped. “I was about to ask if you would consider coming to speak with my sister and me about what you know of them? I know very little about their character or the like and anything that you know might be of aid to us.”

Much to her relief, Lord Crestwood began to nod slowly as they continued to wander through the crowd of guests. “I do not think that there is much I could tell you but I would be glad to share with you what I know. Might I suggest that Lord Trenton joins us? He has also had a few dealings with Lord Foster and might be able to speak on that also.”

Recalling that gentleman, Charlotte agreed quickly. “Yes, of course. I should like that very much although please, given what you have overheard already, I would be grateful if you did not share that with Lord Trenton in advance. If my sister and I feel it prudent, we might be willing to share a little of our present difficulties.”

“But of course. As I have said, I was wrong to stand and listen to something that was not mine to pay attention to,” the gentleman answered, quickly. “Now, I must beg your forgiveness but I must step away. I am to dance now with Lady Imogen, I think, and must go in search of her before it is called.” Releasing her arm, he turned to her, smiling as he inclined his head. “I shall call tomorrow, if it is convenient?”

Charlotte nodded, bobbing a quick curtsy. “It is, I thank you.”

With another smile, he turned and took his leave and Charlotte, for whatever reason, could not help but watch him depart for just a few moments. Her hands clasped tightly together in front of her, her heart filling with a sense of contentment and, with it, some relief that this gentleman had not only come to her aid with Lady Foster but was about to offer her some understanding as to who this lady truly was. With a smile on her face, Charlotte turned on her heel and went in search of her sister, the happiness within her growing steadily. Lady Foster had given her a shock, indeed, but it had led to an excellent conversation – and a wonderful dance – with Lord Crestwood. Charlotte could not have asked for anything better.

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Lord Trenton lifted an eyebrow as Samuel climbed into the carriage. “Good afternoon. Remind me where it is we are to go this afternoon?”

“To speak with Miss Charlotte Millerton and her sister, Lady Amelia Hesterway,” Samuel answered, as he rapped on the carriage roof to tell the coachman to make his way onward. “Goodness, it is bitterly cold today, is it not?”

“It is.” Lord Trenton shivered, his gloved hands clasped tightly in his lap. “I am sure we shall be given a warm welcome, however.” He tilted his head just a little, searching Samuel’s expression. “You danced with Miss Millerton last evening.”

Samuel nodded. “I did. That is the reason that we are both calling on her and her sister today.” Seeing the confusion on his friend’s face – for Samuel had not explained everything the previous evening when he had asked Lord Trenton to accompany him – he began to speak of what had happened. “Quite by chance, I saw the lady that I had overheard speaking with her sister at your ball. What shocked me was that another lady reached out and yanked her hard, by the arm, dragging her back towards her rather than permitting her to leave which was clearly what she desired.”

Lord Trenton’s eyes flared. “Goodness.”

“It was Lady Foster,” Samuel continued, quickly. “I am not acquainted with the lady myself but in conversation with Miss Millerton, came to understand that there was some difficulty there. We danced, indeed, for that was the reason I gave for interrupting their conversation, and thereafter, she asked if I would come to speak with her in order to inform both Lady Hesterway and her about Lord Foster and what I knew of him. I suggested that you attend also, given that you know the fellow a

little too.”

Lord Trenton’s lip curled. “I wish I did not know him,” he muttered, a little darkly. “Might I ask why they wish to know about them both?”

Samuel opened his mouth to respond, only to close it again and shake his head. “I cannot say, I am afraid. That will be for the ladies themselves to share, if they so wish it. All I will say is that there is clearly some difficulty being brought to them by Lady Foster, if not by her husband also, and given that they are not very well acquainted with either of them, they now desire our help.”

“Which, of course, I am glad to give,” Lord Trenton said, quickly, as the carriage came to a stop. “It is good that you were able to intervene. How dreadful for Miss Millerton to have been treated so by the lady, particularly in front of all the other guests! Did she not think of the gossip and the like which the ton might then throw at her?”

Samuel winced as the door was pulled open and cold air rushed in. “I do not think, given Lady Foster’s scarlet face, that she cared very much about who could overhear her,” he said, gesturing for Lord Trenton to hurry out. He recalled the moment that he had seen the lady reaching out to grab Miss Millerton’s wrist, remembering the fire of indignation which had rushed up through him. He had wanted to speak to Lady Foster, had wanted to demand to know what it was she thought to be doing to the young lady but had, at the very last moment, changed his mind and stepped in simply to take the lady out to dance. He was glad to have made such a choice, aware that things could have been turned out very poorly indeed had he chosen to speak with harshness.

Climbing out of the carriage, both he and his friend climbed the steps to the house and were shown in at once. Much to Samuel’s delight, the drawing room had a fire blazing, warmth rushing towards him as he walked inside, bowing first to Lady

Hesterway and, thereafter, to Miss Millerton. Miss Millerton, he noted, appeared to be a little pale though she was smiling, her expression filled with welcome. Had something more happened with Lady Foster? Or was it that she was merely fatigued after yesterday's ball?

"How very good of you both to come to call," Lady Hesterway said, just as the door opened to reveal Lord Hesterway, whom Samuel was already acquainted with. The gentlemen all shook hands, Lord Hesterway poured them a drink while the ladies settled to a tea tray and, once a few minutes of conversation had passed by, Samuel turned his attention to the matter at hand.

"Miss Millerton, I do hope that you are quite all right after your ordeal last evening?"

Miss Millerton smiled at him, then reached for her tea. "I am quite well, I thank you." She picked it up and took a small sip but Samuel continued to study her, taking in the paleness of her cheek, her green eyes a little more vivid than they might otherwise have been. "It was something of a shock, indeed," she continued, perhaps aware of his scrutiny. "I did not expect Lady Foster ever to treat me in such a way." A sidelong glance towards her sister stole Samuel's attention for a moment, looking instead to Lady Hesterway who had reached out to press her sister's hand.

"I have explained to Lord Trenton what I witnessed and what I did," Samuel added, before nodding to his friend. "He and I are more than willing to tell you as much as we can about Lord and Lady Foster."

"That would be very helpful." Lord Hesterway cleared his throat but shook his head. "This is a most unsettling business and not at all helpful for Charlotte, of course!"

"I can imagine." Lord Trenton sent Miss Millerton a small, encouraging smile which the lady returned, and something pinged in Samuel's chest. Confused, he frowned and then dismissed it, looking instead to Lady Hesterway.

“I believe that you are both acquainted with Lady Foster but do not know her in any way?” he asked, as Lady Hesterway nodded. “Though all the same, there is some difficulty there, yes?” Seeing the ladies look to each other, he quickly dropped his head. “Pray, I do not mean to pry.”

Miss Millerton let out a sigh and spread out her hands. “There is no need to apologise. Yes, there is a great difficulty there, which I am all too aware that you have overheard and now witnessed, Lord Crestwood. I am sorry for that but I am, as you know, very grateful for what you did to protect me. Lady Foster was very angry indeed and, to be truthful, I was a little worried.”

“She was certainly angry,” Samuel murmured, picking up his glass. “I thought her most improper.”

There was a brief silence, only for Miss Millerton to again look at her sister, before giving her a small nod as though to suggest that she had decided something. “Lord Crestwood, Lord Trenton, I am more than willing to be honest with you, if you should be willing to hear it! It might help you understand why it is that we desire to know as much about Lord and Lady Foster as we can.”

Samuel glanced to Lord Trenton and then returned his gaze to Miss Millerton. “If you wish to explain all to us, I would be happy to hear it.”

With a brief smile – though it did not reach her eyes – Miss Millerton took a sip of her tea and then set it back down on the China plate. “Lady Foster is sister to our stepmother. Some years ago, our father remarried – our mother passed away when we were both very young, you understand, though my father did not ever seem to think of remarrying at that time.”

“I have often thought that he must have cared for our mother very dearly,” Lady Hesterway put in, making Miss Millerton smile gently. “However, the lady that he

chose to wed, while she was pleased with the match, was not pleased to have two stepdaughters. That was not made clear in all its fullness, however, until our father passed away.”

“I am sorry for the loss that must bring to you both,” Samuel said quickly. “My own parents both passed from this life to the next when I was very young. My uncle raised me instead.”

Miss Millerton’s expression softened as she looked back at him. “Then you understand the pain of losing a parent,” she said, quietly as Samuel nodded. “However, the sorrow was made all the greater as we learned just how much our stepmother disliked the two of us.” She shared another look with her sister whose lips pulled into a thin line, obviously recalling something displeasing. “Amelia had to wait to marry given that we were then in mourning. However, on the day of her marriage, our stepmother, Lady Barcsay, informed me that I could never hope to be as she was.” A light pink touched her cheeks as she looked away, making Samuel frown. Whatever did she mean by that?

“That is to say, Charlotte has, by request of our late father, decided that she must devote her life to the care of our stepmother,” Lady Hesterway explained, quickly. “Lady Barcsay stated that, in our father’s will, he made it clear that he desired for Charlotte to remain unwed and, instead, to be Lady Barcsay’s companion.”

Samuel blinked quickly, surprise rattling through his chest. “Why...” he began, only to close his mouth and shake his head. He had no reason to ask such a thing, no need to say anything about that. He did not need to know why a gentleman would lay such a heavy burden upon his youngest daughter even though, to his mind, it was the most extraordinary – and unfair - burden to place upon her shoulders. Why should she not have the chance to marry? Why should she not have that choice?

“It did come as a surprise,” Lady Hesterway continued, her voice soft. “However, it

was Charlotte's decision to align herself with our father's desire, even though I myself might not have thought well of it."

"It was not forced upon you, then?"

In answer to Lord Trenton's question, Miss Millerton shook her head. "No, it was not demanded but requested of me. However, how could I refuse my father's last wishes?" Her eyes glistened gently and a heavy weight settled on Samuel's heart. "He was my father and very dear to me. Therefore, I cannot imagine setting that aside to follow my own heart and my own desires."

Samuel winced inwardly and pulled his lips to one side. It was clear by what the lady said that she had no real desire to remain loyal to her stepmother, to be her companion for the rest of her days but duty and honor required it of her. Indeed, there was a good deal to be admired there but, at the very same time, Samuel felt his heart grow sorrowful for her. To have been denied even the chance of finding her own future surely must have been very difficult for the lady.

"This still does not explain our questions as regards Lady Foster, I am aware," Lady Hesterway continued, looking a little embarrassed. "Forgive us. It is a long explanation and there is much to say still."

"I do not think you need to apologise, my dear." Lord Hesterway rose to his feet and, settling a hand on his wife's shoulder for a moment, smiled down at her. "Lord Trenton and Lord Crestwood are clearly willing to listen."

"Of course, of course," Samuel said quickly, finding a slight hint of envy edging down through his heart at how tenderly Lord Hesterway spoke to his wife and how sweet the smile was that she gave him in return. Was there something about that interaction he wanted for himself?

“I thank you.” Miss Millerton spoke again, though the pink in her cheeks remained – and for the first time, Samuel found himself distracted from the conversation and, instead, noticed just how pretty the lady was. The hair he had thought was only a mere brown now appeared to be copper as the light shone on it, the color in her cheeks adding to his awareness of her. It was only as she began to speak that Samuel realized he had not been paying even the smallest bit of attention to her words.

“Therefore, when my sister extended the invitation to me to join her here for Christmas, I accepted, despite the fact that my stepmother did not want me to do so. It is not as though I have left her alone for the festive Season, however,” she added, speaking a little more quickly now. “My brother and his wife are to share the festivities with her at their estate.”

“However,” Lady Hesterway added, reaching to pick up her teacup again, “our stepmother has now involved her sister in this scheme of hers.”

Samuel frowned. “Scheme?”

Lady Hesterway nodded. “It is clear to me that our stepmother, greatly displeased at Charlotte’s refusal to do as she was expecting and staying with her at the Dower house, has now determined to make Charlotte’s time in London as miserable as possible. And thus, she has involved her sister in it.”

It took a moment for Samuel to make the connection, though Lord Trenton slapped his knee just as Samuel understood. “You mean to say that Lady Foster is Lady Barcsay’s sister?” he asked, as Samuel looked intently to Miss Millerton, seeing her nod. “And Lady Foster, therefore, has agreed to do whatever has been asked of her by Lady Barcsay?”

“Yes, that is it precisely.” With a slight sadness about her, Miss Millerton took a sip of her tea and then set down the cup again, though there was a roundness to her

shoulders which Samuel had not noticed before. “Lady Foster has stated that she intends to be my shadow during my time in London.”

“Your shadow?” Samuel repeated, frowning. “For what purpose?”

“To supposedly make certain that Charlotte is doing as she has promised and not permitting herself to be courted or the like,” Lady Hesterway interjected, flapping one hand in Samuel’s direction. “It is foolishness, is it not? I think that if my sister finds a gentleman whom she... well, that is not my place to say, is it?” She shot a glance towards her husband who, while she had been speaking, had cleared his throat gently. A flush trickled into her cheeks as she turned her attention to Miss Millerton though Samuel felt himself agreeing entirely with all that Lady Hesterway had not only said but had been about to say. “Charlotte has the freedom to live as she wishes and she has already said that she will agree to abide by our father’s wishes. However, whilst Lady Foster avers that she shall act as Charlotte’s shadow to ensure she adheres to her declarations, I am convinced that such a proclamation has been made— and will be executed— solely out of spite.”

“In order to make your time here in London miserable,” Samuel murmured, as Miss Millerton dropped her head for a moment, her shoulders rounding all the more.

Lady Hesterway exchanged a look with her husband who, with a nod, looked back to Samuel and Lord Trenton.

“Anything you can tell us about the character of Lord and Lady Foster would be of great help,” he said, firmly. “It is not that we wish to cause them harm in any way but rather that we seek to make certain that we know the sort of people we now face in this situation. I have every intention of doing all I can to make certain that Charlotte has an excellent festive Season, despite this, but that can only occur if we are able to work through these difficulties and somehow, find a way to fight back against this threat. If Lord Foster is of a determined sort, that will make it a little more difficult,

whereas if he is not a gentleman with a great deal of strength in his character, then it will be easier for us. I do hope I make myself plain.”

Samuel nodded quickly. “Of course. I confess that I do not know Lady Foster – though I have formed an opinion of her character already based on what I have seen – but of Lord Foster, I can say something, as can Lord Trenton.”

His friend took Samuel’s lead and began. “Lord Foster is a gentleman who has something of a weak character, I would say, though a willingness to enter into all manner of wickedness and foolishness. He is very easily pushed into things and unfortunately, if he desires something, will demand it most vehemently until, either, he is convinced otherwise or it is given to him.”

“I would agree with Lord Trenton in that,” Samuel added. “In playing cards with him very recently, he imbibed far too much, gambled foolishly and then produced a vow rather than the coin required. As yet, I have not received payment.”

Lord Hesterway’s eyes flickered with interest. “Then do you think he is soluble?”

Samuel shrugged. “I am afraid I could not say whether he has the funds he states or not, only that he has not paid me as he said he would.”

“It may be that he has forgotten about it, given how much he drank,” Lord Trenton suggested darkly and Samuel had to nod and agree. “He is often imbibing too much brandy and the like, becoming loud and raucous which is most displeasing in good company. I have seen gentlemen go out of their way to avoid him and I find that desire within myself also.”

“Then you do not think that he is a good sort,” Miss Millerton said, quietly. “He is not good company.”

With a nod, Samuel offered her a slightly rueful smile. “I am afraid that my impression was that I should avoid his company wherever possible. However, given what I have seen of Lady Foster, might I suggest that she is determined where he is not? Where he may be more inclined to liquor and foolishness, she may be more sharp eyed and quick witted.”

“But yet also willing to be led by her sister,” Lady Hesterway added. “She may feel loyalty to Lady Barcsay as her sister and has accepted all that Lady Barcsay has said to her as regards Charlotte.”

Samuel paused for a moment, considering what he wanted to say and hoping that he would not cause any lady to feel insulted. “If I might be so bold, I would base your opinion of Lady Foster on what you know of your stepmother. I believe that they might very well be of the same character and that, unfortunately, Lord Foster is either too weak willed to care about what his wife is doing or is encouraging her in it. Either way, Miss Millerton, you must be cautious.”

There came a short pause and, for a moment, Samuel became afraid that he had injured Lady Hesterway and Miss Millerton in some way by speaking as he had done about Lady Barcsay, only for Miss Millerton to nod slowly.

“Yes, I think you are right. Lady Foster has already proven herself to be determined.” She glanced at him, then looked away. “I pray you will not think ill of me for this, but she came to call and my sister stated that we were not at home. I told the footman to state that we were out walking in St James’s Park, despite the fact that it was bitterly cold.”

A flicker of delight spread across Samuel’s expression. “And she went in search of you?”

Miss Millerton blushed furiously but nodded. “That is why she was so angry,” she

explained, as Samuel fought, unsuccessfully, to hide his chuckle. “I did remind her, however, that I was not responsible for her decision to walk through the park. She was searching for me and that was entirely her own doing.”

Lord Trenton slapped his knee and let out a guffaw, making Samuel snort with laughter. It was a welcome relief after the strain and the heaviness of what they had been speaking and, as that very same relief spread across Miss Millerton’s expression, Samuel smiled directly at her.

“I think that you may have to show the same sort of shrewdness in your future dealings with Lord and Lady Foster,” he said, making it plain that he did not think poorly of her in the least. “And if I can be of aid to you in any way, then I would be glad to be of help.”

Miss Millerton smiled back at him. “You are very kind. It may be that I shall simply have to do my best to escape Lady Foster’s presence whenever and however I can! In a way, it is good that I am of age now to not constantly require a chaperone when I am around other people though, no doubt, she will use that against me should she see me alone.”

“I am sure that both Lord Crestwood and I will do whatever we can to be of aid, though we must hope that Lady Foster does not behave in the way she did with you at the previous ball,” Lord Trenton put in, sending another kick to Samuel’s heart – a kick that he still did not fully understand. “I heard what took place. Utterly disgraceful on her part.”

“I quite agree.” Lord Hesterway shook his head and clicked his tongue. “Disgraceful. I will, of course, be throwing a ball very soon and will make certain that the Fosters are not invited.”

“As will I.”

The words were out of Samuel's mouth before he could stop them, garnering a curious look from Lord Trenton, no doubt wondering why he was saying such a thing when, previously, he had made it quite plain that he had no desire to be involved in society in any way. "I am sure that I can host a soiree or another evening of some sort. I have not sojourned in London for quite some time, and my abode most certainly longs for the company of genteel folk once more after this extended interval. That way, you will have some events and occasions to attend where you will not need to look over your shoulder, Miss Millerton."

"That is very kind of you. You need not feel any obligation, however," she said, her cheeks still a little pink. "We are barely acquainted and – "

"I am glad to, truly," Samuel said, interrupting gently. "After what I witnessed from Lady Foster, I feel it my duty to make certain such a thing does not happen again." He hesitated for a moment, then spoke his mind. "Miss Millerton, you must not let Lady Foster ruin your time in London. Instead, you must simply ignore her, show her that what she intends will never come to pass and, instead, throw yourself into as much enjoyment as you can."

Lady Hesterway reached to take her sister's hand. "You see? This Christmas Season shall be quite wonderful for you, after all."

Miss Millerton nodded, her eyes shining gently. "It seems that, with such kindnesses shown, it shall be," she said, a slight wobble in her voice which spoke of her emotions. "Thank you, Lord Trenton, Lord Crestwood." Her eyes closed for a moment. "Thank you all."

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You must not let Lady Foster ruin your time in London. Instead, you must simply ignore her, show her that what she intends will never come to pass and, instead, throw yourself into as much enjoyment as you can.

Nodding to herself, Charlotte considered the beautiful things strewn across the table, ready for Amelia and herself. The conversation she had shared with Lord Trenton and Lord Crestwood the previous day had given her a great deal to consider and, as she had pondered, the truth of what Lord Crestwood had said had settled into her heart and mind. He was quite right. Either she let Lady Foster do as she pleased and would spend her Christmas time looking over her shoulder, always afraid of what she would find there or she simply ignored her as best she could and did as she pleased. It was a choice and Charlotte was, now, slowly becoming determined to do the latter.

“What did you think of Lord Trenton?”

Charlotte glanced at her sister before reaching for another silk ribbon. “I thought him a very kind-hearted gentleman, just as was Lord Crestwood.”

“Handsome too.”

Ignoring this, Charlotte picked up a silver ribbon and began to make her garland, combining ribbons, strands of ivy and holly with which to decorate her sister’s home in time for Christmas day.

“Though I must say, I thought that Lord Crestwood was a little more desirous in his eagerness to help you. The way that he first came to your aid and then, thereafter, said he would host various events simply so that you would be able to attend without

concern... that speaks of a very kind heart.”

“Yes, I quite agree,” Charlotte murmured, keeping her eyes on the task at hand rather than looking at her sister. The trouble was, she had found both Lord Trenton and Lord Crestwood very generous indeed and certainly, they were both handsome, but there had been something about seeing Lord Crestwood again which had warmed her heart.

“Are you quite certain...?” Amelia trailed off and let out a small sigh, shaking her head as she did so. “Forgive me. It is only that I continue to think that this entire circumstance is deeply unfair. I wish very much for you to have as much happiness as I do and to know that you never shall, breaks my heart.”

Charlotte gave her sister a small smile. “You need not worry about me. I am sure I shall find some sort of contentment.”

Amelia scowled but said nothing and Charlotte set her mind away from Lord Crestwood and focused on all that was before her. She had many other events to enjoy, she now had newfound acquaintances willing to assist her when it came to Lady Foster and Christmas day was still to come! There would be much laughter, enjoyment and fine company, she was sure, and that would make her very happy indeed.

Though I shall then have to return to my stepmother.

The thought made her heart sink low almost instantly, her shoulders dropping at the thought.

“It is very bad with her, is it not?”

Charlotte glanced at her sister. “I do not want to speak of it, not because I think you

rude but because I know that you will continually worry,” she answered, gently. “You have a great deal of happiness and I will not let my circumstances dampen that.”

“I shall worry about you regardless. It mars my own happiness knowing that you are suffering.” Amelia reached to touch her hand. “I do not say that with the desire that you pity me but rather so that you know just how much I desire for you to be as free in your choices as I was.”

Charlotte smiled, squeezed her sister’s hand but said nothing. The weight of what her father had asked her weighed heavily upon her but she could do nothing about it.

“Our brother informed me that he has never seen the will, however,” Amelia continued, taking her hand back. “Is that not a little strange?”

“Given that there was an attack by highwaymen on the mail coach, I do not think so,” Charlotte answered, giving her sister a glance, lifting her eyebrow as she did so. “Besides, I read those words, remember? Now please, can we stop discussing this matter and, I must insist, that includes discussion about Lord Trenton and Lord Crestwood!”

“Lord Trenton might be interested but I am afraid that I have heard recently that Lord Crestwood has determined never to marry... or at least, not to consider it for a long time.”

A blush infused Charlotte’s cheeks as Lord Hesterway walked into the room and bent to kiss Amelia on the cheek. “I was just informing Amelia that I have no desire to be urged to consider either gentleman. Though,” she continued, her curiosity piqued, “is there a reason that he has said such a thing?”

“Oh, do you not know?” Amelia pressed one hand lightly to her forehead. “No, of course you do not. I should have told you about it before but I quite forgot.”

“What is it?”

Amelia let out a sigh. “It is a very sad story. He was due to engage himself to a young lady who had declared herself in love with him and he with her. However, even though he sought permission from her father – and was granted it – the lady in question then went on to elope with another!”

“Another?” Charlotte’s heart squeezed painfully in sympathy for Lord Crestwood. “Why would she do such a thing? Why accept courtship from Lord Crestwood if she was only to agree to marry another?”

“Because Lord Grifford was – and still is, I might say – a rogue. There was no hope that her father would agree to her courtship nor her betrothal to such a gentleman.” Lord Hesterway shook his head. “Lady Maria, as she was then, made a somewhat foolish decision, I think. Mayhap she believed herself in love with him, I do not know.”

Charlotte put one hand to her heart. “He has not proved himself worthy of her, then?”

Amelia shook her head. “Once they returned from honeymoon, he was found here while she lingered at the estate. It soon became clear that he did not think matrimony was anything of significance. Since then, I believe that her father has intervened and offered the gentleman a substantial amount of coin if he will stay at the estate with his wife. Given that I have not seen him present in society, I assume that he has done that very thing.”

“Oh, how awful,” Charlotte answered, her heart filled with sadness over the entire situation. “But Lord Crestwood, why has he rejected matrimony in such a way?”

Lord Hesterway shrugged. “Who can say?”

“Though,” Amelia said, tilting her head, “it does mean that you need not have any concern about being in his company.”

“What do you mean?” Charlotte frowned, wondering if her sister was, yet again, attempting to convince her to pursue a connection with a particular gentleman, only for Amelia’s next words to free her from such thoughts.

“If Lord Crestwood has turned from such things and is determined that he will not engage himself to any lady in any way, then there can be no concern on your part about being in his company, can there?”

Considering this, Charlotte began to nod slowly, a hint of a smile at the edges of her mouth. “You are certain that you have no other motive in suggesting that, my dear sister?”

“None in the least!” Amelia’s eyes went wide. “I can assure you, my only thought is of your happiness during the Christmas Season and, given that you will become bored of my company alone, then why should you not spend time with a kind, amiable gentleman who has no interest in pursuing any young lady for matrimony?”

“He is an excellent fellow, aside from the heavy moods which come upon him at times – or so I have been told,” Lord Hesterway added. “Though now, at least, you can understand why that might be, should it happen when you are in his company.”

Charlotte nodded. “I suppose that I can.” A hint of a smile brushed the sides of her mouth. “And though this is terribly wicked of me to say, would it not also upset Lady Foster a little?”

There came a silence after this remark and Charlotte’s smile cracked, suddenly afraid that she had said something she ought not to have said. She was about to pull that remark back, about to say how foolish she had been to have thought such a way, only

for Amelia to burst into laughter, with her husband soon joining her.

Charlotte's smile returned.

"My goodness, I would never have thought that you would say such a thing as that!" Amelia panted, her eyes streaming as her mouth pulled wide. "My goodness, you have gone from a lady afraid of the disaster that Lady Foster might bring to you to someone who is now determined not to permit her to do such a thing!"

"I have had much to consider," Charlotte answered, flushing as Lord Hesterway also continued to chuckle, though he appeared delighted with what she had said also. "I do not want to spend my time here continually worried about what she will do, what she will think and what she will relate to our stepmother. I have been looking forward to spending time with you both and to permit Lady Foster to bring disaster to that would be deeply upsetting and, no doubt, I would regret it also."

"Indeed, I think you would," Amelia agreed, suddenly serious. "Can you think about how you would feel in the midst of dreary January or February, knowing that you let Lady Foster occupy your thoughts?"

Charlotte swallowed, a knot in her stomach. "Yes, I see what you mean," she said, quickly, finding herself a little unsettled. "I have decided that I will not permit her to do such a thing, however." She took in a deep breath and set her shoulders. "And if it is truly as you say as regards Lord Crestwood – and I shall ask him, have no doubt – then I do not see why I should not spend time in his company, even if it will anger Lady Foster!" She smiled and then looked down at her garland which was almost completed. "I am here to enjoy the Christmas Season and that is precisely what I shall do," she said, firmly. "Lady Foster shall be nothing more than a thought to me from now on."

"Wonderful!" Amelia's voice was overly bright and Charlotte tossed her a sharp

look, wondering if what she had said about Lord Crestwood really was true or if there was something more there, only to shrug inwardly. She would have to be bold, yes, but she would simply ask him and from there, determine what she would do. Setting her first Christmas garland aside, she reached for another ribbon, ready to do the same as a smile rose across her face. Perhaps this connection with Lord Crestwood would be an excellent one indeed!

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“I am truly sorry for what you had to endure.”

Samuel stiffened but forced himself to smile. “You are very kind, Lady Dalmyre.”

The lady smiled gently and put her hand to his arm for a moment. “You must remember that there are many other young ladies present who would be more than willing to consider you. Not everyone would behave as terribly as Lady Maria did, I can promise you that!” With that remark, she sent a long look towards her daughter who was standing next to her, a light smile on her face – and Samuel’s stomach dropped.

He cleared his throat. “I should never want to suggest that all ladies are of that ilk, of course. However, I am not yet considering matrimony again, I am afraid.”

The smiles on both of the ladies’ faces fell.

“I am here merely to enjoy some time in good company over the Christmas period,” Samuel continued, inclining his head. “Now, do excuse me. I am to dance very soon and must go in search of my partner!”

It was not at all true that he was to dance, for he only wanted an excuse to step away from the lady who was clearly attempting to push her daughter into his acquaintance. With a nod of his head – and as a rush of relief washed over him – Samuel made his way to the side of the ballroom, only to catch sight of none other than Miss Millerton.

He paused for a moment, taking her in. She was standing with her hands clasped in front of her and the edge of her lip caught between her teeth. Samuel smiled and

came closer to her, delighted to see the smile which spread across her face when she caught his eye.

“Miss Millerton, good evening.” Samuel bowed quickly. “Are you enjoying your evening?”

“I am, yes. Though I confess that I am not as confident as I thought I would be.”

Samuel tipped his head just a little, searching her face. “You are concerned about Lady Foster?”

Miss Millerton nodded, though she looked away, perhaps a little embarrassed. “I do not want to be. I told myself that I would be determined and bold and that I would show her that her presence did not concern me... but now I find myself worrying that she will be present.”

“Then should you like to dance?” Samuel found himself saying, a little surprised that he had offered such a thing. “Or we can take a turn about the room?”

Miss Millerton smiled. “I should like to dance very much though...” A slight hint of color came into her cheeks. “Might I ask you something first?”

“Of course.”

The color in her cheeks heightened all the more. “My sister informs me – and pray, do not think that we were gossiping – that you have no interest in matrimony.”

Samuel blinked, rather astonished at the lady’s remarks.

“Forgive me for being so blunt and indeed, I do not wish to know your reasons for such a thing, but I must know if this is true. You are only interested in friendship?”

You will not seek to pursue anything more?”

Clearing his throat and finding a tightness in his chest which had not been there before, Samuel spread out his hands. “Yes, that is so.”

Something like relief spread across Miss Millerton’s face. “Then I should be glad to dance with you.”

A little confused, Samuel frowned. “Might I ask why you needed to know such a thing?”

The lady ducked her head for a moment, a flush in her cheeks. “If you recall from our conversation, I have made a commitment to remain companion to my stepmother. I wanted to ascertain that you were also as I am – that is, not searching for any sort of... intimate connection.”

Those words sent a shot of fire up Samuel’s spine, though he quickly smiled and nodded, spreading out his hands either side. “It is just as your sister has said, I am not in the least bit interested in forming any sort of attachment. I would, however, be more than happy to be your friend.”

This made a bright smile spread right across Miss Millerton’s face and Samuel’s heart leapt, making him frown suddenly. Seeing this, Miss Millerton’s smile fell away but Samuel turned and then offered her his arm, forcing a more composed expression to his face. “Shall we dance, then?”

“I would be glad to. Thank you,” she murmured, taking his arm as he led her to the floor. The quadrille had only just been announced and, as Samuel made his way to join the other dancers, he caught Lady Dalmyre’s eye and offered her a brief nod, relieved that he was now proving to her that his reason for stepping away from herself and her daughter was, truly, so that he might dance. That strange jolt of fire in

his frame and the leap of his heart, however, was not something that he could understand and it was with some relief that he stepped back, ready to bow before the quadrille began. It gave him a moment or two to gather himself and, telling himself silently not to be as ridiculous as to permit strange thoughts to take a hold, Samuel lifted his chin and, as the music began, stepped forward.

The music seemed to calm his mind all the more and, though they said nothing during the dance, Samuel found himself beginning to relax despite the tempo of the dance itself. When Miss Millerton smiled up at him, Samuel returned it at once, glad that she was enjoying his company as much as he was hers. They were barely acquainted, he considered, but all the same, there appeared to be an easiness within their connection which he was grateful for.

“A wonderful dance.” Miss Millerton, a little breathless, dropped into a curtsy as the dance came to a close. “Thank you, Lord Crestwood. My sister was encouraging me to dance a little more so I am grateful for the opportunity.”

“You dance very well.” He offered his arm again and she took it without hesitation. “I hope it has distracted your thoughts long enough to put you into a more pleasant frame of mind?”

She laughed and nodded. “It has indeed.”

“Then I am contented.” Samuel continued to wander around the ballroom, seeing the glances which were sent in his direction before being quickly pulled away again. He frowned, realizing that even his nearness to Miss Millerton might soon grant him some more whispers. “Though I am afraid that the ton might soon make some remarks, Miss Millerton.”

A glance up at him told Samuel that she did not understand what he meant.

“There might well be rumours and whispers,” he said, “given that I am unwed and you are also unattached.”

“Oh.” Miss Millerton frowned, only to shrug. “Well, I do not think that such a thing matters. You can continue to declare yourself determined to remain unattached and I shall say nothing. The ton can whisper all they like and it will do me no harm.”

A little surprised at her response, it took Samuel a moment to respond. “I – I see.”

“Though Lady Foster will, no doubt, be most concerned,” she continued, with a sigh. “However, I can do nothing about that. If she wishes to involve herself in such a way then what can be done about it?” The smile on her face lifted Samuel’s spirits all the more. “You see? I am quite determined to enjoy myself this Christmas time.”

Whether it was her tenacity or the beauty of her smile, Samuel did not know but regardless, his heart leapt up all over again, sending a broad smile across his face. “I am glad to hear it! We shall ignore the whispers, then. We shall do nothing about them, either by way of quietening them or encouraging them.”

“Precisely.”

Samuel smiled back at her. “Now, you must tell me what else you intend to do during your visit to London. Are you interested in the theatre? There are many plays being performed this time of year and though I have not been to one as yet, I have heard that there is a comedy being played which is excellent!”

“Oh, how wonderful!” Miss Millerton’s eyes lit up. “No, I have not thought to attend a play as yet but I should certainly like to. I do also hope to help my sister throw a ball very soon, the invitations are to come out tomorrow, I believe.” A look of curiosity came into her eyes. “You are to host a ball or some such event, I believe?”

Recalling that he had said to her that he intended to host various events, Samuel nodded without having any real idea as to what it could be. “I have every intention to, yes. Mayhap a soiree? Or a card party of some kind? Something where it could be a little more intimate and without too many guests. I confess that I find balls to be a little too crowded for my liking, though they are enjoyable enough.”

“I quite agree.”

Samuel found himself smiling, his heart feeling a good deal lighter as he walked with the lady. For the first time, he realized, he was at an occasion where he had not once thought about what had happened with Lady Maria. He had not given her a single thought. Instead, he had actually found himself enjoying the company and the conversation – and even the dance! How strange a thing that was.

“Crestwood?”

Someone called his name, a hand touched his arm and Samuel turned quickly, only for his breath to tighten and coil in his chest. He stepped back, his arm falling to his side, releasing Miss Millerton from him. A rush of heat tore from one side of his body to the other, leaving a sense of weakness lingering, his heart hammering, clawing at his chest.

“Maria.”

“Samuel.” She reached out one hand to him, only for her gaze to slide to Miss Millerton, then looking back to him again. “Forgive me, I... ” With a pause, she closed her eyes and then dropped into a curtsy. “Good evening, Lord Crestwood.”

The pain in his chest was screaming at him to breathe, to take in at least one breath so that he might respond but he could do nothing but stare, letting the pain linger. This was Maria as he knew her but she looked different, altered in some way. Samuel

finally took in a breath, his whole body shuddering violently for a moment as he did so.

“Good evening,” he rasped, reaching to grasp Miss Millerton’s hand again, lifting it so it might settle on his arm. He did not know why he needed it, did not truly understand what he was doing but something in him told him that he needed her near. “I – do excuse us.” On trembling legs, he made to step away, only for Maria to move to the side, preventing him from leaving.

“Please, do let us talk for a moment,” she said, never once looking to Miss Millerton, seeming to choose now to ignore her. “I know that I am the last person you might wish to see but so much has happened, so much has changed and I – ”

“You perceive correctly, Lady Grifford,” Samuel interrupted, a little harshly. “Now, if you will excuse us, we are currently in the depths of conversation.”

“Grifford is dead.”

Samuel stopped short, his heart slamming hard against his ribs as he looked back into her face, seeing glistening tears in her eyes.

“I am not mourning for him,” she continued, lifting her chin just a little. “I have done a few months but that is all. I refuse to do more given how he treated me.”

Something stirred in Samuel’s heart but he refused to listen to it. “I am sorry to hear that your husband is dead,” he managed to say, seeing the way her eyes glistened though her expression softened as he spoke, perhaps seeing something more in his words than he meant to give. “You have returned to London for Christmas, I see. I do hope that you enjoy your time here back in society.”

“I did hope that we might speak. There is much that I wish to say.”

Samuel swallowed tightly, looking back into Maria's face and becoming aware of the hope shining in her eyes. What was it she was expecting of him? A great and dreadful fear began to wind around his heart, suddenly afraid that she was expecting a rekindling of their affections, that she would see him as her saviour from the difficulties she was now experiencing.

Could it be that my heart would ever be willing to return to her again?

That frightened him all the more, dreading the thought of letting his emotions burn hot for the lady who had not only broken him apart but betrayed him in doing so. He was surely not as weak as that, was he?

"Forgive me, I have not introduced you to... Miss Millerton." An idea struck him and before he could stop himself, he said the words that he knew would not only shock Miss Millerton but would also stun – and mayhap silence – Lady Grifford. "My betrothed."

Miss Millerton did not even flinch. Instead, she went very still, her eyes fixed on Lady Grifford – for that was how he had to think of her now, not as Maria any longer. She did not speak, she did not even make a single sound and Samuel silently prayed that she would understand what he had said and why he had said it.

"Your betrothed?" Lady Grifford blinked and then turned to face Miss Millerton. "I did not know. But, then again, why should I know such a thing?" She tried to laugh but it came out as a broken, harsh sound. "How very good to meet you, Miss Millerton." Her gaze went back to Samuel. "Might we meet for even a few minutes, just so that I might speak with you? There is much that I wish to say, much that I wish to apologise for."

"It would not be seemly for me to be noticed by the ton in your company and your company alone," Samuel stated, with a lift of his chin. "However, if you wish to

Speak with Miss Millerton and me, then we might arrange that at some point soon. Now, if you will excuse me, I must continue walking with Miss Millerton.”

Without another word to her, with only a nod, Samuel stepped away. Miss Millerton while walking with him, he realized, had not said a single thing either to himself or to Lady Grifford. As he glanced at her, Samuel saw the white in her face, the pinched expression and his gut twisted.

What had he done?

“Crestwood?”

Charlotte stopped just as Lord Crestwood caught his breath as he turned. The next moment, he had not only taken a step back but had also dropped his arm so that her hand fell back to her side. His eyes were wide, his face now like parchment and Charlotte’s concern grew rapidly. She turned, seeing a young lady standing before Lord Crestwood, her blue eyes searching his face, a familiarity with him in not only her expression but in the way she had spoken to him.

“Maria.”

The manner in which Lord Crestwood's voice droned upon the lady conveyed to her a sense of profound unease. She did not know what to do, whether she ought to say something, whether she ought to introduce herself or if she should remain silent and permit Lord Crestwood to speak.

“Samuel. Forgive me, I...” Her gaze went to Charlotte who offered her a small smile, still uncertain as to what else she ought to do. The lady then dropped into a curtsy, speaking a good deal more formally now. “Good evening, Lord Crestwood.”

Lord Crestwood did not answer. The way that he was looking at the lady made Charlotte frown, wondering what it was about her that was causing such a strong reaction.

And then, she remembered.

Could this be the lady that had broken his heart? The one whom he had been meant to marry, the one who had chosen someone else over him? He had never spoken of it to her, of course, but Charlotte recalled what Amelia had told her. Surely that could be the only reason for a gentleman to respond so strongly. She cleared her throat gently and just as she did so, Lord Crestwood took in a long, deep breath and then closed his eyes before, much to her relief, he spoke.

“Good evening.” Without warning, he reached for her hand and then set it again on his arm, twisting towards her as he did so. “I – do excuse us.” Without offering her a word of explanation, Lord Crestwood began to take his leave of the lady and Charlotte went willingly, sensing that this was not a situation that she needed to be a part of, only for the lady in question to move in front of them, preventing Lord Crestwood from making his way forward.

“Pray, do let us talk for a moment,” she said, her gaze firmly fixed to Lord Crestwood rather than looking at Charlotte. “I know that I am the last person you might wish to see but so much has happened, so much has changed and I –”

“You perceive correctly, Lady Grifford.”

Lady Grifford? Charlotte’s hand gripped Lord Crestwood’s arm for a moment, remembering the name that Amelia had spoken to her. This was, then, the lady who had rejected Lord Crestwood and who had married a rogue instead.

“Now,” Lord Crestwood continued, his voice hard, “if you will excuse us, we are currently in the depths of conversation.” Again, he took a step and again, the lady interrupted him.

“Grifford is dead.”

Charlotte's heart leapt up in astonishment, sensing Lord Crestwood's shock. Lord Grifford, the rogue that this lady had married, the one Amelia had believed was now remaining at his estate in order to gain coin for himself, was, in fact, no longer in this world.

The lady lifted her chin. "I am not mourning for him. I have done a few months but that is all. I refuse to do more given how he treated me."

Sympathy moved through Charlotte's heart, seeing from the look in the lady's eyes just how much she had endured by her husband's hand. Yes, she had clearly done wrong in leaving Lord Crestwood as she had done but there was still suffering there, nonetheless.

"I am sorry to hear that your husband is dead. You have returned to London for Christmas, I see. I do hope that you enjoy your time here back in society." Lord Crestwood's voice was still low but there was a hint of softness there, as though the shock of hearing of Lady Grifford's loss had spoken to his heart. Charlotte, sensing that he was about to take his leave, made to step away but, for what was the third time, Lady Grifford prevented them.

"I did hope that we might speak. There is much that I wish to say." Looking solely into Lord Crestwood's eyes, the lady's voice grew quieter and Charlotte frowned, a strange sense of confusion within her. To her mind, Lady Grifford had no right to ask such a thing of the gentleman though, she considered, she had no right either to make any sort of remark or, indeed, even to feel anything. Whether Lord Crestwood accepted or not had nothing whatsoever to do with her.

Again, there came a prolonged silence and Charlotte looked away, her heart twisting in a most discomfiting manner. To her mind, Lady Grifford was almost enticing Lord Crestwood back into forming a connection with her – a connection which, Charlotte considered, would not be a wise one given what had happened.

And who are you to think such things? The quiet voice of her conscience pricked her and her cheeks went hot. You barely know this gentleman, he has never once spoken to you of Lady Grifford and yet you think you know what is best for him? Come now, stop being so foolish and leave the gentleman to his own thoughts.

“Forgive me.” Lord Crestwood turned to Charlotte and she lifted her gaze to his, wondering what he was to say next. “I have not introduced you to... Miss Millerton.” As he took a breath, Charlotte turned her attention to the lady, a slight sense of awkwardness growing there given that there had been such a long conversation without any sort of introduction.

“My betrothed.”

Charlotte blinked, her whole body slowly beginning to turn to ice. Surely it could not be that Lord Crestwood had said such a thing? They had only just finished speaking about the fact that neither of them desired to be in the least bit connected to another in an intimate fashion and yet now, here he was declaring her to be his betrothed? The ice in her veins had her frozen to the spot, her chest tight, her breathing becoming a little more difficult.

His betrothed?

“Your betrothed?” Lady Grifford, sounding just as astonished as Charlotte felt, looked to Lord Crestwood and then, thereafter, to Charlotte herself. Her eyes were wide but no smile lingered on her lips. “I did not know. But, then again, why should I know such a thing?”

The laugh which followed made Charlotte wince, for it sounded forced and unnatural. It was enough to force her back to life, to have strength return to her limbs as she took in long, slow breaths in the hope of quietening her furiously pounding heart.

“How very good to meet you, Miss Millerton.” This time, Lady Grifford’s voice was a little tight, though she gave no time for Charlotte to respond, looking instead to Lord Crestwood. “Might we meet for even a few minutes, just so that I might speak with you? There is much that I wish to say, much that I wish to apologise for.”

Charlotte swallowed hard, still struggling to understand all that Lord Crestwood had said and why he had said it. Had it been in the hope of dissuading Lady Grifford from seeking out his company? If that had been his reasoning, then it clearly had not made any impact whatsoever.

“It would not be seemly for me to be noticed by the ton in your company and your company alone,” Lord Crestwood said, glancing at Charlotte with something like an apology in his expression. “However, if you wish to speak with Miss Millerton and me, then we might arrange that at some point soon. Now, if you will excuse me, I must continue walking with Miss Millerton.”

It was with a slight stumble that Charlotte let herself be led away by Lord Crestwood. She was breathing hard, her vision a little blurred as she walked back through the sea of faces, trying to understand what had just taken place and what it was he had done.

“I am sorry.”

Charlotte said nothing, Lord Crestwood’s voice low as he leaned towards her just a little.

“I did not mean for that to be said. It was a simple idea, a foolish idea, and before I could let myself consider it for any length of time, the words came out from me.”

With a long breath, Charlotte bit her lip, trying to contain the swell of anger which had suddenly begun to rear itself up over her. “You already promised me that we would be nothing more than good friends.”

“And we shall be,” he promised. “I did not say that for any other reason than to silence Maria’s.... that is, Lady Grifford’s, hope of reconnecting with me in a way that she might find pleasing.”

Charlotte looked at him, frowning. “You mean to say that you thought to use me in order to convince her that you will never again return to her company?”

Lord Crestwood winced. “Yes, that is just as it is.”

“Then how could you do such a thing?” she responded, the anger beginning to seep through now despite her best attempts to hold it back. “You know that I cannot engage myself to anyone! My stepmother will be utterly furious and –”

“I am sure that no-one will know of it,” he interrupted, only to then apologise for doing so. Rubbing one hand over his face, he released her hand from his arm and then stepped back, putting his arms wide. “I apologise. I was foolish, panicking almost, if I am to be truthful. I do not believe that anyone aside from Lady Grifford will know of such a thing, however. She is not welcomed by society given her reputation and all that has happened so I am sure such news will not be spread.”

“And if it is?” Charlotte let out a huff of breath as Lord Crestwood looked away, clearly uncertain. “You did not think of the consequences of this, Lord Crestwood. You spoke without thinking and now we are in a very difficult situation indeed!”

“I will find a way to fix it,” he promised, his hands falling back to his sides. “I do not know what that will be as yet but I assure you, it will not give you any sort of difficulty. Might I call on you tomorrow?”

Charlotte wanted to rail at him, to tell him that she wanted a solution at this very moment but, seeing that she could not have it, closed her eyes and let out another calming breath, her anger beginning to fade. “Very well.”

“I am truly sorry,” he said, in a manner which made her believe he truly was so. “There is a reason as to why I spoke as I did, a reason as to why I reacted as I did, but that is not an excuse. By tomorrow, I promise you, I will have thought of something.”

“I hope you do,” Charlotte murmured, before turning away without offering him so much as a nod.

Making her way through the crowd, Charlotte tried to ignore the sudden thrill which ran up her spine when she thought about being engaged to Lord Crestwood. It was foolishness, of course, for it was nothing more than a moment which would soon fade but, all the same, there was something there that was delighted with the notion that she was now betrothed to a handsome, amiable gentleman. Despite her feelings and her lingering anger, a hint of a smile tried to brush itself upon Charlotte’s lips but she refused to permit it. Picking up a glass from one of the footmen’s trays, she stepped back into the shadows, found a place to sit and remained there.

“He will have a solution by the morrow,” she told herself, quietly. “And then this nonsense will be at an end before it has even begun.”

“What?”

“Do quieten yourself!” Samuel exclaimed, as Lord Trenton stared at him, his eyes huge. “Yes, I did something foolish but now I must find a way to reverse that very thing. Can you not help me instead of practically shouting your astonishment to the very top of Whites?”

Lord Trenton said nothing for some moments, simply staring back at Samuel, not speaking a single word. His mouth opened and then closed again multiple times and Samuel, growing weary of this, eventually sighed and rolled his eyes, trying to hide his own embarrassment.

“It was only because Lady Grifford asked me to meet with her,” he muttered as Lord Trenton coughed and then shook his head again. “There was no forethought.”

“I cannot quite believe you did such a thing.” Lord Trenton shook his head again. “I thought you a good deal more sensible than that.”

Samuel scowled. “When it comes to Lady Grifford, it appears that I am nothing but a simpleton.”

Lord Trenton shook his head and let out a long breath. “My goodness, you have twisted yourself up into all manner of trouble, have you not?”

“Not intentionally.” Samuel rubbed one hand over his eyes, feeling them gritty and tired. “Miss Millerton was greatly upset, I should add. She did remarkably well in front of Lady Grifford so that the latter now believes that I am betrothed, just as was

said, but thereafter, she became quite upset. Not that I am in the least bit surprised or upset by that, of course!” He winced as he recalled how her green eyes had sharpened, how there had been anger in her expression and in her voice. “I do not even know her very well and that is what I said? Goodness, looking back, I wonder how I ever thought to speak such nonsense.”

“Such serious nonsense,” his friend muttered, before snapping his fingers at a nearby footman so that there might be drinks brought. “Miss Millerton is the one who has already promised her aunt she will stay unwed, yes?”

“Her stepmother,” Samuel corrected, “but yes, that is she. Her father evidently requested it of her in his will and she has felt herself obliged to that.”

“Little wonder that she is upset, then. Other young ladies might have been quite delighted at the prospect and you would find yourself with the opposite problem.” He chuckled a little ruefully. “Mayhap you ought to be grateful, in a way!”

Seeing what he meant, Samuel nodded and then took the glass of brandy from the footman. “Perhaps. Though now I must think of what to do, for I cannot simply go to Lady Grifford and state that what I said was not the truth, for then that will give her the wrong impression.”

Lord Trenton’s expression grew suddenly serious. “Ah, indeed. She will think that either you were betrothed but have ended it because she has returned to London and is free to marry, or she will think that you are telling her the truth because you desire to connect with her again.”

“Precisely.”

“But then, if you do not say anything, there is the chance that Lady Grifford will do what you do not want her to do and will tell others around her that you are engaged.”

Samuel nodded, his heart sinking as he realized just how much difficulty he was in. There appeared to be no easy answer, no way to escape this. It was a mess he had made himself and with no simple way to set it all straight again.

“Though,” Lord Trenton continued, a little more slowly, “might this not have an advantage to it?”

With a frown, Samuel looked back at his friend. “An advantage?”

“Yes.” Lord Trenton’s expression brightened as he sat forward in his chair. “You have been eager for the ton to leave you alone, have you not? You want them to step back from you, not to push their daughters, sisters or nieces into your company, so why do you not continue on with this betrothal?”

Samuel blinked quickly, then shook his head. “I cannot. Miss Millerton does not want to be engaged... and I have already determined not to be either.” A little surprised at how little the thought of marrying Miss Millerton appeared to upset him, Samuel took another sip of his brandy. “That is not a solution.”

“Oh but it is!” Undaunted, Lord Trenton’s voice grew a little louder, his fervency increasing with every word. “If you convince Miss Millerton to continue on with this engagement, knowing that, at the end of her time in London, you will both mutually bring it to a close, then you will find yourself without the difficulty of Lady Grifford pursuing you and the ton seeking to press their interests upon you also!”

The idea was not as dreadful as Samuel had expected and, letting it sink into his mind a little more, he considered it silently for some minutes. Lord Trenton, now grinning, sat back in his chair and watched Samuel as he thought, clearly quite certain that what he had suggested was the very best solution to all of his difficulties.

“I would need to convince Miss Millerton to agree,” he said slowly, as Lord Trenton

shrugged. “You think that it would be that easy?” A laugh broke from his lips. “I hardly think so. She was already upset with me for suggesting that to Lady Grifford, I cannot imagine that she will take well to the thought to the entirety of the beau monde being aware of it!”

“I am sure you could convince her,” Lord Trenton said, dismissing Samuel’s concerns with a few words. “All you need to do is ask.”

A little interested at how nonchalant his friend appeared to be – and how simple he thought the solution was – Samuel looked away and let his gaze rove around Whites. Yes, he considered, it would be very easy indeed for him to be engaged to Miss Millerton for a time and it would be an excellent thing also given what it would do to the ton and their expectations of him. For Miss Millerton, however, it would do precisely the opposite. She might find herself in yet more difficulty with Lady Foster and even her stepmother! What of her family? Would they understand what had happened? Would they accept that this pretense was justified or would there be an unhappiness about it all?

“All you can do is suggest it and see what she says,” Lord Trenton said again, as Samuel continued to think hard about what he ought to do. “Have you any other solution?”

Samuel scowled. “You know that I have not.”

“Then?”

Closing his eyes and letting out a long, slow breath, Samuel shook his head. “I do not want to suggest this to her, Trenton, not after how much I have already upset her but it seems that I have no choice.” Letting out a sigh, he swirled the remaining brandy in his glass, his heart heavier than it had been before. “I shall ask her if this engagement can continue until she returns home with the full expectation that she will refuse.”

“Excellent!” Lord Trenton beamed, his eyes gleaming with evident delight that Samuel had taken on his solution. “And if she refuses, then we shall meet again at Whites and come up with another solution. Though, however, I do not think that you will need to.” He chuckled. “I think she will agree.”

“We shall see,” Samuel muttered, doubtfully. “We shall have to wait and see.”

“Miss Millerton, thank you for letting me call on you.”

The lady nodded but did not smile, settling herself back into her seat. “You will not mind, I hope, if my sister sits with us?”

Samuel looked to Lady Hesterway who was, it seemed, entirely at a loss as to why this meeting was taking place, given the strange look she sent her sister.

“No, not in the least.” He managed a smile but then let it fade, looking back at Lady Hesterway. “Might I ask what you know of the situation?”

Alarm clouded her expression. “Situation?”

“At the ball last evening,” he continued, only for Lady Hesterway’s eyes to widen, a quiet gasp escaping her.

“Did something happen with Lady Foster? Something I did not know about?” She made to rise, evidently going to sit near her sister but Miss Millerton quickly shook her head, gesturing for her to sit down again.

“No, Lady Foster had nothing to do with this,” she said quickly, just as the tea tray was brought in. “Do not be alarmed.”

“It was all entirely my own doing,” Samuel said, waiting for the maid to depart the room and close the door before he continued. “I spoke hastily, making a situation a good deal worse than it needed to be and I confess, brought your sister into it.”

Lady Hesterway blinked, just as Miss Millerton rose to pour the tea. “I do not understand.”

Samuel closed his eyes briefly, feeling the knot of pain in his heart as he thought of Lady Grifford. “Last evening, I was surprised by an unexpected presence. Lady Grifford came to speak with me. As you might well be aware, Lady Hesterway, she was once my betrothed – well, almost my betrothed. I had every intention of marrying her.”

“Yes, I am aware of that story,” Lady Hesterway said, looking almost a little guilty as she glanced away from him. “I believe she wed Lord Grifford, a gentleman who was nothing but the very opposite of you.”

“You are quite correct there,” Samuel answered, not in the least bit surprised that she knew the details. “Lord Grifford was a rogue and a charlatan. Whether he believed himself truly in love with Lady Grifford, I do not know but he certainly convinced her to trust him.”

“Was?” Lady Hesterway looked confused, a line forming between her eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

Setting the teacup down in front of her sister, Miss Millerton spoke up. “Lady Grifford informed us that he had died. I believe that was one of the reasons she came to speak with Lord Crestwood.”

“Oh.” Lady Hesterway’s eyes flared. “Oh!”

“Yes, your thoughts turn the same way as my own,” Samuel answered, quietly. “However, given the shock of coming face to face with the lady who had caused me so much difficulty and then to hear of Lord Grifford’s passing, I found myself in a very strange frame of mind. The truth is, I was not certain what to think and even less certain as to what to say!” Resisting the desire to tug at his collar with one finger, Samuel looked to Miss Millerton. “When Lady Grifford asked to speak with me alone, when her desire began to wind its way towards me, I am afraid that I introduced Miss Millerton as my betrothed.”

Silence filled the room, ballooning outward as Lady Hesterway stared at him and Miss Millerton looked away, her cheeks pink. Samuel could not move nor find a single word to say, holding his breath as he waited for Lady Hesterway’s judgement to fall upon him.

“You told the lady that you were engaged to my sister?” Lady Hesterway’s whisper finally broke the silence but did not make Samuel feel any better, still uncertain as to what her reaction was to this statement.

“I did and I am sorry for it,” he said, putting one hand to his heart. “I did not think clearly. I was much too confused, afraid that Lady Grifford was attempting to insert herself back into my life when that was the very last thing that I wanted. In wishing to make that desire clear to her, I used Miss Millerton as an excuse and for that, I am truly sorry.”

Lady Hesterway blinked rapidly, only to then turn to her sister though, Samuel noticed, the edge of her lips did quirk just a little. “Charlotte? You did not say anything.”

“That is because I wanted you to hear the explanation rather than throw a thousand questions at me,” Miss Millerton replied, picking up her teacup. “Now, however, you must help us see what we are to do next, unless you have come with another solution,

Lord Crestwood?”

Samuel licked his lips, his fingers twisting together as he held them in his lap. “It is not a solution, no, but rather a suggestion.”

“You are engaged to my sister?” Lady Hesterway exclaimed again, interrupting Samuel’s conversation with Miss Millerton. “Does the ton know as yet?”

“Not as yet, though I am certain they soon shall. Lord Crestwood here believes that Lady Grifford is not well enough known in society to spread such a story but I am not convinced.” Miss Millerton turned her sharp green eyes back towards him. “Well? What is it that you are thinking?”

Feeling his courage fail him, Samuel grasped a hold of what he had and spoke forcefully. “For us to continue. We will continue the betrothal until you return home, whereby I shall tell the ton that I was not worthy of you. The blame will fall on me and all will come to an end.”

For the second time that afternoon, silence held reign over the room. Lady Hesterway was, for whatever reason, smiling brightly as though this was the most wonderful thing she had ever heard, whereas Miss Millerton was slowly turning pale, her mouth in a small circle of utter astonishment.

“It is a favour I am asking of you, I know,” Samuel continued, a sense of shame beginning to wind through him. “Ever since Maria ended our connection and instead, eloped with Lord Grifford, I have found myself seeking solitude and refusing all manner of company... until this year. When Lord Trenton asked me to come to London to be a part of his festivities, something in me shifted. I wanted to attend, I wanted to be amongst society but I feared greatly the whispers and the gossip of the ton . I did not want to be scrutinized, I did not want to have various young ladies put under my nose for me to consider. I have been attempting to tell the beau monde that

I have no interest in marrying but I do not think that it dissuades many. The whispers have persisted, as I knew they would but now there are those wondering if I am here in London again to seek for a wife.”

“And by engaging yourself to my sister, you would end that scrutiny and be able to enjoy all that the Christmas season has to offer you,” Lady Hesterway said slowly, that smile still on the edges of her lips. “I will not say that it is not a little selfish, Lord Crestwood but I can understand it.”

“As can I,” Miss Millerton said hastily, “but that does not mean that I need to accept the suggestion. Thank you, Lord Crestwood, but I – ”

“It is something that needs to be discussed and considered!” Lady Hesterway reached out, coming half out of her chair, to grasp her sister’s hand. “We cannot simply accept or refuse at this very moment, can we? There could be benefits for you also and –”

“I do not want to cause any difficulty. If Miss Millerton does not like the idea, then I will consider another way to end this charade before the whispers have even begun.”

Miss Millerton reached for her teacup again. “You could simply go to Lady Grifford and tell her the truth.”

Samuel nodded. “Yes, I could, though I fear what the consequences would be from that.” Shame bit at him and he dropped his gaze. “Though you must forgive me. I am speaking of things that do not concern you.”

Miss Millerton pressed her lips tightly together for a moment and then sighed. “You fear that Lady Grifford would think that your explanation was, instead, a desire to rekindle what you once had.”

“It is not your concern,” Samuel said again, refusing to answer the question. Instead, he got to his feet, a heaviness on his shoulder. “Forgive me, Miss Millerton. Had I not reacted as I did, had I given myself a little more thought, then I am certain I would never have involved you in such a thing as this. I am to blame and I must beg your forgiveness.”

Miss Millerton rose to her feet. “I will think about all that you have said, just as my sister has suggested, though I confess that my thoughts are not positive towards the idea as yet.”

Putting one hand to his heart, Samuel bowed low. “You are very good even to consider this, Miss Millerton.”

For the first time since he had sat down, Miss Millerton smiled and Samuel felt some of the ice which had formed between them begin to melt. Indeed, he had upset her and yet, despite that, she was still willing not only to listen but to consider what he had said while, it seemed, no longer holding anything against him. He shook his head, feeling himself deeply unworthy of such a remarkable lady.

“But of course. Might we speak again tomorrow, Lord Crestwood?”

He nodded. “Are you to attend Lord and Lady Hickman’s soiree tomorrow evening?”

“We are, yes.”

“Then,” Samuel suggested, looking steadily at Miss Millerton, “might we speak there for a few minutes? Your sister will remain nearby, of course, for propriety’s sake.”

It took a few moments of silence but, eventually, Miss Millerton nodded. “I suppose that would be suitable. I will have made my decision by then.”

“Capital.” He cleared his throat, shifting one foot to the next. “I am also to have invitations sent out this afternoon. I would be very glad if you would all join me for a card party in three days hence.” So saying, he inclined his head and then made his way to the door, beads of sweat breaking out across his forehead. Swallowing hard, he hastened to the door, shivering as the icy draft rushed forth revealing the waiting carriage.

Will she accept? That question gnawed at him as he sat back in his carriage and it began to rattle across the London cobbles, wondering not only what it was Miss Millerton would give by her answer but also, why it was that he felt himself yearning for her to say yes.

“It is a preposterous idea!”

“It is but it also has some positive notions with it.”

Charlotte shook her head, continuing to pace up and down the drawing room. “I have already made it clear that I will not marry any gentleman. I have made my promise and that is all that can happen!”

“But you are not going to marry him,” Amelia protested, as Charlotte shook her head again. “That is not going to happen and you are both well aware of that. “

“The only benefit is to him,” Charlotte protested, throwing up her hands and trying to ignore the flicker of delight within her heart. “He wishes to announce himself engaged so that he can remove any and all attention from the ton as regards his own situation and so that Lady Grifford will not attempt to pull herself close to him again. Though I do not know why he simply cannot state that directly. He does not need me to pretend to be his betrothed in order to make it clear to her that he has no interest in attaching himself to her again.”

Her sister smiled softly. “It must have been just as he said, I think. He was shocked, panicked and confused and hearing her speak of her husband’s passing would only have heightened that further. So, yes he did not need to use you in that way but it was all his mind went to in the height of his upset.”

Charlotte let out a sigh and sat down heavily opposite her sister, spreading out her hands. “Do not think that I do not feel any sympathy for him, my dear sister. I feel a great deal. Indeed, I cannot imagine what it must be for him to know that she has

returned after all he has endured.”

“And after the years of solitude thereafter,” Amelia told her, making Charlotte’s heart twist. “The gentleman has only just returned to London! This is his very first foray into society for many years and now, to find, not only, that she has returned but mayhap also seeking to reconnect with him must be very difficult indeed.”

Coupling her hands in her lap, Charlotte let out another long, slow breath and then shook her head. “It must be, yes.” Her heart squeezed again and she shook her head, but this time, it was to herself, to the sense of compassion which seemed determined to make its way to her heart and mind, settling there. “I do not want to pretend to be betrothed, Amelia,” she said, though without as much firmness as before. “You know what I have determined. To step away from that –”

“But you would not be!” Amelia cried, throwing up her hands. “Charlotte, I do not mean to be at all irritating, but this is an experience that you shall never have otherwise! To have a gentleman’s sole attention, to be taken to the floor to dance in his arms, to have a closeness of connection, that is something that you will never experience otherwise.”

A slight tremor ran through Charlotte’s frame as she took a deep breath, trying not to allow the desire to pursue that breakthrough. “You are quite right, Amelia, but even if I were to accept, even if I was to pretend to be engaged, those experiences would be nothing but false, would they not? There would be no truth to our connection, no real happiness between us.”

“It would be something to enjoy all the same.”

Charlotte bit her lip, aware that the desire to experience what it would be like to be an engaged lady in the eyes of the ton was beginning to push through into her heart. “And then when I made to step back? What then? What if...” Her eyes closed. “What

if I let myself feel things I ought not to?”

Amelia’s expression altered in a moment. “You fear that you might fall in love with him?”

“It is a possibility,” Charlotte had to admit, her chest tightening for a moment. “I cannot pretend it is not.”

“Then,” Amelia countered quickly, “if you see such a thing happening, then you would have no other choice but to end the betrothal at that very moment, breaking apart your connection and assuring yourself that nothing more will happen. In addition, however, I think that you are much too sensible to permit such a thing. I am sure that you will guard your heart well.”

Charlotte considered this, looking away from her sister. She had been so determined not to accept Lord Crestwood’s request but now, for whatever reason, she was beginning to consider it. “I would have to write to Lady Barcsay.”

Her sister blinked, then frowned. “For what purpose?”

“To inform her that this engagement, should she hear of it, is nothing that she needs to be concerned about,” Charlotte stated. “I do not want her to think that there is anything wrong nor do I want her to believe that I have stepped away from the commitment I have made.”

Amelia’s eyebrows lifted. “Goodness, Charlotte, you have a kinder heart than I! I would have done nothing of the sort, were I in your shoes. Instead, I would be quite determined that even if she should hear of it, I would give her no explanation whatsoever and let her stew in her discontent and confusion for a time – almost a recompense for how she has treated us.”

“That thought did cross my mind,” Charlotte admitted, wincing. “Do not think me as overwhelmingly good... and certainly do not when you hear that I have no intention of speaking to Lady Foster about it!”

At this, her sister began to giggle and, in a few minutes, the room was filled with the sound. Charlotte put one hand over her mouth, seeing her sister’s eyes dancing as she laughed. Soon, nothing but mirth filled them both and all thought of concern or worry over this potential engagement disappeared.

“Goodness, can you imagine the upset this will cause her?” Amelia asked, when she finally managed to catch her breath. “Are you quite certain that you will go ahead with this, then?”

Charlotte’s smile began to fade away. “I do not want to but I must admit that there is compassion within me for all that Lord Crestwood has endured. Besides he does appear to be an excellent gentleman who has been willing to come to my aid with Lady Foster and thus, I suppose that I can agree to his idea for a time.” Her sister clapped her hands together in evident excitement but Charlotte held up one hand to silence it. “I am not to hear any words from you as regards this, however, do you understand? I do not want you to think for a moment that anything might come of this. I do not want you to expect that I might turn around and change my mind, simply because I am pretending to be betrothed to Lord Crestwood. He knows my intentions and I know his. Neither of us want to pursue matrimony so, therefore, neither of us shall.”

Amelia’s expression grew serious. “Of course. I understand.”

“And I am going now to write to our stepmother to explain,” Charlotte continued, rising from her chair. “And, mayhap to our brother also!”

“Yes, write to our brother and ask him also to make certain that our stepmother’s

letters to her sister – or to anyone else in London – are held until you return home.”

A little confused, Charlotte looked back at her sister. “Why?”

“So that she will not think to reveal the truth to the ton and embarrass you with it,” Amelia explained. “Now, I will not disturb you further. I think you have made a good decision, Charlotte.”

With her hand on the door handle, Charlotte ignored the way her heart leapt about, demanding that she feel some sort of excitement at her pretend betrothal. “I do hope so,” was all she said, before stepping out of the room.

“I will agree.”

Charlotte could not help but smile as astonishment rippled across Lord Crestwood’s face.

“You... you agree?” he repeated, as Charlotte nodded. “You will do this for me?”

“I will. You showed great kindness to me as regarded Lady Foster and I am glad to have opportunity to return it.” With a chuckle at the way he closed his eyes tightly and then shook his head, Charlotte took his hand for a moment. “I do not know the full extent of your suffering but I can understand that it must have been great.” Her smile fell away. “The shock you endured upon seeing her was evident to me and I cannot imagine what you felt in that moment.”

Lord Crestwood opened his eyes, his thumb running back and forth across the back of her hand. “I do not deserve such kindness. It was foolishness itself which made me speak in such a way, foolish that I was though, you are right to say that it came from

a place of utter shock and astonishment. This will, I am sure, push Lady Grifford as far back from me as she can be, which is what I want.”

Charlotte nodded slowly, tilting her head, studying him. “You are quite certain that you wish to do this?”

He nodded, his eyes widening just a little. “Why do you ask?”

“Because I did wonder if there was a part of you which desired to be near her again,” Charlotte answered, honestly. “It seems that she had a great hold of your heart.”

Lord Crestwood did not immediately answer though, when he did, there came a great sigh with it. “I believe I was deeply in love with her, Miss Millerton. It is not that I fear that I might do so again, more that my heart would be much too sympathetic towards her. She might then hope for a closer connection to me again and, I confess, I worry that I might feel myself obliged to that. Does that make sense?”

Smiling gently, Charlotte nodded. “It does.”

“But this betrothal will prevent that,” he continued, with an obvious sigh of relief. “You are very gracious and obliging, Miss Millerton.”

“Charlotte.”

The way he blinked and then smiled made Charlotte’s heart lurch, the light in his eyes making her own lips curve.

“Charlotte, yes,” he murmured, finally releasing her hand. “In private company, of course. You should also refer to me as Crestwood, if you wish.”

“I shall.” Charlotte paused, wanting to say more but feeling a building up of

something – though she did not know what – between them. The murmur of conversation around them, the laughter and the music, seemed to fade as she looked into his eyes, wondering at all that she saw there.

Lord Crestwood was the first to pull his gaze away. “Your sister and brother in law are contented with this, then?”

Charlotte coughed lightly, trying to recover herself. “Yes, they are.” She looked back at him, a strange fluttering in her stomach. “I wrote also to my brother and to my stepmother, informing them of what has happened.”

“You did?”

She nodded. “The moment they were complete, I handed them to my sister and she made certain they were sent at that very moment. I do not want my stepmother in particular to think that I have stepped away from my commitment.”

Lord Crestwood’s eyebrows lifted for a moment, only for him to smile. “You are quite remarkable, I must say.” His smile returned. “I believe that the ton will think me a very fortunate gentleman indeed.”

A warmth in her cheeks told Charlotte she was blushing. “How very kind, Crestwood,” she murmured, seeing the smile on his lips grow. “Now, shall we make an announcement of some sort or do you wish simply to let the news spread as it will?”

“I think I know what we should do.” A quiet chuckle broke from Lord Crestwood and he leaned closer, making Charlotte’s breath catch quietly. “There are two prolific gossips here this evening. Shall we inform them?”

Charlotte laughed up at him, taking his arm when he offered it. “At once. Let us tell

them both about our Christmas engagement and see just how long it takes for all of society to know of it!”

Lord Crestwood grinned. “I should say, mayhap a day or so?” With another chuckle, he pressed her hand lightly as it rested on his arm, only for that grin to turn into something a little softer. “By the end of the week, at least, everyone will know of it. Are you sure you wish to do this?”

Taking in a breath, Charlotte smiled back at him. “More than certain. Now, let us go.”

“Engaged?”

Samuel chuckled as his friend rushed into the study, his eyes wide. “Good evening, Trenton. How are you this afternoon?”

“Astonished is what I am!” Lord Trenton exclaimed, a light dusting of snow on his shoulders. “How could you do such a thing without informing me? You did not once think to tell me that she had agreed? That there was consent and that it would then be announced to all of the ton?”

Samuel wagged a finger. “I did not announce it!”

“No, but I am certain you told it to those who would!”

Seeing that he had no choice but to admit that, Samuel laughed and shrugged. “Mayhap that is true.”

Lord Trenton, finally, chuckled along with him. “I am delighted for you. Has it brought about the consequence you hoped for?”

Rolling his eyes, Samuel shook his head. “It has only been three days since we first broke the news. That is much too short a time!”

“But Lady Grifford has not come back to your side?” Lord Trenton asked, lowering his voice. “The ton have finished pushing their daughters to you?”

“I suppose in that regard, you are right,” Samuel agreed, “though time will tell as to

whether or not I have been entirely successful. Now,” he continued, getting to his feet, “you must excuse me. Miss Millerton and I are to take a walk through the park.”

Lord Trenton blinked. “But it is very cold indeed out there! The snow has been falling for a few hours and, though it does not any longer, there is still a good deal of it on the ground.”

“And yet, when I suggested it to Miss Millerton, she accepted with great eagerness,” Samuel countered. “It seems as though she is not as afraid of the cold as you.” Opening the door of the study, he waited for his friend to walk out, only for Lord Trenton to hesitate, standing only a few steps away.

“What happens if you end up falling in love with her?”

The thought made Samuel snort, shaking his head briefly. “That is preposterous.”

“Why?”

“Because you know – as does she – that I have no intention of considering matrimony,” Samuel answered. That is why this betrothal works as it does. Neither of us wish to take it forward into fruition.”

“But all the same,” Lord Trenton continued, pushing the subject forward and still refusing to step out of the door, “there is still a danger of that, is there not?”

“No.” Becoming a little impatient, Samuel gestured for his friend to take his leave. “My heart will not allow it, I am sure. I have already fallen in love once and look how disastrously that turned out? No, I have every intention of remaining just as I am for many years, just as she is determined also.”

Lord Trenton chuckled as though he knew something that Samuel did not before,

after another moment, obliged him by quitting the room. Samuel let out a heavy sigh of frustration before following after him. He did not need Lord Trenton to be asking him such things, not when his friend already knew of Samuel's determination. What he had done was already more than foolish, was it not? He was certainly not going to add to it by letting his heart become affected.

"I shall see you this evening at the Christmas ball?" Lord Trenton put on his hat and then began to pull on his gloves as he stood by the front door. "Lord Dutton's Christmas ball is usually an excellent evening and one that you do not want to miss."

"Then I shall not miss it," Samuel assured him. "I have every intention of being present and dancing with Miss Millerton also. I can have even three dances with the lady if I wish, given not only the Season but the fact that we are betrothed!" A sense of happiness began to flood him and he grinned as Lord Trenton finished pulling on his gloves. "Less time for me to stand up with any other young lady, so I can only consider that a good thing."

Lord Trenton chuckled. "I suppose that is true. Until this evening, then. I do hope your walk goes as well as it can in this weather." Just as he spoke, the door was opened and Samuel winced, seeing the thick, white flakes of snow falling to the ground. Mayhap Miss Millerton would not appreciate walking out in the snow though, he considered, it might then mean that she would simply stay in his carriage as they rode together for a while. It was all being done to make sure that the appearance of their connection was left strong enough for the ton to scrutinize. On the other hand, Samuel considered as he climbed into his carriage, he was looking forward to spending more time in her company.

That is only because she is an amiable young lady with a good deal of excellent conversation, he said to himself, attempting to convince himself of it. And not because my heart is in any way affected by her presence.

“I do not mind walking through the snow.”

Samuel looked at Miss Millerton, finding his breath hitching just a little as he took in her laughing green eyes, the warm smile on her face and the way her copper curls danced at the sides of her bonnet. Her cheeks were pink with the cold but she clearly was not at all concerned, given how she smiled.

“It is just as well it has stopped snowing, else we would both be covered in snow by the time we returned to the carriage!” he laughed, as she walked alongside him. “I did not think that they would be able to hold the Frost Fair this year but if it continues to be as cold as this then mayhap they shall!”

Miss Millerton’s breath frosted out in front of her. “I have only been once to the Frost Fair. I must confess, I found it a little disconcerting to be walking across the middle of the Thames with so many others!”

Samuel chuckled, recalling the first time he had stepped out onto the ice. There had been many stalls set up, each trying to sell their wares, while others had taken to ice skating. It had been both wonderful and unsettling, though to his knowledge, no-one had ever fallen through the ice. “It is a wonderful winter tradition and I hope it continues,” he said, just as the wind whipped up a little more around them, making Miss Millerton shiver visibly. “Now, you look cold. Shall we return to the carriage?”

“I confess, the thought of hot bricks is a wonderful one.”

Turning around, Samuel began to walk with her back to the carriage. “I believe there is hot cocoa waiting for us also,” he said, with a smile. “Your sister said she would have some prepared for our return.”

Miss Millerton smiled, shivered again and moved a little closer to him as they continued to walk – and Samuel’s heart warmed. It was not just the thought of the cocoa but also the company that was present with him. This was only the first sennight since they had announced their engagement and yet, in getting to know her, Samuel found himself delighting in her company all the more. How strange it was, he considered, that he had not thought about the Christmas which had torn him apart in some days. He had expected that, in seeing Lady Grifford again, he might then be filled with thoughts of her, might find himself considering what pain she had settled upon him all over again but instead, the opposite had occurred. He had not thought of her once – and, much to his relief, she had not approached him again either.

“There is someone waiting at the carriage.” Miss Millerton’s voice broke into Samuel’s thoughts and he looked directly ahead, seeing a figure standing by the door. They were much too far away for him to make out clearly, however.

Miss Millerton glanced at him. “Is it the coachman?”

Samuel shook his head. “No, I do not think so. I told him that he could shelter from the cold within the carriage if he wished.”

“You did?” Her voice was filled with surprise and Samuel glanced at her, heat filling him.

“I did. I know that it is not the done thing but I could not bear to leave the poor fellow sitting in the cold. The horses are tied and secured and –”

“How wonderfully kind of you!” Miss Millerton exclaimed, her hand going to his arm as they continued to walk together. “Very few of the gentry would think of such a thing or have such a considerate heart. How generous you are.”

Dismissing the compliment as best he could – though he was grateful for it – Samuel

directed his attention back to the figure by the carriage. “If it is not my coachman, then I wonder... oh, look! Another carriage is beside it.” His eyebrows began to pull together in confusion as he made his way towards the carriage, wondering who could be foolish or bold enough to stand out in the freezing cold waiting for them to return.

His question was soon answered by Miss Millerton’s gasp and by her feet pulling them to a stop.

“It is Lady Foster!”

Samuel’s frown grew heavier and though he sensed her reluctance, began to walk again, tugging her along with him. “You have nothing to concern yourself with, Charlotte. She cannot hurt you.”

“She will rail at me, I am sure of it. Though,” she continued, sounding a little upset, “I did not tell her that the betrothal was only a pretence. Mayhap I should, for then she would not think otherwise.”

Samuel turned to face her, despite the cold wind now blowing between them. “I do not think that would be wise, though I can understand your reason for considering it. She will, no doubt, tell everyone that it is a pretence and then we shall both be mortified.”

Miss Millerton closed her eyes, her fingers tight on his arm. “It is foolish of me to have reacted to her presence with such fright. I have already told myself that I am not going to permit her to affect me in any way.”

Smiling in what he hoped was an encouraging way, Samuel gestured to the lady in question. “Then now is your chance to prove it.” He watched as Miss Millerton nodded, pulling in a long breath though, much to his delight, there came a spark in her eyes as well as a lift of her chin as she turned back to face Lady Foster. Nothing

more was said between them until they reached the lady, though Lady Foster immediately strode forward, ready to meet them.

“What is this?” she demanded, her face red with the cold but her eyes dark with anger. “You informed me, Miss Millerton, that you had no intention of engaging yourself to anyone only for me then to hear that you are to marry Lord Crestwood? What can you be thinking?”

Samuel bit back his retort, leaving it to Miss Millerton. Much to his delight, she spoke firmly and with it, offered a long, hard stare towards the lady.

“I believe that such matters are mine and mine alone, Lady Foster. Now, if you will excuse us, we are to return home.”

“But you cannot!” Lady Foster reached out and grabbed Miss Millerton’s arm, yanking her back from where she had been making to step towards the carriage. “Do you understand me? You gave your word and –”

Miss Millerton pulled her arm away just as Samuel had been about to step forward, angry that the lady had thought to act in a physical manner all over again. “Do not think that you have any rights over me, Lady Foster! I have never been forced to make any decision, having only ever been requested by my father to do such a thing but that does not mean that my heart cannot change!”

Lady Foster moved closer to Miss Millerton but she did not flinch and nor did she move away. Instead, she held Lady Foster’s gaze, her chin tilted up.

“You must be dedicated to my sister,” Lady Foster hissed, her hands now clenched into tight fists. “You have made your promise.”

“I have given my word, indeed, but if I decide that my life is much too sorrowful

when I have, instead, the chance of happiness, then it may be that I break that word.”

“You cannot!” Lady Foster screeched, throwing up her hands, making Samuel step forward, fearing that she would injure Miss Millerton in some way given her anger. “It must be this way, else she will lose – ”

Much to Samuel’s astonishment, the lady came to a sudden stop. She spluttered for a moment and then, without so much as another word – and in a very calm manner – turned on her heel and made directly for her carriage. It was not only Samuel who stared after her but Miss Millerton also, her eyes wide and her whole body trembling.

“You are cold,” Samuel murmured, gesturing for her to make for the carriage. “Come, let us return you home. That was a most unfortunate encounter.”

“I – I do not understand.” Miss Millerton did not move but instead stared up at him, one hand going to his chest, leaning on him as though she needed his support. “What did she mean?”

Samuel shook his head. “I do not know but come, into the carriage. It is much too cold to stand about and you should discuss this with your sister.”

It took a moment but eventually, Miss Millerton nodded, her gaze still holding his. “You will join us, will you not?”

“Of course I shall.” Samuel kept his voice gentle though he found himself a little concerned at the whiteness of her cheeks. “Please, let me take you home.”

It took yet another moment but eventually, Miss Millerton climbed into the carriage and, coming in after her, Samuel rapped on the roof immediately, suddenly urgent in his desire to return the lady home. What had started as a lovely but cold walk in the park had ended in confusion and upset, and Samuel was both concerned and upset for

the lady. Reaching for her hand, he held it in his as they were taken home in silence, never once letting her go until they arrived back at Lord Hesterway's townhouse.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:31 am

“What happened?”

Charlotte managed to smile as a cup of tea was pressed into her hands. “I am quite all right, Amelia. You need not hover.”

Amelia, who had been at Charlotte’s elbow ever since Lord Crestwood had ushered her back into the house with a murmur about Lady Foster, finally sat down though her eyes were fixed to Charlotte.

“It was Lady Foster,” Charlotte said, quietly. “Lord Crestwood and I were returning to the carriage but she was there waiting for me, ready to rail at my choice to engage myself to Lord Crestwood.”

“Obviously, she does not know it is a pretence,” Lord Crestwood stated, coming to sit beside Charlotte though Charlotte presumed it was simply because the couch was close to the fire and he could warm himself. “However, she was very angry indeed.”

“I am sorry.” Amelia let out a sigh and closed her eyes. “What are we to do?”

“It is not that which upset me,” Charlotte said, pausing to sip her tea and let the warmth push through her. A slight tremble ran through her frame, right down to the tips of her fingers, and she set the teacup down with a slight clatter. “She was very angry, as Lord Crestwood has said, but as she was throwing harsh words at me, she said something which gave me pause.” Another breath, another sip of her tea and, closing her eyes, Charlotte finally managed to repeat them. “She said, ‘You cannot! It must be this way, or else she will lose – ’” and then came to a sudden stop.” She opened her eyes to see Amelia frowning. “She was speaking of our stepmother, I am

sure, but once she stopped herself from saying anything more, she turned on her heel and took her leave.”

“In a most abrupt manner,” Lord Crestwood added, just as Lord Hesterway came into the room to join them. “I did not understand what happened.”

Charlotte swallowed hard, lacing her fingers in her lap. “I am sure that she stopped herself from saying something she ought not to have said. In saying, “it must be this way, else she will lose,” it is clear to me that there is a reason behind my request to remain unwed.”

Lord Hesterway frowned. “Who said this?”

“Lady Foster,” Amelia replied, quickly explaining what had happened to her husband. “But Charlotte, what possible reason could there be? Father’s will stated that it was only to keep Lady Barcsay company, so that she would never be alone. Could it be that this was what she meant? That Lady Barcsay would lose your company?”

No-one spoke for some time but Charlotte’s heart fluttered within her, telling her that there was something more here, something that she did not yet fully understand.

“To my mind, that does not make sense,” Lord Crestwood said, eventually. “Forgive me for sharing my opinion when it is not my matter but it seems to me that saying that Lady Barcsay would lose Charlotte’s company would not be something that would be snapped back as it was. It would not force her to turn away as abruptly and rush to her carriage.”

“I agree,” Lord Hesterway said, as both Amelia and Charlotte nodded, though that did not bring Charlotte any relief. “But what else could it mean?”

“I – I do not know and it is that which makes me tremble,” Charlotte admitted, a little tearfully. “Oh, sister, what if there is more to our father’s desire for me to remain unwed? His words might have been spoken differently but have been captured incorrectly – and mayhap Lady Foster and our stepmother know of it!”

Amelia opened her mouth, then closed it again before looking away. “Would that I knew what to say to you, Charlotte,” she answered, eventually. “But if you are sure that there might be something more here- and I confess, on hearing what you have said, I quite agree – then there is something that must be done.”

Charlotte blinked quickly, trying to understand. “I cannot speak to Lady Foster again if that is your thinking. I am sure that she will not tell me a single thing.”

Amelia nodded. “I am sure she would not! However, might you not speak to our brother’s solicitors? I am certain our brother would not mind in the least.”

Lord Crestwood shifted slightly in his seat. “You mean to suggest that she would be able, then, to ascertain something from them? Mayhap one of them might know of exactly what was said when the will was created?”

“It would be worth asking, yes,” Lord Hesterway agreed, before Charlotte could speak. “What a pity the will itself was lost.”

Charlotte felt rather than saw Lord Crestwood’s frame tightening, his gaze swift as he turned to her. “It was lost?”

She nodded then spread out her hands. “Some highwaymen, it is thought, stopped to rob the mail coach. The will, which was being sent back to our solicitor, was within it. It has never been seen again.”

Lord Crestwood blinked rapidly, his face paling just a little, and something within

Charlotte's frame tightened, her eyes searching every part of his expression in the hope of finding some explanation for his sudden pallor.

Lord Crestwood, however, said nothing. Instead, he looked away.

"Please." Her hand went to his, grasping it lightly. "You were going to say something, were you not?"

Lord Crestwood pressed her hand back in return though he smiled at her gently. "It is not my business, my dear lady."

"But we should value any thoughts you might have," Charlotte answered, shifting herself a little closer to him though she made sure that her leg did not come close to touching his. "What are your thoughts?"

Lord Crestwood looked away, a breath hissing out gently from between his teeth. "I do not mean to disparage anyone, nor do I want to suggest any sort of wrongdoing. However," he continued, pausing for a moment just as Charlotte nodded in order to encourage him, "is there any possibility that what happened in the loss of the will might have been deliberate?"

The shock of what he said ricocheted across Charlotte's chest, her hand pulling from his so it might press lightly against her heart.

"I should not have said anything," Lord Crestwood continued, immediately. "Forgive me, I have upset you and –"

"Charlotte saw the will with her own eyes," Amelia broke in, though she spoke gently. "She saw what was said, read those words for herself and then she made her decision on that."

Lord Crestwood's jaw flexed for just a moment, his blue eyes darkening gently. "I see. I did not realise that you had read the full will, Miss Millerton. I –"

"Oh, I did not read all of it."

Silence descended on the room as everyone turned their full attention to Charlotte. So great was the intensity of their look that Charlotte flushed, not quite certain where she now ought to look. Her gaze flickered around the room before she dropped it to her lap, her hands now twinning together as nervousness flickered through her.

"I suppose it would not be expected for you to read the will in its entirety," Lord Hesterway said, though he spoke very slowly as though he were choosing each word with great care. "When you say that you read only that part, might I ask if there were statements and the like before it and afterwards also?"

Charlotte blinked, a light frown on her forehead. "I do not think there was, no. I read only the piece of paper which held the instructions about my duties as regarded my stepmother."

Lord Hesterway glanced at his wife then looked back to Charlotte. "So there was nothing else there."

She shook her head no.

"But it was signed by your father?"

"Yes, it was. I presumed that it was added later, perhaps once the rest of the will had been written," Charlotte answered, feeling herself all the more embarrassed, as though she ought not to have done something – or should have done something else! "But it was signed by our father, sealed with his signet ring and then certified by the solicitors, I am sure of it."

Another exchange of glances took place, though this time it was between Lord Hesterway and Lord Crestwood, but Charlotte could not understand what it was that such a look meant. She wanted to cry out in frustration, wanted to exclaim that she ought to be told what it was they were speaking of, only for Lord Crestwood to turn himself towards her a little more, reaching to catch her hand for just a moment as he spoke.

“Might I ask if you have ever considered the possibility that there could be something untoward in all of this?”

“Untoward?” Charlotte looked to her brother in law, seeing him frown as her heart began to clamor furiously. “I do not understand. My only consideration has been to do what my father has asked of me and I have done so.”

“What Lord Crestwood means is that there could have been some undue influence there,” Lord Hesterway explained, as Lord Crestwood withdrew his hand. “The fact that it was written separately and not as part of the will itself does bring up some questions.”

Charlotte’s heart began to pound furiously, a terrible ache beginning to settle there.

“You mean to suggest that Lady Barscay encouraged our father to do this? That she wanted me to be her companion rather than it be our father’s true desire?”

“That is what I think is being suggested, yes.” Amelia’s voice, much to Charlotte’s surprise, was light as though she were happy – nay, delighted – about this. Her eyes held a shine to them that Charlotte could not understand and, as she herself frowned, Amelia sent her a smile. “Charlotte, this means that you might be free of such demands!”

It was too much for Charlotte to take in. Her breath hitched, her face burned hot as

she recalled that she was sitting very close to Lord Crestwood and, without warning, she found herself on her feet.

“I... I need to step away for a time,” she said, her voice a little hoarse. “This is too much to consider. I –”

Amelia rose and caught her hand. “I do not mean to upset you but surely, if there is some chance of this, then it is worth pursuing!”

“I do not mean that I do not want to pursue it,” Charlotte answered, quickly, tugging her hand away, “but rather that this changes so much – if it is true, of course. It may not be.” Her voice grew thin, emotions beginning to press up through her. “I simply need a little time alone to think on it all.”

“And I shall take my leave, of course.” Lord Crestwood got to his feet, cleared his throat and then offered them all a slightly stiff bow. “Forgive me for the intrusion and I do hope I did not speak out of turn. I –”

“No, you did not. Not in the least.” Turning to face him, Charlotte swallowed the tightness in her throat, eager to reassure him. “You have done so much for me, Lord Crestwood. I am not in the least bit upset as regards what you have said or what you have done. I am nothing other than grateful for them, I assure you.” Seeing him begin to walk to the door, she came to join him, her heart still beating a little too quickly for her own liking. “I am truly grateful for the support and for the kindness you have shown me.”

The footman opened the door and both she and then Lord Crestwood stepped through it, as though they were both continuing their walk together. Lord Crestwood shook his head and let out a breath, making Charlotte’s eyebrows lift in question.

“Would that it were not so, Charlotte,” he murmured, the gentleness in his voice

making her spirits lift just a little, her anxious thoughts beginning to dissipate. “From what I understand, you have followed the suggestion in your father’s will that you give up your freedom and your future in order to be companion to your stepmother, and I cannot now imagine what you must be both thinking and feeling with the awareness that it might now be a little... altered from what you first thought.”

Charlotte nodded, her eyes beginning to sting with tears which she forced back, refusing to let them fall. “My mind is filled with all manner of disquieting thoughts,” she said, hoarsely. “If there is a question over it, then how am I to discern the truth? How am I able to tell what it is that my father really wanted?”

Lord Crestwood turned to her, taking her hands in his and looking straight into her eyes. “You will discern it,” he said, with enough firmness to convince her and enough gentleness to steal some of her upset away. “I am certain that you have the strength and the skill to do so. You are determined, I think, and I say that in the hope that you will consider it a compliment.” His smile was sweet and in no time at all, Charlotte’s tears had faded, her own lips curving just a little.

“You appear to know me rather well, even though we have been acquainted for only a short while, Lord Crestwood.”

He grinned at her. “You have been very honest with me, I think.”

“That is because I have found you trustworthy,” she answered, aware now of the gentle heat which was beginning to stir in her core. “I have seen that your own character is one of kindness, given that you came to rescue me from Lady Foster and in your words and actions thereafter.” Her heart squeezed gently and she smiled, though her gaze dropped away, finding it a little difficult to look into his eyes. “Even now, I find myself comforted and reassured.”

“I am pleased to have been of assistance to you,” he said gently, and as Charlotte

lifted her gaze to meet his, some deep-seated feeling within her began to stir. She could not explain it, could not understand what it was and yet, there was something there. Something that pushed her, almost bodily forcing her forward so that she did, in fact, take a step closer. The way his eyes flared, however, told her that he was a little taken aback by what she had just done and thus, she immediately took a step back again, dropping her gaze and, after a moment, taking her hands out of his.

“Thank you again,” she said, softly. “Do excuse me.”

“Of course. You will be attending Lord and Lady Howden’s Christmas soiree tomorrow evening, I hope?”

She glanced up at him, then away again. “Yes, I hope to do so.”

“I look forward to being in your company again.” Without warning, Lord Crestwood caught her hand in his, lifted it to his lips and pressed a kiss to the back of her hand. The warmth which flooded her made her breath swirl in her lungs, her eyes flaring as he looked back at her with a heavy intensity in his gaze.

And then, he was gone.

Charlotte pressed one hand lightly to her stomach as she began to make her way to the staircase which would lead to her bedchamber. She had a great deal to think about already but this newness, this uncertain confusion over Lord Crestwood seemed to take priority in her thoughts. It was as though, in recognizing that there might be some difficulty in what had been asked of her in her father’s will, there had also come the realization that she might now be free to pursue love and matrimony... and then Lord Crestwood had come into view and something had changed.

“There is much to think on,” Charlotte sighed to herself, pushing open the bedroom door and stepping into the room, grateful for the quiet. “Though quite how I am to

find out the truth, I do not know.”

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:31 am

I have done nothing but think of Charlotte. Samuel let out a frustrated sigh and rubbed one hand over his eyes. He had been attempting to keep abreast of his correspondence and sign each of the invitations to his planned ball; however, he had struggled to do so. All he had done thus far was think about the lady and wonder about how they were to find out the truth about her father's will, only to then remind himself that it had nothing whatsoever to do with him given that he was not a part of that family!

Scowling, Samuel set down his quill and rose to his feet, walking to pour himself a small measure of brandy. His thoughts had been fixed upon her ever since the previous afternoon and though he had tried to stop thinking about her and what her present situation was, it had been difficult.

"I must complete these." Muttering to himself, he threw back his brandy and made his way back to his desk. He only had a few more invitations to sign before they could be sent out but it was taking him an age to complete them!

"Good afternoon. I hope you do not mind the intrusion?"

Samuel looked up from his desk, glad to see Lord Trenton. "Not at all, otherwise why would I have told the butler to always permit your entry without any need for introduction?" He grinned as his friend chuckled, a welcome relief from his own frustration. "Come. Sit down and tell me all that you have been doing."

"Well." Lord Trenton sat down and slapped one hand across his knee. "I have been doing a great many things, including sending my servants out to fetch the Yule log!"

“Something I am still to do,” Samuel murmured, his thoughts turning again to Miss Millerton, wondering if she would like to come out to the nearby forest in search of the best Yule log. “Though I have made certain that the cook knows to prepare the Twelfth Day cakes.”

“And you recall that St Thomas’ Day is very soon?”

Samuel nodded, recalling that there would soon be widows in need coming to the house in the hope of some gifts of food or coin by which they might survive the winter. “I shall also have to have my Christmas boxes soon prepared for the servants.”

“Indeed you shall – though there is to be much gaiety before then!”

Samuel gestured to the pile of invitations sitting on his desk. “Gaiety that I intend to add to! I have decided to have a masquerade ball.”

Lord Trenton’s eyebrows lifted. “Indeed. That is interesting. I do not think you have thrown a ball in many a year.”

“That is because I have been absent from London and endured all of Christmas alone,” Samuel answered, a wry smile on his lips and a heaviness in his heart as he recalled all he had tolerated and suffered – though his previous loneliness had been by his own hand. “I did say that I would do what I could to make certain that Miss Millerton was given some events to attend where Lady Foster would not be present and I do intend to do that.”

“An excellent thing,” his friend answered, still smiling. “I am to have a soiree this week, if you recall?”

Samuel laughed, seeing Lord Trenton’s smile grow to a grin. “Indeed, you have done

very well also. The soiree shall be an excellent one, I am sure, and she will be delighted to be present there without Lady Foster's attendance." He tipped his head, his lips bunching for a moment as he thought about whether he ought to confess the difficulty he was having in removing the lady from his thoughts. "I should also tell you that –"

A scratch came at the door and Samuel, a little frustrated, called for the butler to enter. "Yes?"

"A caller, my lord. She is most insistent and –"

"I must speak with you."

Samuel's heart leapt – though not with delight – as Lady Grifford hurried into the room, her eyes fixing to his.

"Forgive the intrusion but I have been waiting for many a day now for you to call on me but that has not taken place. I had to speak with you, I had to –"

"As you can see, I am in company at the present moment, Lady Grifford." Irritation crept up as a flush in Samuel's skin, reaching up to his neck. "I did not expect you to call, given that we have not arranged anything."

"But that is precisely my point!" the lady exclaimed, clearly ignoring all that Samuel had said. "I must speak with you! There is so much that I wish to say, so much that I desire to share with you that I feel as though it is a heavy burden upon my shoulders and I am struggling to bear it!"

Samuel bit back his first response, wanting to inform her of just how much he had suffered and endured after her decision to step away from him and into the arms of another. Instead, he looked to Lord Trenton who, it seemed, was watching the

situation with interest, though Samuel knew that he would not think well of Lady Grifford in all of this.

“With Grifford now gone, my heart is torn into pieces, my shame spread out for all to see.” Lady Grifford’s voice grew softer, her head lowering just a little. “I am sure that the ton now all whisper about me, speaking of my foolishness and of the scoundrel I once called husband. Not that I do not deserve such a thing.” Her head dropped even more, her shoulders rounding. “I am also well aware that I do not deserve even the slightest consideration from you, Crestwood. Yet, here I am.”

The familiarity with which she spoke his name sent fire shooting up Samuel’s spine, though it was not a pleasant sensation. All the same, he did feel a little sympathy for the lady, but there was no stirring of his affections. “I shall always be cordial with you, Lady Grifford,” he stated, hoping that she would see the emphasis he placed on speaking her title correctly rather than with the familiarity that she had. “However, I do have many other matters which concern me at present. I am sorry to speak plainly but you must recognise that your considerations are no longer something that I think on.”

Her head lifted, her eyes fixing to his. “I am no longer of significance to you,” she said, a sadness in her voice which, much to Samuel’s frustration, aroused his sympathy. “I understand. Though, despite my rudeness and my thoughtless interruption, might you please come to call on me soon? I promise it will not be more than a few minutes of your time.”

Samuel took in a slow breath, studying her. He did not want to spend any time in her company; that he knew very well. Everything in him was pushing back from her, pushing away, so why should he want to linger in her company? But there was still something there between them, something that he could not ignore. Perhaps it was only sympathy and sympathy alone which called him to her, Samuel did not know. But he found himself spreading out his hands and promising that yes, he would call

upon her very soon.

“Very soon?” Lady Grifford took a step closer to him, her hand reaching out though she did not touch his hand or arm. “When, Crestwood? In two days’ time? Three? Or will I be forced to wait sennight upon sennight, telling myself that there is going to come a day when you will remember what you have said and will come to call.”

A flickering annoyance pushed through Samuel’s heart but he kept his expression clear. “I will call upon you within the week,” he promised, seeing how her eyes cleared and how what seemed to his eyes to be relief, begin to flood her expression. “I give you my word.”

“Oh, I thank you.” This time, she did catch his hand in hers, did press his fingers and smile up at him – and inwardly, Samuel pulled back though he did not forcibly yank his hand out of hers. Instead, he merely let her release his hand and felt himself glad when she had done so, moving back slowly so that she would not think to do such a thing again.

“Within the week,” he said again, as Lady Grifford made for the door, hurrying towards it as though she could not now be eager enough to step away from him. “Good afternoon, Lady Grifford.”

She smiled, waved and then without a word, quit the room, leaving Samuel to close his eyes, blow out a breath and then shake his head as he looked to Lord Trenton. “Whatever was that about?”

Lord Trenton chuckled mirthlessly. “To my mind, that was Lady Grifford’s attempts to coerce you into calling upon her, which, unfortunately, she succeeded in.”

“Coerce?” Samuel shook his head. “Hardly.” Seeing his friend’s eyebrow lift, he winced and then shrugged. “I am afraid that there was nothing within m? willing to

refuse her.”

“Because you care for her still?”

The harsh response which jumped to Samuel’s lips was held back solely by sheer effort. Taking a moment, he went to pour another measure of brandy for himself and another for Lord Trenton. “I can assure you, I felt no gladness, no happiness or the like.”

“Then what did you feel?”

Samuel took a sip of his brandy rather than speaking. Waiting for a few moments, he let out a slow breath and then shook his head. “I believe it was sympathy,” he said, as Lord Trenton’s eyebrows lifted. “We had a strong connection even though it was some years ago.”

“Or so you thought.”

Wincing, Samuel spread out both arms wide, one hand still gripping his glass of brandy. “We had a connection still! I do not believe that everything she ever said to me was false and we did share a great deal.” He let his arms go back to his sides. “I would not have come to care for her as I did had I not known her. Yes, she did not love me as I loved her but we were well acquainted. It is that which I feel still, I suppose.”

Lord Trenton clicked his tongue. “I would say that she is using that to her advantage. You must be careful, my friend.”

“Careful?” Samuel chuckled ruefully. “I can assure you, when it comes to Lady Grifford, there is no danger there for me whatsoever.”

Another lifted eyebrow.

“I do not even think of her any longer,” Samuel promised, speaking the truth wholeheartedly. “She is not in my thoughts, whether it be in a good or bad way. I spent years doing so and I can assure you, I do not permit her into my thoughts for even a moment.”

“I am surprised, I confess, though I am glad to hear it.” Lord Trenton smiled briefly. “I did think that, in seeing her again, you might find yourself a little... tangled.”

Without warning, Miss Millerton swept her way back into Samuel’s thoughts and he smiled without meaning to. Seeing his friend’s look of surprise growing, Samuel shook his head, dismissing the questions Lord Trenton might be about to ask. “I have had other things on my mind of late, that is all – including these invitations to the masquerade ball which I fear I shall never finish!”

“I see.” Lord Trenton rose to his feet and, finishing his brandy, set it down on the table. “Then I shall take my leave of you and permit you to complete them without further interruption.” Without smiling, he came closer to Samuel and, putting a hand on his shoulder, gazed at him steadily. “I do hope that you will take a great deal of care when it comes to Lady Grifford. I fear that she is just as deceptive as she was before.”

Samuel nodded, wanting to tell his friend that he had no need to concern himself but instead, simply accepting Lord Trenton’s warning. “I shall be.”

“Good.” With a nod, Lord Trenton stepped away. “I shall see you this evening.” He grinned over his shoulder. “Mayhap they shall have a kissing bough again this evening!”

“A kissing bough at a soiree?” Samuel scoffed, shaking his head. “I hardly think so.”

“Oh, but do you not know that our host, Lord Howden, has decided to make it a good deal grander than he first thought?” Lord Trenton’s grin grew all the wider. “There is an orchestra and the ballroom shall be adorned accordingly, as well as having the Christmas soiree in the other rooms of the house. There will be a feast and cards and all manner of entertainment – in short, I believe he is trying to outdo my own magnificent Christmas event!”

Samuel laughed as Lord Trenton opened the door. “And you are still to attend?”

“But of course. It sounds quite marvelous and I am determined not to miss it, even if he does prove himself to be a better host than I!” With another laugh, Lord Trenton quit the room and left Samuel to his own thoughts.

“A kissing bough,” Samuel murmured to himself, his smile slowly beginning to fade as he made his way back to his desk, the invitations waiting for him still. The thought was a pleasant one, he had to confess, made all the pleasing by the thought of having Miss Millerton in his arms and stealing a kiss from her.

The thought was a startling one but it brought him no shock nor dread. Instead, he let himself linger on it, thinking about all that might be and wondering, silently, what it was that made him consider such a sweetness.

I have already assured her that I have no intention of courtship or matrimony, he reminded himself, sitting back down and picking up his quill. There can be no reason for my thoughts to turn to her in such a way as this.

Determining to consider only his invitations, Samuel dipped his quill in the ink and began to write – only for his quill to lift as a vision of Miss Millerton cast itself before his eyes. It was as if, in hearing that she might be freed from her vow to live as a spinster and companion to her stepmother, his heart had found a new sense of freedom also – even if it seemed, very much, to want to be captured anew... though

this time, by someone who would treat it with a good deal more care and consideration than Lady Grifford ever had.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:31 am

“I do hope you are to dance this evening, Charlotte?”

Smiling at her sister, Charlotte nodded. “Of course I shall, though I did think that it was to be a soiree this evening rather than a ball?”

“Ah, but that is because you do not know Lord Howden!” Lord Hesterway laughed, as the carriage came to a stop. “He is never contented, always determined to do more and more and more until his wife, finally, demands that he relent – but it is always much too late!” He chuckled as the footman opened the carriage door. “I recall once being at a dinner party where we were near to thirty dishes! I could barely manage the port I was given at the end – and even then, he had three different ports for us all to try!”

Charlotte laughed at this, imagining the scene. “Even by society’s standards, that is a great number of dishes!”

“It was.” Lord Hesterway offered his arm to her, while taking Amelia on the other. “But his indulgence and determination is well known. This evening shall be unlike any other this Season, I am sure!”

With a sense of anticipation, Charlotte walked into the house, only to be met by a great swell of noise. There appeared to be people everywhere, standing not only on the floor but also on the staircase, as though they simply could not find room! There were whispers of music coming towards her, laughter ringing all around and, despite her own confusion and upset over her stepmother and the will, Charlotte’s spirits lifted high.

“This is certainly no soiree!” Amelia exclaimed, as they attempted to find their host in order to greet him, for there did not appear to be any sort of greeting line which they might join. “Goodness, there are people everywhere! I do not think I have seen so many guests in one space before.”

“I think we shall have to give up on finding Lord Howden,” Lord Hesterway remarked, laughter in his eyes. “Now, my dears, shall we make for the ballroom? Or should you prefer to find something to eat? There will be a good deal of entertainment within the drawing room and the library and the music room, no doubt, mayhap also in the gardens!”

“Oh, they are playing snapdragon in the drawing room, Lord Hesterway!” A passing gentleman clasped Lord Hesterway’s hand, shaking it firmly. “It is a very rambunctious gathering indeed!”

Charlotte laughed softly, simply from the sheer joy of being a part of something so wonderful. It was exactly what she needed to forget her troubles as regarded her stepmother and the will.

“Now, there was something I wished to tell you.” Amelia took her arm as Lord Hesterway fell into conversation with the other gentleman. “I have taken the liberty of writing to our brother.”

Charlotte’s smile fell away. “For what purpose? As you know, I have already written to him and to our stepmother about my false betrothal to Lord Crestwood.”

“Yes, but it is not about that. I – I wanted to ask him about the will.” Amelia’s expression grew a little darker. “I know that we have not spoken about it all as yet but there is something malignant there, I am sure of it. I have asked him if he ever heard father speak of such a thing before he left for the continent. I also wanted to ask him if he has ever spoken to the solicitors about it. Surely there must be someone within

our family's solicitors who would have heard our father speak of that requirement and who could confirm that it was written just as he desired – and could also speak into whether or not it came from duress or influence.”

Charlotte's stomach twisted. “Amelia, I do not want to speak of it at all this evening. I simply want to enjoy myself.”

“I understand.” Amelia pressed her hand quickly. “I wanted to let you know that I expect his response very soon. The roads are very bad, of course, but I have sent the fastest rider and he will change horses very often also. No expense has been spared for this is an important matter. You are important to me – and to others, Charlotte, and if this can offer you the freedom you thought you had lost, then it must be resolved without delay.”

“I quite agree.”

Charlotte turned, only to see Lord Crestwood smiling down at her, his eyes holding a softness which made her heart turn over. “Good evening, Lord Crestwood.” She took him in, finding her heart appreciating the fine cut of his clothes, his handsome features and the light smile which spoke of kindness and consideration. When her eyes caught his again, she saw him lifting one eyebrow just a little in question, as though to wonder what it was she was thinking. Flushing, Charlotte dropped her gaze. “I am surprised you found us in such a crush as this!”

Lord Crestwood chuckled, his eyes twinkling. “It is quite something, is it not? Lord Trenton will be quite jealous, for he was determined to have the very best event of the Season!” The way he laughed as he spoke, however, convinced Charlotte that this was said slightly in jest and she, too, smiled back at him.

“Should you like to take your betrothed for an exploration of this magnificent event?”

The way that Amelia described her made Charlotte start, her smile fixing to her face. It was not that she had forgotten that she was engaged to Lord Crestwood – albeit for nothing more than a pretense – but to be referred to as his betrothed seemed a little more intimate, somehow. The heat in her face grew all the more and she found it suddenly very difficult indeed to look at Lord Crestwood though he did not appear to be in the least bit affected.

“I should be delighted! I am hopeful that you will dance with me, Miss Millerton. The ball is already in full swing, though there are no dance cards or the like. Gentlemen must ask ladies at the very moment of the dance which is most extraordinary.”

The thought of being in Lord Crestwood’s arms as they danced together made Charlotte’s heart beat a little more quickly but she did take his proffered arm. “That is unusual but yes, I should be glad to both dance with you and walk with you for a time, if you would like.”

“You must not lose her in this crush!” Amelia laughed, as Charlotte shot her a sharp look, hoping that she would stop talking before she mortified Charlotte in some way. “There are so many guests!”

“I assure you, I will keep my betrothed as close to me as can be,” Lord Crestwood answered, his tone warm and sending Charlotte’s heart into a flurry. “There is nothing I would like more than to spend as much time as I can in her company.” His eyes slid to hers as he spoke and Charlotte shivered lightly, her gaze fixed to his as he led her away from Amelia. He soon had to turn his head away from her, however, as they threaded through the other guests, all of whom appeared to be standing elbow to elbow.

“Surprisingly, the ball is a little less busy,” Lord Crestwood murmured, bringing her towards the door. “Should you like to dance?”

“Yes, I would.” Charlotte did not hesitate, the thought of being in his arms a truly wonderful one. “Goodness, the ballroom is beautiful!” She took in the array of colors, the leaves, winter flowers and berries which adorned the walls, the mirrors which reflected back the light from the seemingly hundreds of candles which were lit there. She came to herself after a moment, only just realizing that she had come to a stop to admire the beauty of the room – and that Lord Crestwood was looking at her with a soft smile on his face. The blush returned quickly though she could not help but smile back, wondering what his thoughts were at that moment.

“Ah!” Lord Crestwood straightened suddenly, his eyes flaring. “The waltz has just been announced!” He inclined his head just a little, looking at her. “What say you, my lady?”

“I say that I should be delighted.” Charlotte took his hand with what she hoped was a small, swift intake of breath that he did not hear. Excitement fizzed through her, expectations rising suddenly – but she did not know why, nor what it was she hoped for. There was barely time for him to bow and for her to curtsy before he caught her up in his arms and began to waltz around the floor.

It was the second time they had waltzed together but for Charlotte, it was even more wonderful than the first. The first time, she had been uncertain and a little concerned but now, on this occasion, she was able to give herself up to it, up to him and let him lead her without a single concern. She felt safe in his arms, her eyes searching his face as he looked away for a moment, trying to remind herself that this engagement, this betrothal was nothing more than nonsense. Nonsense which would soon come to an end.

That thought sent her happiness fleeing, reminding her that what she had was nothing more than an imagination. Her feelings, which she had been doing nothing to hold back of late, ought never to have been permitted to grow. She had been foolish not to keep things in check, she realized, her shoulders dropping just a little, her smile

fading.

And then, Lord Crestwood began to slow his steps and before she knew it, they had come to a complete stop.

“I – I do not... ”

“Might I be so bold?” There was a softness about his voice which she had never heard before, though she still did not understand what it was he meant. It was only when he reached up and plucked one berry from the bough above her head that Charlotte realized why he had stopped.

The mistletoe bough above her and the berry in his hand meant that they might exchange a kiss – in full view of all the other guests, though many other gentlemen and ladies were sure to do the same. It was expected, she supposed, trying to reason with herself as he held out the mistletoe berry to her. In society’s eyes, they were engaged and thus, a stolen kiss under the mistletoe bough would be all that everyone might expect.

But what will it do to my heart if I accept?

With a lick of her lips, Charlotte reached and took the mistletoe berry from his hand, her heart beating so furiously and so loudly, she was certain he could hear it. Lord Crestwood smiled and began to lower his head – and on instinct, Charlotte closed her eyes.

When his lips pressed to hers, Charlotte froze in place, her entire world shifting. She could not move, one hand still on his shoulder, her fingers gripping there as weakness washed over her. Quite how long he kissed her, she did not know, for it felt as though all of the world had gone by and she had simply stood there, holding herself to him.

When he lifted his head, Charlotte took in a shuddering breath and forced her eyes open. She did not know what Lord Crestwood meant by that kiss, for it might well be that there was nothing meant by it at all, given the facade they were portraying, or it might mean a good deal more.

“Charlotte, I – ”

“Do hurry up, Crestwood!” A shout interrupted whatever it was that Lord Crestwood had been about to say. “Some others are waiting to reach the bough!”

Lord Crestwood laughed but to Charlotte’s mind, it sounded forced and a little strangled. The next thing she knew, they were dancing again together, the waltz continuing on for some minutes, though Charlotte said not a word to Lord Crestwood and neither did he to her.

All too soon, it came to an end. Charlotte stepped back and curtsied but when she looked up, Lord Crestwood was frowning at her. It cleared from his expression almost the moment that she looked back at him but it had certainly lingered there, nonetheless.

Charlotte pressed her lips tight together for a moment before accepting his arm again. There was something in his mind, she was sure of it, but given that he was frowning, it did not appear to be anything good. Her worry grew all the more as they continued on in silence, with neither of them speaking, neither of them appearing able to find something to say to each other. That kiss had changed something, though Charlotte could not say what it was.

“I see your sister.” Lord Crestwood finally spoke, his voice rasping a little. “I shall return you to her, I think, for a short while.” He threw her a smile though it did not show any real happiness, Charlotte was sure. “I will return to you later this evening, of course.”

“I thank you for the company and the dance,” Charlotte answered, her smile wobbling as she tried to keep her true concerns hidden from him. “It was most enjoyable.”

Lord Crestwood did not respond for a few moments, looking long at her as though there was an answer from her that he wished very much to hear. When he did, however, it was with a lowering of his gaze and with a small but heavy breath which Charlotte could not pretend she did not hear.

“It was most enjoyable, yes,” he admitted, as though speaking in such a way was painful for him. “Good evening, Miss Millerton. I will return to your side soon, just as any betrothed gentleman ought.”

Before she could respond, he had turned and walked away, lost in the crowd within only a few moments. She wanted to reach out her hand and catch him, wanted very much to pull him back towards her and ask him what it was that troubled him, why he was now looking at her with such strangeness in his eyes – but she knew she could not.

“Did all go well with Lord Crestwood?” Amelia touched Charlotte’s arm, catching her attention. “I am surprised that you are gone from each other so quickly.”

“He will return soon,” Charlotte answered, though she did not smile with it. “We danced and yes, it made for a perfectly pleasant time.”

Amelia looked as though she wanted to say or ask more but instead, she nodded, smiled and then turned towards the door. “Come, let us go and find something to eat. I am sure that you are hungry after that dance!”

Charlotte did not answer with anything but a smile and obliged her sister thereafter by following after her. Her thoughts remained with Lord Crestwood, however,

wondering if all that had come over her as they had danced – and after the kiss they had shared – had now come over him also. Or might it be that he had seen her response, her reaction to all that they had shared, and it was now beginning to push him away from her?

I am never to marry, she reminded herself, silently. I am to be companion to my stepmother and, until I learn otherwise, that is all that I shall be.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:31 am

That kiss had broken something in him, though Samuel did not know what it might be. It had come over him with a roar, sweeping through his frame until he had been barely able to breathe. When he had lifted his head, it had been almost enough to have him declare his affection for her right there and then, given what he had seen in her eyes – but good sense and a twinge of fear had prevented him from doing so.

“Good evening, my friend.” Lord Trenton set one hand on Samuel’s shoulder, grinning broadly. “I saw you with Miss Millerton, dancing across the floor. An interest there, I think?”

“An interest?” A streak of fire ran up Samuel’s spine. “I – I would not say... that is to say, I cannot be – ”

At this, Lord Trenton began to chuckle, shaking his head as though Samuel had caused him a great deal of mirth. “Goodness, my friend! You are not about to tell me that you care nothing for the lady, are you?”

“Will you keep your voice low, please?” Samuel hissed, coming a little closer to Lord Trenton. “There are so many guests here that – ”

“Guests who all believe you betrothed to the lady,” his friend interrupted, his smile lingering. “One begins to wonder if you might now be thinking that this engagement could very well continue?”

Samuel blinked furiously, attempting to shake his head and state that no, he had no such thoughts, only for the truth to hit him right between the eyes.

He did not want to separate himself from the lady.

I cannot want such a thing. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he squeezed his eyes closed tightly. I cannot! I have always told myself that I would not consider matrimony with any sort of seriousness until I had no other choice but to do so.

“That is no bad thing,” Lord Trenton continued, as though he knew Samuel’s thoughts. “To find yourself drawn to the lady is an excellent outcome, I must say!”

“Excellent?” Samuel repeated, his voice a little hoarse. “I do not think it can be. I have told myself that there is no possibility of igniting affection within my heart again, not after all I have endured.”

“But surely you can see that Miss Millerton is entirely different from the previous,” Lord Trenton said, speaking quietly now, his eyes searching Samuel’s face. “Come now, I – ”

“Do you wish to play cards?” Samuel gestured to the table ahead of them both. “That is what I have come for, nothing more.”

His friend frowned, a heaviness settling over his expression. “I do not mean to upset you, Crestwood. I only wish to encourage you, in fact.”

Encourage me towards her? It is not as though I need such encouragement. The thoughts began to throw themselves into Samuel’s mind and he winced, attempting to consider each one. “There is much I must think on, Trenton, that is all.”

“I see.” Lord Trenton, clearly understanding, made his way to the table. “Then yes, I shall enjoy a game of cards with you though I do hope that you will not ignore all that you have been thinking of and set it aside in the belief that you will be able to forget it. You have a chance of happiness here, my friend, and I would not want you to miss

it.”

Samuel nodded but said nothing, sitting down so he might concentrate on cards rather on what that brief kiss with Miss Millerton had done to his heart. And yet, all the same, the desire to pull himself closer to her, to continue on with their increasing intimacy grew all the stronger so that even when he looked at the cards in his hand, all he saw was her face.

“Good afternoon, Lady Grifford.”

Samuel bowed and then straightened, lifting his chin as he looked back at Lady Grifford who had risen from her chair at once and taken a few steps towards him.

“I have come to call as you have asked,” Samuel continued, disliking every moment that he spent in her company. After last evening’s confusion, he had taken himself to his bedchamber and slept fitfully, tossing and turning as he battled all manner of thoughts. One of those thoughts had, unfortunately, been of Lady Grifford and of his promise to her – and how much he did not desire to call upon her. However, he was a man of his word and thus, he now found himself standing in her drawing room, hoping that the conversation would not last more than a few minutes.

“You did come to call, as you said.” Lady Grifford’s eyes were flooded with tears as she gazed at him, never once lifting her gaze from his. “You cannot know how grateful I am for your presence.”

Samuel cleared his throat, looking away from her. “Whatever it is you wish to say, Lady Grifford, I am ready to hear it.”

Evidently a little frustrated, Lady Grifford cast her eyes up to the ceiling for a

moment before shaking her head. When she looked back at him, there was a slight tightness to her jaw which Samuel had never noticed before.

“Must you be so formal?” A hint of annoyance ran through her voice. “We were so very close and —”

“Yes, I think we must be,” Samuel interrupted, again refusing to permit her to have any hint that what they had once shared would bring out a tenderness within him. “Now, what was it you wished to say to me?”

Lady Grifford blinked rapidly though, much to Samuel’s relief, no tears fell. “Will you not sit? I have called for a tea tray to be brought, though there is some very fine French brandy in the corner if you wish?” She smiled briefly. “I know that you have always been partial to it.”

Samuel cleared his throat. “I do not wish for brandy at this moment, nor even for tea.” Seeing the flicker of hurt across her expression, he went to sit down, having no intention of being harsh but certainly firm. “The only thing I want, Lady Grifford, is to listen to whatever it is that you wish to say to me. Thereafter, I shall take my leave.”

“That is all you will do?” Lady Grifford sat down directly beside him, making Samuel distinctly uncomfortable. “Surely, you will have something to say also? You will have a good many things to tell me about how I have influenced you, yes? How you have been upset by all that I have done?”

Samuel shook his head. “There is nothing that I wish to say to you. There may have been, at one time, but not at the present moment. I have thought for too long about all that took place and ruminated endlessly. That has now come to an end and, thus, I have no interest in expressing anything to you.”

She closed her eyes. “Then I shall speak,” she said, a little more quietly. “Given that I was the one who caused you a great deal of injury, it is only right for me to not only apologise but to practically throw myself at your feet by way of an apology! I would do that if you wished it, for I know that I must have caused you a great deal of pain.”

Samuel looked back at her steadily. “Yes, you did, but there is no need to labor over the past, Lady Grifford. It is all at an end now.”

She shook her head, a single tear splashing onto her cheek. “Can you really mean those words? I confess that it has not come to an end for me as yet.”

Something tight twisted itself into Samuel’s stomach and he looked away, relieved that he did not feel any interest in pulling closer to her. “Yes, there is nothing more for us to say to each other in that regard,” he said, as firmly as he could. “If you feel the need to unburden yourself then please, do so, but do not feel as though it is required. I am not desperately waiting for that to take place, I can assure you!”

“No?”

Her hand touched his and Samuel’s head whipped around, seeing her a little closer to him now. Quickly, he pulled his hand away and then rose to his feet, an uncomfortable prickling running over his skin. Whatever was it that she was trying to do? “No.”

Lady Grifford let out a long, lamenting sigh which, he presumed, might be an attempt to garner sympathy from him. “I find it hard to believe that you are so willing and so ready to forgive me after all the pain and sorrow and shame I caused you.”

“And yet, that is the truth.”

She too got to her feet, standing to face him directly though she did not come any

closer to him, much to his relief. "I should never have left your side," she said, with a steadiness now in her voice which surprised Samuel a good deal. "I realise now that I was not in love with Lord Grifford, as I thought, but rather was somewhat infatuated with him. I did not listen to advice, I did not think of him as I ought to have done and instead, allowed myself to become caught up in all that he offered me. I should have compared the two of you to each other, for then I would have realised just how much I had in being your betrothed. I might not have given it all up for some foolishness which almost led to ruin."

"I see." Samuel was not certain what else there was to say. To his mind, Lady Grifford was merely expressing her own regret, though it was combined with an apology to him also which he did appreciate, though he still felt it unnecessary. "I do hope you have unburdened yourself now, Lady Grifford. I should take my leave."

"I know that your betrothal is not one of love."

Samuel stopped dead, his eyes widening at the edges as he turned his head to look back at the lady. "I beg your pardon?"

Lady Grifford lifted her chin just a little, though her fingers twisted together in front of her. "I know that you do not really care for Miss Millerton, that you do not love her."

"And how could you know such a thing?"

The lady spread out her hands. "It was not deliberate, I assure you, but I heard you speak with Lord Trenton as you waited to play cards at Lord Howden's soiree. I was also in attendance but managed to keep myself hidden among the crowd of people. It was only in passing but I heard you say clearly that you had already determined not to permit affection back into your heart again. I cannot tell you how sorry I am for that for I can see that it is my doing."

His whole frame felt stiff and tight with both tension and slow growing anger; anger that she had not only overheard him but now thought it suitable to bring up in conversation. Did she not realize that they were now entirely separate? That there was nothing between them any longer? “Lady Grifford, I must make it clear to you that my affairs are solely that – mine.”

“Oh, I am well aware of that and I must beg your forgiveness in speaking as I have done, but I must hope that in time, you will permit your heart to open again.”

It took Samuel a few moments to gather himself, his anger still hot as he gazed into the face of the lady he had once loved. “My heart and my affections are entirely my own business. Whatever you may have overheard, there is no need for you to consider them. I am engaged to marry Miss Millerton, and that I shall do.” The confidence and determination in his voice made his own heart believe it, albeit just for a few seconds, and it leaped up fiercely. Taking in a slow breath, Samuel turned away from Lady Grifford, suddenly desperate to leave her company. “Do excuse me.”

“One thing more I must ask.”

It took all of Samuel’s inner strength not to turn about and inform her that he had neither the time nor the desire to listen to her any longer. Instead, he remained where he was in silence rather than speaking, no longer willing to turn back to look at her.

“If it is that there is a small, abiding affection for me still – something I know I do not deserve and have never deserved – then might I beg of you to be bold enough to share it with me?”

Samuel’s head swung around sharply, astonishment chasing away his anger but Lady Grifford was not finished.

“Mayhap it is that we were always meant to find happiness together,” she continued, reaching out one hand to him only to let it fall back to her side again. “I was the one who did not see it, I was the one who pushed you away. But now, mayhap, we are being given another chance to find our way back together again.”

“No.” His voice rasped so greatly and was so filled with emotion, Samuel did not know if the lady had understood him. Swiping the air with his hand, he made to step towards her, determined to make himself clear, only for there to come a knock at the door. To his surprise, Lady Grifford called for the butler to enter rather than permitting them to finish their conversation – and he found himself all the more surprised when she bade her new callers to enter! A little taken aback and feeling himself unsettled, Samuel made his way to the door directly, refusing to give Lady Grifford any kind of farewell in the hope that he might slip out without being noticed, only for Lady Ryndale to step into the room, alongside her daughter and another he did not recognize. Giving them only the smallest of bows, he stepped out almost immediately, sweat breaking out across his brow.

“Goodness, was that not Lord Crestwood?” he heard Lady Ryndale ask, as the door closed. “He called upon you? The gentleman to whom you were almost engaged some years ago?”

Samuel let out a low groan and rubbed one hand over his face, hearing the whispers and the gossip already beginning to fly through London. He could only pray that Lady Grifford would make it clear to her guests that there was nothing of any interest between them though, given what she had said, Samuel began to fear that she would do entirely the opposite.

I should tell Miss Millerton what has happened, he mused, making to sit in the carriage, shivering as he did so given the coldness of the winter air and the gusty wind. She should be prepared.

He blinked rapidly to himself, realizing that what he was thinking of was entirely unnecessary. Miss Millerton and he were not truly engaged, they were not about to marry and therefore, she would not be hurt if she heard such rumors, would she?

But I still want to tell her.

Letting out a low groan, Samuel covered his face with his hands as the carriage took him home. His heart was in a ball of confusion, covered in threads from the past and yet twined with the heart of another. He was aware of it now, unable to turn from it, unable to pretend that he did not have any sort of affection for Miss Millerton. She was settling all the more deeply into his heart this Christmas time and the more he thought of ending the betrothal, the more his heart cried out with pain at even the thought of it. But yes, as far as he knew, she was still determined not to wed, to do as her late father had begged of her so even if he did confess that he might have an affection for her, she might then go on to refuse him and his heart would be quite broken... all over again.

With another sigh, Samuel leaned his head back against the squabs and closed his eyes.

Whatever am I to do?

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“I shall take this one, I think.” Charlotte smiled as she picked up the velvet mask with the feathers at either side. “It looks quite beautiful.”

“Though it is rather simple.” Amelia wrinkled her nose. “Do you not wish for something more ornate? The shop is full of beautiful ornate masks.”

Charlotte shook her head. The mask was elegant, without any additional fripperies to it and she much preferred that to the overabundance of feathers, paste jewels and the like. “I am contented with this.”

Amelia smiled and touched her hand. “You were always easily contented, Charlotte. I must say, your willingness to give up so much speaks of your beautiful character.” Her voice softened with an obvious swell of emotion. “I do hope that you have the chance for happiness, Charlotte. It is something that you deserve.”

A swirl knotted itself in Charlotte’s stomach as she took in her sister’s meaning. “You are speaking of Lord Crestwood,” she murmured, making sure to keep her voice low. “Amelia, please do not think that there is going to be any serious connection between us. There cannot be. He has already determined that he will remain unwed. That is the very basis upon which we agreed about this falsehood.”

Her sister’s smile did not fade. “Ah, but have you not seen how he has been watching you of late? How his gaze lingers upon you? And besides all of that, he has shown you such great consideration and care that, to my mind, there is something more there than mere friendship.”

“I do not think it matters whether there truly is that consideration or not,” Charlotte

answered, quickly, refusing to let her hopes rise as she brought to mind the look that Lord Crestwood had worn after their dance together at the ball, the night when he had stolen a kiss from her under the mistletoe bough. “He has made himself perfectly clear.”

“But things can change. Affection can alter a gentleman’s intentions.”

Charlotte closed her eyes, fighting inwardly to keep her hopes back. “Please, Amelia,” she rasped, “do not let my heart begin to pray for something that might never be.”

Her sister caught her hand again, squeezing it fiercely. “Do you mean to say that you have an affection for Lord Crestwood?”

Opening her eyes, Charlotte blinked back her tears which had come upon her very rapidly indeed. “I dare not even let myself hope for such a thing,” she answered, hoarsely. “But it is there, nonetheless. It is as though, ever since I heard that there might be something questionable about our father’s will, my heart has determined to pull towards him with a strength that I never expected.”

“That is because you have permitted it to be free.” Amelia’s eyes searched hers. “You have had it bound up for many a month, have you not? You have told yourself over and over and over again that what you might once have hoped for can never be and, therefore, you have pulled back from even the thought of it! But now, there is hope and, in seeing that, your heart has filled with all of the affection and the desires and the delight that it has held back for so long.” She pressed Charlotte’s hand again. “Lord Crestwood is an excellent gentleman.”

“I dare not hope,” Charlotte whispered, pulling out her handkerchief to dab at her eyes. “Not yet, at least.”

Amelia nodded in understanding. “We will find out the truth about the will, I am sure. I think that – ”

She turned her head as the door to the shop opened, only to then turn on her heel and begin to drag Charlotte to the other side of the shop. Charlotte went without question, glancing back over her shoulder, wondering as to what it was that had affected her sister so... only for her gaze to land upon Lady Barcsay. With a gasp, she turned her head back again, just as Amelia pulled her into the back of the shop, where fittings often took place.

“Whatever is she doing here?” Charlotte whispered, as she and Amelia stared at each other, shock written across her sister’s face. “Our brother did not write to inform us of her arrival! Where will she be staying?”

“At our brother’s London townhouse, mayhap?” Amelia moved closer to the edge of the door and looked out, only for her brow to furrow. “No, of course. She is residing with her sister, Lady Foster. She is there with her, you see?”

Charlotte shook her head, refusing to come and look. Her mind began to turn over what this might mean, her eyebrows pulling low. “Our stepmother will have heard about my betrothal to Lord Crestwood, though she should also have heard that there is nothing genuine about it, given that I wrote to her. Why, then, should she come to London?”

Amelia turned back to face her, biting the edge of her lip, her eyes cast downwards. “Charlotte, there is something that I should tell you.”

Charlotte looked back at her.

“I – I did not send your letter to our stepmother,” Amelia continued, her face beginning to flush. “I promised you that I would send it and indeed, I had every

intention of posting it but only once I was certain that you were going to bring the connection to a close, as you had said. I did, however, send the letter to our brother though I enclosed my own additional note also, begging him not to inform her about your pretence.”

Shock spread out like ice across Charlotte’s chest and for some moments, she could not speak. Her chest grew tight, her throat constricting as Amelia closed her eyes, shame burning into her features. “Lady Barcsay does not know that this is a falsehood, then?” Charlotte whispered, as her sister nodded. “She does not know that there is nothing genuine about my engagement? She thinks that I truly intend to marry Lord Crestwood?”

“Yes.” Amelia took in a deep breath but then looked back at Charlotte steadily, no regret in her expression or her voice. “I did it because I wanted you to see that there was still hope for happiness for you. I did not know what would happen, of course, but given that we have now found out that there are questions about the will, I am glad that I did not send it... though I do regret betraying your trust, of course.” Her gaze dropped low again. “Forgive me for that. I did it because I care for you, that is all. I want you to be free of our stepmother and instead, find a life of your own!”

Charlotte did not know how to respond. The shock was so great, it was as though it had wiped away almost all of her emotions, numbing her to what she truly felt. She let out a slow breath and then closed her eyes, trying to think clearly but still struggling to do anything of the sort.

“You must forgive me,” Amelia said again, coming forward to grasp Charlotte’s hand. “I only wanted you to be happy and I believe that you can find that happiness with Lord Crestwood – I believe that now more than ever! I – ”

“Then she is here because she believes I am engaged.” Charlotte opened her eyes and interrupted her sister, seeing Amelia’s wide eyes and the tears swimming there.

“Lady Barcsay has travelled to London because of my engagement, because she wants to put an end to it, I presume.”

Her sister nodded. “And mayhap because she has learned about what her sister said to you and to Lord Crestwood.” She let out a small huff of breath. “Would that our brother was here! He might be able to explain what has been occurring at the house and – ”

“Mayhap he has written to us.” Urgency pushed through Charlotte’s frame. “We must return home.”

“But the masks!” Amelia exclaimed, gesturing to the shop. “And we cannot leave when they are still present.”

Charlotte moved to look out to the shop, seeing Lady Foster and Lady Barcsay talking together. They were both holding a mask in their hand, though that in itself made Charlotte frown. It was not as though they had been invited to the masquerade, so why would they be seeking to purchase such a thing? As she watched, they made their way to the counter and within a few minutes, had not only purchased the masks but had stepped back outside, allowing Charlotte and Amelia to find their freedom.

“If our brother has not written to us, then I intend to go to our father’s solicitors directly,” Charlotte stated, a fresh determination rushing through her as Amelia’s eyes flared in surprise again. “I am tired of hearing what might be and what could be, without having any certainty on the matter! If Lord Hesterway will deign to attend with me, then – ”

“Of course he shall, as shall I,” Amelia said quickly, as Charlotte made her way across the shop to pick up the mask, bringing it to the counter to pay for it. “But let us hope that our brother has written. Mayhap he will be able to give us some insight into why Lady Barcsay has made her way here.”

Amelia caught her arm, bringing Charlotte to a pause. “I am sorry, Charlotte. I know that you expected me to send your letter and I did not.”

Charlotte nodded, not smiling but not angry either. “I understand why you did it. Truth be told, things have altered for me so significantly, I must confess to being a little relieved that she does not know of it all.”

“Then you forgive me?”

Without hesitation, Charlotte nodded. “I do, of course. Now, let us return home as quickly as possible. I want to see if there is any insight from our brother – and thereafter, what our solicitors themselves might have to say.”

Charlotte straightened herself up as she walked into the solicitors office. There had been no letter from her brother, no explanation for what might have taken place at the estate which had sent her stepmother to London and thus, Charlotte had determined to make her way to the solicitors to ask some questions about her father’s will. Whether it had been the arrival of Lady Barcsay or the admission to her sister that she had an affection for Lord Crestwood, Charlotte did not know but whatever it was, it was forcing her into action.

“I am not certain that they will tell you anything, I am afraid,” Lord Hesterway murmured, as they waited to be admitted. “But let us hope that they shall say something at least!”

“Indeed,” Amelia murmured, coming to stand beside Charlotte. “With the three of us present, there will be a good deal of influence, at least!”

Charlotte said nothing, her stomach twisting with nerves as the door opened and a

man bowed first of all before standing back to permit them all to enter. She lifted her chin and walked in directly, sitting down in one of the chairs which were in front of the solicitor's desk. "Mr Greer, I presume?"

"Yes, it is." The man made his way around to the other side of his desk, his head bobbing forward a little as though he was not quite certain whether or not he ought to bow or not. "Lord and Lady Hesterway, Miss Millerton – please, do tell me what it is that I can do for you."

Charlotte glanced at her sister and then spoke, silently praying that there would come an easy answer from the man. "My sister and I have come to speak with you about our late father's will."

"Lord Barcsay, yes." The man's small eyes glinted. "Your brother, however, has taken on the title, yes?"

"Yes, but he could not be present." Charlotte kept her voice steady as she looked back at him. "I understand that the will was, unfortunately, lost. Is that not so?"

The solicitor blinked.

Silence flooded the room.

Charlotte's breath hitched, her heart slamming hard against her chest.

"It was not lost?" she asked, after a few more seconds had past. "I was told that –"

"The mail coach where the will was being transported was unfortunately held up, yes," the solicitor said, slowly, "though the will itself was recovered, albeit with some damage."

Her chest grew so tight, it was painful. Charlotte's hands curled into fists, her fingers digging into the soft skin of her palms as dizziness broke over her. If this was not as she had believed, then what did it all mean?

"Can I confirm that you are stating that the will was recovered?" Amelia's voice was thin, clearly just as astonished as Charlotte felt. "We did not... that is to say, we were unaware."

The solicitor frowned. "I am dreadfully sorry. I am certain that correspondence was sent to the new Lord Barcsay informing him of it. We had to take great care over the will, in attempting to make certain it was restored as best it could be. Thankfully, after some time, all that was written there remained quite clear."

"Then... then you have it all?" Charlotte asked, her heart still beating painfully. "Including the addendum?"

The solicitor frowned, rubbing one hand over his chin.

Charlotte closed her eyes, blood roaring in her ears. She already knew what the answer was going to be.

"I do not recall there being such a thing, I confess," the solicitor said, slowly, "though it has been some time. If you wish – and I will need the permission of Lord Barcsay also, of course – I will look through the will again and make certain that what I have said is the truth. Though, and I say this with the awareness that I might well be wrong, I do not know if I have ever seen such a thing. We spent a lot of time making certain it was restored and I do not recall ever seeing such a thing."

Silence flooded the room and Charlotte, her eyes still closed, bit her lip hard to stop herself from crying out. What was it that her stepmother had done? What purpose had there been in attempting to keep Charlotte to herself and to her own company if that

was what had occurred?

“You say that you do not recall seeing it? Could it be that it itself was lost?”

The solicitor shook his head. “There was more than just the will being returned to us, Lady Hesterway. We retrieved every item and I would be very surprised, I confess, if this addendum had gone missing, though everything else remained.”

“I see.” Amelia reached across to take Charlotte’s hand. “Charlotte, are you –”

“I shall write to our brother at once to engage his consent.” Charlotte pressed Amelia’s hand and then rose to her feet. “Thank you for your time, sir. What you have told us is invaluable.”

With a look to her sister, Charlotte made to step away, hurrying out of the solicitors and onto the street. The cold winter wind was a welcome relief, bringing a sharpness with it which brought Charlotte back to herself a little. Her mind, which had been filled with confusion, suddenly came to a clear understanding and, even though Amelia hurried out after her, taking her hand and leading her to the carriage, Charlotte did not need her sister’s support.

“It is all very clear to me now,” she said, as the carriage made for home, the sleet beginning to whip around the carriage itself. “I confess, the shock of it was so great, I did not know what to make of it all but now... well, now I see that there is something here that must be discovered. Something which will determine the course I now take.”

Amelia held her gaze, her own face a little white. “I am astonished at how clearly you are speaking, Charlotte.” She offered a small, slightly watery smile. “But then again, I suppose that you have always been determined. Once you have set your mind to something, you follow it.”

Charlotte nodded, though she clasped her hands together tightly in her lap, aware of the tension which still wound itself through her. “Do not misunderstand me, Amelia, I am utterly horrified to hear that this addendum, this part of the will which I believed was from father directly, might not be as I have believed for so long but I am also not going to simply cry over it. Rather, I want to find the truth in its entirety so I might know the path which my life must now follow.”

Her sister nodded, as Lord Hesterway frowned, looking deeply frustrated.

“Would that I could have commanded him to do as I know you both – and your brother – desire to do also,” he said, a little heavily. “I would have done so had I the ability.”

Charlotte smiled briefly. “I am grateful for that. It is frustrating but it must be done. That being said, however, I am going to speak with our stepmother this evening, should she appear, and if not, then I will call upon her tomorrow.”

“For what purpose?” Amelia asked, her eyes a little wider. “Do you mean to confront her?”

The determination which had driven her to the solicitors in the very beginning grew all the more forcefully and Charlotte nodded. “In a way, yes. I know that we need our brother’s permission to see the will but I do not have to inform her of that. All I can say to her is what we believe to be true, in the hope that she might speak the truth regardless.”

“You believe that she will be at the ball this evening, even though she has no invitation?”

Charlotte shared a glance with her sister before nodding. “Yes, I do. I saw her looking at masks earlier and given that it is a masquerade, I presume it might be a little easier

to sneak into the ball than it would otherwise have been.”

“I will be there when you speak with her, if you please,” Lord Hesterway said, gently, speaking with no authority nor demanding in his voice, leaving the choice to her. “I want very much to be present, to make certain you are kept safe... that is, unless there is someone else stepping in beside you?”

The lift of his eyebrow told Charlotte precisely whom he was thinking of and she merely lifted her shoulders in response, not certain whether or not Lord Crestwood would be willing to do such a thing. After his reaction to their stolen kiss, she could not say for certain.

“If he is present and willing, then I shall ask him,” she conceded, quickly. “Though my first task is to write to my brother. That is of the greatest importance.”

“You can do so the moment you step in,” Amelia promised her. “Here we are now. I shall order tea and bring you some.” Leaning forward, she gazed into Charlotte’s eyes, concern written into every part of her expression. “You are quite all right, truly?”

Charlotte nodded, a sense of relief washing over her as she smiled. “Indeed. There is a relief in knowing that I might well be free of the burden I have carried for so long, though with that comes the desire to know the truth.” Her smile faded as she sighed. “And once I discover it, that will change everything – for better or for worse.”

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“An excellent evening thus far, I must say!”

Samuel grinned as he shook the gentleman’s hand, well aware that it was Lord Trenton behind the mask. “You have decided not to hide your face, I see.”

Lord Trenton drew back in what Samuel presumed was an attempt to look offended. “I am wearing a mask, am I not?”

Samuel snorted. “The smallest one I have ever seen. It barely covers your eyes!”

“But it is still a mask.”

Conceding this, Samuel chuckled and shrugged. “I suppose that is true.”

Suddenly serious, Lord Trenton set a hand to Samuel’s shoulder. “I presume that your betrothed will be here this evening.”

Samuel’s smile fell away. “Yes, she will be.”

“And?”

Closing his eyes, Samuel shook his head. “I have not yet spoken to her about Lady Grifford’s nearness and obvious desire to return to what we once had, though I have every intention of doing so.” Having already told Lord Trenton about what had taken place, he already knew what his friend thought about the matter.

His friend’s hand fell away. “You are hesitant, I understand.”

“I am not hesitant!” Samuel protested, only to see Lord Trenton’s eyebrows lift. Sighing, he shook his head and let out a hiss of breath, unwilling to admit what he knew his friend already understood. “Yes, I suppose that I am. It is because that in telling her about Lady Grifford, I will have to also speak of my own heart.”

“Which you have recognised now holds an affection for the lady, yes?”

Samuel nodded.

“Then I am glad to hear it!” Lord Trenton declared, firmly. “I am sure that she will be glad to hear your words.”

Not having the same certainty, Samuel looked away. “She has still the burden of her father’s demands on her shoulders. The matter has not yet been made clear, not as yet anyway.”

Lord Trenton tilted his head just a little. “You may find that your declaration brings about more than you had ever imagined,” he said, his voice dropping just a little. “Now, if am not mistaken, your betrothed approaches!”

A little confused as to how his friend might know of this, Samuel turned around quickly, only to see Miss Millerton smiling up at him, flanked by both Lord and Lady Hesterway. The flush of pleasure he felt upon seeing her warmed him right through and all he could think about was catching her up in his arms as he had done at the previous ball... and stealing yet another kiss.

“I am afraid that my mask is not very substantial this evening,” Miss Millerton laughed, gesturing to the very simple mask which did hide some of her features, but not enough to make her unrecognizable. “Although I am astonished at some of the masks I have seen this evening. There are so many feathers!”

Samuel laughed aloud at this, relieved that there was no tension between them. After he had kissed her and then taken himself to the card game, he had begun to be concerned that there might be some sort of strain here, only to see now that there was nothing whatsoever. “I think your mask is quite superb,” he said, as Lord and Lady Hesterway melted into the crowd, leaving the two of them together. “I am glad that you were able to find me so easily.”

Miss Millerton’s cheeks lit to a gentle pink. “It was not difficult to recognize you, even with your mask.” There was a softness to her voice now, a tone which he had not expected to hear, and a sudden thrill ran up his frame. “Lord Crestwood, I know that you will be very busy indeed this evening hosting this magnificent Christmas masquerade, but I was hopeful that we might speak together for a short time? There is something that has come to light and I would like very much to share it with you.”

Instantly, all of Samuel’s attention went to her. “This is about your father’s will?” When she nodded, Samuel offered his arm to her and then quickly walked to the side of the ballroom, lowering his head so he might hear her speak. “Tell me whatever you wish. I am eager to support you in this, where I can.”

Miss Millerton’s eyes searched his for a moment though Samuel did not know what it was she was looking for. When she spoke, there was a heaviness there, as though her heart carried a great deal of pain.

“It seems that the will was not lost, as we were told,” she began and Samuel’s heart began to clamor, aware of the possibilities that this statement held. “And the part of the will which stated I was to be companion to my stepmother was not lost with it.”

All of Samuel’s hopes suddenly faded. “You mean to say that there was such a clause?”

It took a moment but Miss Millerton dropped her head, paused and then shook it. “I

am unsure on that matter. The solicitor did not know to what I was referring.”

Samuel’s heart jumped up furiously, his eyes widening. “Then it was never there?”

“There is a good deal of confusion, I have to admit,” Miss Millerton told him, a rueful smile on her lips, “and I have felt a great many things as I have considered all that has taken place. I am determined to find the truth and, therefore, hope to hear from my brother very soon as he must give permission to the solicitor to go through the will with my sister and me again.”

Samuel nodded slowly. “And if that part of the will is not there, then...?”

“Then I must find out how it was that I read those words which were then signed by my father before I can determine what to do next,” she answered, quietly. “I do hope that you understand.”

Nodding slowly, Samuel turned so that he faced her rather than standing alongside her and, thereafter, took both of her hands in his. His frame trembled lightly for a moment as he considered his next question, fully aware of what it was he wanted – nay, needed, to ask. “What if you discover that it was not your father’s desire for you to do as you have been?”

Miss Millerton closed her eyes for a few moments, her jaw tightening. “I will have a good many questions for my stepmother, I confess it, for I now believe that my unwed state must benefit her in some way, given what Lady Foster said.”

“Of course!” Samuel’s heart beat furiously, coming a little closer to her. “Lady Foster stated that you had to remain unwed, otherwise your stepmother would lose something.”

“Precisely.”

Hope began to flood through Samuel's heart and he pressed her hands a little more. "But you would be free to make your own choices, yes?"

She smiled at him, her eyes holding something that he could not quite make out. "Yes, that would be so."

Samuel opened his mouth to say more, to say that he wanted her to consider what they might be to each other, should that freedom be granted, but he snapped his mouth closed before anything was spoken. She had enough to contend with already. It would not be fair of him to say more.

"I will do whatever I can to help you, I promise."

"I am grateful for that," she answered, releasing his hands as her gaze went over his shoulder. "I should also tell you that I believe my stepmother and mayhap Lady Foster also, will be present this evening."

Surprise caught Samuel's expression. "How can that be? I did not invite them and I thought your stepmother was at the estate for Christmas."

"As did I." Again, that rueful smile tipped her lips. "My sister and I saw them unexpectedly in a shop, and they both purchased masks. Yours is the only masquerade ball for some time, I think."

"And one can step into a masquerade ball without too much difficulty, I suppose," Samuel murmured, rubbing one hand over his forehead. "If I find them, then –"

"Do not feel you must push them away from me for my sake," she interrupted, astonishing Samuel. "I have some things that I wish to say to her, to ask her... and this evening might be the very best opportunity."

Samuel held her gaze steadily, seeing her smile but also the glint in her eyes which spoke of determination. "Very well," he said, slowly. "So long as you are certain."

She nodded. "I am. Though now I should step away and leave you to the other guests who, I am sure, are looking forward to your company!"

"I would rather spend this entire evening in your company and your company alone."

The words left his mouth before Samuel could stop them but as he saw the gentle smile spread across Miss Millerton's face, Samuel did not feel a single ounce of regret in speaking so. He was glad he had spoken of his heart, although it was not entirely all that he had wanted to say as he recognized it was not the right time to do so.

"But alas, I see that the other guests are still looking to you," she murmured, taking his hand in her own for just a moment, pressing his fingers. "Mayhap we might dance later?"

He nodded fervently. "Yes, indeed."

"Might I ask if there is a mistletoe bough there?"

Samuel's heart ricocheted around his chest as she gazed back at him, her color still heightened but his gaze steady. "Yes, there is. Why do you ask?"

She dropped her gaze. "Because I do not want you to feel as though you must dance with me under it. After the last time, I believe... I believe you were a little uncertain and I do not want there to be any strain between us."

Samuel acted before he could even think about what to do. He closed the distance between them, his arm about her waist, his eyes searching hers. It was a masquerade

so they might not easily be recognized but even if they were, he did not care. “I was uncertain,” he admitted, his voice quiet but firm. “But I am no longer. My dear Charlotte, there is much that I wish to say but now is not the time for such things.”

Her eyes flickered but the smile on her lips made his heart sing, an expectation of happiness and joy filling him.

“I understand,” she murmured, quietly. “Then I look forward to speaking with you – and dancing with you – later this evening, Lord Crestwood. More than I can say.”

“Lord Crestwood, good evening. What an excellent ball this has been.”

Samuel stiffened instantly, turning to face Lady Grifford. She wore a mask but he recognized her voice at once and, as he looked into her eyes, warning began to ring around his mind. The terrace was practically empty and he did not want to be seen alone here with her, especially not this evening.

“Lady Grifford.” He inclined his head. “I stepped out for a breath of air but I should return to my other guests. Do excuse me.”

“Wait a moment, if you please.” Lady Grifford put one hand to his arm, catching him and pulling him back. “Do you recall the last time we stood on a terrace in this way?”

Samuel flinched visibly. “I do not wish to be reminded of that time, Lady Grifford and, quite frankly, I cannot understand why you would wish to think of it either.”

She smiled but there was a sadness in her eyes which Samuel could not avoid noticing. It etched itself into her expression, into the way that she lowered her head, into her sigh, into the heaviness which dropped into her shoulders. Sympathy began

to rise within him but Samuel pushed it away. What she had done had been her own choice and though he was sorry that Lord Grifford had treated her poorly, he did not need to do or express anything further to her.

“I often think of what I did, of what I said and how much I must have injured you,” she answered him, her voice so soft, he had to strain to hear it. “At times, I daydream about the future I might have had, the joy which could have been ours, had I chosen differently.”

“And while that is true, there is no need to consider such things any longer,” Samuel replied, keeping his tone firm. The last thing he wanted was for Lady Grifford to think that he too often thought of such things. “I myself have, after some time in darkness and shadow, chosen to step forward in my life and now, I am certain I shall have happiness again.”

“With Miss Millerton?” Lady Grifford’s eyes flashed with something akin to anger, something which surprised Samuel. “Come now, you cannot believe that you will be happy with someone that you do not care for!”

Samuel’s jaw tightened. “And what makes you think that I do not care for her?”

“Because I overheard you, if you recall. I heard you say – ”

“I was lying.”

The words he spoke broke through Lady Grifford’s words and he saw her tense, color draining from her face, the light in her eyes seeming to dim just a little.

“I was lying,” he said again, though this time a little more gently. “I feigned pretence when I spoke to Lord Trenton, pretending to him that I did not feel anything for the lady and that I could not truly understand what it was he spoke to me about. That,

however, was nothing short of a lie and my friend knew it!” With a slightly wry smile, he shook his head and spread out his hands. “I lied to myself also, I confess it. I did not want to admit what I felt, solely because I had promised myself I would never permit myself to do so again.” Seeing the glimmer of tears in her eyes, Samuel pressed his lips together for a moment, thinking of what he wanted to say but in what way it would be best to say it. He did not want to injure her but he also wanted to be entirely clear. “I do not think of what might have been, Lady Grifford. I think of what I now have and how happy I am in that. I hope you understand.”

Lady Grifford pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes but Samuel remained where he was, his eyes going to the door which would free him from her company and from the terrace itself.

“I think I should return to my guests,” he said, as she sniffed. “Forgive me, I –”

“Is there nothing I can say that will bring you back to me?”

Much to Samuel’s astonishment, Lady Grifford rushed forward towards him as he made to move back towards the door, standing in front of him, her hands going to his. Her eyes were wide, her lips gently parted but Samuel felt nothing whatsoever, apart from dread.

“No.” He pulled his hands away, stepping back from her. “Lady Grifford, I –”

“I have always cared for you!” she exclaimed, coming near him again, attempting to put her arms around his neck as Samuel staggered back, overwhelmed and a little stunned by her sudden fierce response. “I should never have stepped away from you, I should never have removed myself from your company. I am sorry that I did so, sorry that I stepped back from you after all you offered me. How foolish I was to turn away from you! How much of a fool I was in accepting the attentions of a scoundrel over someone such as you!”

Samuel reached up, catching Lady Grifford's arms and attempting to unwind them from around his neck but as he did so, a muffled exclamation caught his attention – and he saw Miss Millerton standing at the door of the terrace.

“Remove yourself from me, Lady Grifford!” he exclaimed, his heart hammering as he tried to make his way towards Miss Millerton. “I have no interest in this! I have no interest in you !” He spoke harshly now, desperate to make his way to Miss Millerton, to explain – but she turned on her heel and rushed back inside. Anger streaked up Samuel's spine and he flung Lady Grifford back, his breathing ragged as he gazed back at her.

“Enough!” His cry rent the air and Lady Grifford gasped, putting one hand to her mouth, her eyes filling with tears yet again but Samuel had no interest, not even the smallest flicker of sympathy in his heart now. “Have I not made myself clear? I have no desire to rekindle anything between us! I am sorry that your husband treated you ill but that is all that I have to say on that.”

“Then... ” Lady Grifford closed her eyes tightly, tears beginning to drip to her cheeks. “Then you will not save me from my present difficulties? I know that I do not deserve even a moment of your consideration but I had hoped that, with our history, with what we once shared, there might be something in your heart still.”

Samuel shook his head, his hands lifting either side, palms out towards her as though he feared that she might reach for him again. “There is nothing in my heart for you, Maria, not any longer.” He gestured to the door. “The lady I care for, the lady who has my heart is there, somewhere within the ballroom and I must go to find her.”

Lady Grifford broke into sobs, her handkerchief pressed to her eyes but Samuel could not linger, not after all that he had said and all that he had seen of Miss Millerton in not only seeing him converse with Lady Grifford but also in her hasty departure. “Excuse me.”

Stepping away from her, Samuel hurried to the door and then made his way directly back to the ballroom, hoping that she would be nearby, hoping that she would see him and come close to him, perhaps trusting that things would not truly be as she had witnessed them. Instead, all he saw was a sea of faces, all masked, all smiling. His heart began to beat all the faster as he made his way to the edges of the ballroom, looking into all the shadowy places – but still, there was no sign of her. Time and again, he stopped, thinking he had seen her copper curls and gentle smile, but every time, he was mistaken.

Where is she?

A little afraid that she had left the ball, perhaps confused and upset over what she had witnessed, Samuel pushed open the door to the hallway and stepped into the cooler, quieter space. Pressing one hand to his forehead, he closed his eyes tightly, his jaw flexing. If Lady Grifford had not ambushed him in such a way, then Miss Millerton would never have seen what she had done and all would be well! He would be able to confess his affection for her without the requirement for any further conversation, whereas now, there was a good deal he would need to explain first.

“And I wanted to tell her what I feel for her,” he muttered to himself, realizing now just how much he cared for her, how much he wanted to say by way of offering her his heart. It was as though, in pushing Lady Grifford away, he had been hit afresh with the strength of his feelings for her – as well as frustration that he had not said anything to her as yet! Instead of being honest both with Miss Millerton and with himself, he had done nothing but try to pretend that he had no such feelings and that this false engagement would come to an end very soon, just as they had intended. Now, however, the thought of severing their connection and releasing himself from her was so painful, it cut him right to the heart, leaving him breathless and morose.

But is it now a little too late?

“Take your hands from me!”

A sudden shout caught Samuel’s attention, tugging him away from his own thoughts as he frowned.

“Unhand me!”

Samuel began to hurry forward, uncertain as to where the voice was coming from but determined to find it. Clearly whoever was there was in some distress and Samuel had every intention of coming to their aid.

“I will not!” the voice cried again, as a rush of familiarity sent a cold sweat across Samuel’s brow. “I have no intention of leaving!”

“Oh, but you will. Come now, the journey back to the house is long and we – ”

Another cry, another broken, fearful shout made Samuel break into a run, turning to his right at the top of the hallway, only to see three figures a little further along. Two were pulling the third forward, though she was resisting as best she could. Anger poured into every part of Samuel’s body as he recognized Miss Millerton and, striding forward, he let out a roar of rage.

Footmen came running.

“Take your hands from her at once!”

One lady turned, her eyes flaring wide as she quickly dropped her hands and then stepped back, turning her wide eyes to the lady opposite. The second one, Samuel recognized as Lady Foster who, it seemed, was quite determined not to release his betrothed.

“I said, take your hands from her,” Samuel shouted again as he came close, reaching to grasp Lady Foster’s arm and pull her away from Miss Millerton, but Miss Millerton herself escaped from the lady’s grip before he could do so. He looked to the footmen. “You there, open up this parlor and escort these two ladies within. Neither of them are to leave.”

Miss Millerton was beside him in a moment, her chest heaving, one side of her face redder than the other, and fury broke out in Samuel’s heart. She looked up at him wordlessly, tears in her eyes and Samuel slipped one hand around her waist, determined to do all he could to protect her.

“You have no right to demand anything!” the lady Samuel did not recognize said, throwing up her hands before placing them onto her hips, glaring at him. “We are merely –”

“You are in my home and have attempted to not only injure but abscond with my betrothed,” Samuel interrupted, seeing shock wipe away the arrogance from the lady’s expression. “Now, either you will make your way to the parlor alone or I will lead you to it myself... or carry you, if I must.” He took a step closer, making it quite clear that he meant every word but there was no need for him to do anything. Lady Foster let out a yelp of evident fear and thereafter, hurried into the parlor. The other lady, however, simply glared at him for a few moments and it was only when Samuel began to make his way towards her that she finally relented.

“Close the door and do not let either of them step out,” he directed the footmen, who both nodded and then took their place by the door. “If there is any difficulty, then you have my permission to lock the room. Do I make myself clear?” With both the footmen nodding, Samuel then quickly turned to Miss Millerton who, though visibly trembling, appeared to be quite all right aside from the redness to her cheek.

“Charlotte.” Rasping, he took her hands in his, gazing down into her eyes. “Are you

all right?”

She closed hers. “I think I am.”

Samuel swallowed tightly, energy still pushing through his veins. “I did not mean – that is to say, what you saw of Lady Grifford and I, that was not my intention. Please, do not think otherwise.” The words came out in a rush, his arms going around her waist. “I know this is not the time for such things but I do not want you to think that there is any connection between Lady Grifford and me. There cannot be again. She was trying to... well, that does not matter.” When Miss Millerton opened her eyes to look up at him again, Samuel’s heart squeezed at the sheer amount of sadness in her eyes. “What happened here? What was Lady Foster and the other lady trying to do?”

Miss Millerton let out a long sigh. “My stepmother.”

Samuel blinked furiously, recalling quickly what it was she had told him earlier in the evening. “They were both attempting to steal you away from the ball?”

“From London,” she said, her voice becoming thin as she blinked away fresh tears. “They intended to return me to the Dower house and, from what I understand, keep me prisoner there.”

“But why?” Samuel pulled her a little closer, feeling her tremble still. “What was it that they wanted from that?”

She shook her head. “I – I do not rightly know.” Taking in a deep breath, she looked up at him again, her gaze becoming steady. “We should find my sister and brother in law.”

Samuel nodded. “Of course.” He did not release her, however, did not let his hands drop from her waist. “Are you sure you are well?”

Much to his relief, Miss Millerton smiled for just a moment before leaning forward and resting her head on his shoulder. “Yes, I am,” she murmured, as Samuel wrapped his arms around her all the more, pulling her as tight to him as he could. “Thank goodness you found me.”

Samuel said nothing though his heart echoed the very same sentiment. If she had gone from him, then might he not have thought that what she had witnessed had been the impetus to drive her away? He might then have chosen not to pursue her, might have left things as they were and refused to do anything that might then bring them back together – and what might they both then have missed out on? With a small sigh, Samuel brushed his lips across her temple and then lifted his head. Now was not the time to begin talking, not when there was much more severe things at hand.

“Let us go and find Lord and Lady Hesterway,” he said, as she lifted her head, no tears in her eyes now. “There is much we must understand.”

“I am sorry this has taken place during your Christmas ball,” she murmured but Samuel quickly shook his head no.

“I would do anything for you, Charlotte,” he promised her, turning her so that they might walk together, arm in arm. “You are worth far more to me than any number of Christmas events. Come, let us get this resolved as quickly as possible before any further damage can be done.”

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“What - ?”

The words stuck in Charlotte’s throat as she looked out at the terrace and saw Lady Grifford throwing herself into Lord Crestwood’s arms. Lord Crestwood’s gaze turned to catch hers, however, and she quickly saw the horror edging into his expression – though she did not know whether or not it was horror at being caught or for some other matter.

Turning about quickly and with her heart and mind racing, Charlotte scurried back into the ballroom, hearing Lord Crestwood’s voice for only a few moments chasing after her – though what it was he said, she did not know.

Whatever was that? Was Lord Crestwood eager for Lady Grifford’s attentions? The thought smote her heart and she could not help but cry out, even in full view of the other guests. Hurrying to the shadows of the ballroom, Charlotte let out slow breaths as she fought to take control, her stomach twisting sharply as she recalled what she had seen. Over and over, it flung itself back at her mind, telling her that she had made all manner of mistakes when it came to Lord Crestwood... and they were all about to come tumbling down around her ears.

But... but I care for him. I do not want him to have another in his arms. Letting out a slow breath, she covered her hands with her face, her heart pained. I think I love him. I think I must be in love with the Marquess of Crestwood.

Tears jumped into her eyes and Charlotte turned, making her way to the hallway rather than stand in amongst the crowd for fear of what someone might notice. This was all so very confusing that she did not know what to do or where to go or even

what to think! She was not even certain that she was free to pursue any kind of connection with anyone and, even if she was, what would happen if she professed her love to Lord Crestwood, only to discover that he was, in fact, pursuing Lady Grifford after all? Yes, there had been a connection between them and yes, some words had been spoken but if Lady Grifford had returned to him, had told him of her evident emotions, then might something now have changed?

“There you are.”

Charlotte turned, just as two ladies stepped out of the shadows, one grasping each arm. Letting out a cry of fright, she pulled back, managing to free herself from one of them, lurching around the hallway as she tried to make her escape.

“Will you get a hold of her, sister?!”

“Lady... Lady Barcsay?” Such was Charlotte’s shock that she froze in place, leaving adequate time for the other to capture her arm again. In all of her thoughts and confusion, she had forgotten entirely about her stepmother’s presence here in London. “Whatever are you doing?”

“Returning you to our home,” her stepmother hissed, angrily. “Hurry up, now. To the carriage.”

“No!” Charlotte tried to pull away but Lady Barcsay and Lady Foster continued to pull at her, making her arms sore, her skin burning where their fingers grasped. “I will not!”

“You told me you would not marry!” Her stepmother’s voice rang around the hallway and Charlotte looked over her shoulder, desperately hoping that someone else would be there, able to help her. “Now my sister tells me that you are to wed! I will not have it, Charlotte! Not now! Not when I am so close.”

None of those words made sense to Charlotte though it was not as though she was going to be able to reason with her stepmother nor with Lady Foster. Her breathing grew ragged and harsh as she fought to free herself. “Take your hands from me!”

“I hardly think so,” Lady Foster huffed, still dragging Charlotte along. “Will you stop fighting us? Do you know how difficult it was for us to make our way in here?”

“Unhand me!”

“Enough!” Her stepmother wheeled around but rather than releasing Charlotte, sent a blow right across her cheek, making Charlotte cry out. “You are to be returned to the Dower house. You will leave London, whether you wish it or not!”

“I will not!” Despite the pain in her cheek and the dizziness which now washed over her, Charlotte continued to pull back, her feet sliding a little on the floor. “I have no intention of leaving!”

A hard laugh came from Lady Foster. “Oh, but you will. Come now, the journey back to the house is long and we –”

“No!” Charlotte yanked back with all her strength, the thought of leaving Lord Crestwood too much for her to bear. He would think that what she had witnessed had sent her running back to the Dower house and, even if there was nothing genuine between them, she still did not want to end their connection in that way. A sudden shout broke all around her and, much to her relief, two footmen appeared from around the corner.

And then, a strong presence filled the hallway and Charlotte did not even need to look in order to realise who it was to know that it was Lord Crestwood. His voice, loud and authoritative, burst between them all.

“Take your hands from her at once!”

In that moment, Lady Barcsay turned and, gasping in shock, dropped Charlotte’s arm at once, bringing her some relief. Lady Foster, on the other hand, gripped her all the more tightly and Charlotte fought not to cry out.

“I said, take your hands from her,” Lord Crestwood cried, his hand reaching to grasp Lady Foster’s arm and pull her away but, just as he did so, Charlotte twisted away from her and finally, found herself free. Gasping, she stumbled back but managed to keep her balance, one hand rubbing at the opposite arm where the marks of Lady Foster’s fingers had been.

Lord Crestwood’s anger was evident, his stance tall and broad, his eyes blazing as he directed the two footmen. “You there, open up this parlor and escort these two ladies within. Neither of them are to leave.”

Charlotte moved to be next to him, her chest tight, her breath coming in short gasps as he slipped one hand about her waist, his strength supporting her.

Lady Barcsay shook her head in response to his demands, her initial shock appearing to have melted away within only a few moments. Instead, she tilted up her chin, threw up her hands and then placed them on her hips. “You have no right to demand anything! We are merely –”

Lord Crestwood interrupted her at once, his voice louder and filled with authority. “You are in my home and have attempted to not only injure but abscond with my betrothed. Now, either you will make your way to the parlor alone or I will lead you to it myself... or carry you, if I must.”

The shock which again filled Lady Barcsay’s expression told Charlotte that she had not recognized until this moment exactly who this gentleman was. When Lord

Crestwood moved towards Lady Foster, she let out a small exclamation and, with a glance to her sister, made her way to the parlor.

Lady Barcsay would not move, however. Charlotte looked at her directly, refusing to let any sort of fear show in her expression. Instead, she gazed back at Lady Barcsay, her heart still thundering furiously but the threat now had passed.

Lord Crestwood stepped forward and, with a start, Lady Barcsay hesitated, then turned and slowly made her way to the parlor. Charlotte caught the way she glanced over her shoulder, perhaps hoping that there might be a way for her to escape, but Lord Crestwood immediately directed the footmen to stand in front of the door, saying that they could lock it if it was required. It was only then that he turned to face her, catching her hands in his and looking down at her with such tenderness in his eyes, Charlotte wanted to weep with relief.

The look in his eyes was too much and Charlotte closed her eyes so that it was hidden from her. “I think I am.”

He pressed her hands gently, only to then release them and gently begin to wrap them around her waist, pulling her closer – and slowly, the shock of what had happened began to fade, replaced instead with a comforting warmth. “I did not mean – that is to say, what you saw of Lady Grifford and I, that was not my intention. Please, do not think otherwise. I know this is not the time for such things but I do not want you to think that there is any connection between Lady Grifford and myself. There cannot be again. She was trying to... well, that does not matter.” He let out a small sigh as Charlotte opened her eyes to look at him, aware of the trembling within her frame. “What happened here? What was Lady Foster and the other trying to do?”

“My stepmother.”

“They were both attempting to steal you away from the ball?”

Tears began to burn in her eyes as she recalled precisely what it was they had intended to do. “From London. They intended to return me to the Dower house and, from what I understand, keep me prisoner there.” Again, the thought of being separated from him ran through her mind and she shuddered, just as his arms tightened around her waist.

“But why? What was it that they wanted from that?”

She shook her head, knowing that she did not yet have all the answers. “I – I do not rightly know. We should find my sister and brother in law, however.”

He nodded. “Of course.” Again, his eyes fixed to hers, worry lingering in his expression. “Are you sure you are well?”

The comfort he offered her was not something that she could resist. Whether this meant anything more than a mere friendship, Charlotte could not say but, boldly, she let her head rest on his shoulder, her eyes closing as a small smile touched the corners of her mouth. “I am. Thank goodness you found me.”

When his lips brushed her temple, Charlotte’s heart clamored for more, begging her to lift her head, to look up into his eyes, to let his lips be only a fraction away from her own but instead, she simply remained where she was, letting the comfort of his arms take away her shock and fright.

After a few moments, Lord Crestwood leaned back just a little and Charlotte lifted her head. “Let us go and find Lord and Lady Hesterway. There is much we must understand.”

She nodded, the desire to find out the truth growing quickly within her. “I am sorry this has taken place during your Christmas ball.”

Lord Crestwood quickly shook his head. "I would do anything for you, Charlotte. You are worth far more to me than any number of Christmas events. Come, let us get this resolved as quickly as possible before any further damage can be done."

Hearing her name on his lips brought Charlotte a good deal of joy despite the circumstances. Might it be that she could find some happiness still? Could it be possible that, though she had come to London unattached, she might find herself departing from it in an entirely altered state?

"Oh, Charlotte, there you are!" Amelia, much to Charlotte's relief, was standing by the door to the ballroom, though she offered Charlotte a slightly knowing smile. "I know that you are engaged but you must not disappear in that way!"

Charlotte released herself from Lord Crestwood's arm. "Lady Foster and our stepmother attempted to pull me away from this ball and into their carriage, Amelia. They intended to take me back to the Dower house by force."

All light and laughter left Amelia's expression at once. "What do you mean?"

"Lord Crestwood came to my rescue but they are both now in the parlor. We must go at once to speak with them. Is Lord Hesterway nearby?"

Her sister nodded wordlessly and then disappeared into the crowd. Charlotte looked up at Lord Crestwood, seeing him frown. She waited until he had looked at her before lifting her eyebrow just a little.

"I do not have to attend with you," he said, softly. "This is a family situation and —"

"I want you to be there," she said, her smile faltering. "Please, if you could, then I would be very grateful."

A smile began to spread across his face and his hand, again, slipped around her waist, albeit for just a moment. “Then of course, I should be glad to attend with you. What happened was entirely unacceptable.” He touched her cheek with his other hand. “Are you feeling well?”

She lifted her hand and pressed it to his. “I am.”

The moment was shattered as Amelia and Lord Hesterway came back to join them, Amelia’s eyes searching Charlotte’s face. “Where are they?”

“This way.” Lord Crestwood gestured to the door. “The ball will continue on perfectly well without me. Come.”

Charlotte followed after him, her heart beginning to beat a little more quickly, nervousness coiling around her. Indeed, she knew that her stepmother had wanted her to be her companion but surely that could not account for such a strong reaction to the news that Charlotte was engaged? It had always been a choice for Charlotte to become her stepmother’s companion given that the will had not stated it, so there had always been the chance that she would not be so – though Charlotte had given her word. What had been present for her stepmother to go to such lengths to attempt to force her back to the Dower house? Now, more than ever, Charlotte was certain that there was something more to this will, to this pressure which had been set upon her ever since her father had passed away.

The door to the parlor was opened for them and, before she had time to think anything more, Charlotte was in the presence of Lady Barcsay and Lady Foster, neither of whom rose to their feet to greet them. Instead, Lady Barcsay sat where she was, her eyebrow lifting as she gazed at Amelia who ignored her entirely.

“Now.” Lord Crestwood did not sit but stood tall, just as Lord Hesterway came to stand beside his wife, leaving Charlotte beside Lord Crestwood. “Inform me as to

why you were attempting to force my betrothed to depart with you back to the Dower house, if you please?"

Lady Foster shook her head. "I do not know. All I did was at her behest."

These words did not seem to unsettle Lady Barcsay, however, for she only snorted and rolled her eyes. "Though not unwillingly, I might add," she answered, looking to her sister. "And you know very well, though I appreciate your attempt at loyalty... I think it might also be self-preservation."

"An answer." Lord Crestwood took a step closer, though he reached to take Charlotte's hand, holding it tightly. "Now."

Lady Foster and Lady Barcsay exchanged another look before Lady Barcsay shrugged. "I was taking my stepdaughter back home. She is my companion and I require her."

"You have no right to take her without her consent," Lord Hesterway stated, unequivocally as a ball of fire began to roll around in Charlotte's stomach, igniting her anger over the nonchalant way Lady Barcsay spoke. "She is engaged to Lord Crestwood and can do so of her own accord, given that she is of age."

Seeing Lady Barcsay look away, Charlotte took a risk and spoke up with a boldness and confidence in her voice that she did not truly feel. "But then, of course, if I marry, you will lose a great deal, will you not?"

The hitch of breath that Charlotte heard from her and the way she flinched told her that there was something more here, something more than just a need for a companion.

"I have spoken to our solicitors," she continued, as Lady Barcsay's gaze swung to

hers, the edge of her lip now caught in her teeth. “As has Amelia and Lord Hesterway. Our brother knows about it all also.”

Lady Barcsay blinked. “How...?”

“The will was not lost, as you told us,” Amelia said, coming to stand beside Charlotte rather than her husband. “Once we learned that, we learned everything.”

At this, Lady Foster let out a low groan and closed her eyes, one hand reaching up to rub across her forehead. Charlotte’s heart pounded but she did not let her expression shift in the least, keeping her chin lifted, her gaze steady and her back straight. Lady Barcsay’s jaw jutted forward, her lips thin and her eyes narrowing.

“He was going to leave me with nothing.”

The venom in her voice made Charlotte tremble and she gripped Lord Crestwood’s hand tightly.

“He said I could have the Dower house and nothing more, that I would never have the freedom I desired, that my finances would be controlled by his son. Can you imagine that? I asked him, I begged him for funds of my own, money that would let me live freely but he refused. He told me that his fortune, his accounts, his house and his title all belonged to his son and he would not take any coin from that and give it to me.” Every word dripped with anger, her eyes like slits now. “This from my own husband, the gentleman I had consented to marry!”

“He saw that you had no kindness within you.” It was Amelia who spoke, not Charlotte, though she echoed the very words that Charlotte herself had been thinking. “Our father refused, then, to take anything that he had decided to leave for us all and give it to you instead.”

“An honourable man,” Lord Hesterway remarked, only for Lady Barcsay to fling herself out of her chair at this, her face flushing red, her hands thrown up wildly.

“Honourable?” she spat, furiously. “Honourable? He told me that I was not whom he had believed me to be and punished me for that! In his death, I received nothing but _”

“Nothing but a grand house, servants, a carriage, horses and monthly income, given to you by our brother,” Charlotte interjected, only for Lady Barcsay to slash the air between them, silencing her.

“I wanted my own money to do with as I pleased, and he knew that,” she retorted, her expression contorted with rage. “When I read the will – since your brother was gone – I saw how I could get what I wanted. All you had to do was remain unwed.”

Charlotte’s throat tightened, a sharp tingling beginning to spread up through her core but she did not move nor let her expression change. Instead, keeping her voice steady, she gazed back at her stepmother. “You added the addendum.”

“Ah, but it held your father’s signature and that was all that mattered,” came the reply, Lady Barcsay clearly believing that Charlotte and the others knew all given the way she was speaking. “The solicitor believed that I had merely found it in amongst Lord Barcsay’s papers and, with a little convincing, added it to the will.”

“Lord Barcsay never wanted this for Charlotte, did he?” Lord Crestwood’s whole frame was stiff with tension, his eyebrows low over his eyes. “It was you.”

Lady Barcsay shook her head as though Lord Crestwood was nothing more than a fool. “Well, how else was I to get her dowry money?”

Charlotte gasped, one hand flying to her mouth. Her eyes flooded with tears as she

tried to understand, tried to make sense of what her stepmother had just revealed. Silence took over every part of the room but all Charlotte could hear was the pounding of her heart, not even taking in the whisper that came to her from Lord Crestwood. His arm went about her waist, tightening there, supporting her as she swallowed hard, once, twice and then a third time as she pushed away her tears. Now was not the time for crying, for sorrow and sadness. Now was the time for understanding, to seek out and find the truth.

“You wanted my dowry money?” Her voice wobbled but she lifted her chin a little more, looking back at Lady Barcsay with a steadiness which she did not truly feel. “What was it my father said?”

Lady Barcsay blinked, a slight fading of the heat in her cheeks betraying her. “You... you did not know?”

“You did not permit us to read the full will, if you recall? You refused to permit the solicitors to read the will to us and given that our brother was still away from England, you had the authority to do so.” Amelia spoke up now, anger flooding her voice. “And you betrayed us! You betrayed our confidence, using your authority to do whatever you could to get what you so desperately wanted.”

“You have told us some of the truth but not all.” Lord Hesterway made his way towards Lady Barcsay, his expression one of utter fury. “Whether you have realised it or not, you have betrayed yourself in speaking as you did.”

“I... I...” Lady Barcsay looked to her sister who shrugged helplessly, clearly entirely unaware as to what they ought to do next. “I thought... I thought that you already knew, I thought – ”

“We knew some.” Charlotte blinked quickly, her tears beginning to fade away as she saw how her stepmother’s confidence began to crumple. “Our brother must give

permission for the solicitor to tell us all and for us to read the will but I am certain that he will do so.”

“I presume,” Lord Crestwood continued, his voice low but heavy with anger, “that the late Lord Barcsay stated that should Miss Millerton remain unwed, the dowry money would go to you.”

Charlotte clutched at his hand, holding onto it all the more tightly.

“And, given what we have learned of Lord Barcsay’s will, I believe that he did not have any intention of Charlotte remaining unwed,” Lord Hesterway added, as Lady Barcsay dropped her gaze. “What was it that you did, Lady Barcsay? How was it you had Lord Barcsay’s signature and seal upon that addendum?”

When Lady Barcsay did not answer but only lowered her head all the more, Charlotte snatched in a breath as fresh wave of shock ran over her. “You... you forged it, did you not?” She saw the color begin to drain from Lady Barcsay’s cheeks and realized that she had hit upon the truth. “Knowing what the will said, you, in your upset and anger, determined to forge his additional part of the will and, thereafter, convinced the solicitor to agree that it was a legitimate part of the will.”

“But what about the mail coach and the highwaymen?” Amelia asked, as Lady Barcsay closed her eyes. “How could that have been arranged?”

Lady Barcsay let out a long, heavy sigh as her shoulders lowered, her whole frame appearing to sink down just a little. “I did not arrange it.”

“Then it was a convenient excuse as to why Charlotte and I could not read the will for ourselves when our brother returned,” Amelia said, her voice quiet. “Letters from the solicitor which stated that the will had been recovered were either hidden or destroyed. Is that not so? And instead, you told us and our brother, when he returned,

that the will had been lost.”

“And in doing so, you forced me into a life of oppression, forced to be your companion – and I did so, believing that there was a requirement from my father to do so.” Tears began to fall like rain on Charlotte’s cheeks, pain tearing through her. “I believed that he wanted me to remain a spinster and though I could not understand it, though I questioned over and over why he would do such a thing, I swore that I would do as he asked. My heart was sorrowful, my life miserable and yet now, I learn it was never my father’s desire for me to be so!”

“No, it was not,” Amelia said, one finger pointing to Lady Barcsay, anger beginning to fill her voice. “Our father hoped that Charlotte would wed, that she would marry and it was only if she did not that the dowry would go to you. How could you do such a thing to her? How could your greed overwhelm you?”

Lady Barcsay shook her head, her face pulled into a furious expression, her eyes narrowing. “Do you not understand? He was not going to leave me anything of my own!”

“Your selfishness and arrogance condemn you.” Lord Hesterway threw out his hands. “You have injured the lady who I consider to be my family, have lied to Lord Barcsay himself and have treated them all with contempt and inconsideration – Charlotte the most.”

“I deserve - !”

“You deserve nothing other than what Lord Barcsay was to give you!” Lord Hesterway thundered, making not only Lady Barcsay but also Charlotte jump. “And you, Lady Foster, I presume that you were simply a part to all of this, willing to do whatever you had to in order to help your sister.”

“Perhaps out of loyalty or mayhap in the hope that you would be rewarded financially also,” Lord Crestwood suggested, as Lady Foster’s eyes flared wide in obvious fear, before she dropped her head, her chin practically on her chest. “Both of you tried to pull Charlotte out of my arms and against her will. Do not think that the ton will not know of this.”

Charlotte looked up at him, a sudden fear catching in her chest. She did not want to be spoken of, did not want the ton to whisper about her but Lord Crestwood squeezed her hand lightly, reassuring her.

“I will not speak of Charlotte, of course, nor of her family, but I will speak of your actions. I will speak of your wickedness, of your determination to do what was wrong simply for financial gain. I do it not as punishment but because I believe that society should know the sort of character you have, Lady Foster... and yours also, Lady Barcsay. Though I am certain that Lord Barcsay himself will have much to say on the matter also.”

“Our brother will not be contented with this, I can assure you.” Amelia took her husband’s arm, tears in her voice but a small smile on her lips as Charlotte did her best to keep herself composed. “But it is done now. It is over and Charlotte is free.”

“Yes,” Charlotte whispered, a fierce and sudden joy pushing through her pain and her sadness over all she had learned, burning away the anger and frustration. She looked up at Lord Crestwood, seeing a light in his eyes which seemed strange given the circumstances, but was something that she understood entirely. “Now, finally , I am completely and utterly free.”

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:31 am

“The Yule Log has been determined!” Samuel laughed as Lady Hesterway and Lord Hesterway each began to rush towards the log that Charlotte had chosen. She had been given the honor of picking out the Yule Log for this Christmas Season and, when he had been invited to join them, Samuel had been thrilled. In the last sennight, nothing about Lady Barcsay nor Lady Foster had been spoken. Nor had he seen Charlotte in order to speak with her, for, much to his own surprise as well as to hers, there had been the sudden, unexpected arrival of her brother, Lord Barcsay. Quite what had taken place, Samuel was uncertain, but Charlotte had written him a note, explaining that there had been a great deal to discuss and determine but that she would speak to him of it all very soon.

Samuel had been glad for that. As yet, she had not pushed him away from her, had not severed their connection and as Samuel pondered over her, he discovered that his thoughts and attention increasingly focused on her, revealing just how much he truly cared for the lady. It was as though he could not breathe without her being either present or resting there in his mind, as though every bit of energy he had longed to be directed solely towards her. Being here with her now brought him such joy, Samuel never wanted to depart from her side again.

I must tell her how I feel.

“Oh, do be careful, Amelia!”

Samuel laughed aloud at Charlotte’s cry, seeing her smiling and laughing as Lord Hesterway made to sit down on the Yule Log, only for Lady Hesterway to catch his arm and pull him so hard, he was forced to stagger forward to regain his balance. As he watched, Lady Hesterway promptly sat down and let out a cry of triumph, leaving

Lord Hesterway to groan at his defeat... though Samuel caught the twinkle in his eye. It was clear that the fellow loved his wife and that, Samuel considered, was a situation that he himself very much sought also.

A quick rush of heat ran from his toes to the crown of his head as Miss Millerton turned her attention to him, the warmth in her eyes – despite the cold of the day and the snow on the ground – making him smile back at her. As yet, they had not been in company alone together for they had arrived in one carriage and he had come in his own – but all Samuel wanted was to be with her. She was all to him, everything that he wanted and everything that he desired. Indeed, he had found himself in love before with Lady Grifford but his connection with Charlotte was different. All that she said, all that she did was genuine and he prayed that the care and consideration she had shown him came from her heart so that they might find themselves surrounded by nothing but happiness. Quite how they were to find that time, Samuel did not know but he was willing to wait until Charlotte was ready. He could not imagine all that she had endured thus far though he did also pray that she had found some relief in discovering the truth.

“I think that it is your sister who will be blessed with good fortune,” Samuel murmured, as Charlotte came towards him. He took her in as she laughed, her face wreathed with smiles, her copper curls vivid against the white snow behind her. It was her eyes, however, which caught his attention the most. They were just as beautiful as they had ever been but there was a new vivacity which he had not seen before, a brightness which made her entire expression light up. The urge to take her in his arms was so strong that Samuel could not help but move towards her, his hands going out to her – and much to his relief, she stepped closer to him also. His fingers twined through hers and they stood close together, leaving Lord and Lady Hesterway to their own laughter over the Yule Log.

“My dear, are you quite all right?” Samuel looked into her eyes, seeing her smile though a niggles of worry still settled in his heart. “I know we have not spoken but I

have been thinking of you often.”

She smiled at him. “As have I of you,” she answered, snowflakes gently beginning to fall around them both. “My brother’s sudden arrival surprised all of us, though it was very timely indeed. He had already been to the townhouse where my stepmother was residing and instructed the staff that she was to take her leave. From what I understand, the carriage had already been prepared, though I am not certain as to where she was going. I do not think it would have been the Dower house, for she would have been afraid of my brother knowing that he was aware now of our confusion over the will. She probably must have ended up at her sister’s trying to avoid the gossip that shall start in the ton.” Taking in a deep breath, she closed her eyes for a moment. “But then he went to the solicitors and all was just as we expected. It was there, a little damaged in places but perfectly legible.”

Samuel nodded. “And the addendum?”

She shook her head. “It was not there. The solicitor who previously did not know what we were talking about confirmed that with my brother and promised that there would be a thorough investigation as to which of the men in his employ had agreed to Lady Barcsay’s demands.” Wincing, she shook her head. “I am quite sure that Lady Barcsay would have been either threatening or sweetly coercive, but regardless of whatever way she chose, there was someone in the solicitor’s involved.”

Letting out a long, slow breath, Samuel held her gaze steadily. “But it is over.”

Her smile was bright but her eyes glistened with tears. “Yes, it is. My father did not want me to give up my future for my stepmother, did not desire for me to be her companion. She made it all up, manipulating me to make sure she had what she wanted from me. That is why Lady Foster was here this Christmas Season, keeping a watch on me. It was solely so that Lady Barcsay could be quite certain that I would not either look into the matter or find myself falling in love. Either of those situations

would have brought about a circumstance she did not want... and yet, I appear to have done both.”

It took Samuel a few minutes to understand what it was she meant. The way that her cheeks flushed with color and caught her lip in between her teeth made his heart stir all over again and, with a flood of energy pouring through him, he released her hands only to catch her around her waist. He did not even stop to think about Lord and Lady Hesterway, looking down at the lady in his arms and finding his heart flooding with love for her.

“You mean to say that you have fallen in love with me, Charlotte?”

She nodded, her smile a little uncertain, a trifle hesitant. “I believe that I have. I know that this was not a situation that either of us expected. I understand that there was a time when you did not want to be truly engaged, did not even want to think about matrimony, but —”

“But that is not something that I want any longer,” he interrupted, as snowflakes began to fall a little harder now, landing on her bonnet and shoulders. “I thought that I wanted nothing more than to remain alone. I believed that setting up this false engagement would bring me the relief that I desired but instead, I found myself quite captured by you, Charlotte. I did not want to think of it, did not want to even admit it to myself but still, it remained. It was only when I went to call on Lady Grifford that I realised the true depth of my affections.” Seeing her eyes flare, Samuel moved closer still, his arms still about her. “I know that we have not spoken of what you saw on the terrace but I can assure you, I did not want her anywhere near me.”

“She was trying to throw herself into your arms,” Charlotte answered, as Samuel nodded, a knot in his throat. “I understand.”

“I rejected her. I told her that there could be nothing between us.” Samuel licked his

lips, a slight nervousness running through him now as he fought to find the words to express just how much he had come to care for her. “I have never felt the way that I do now, even though I have believed myself in love before.”

Charlotte’s smile grew big and bright, her eyes rounding at the corners. “Then you are in love with me also?”

Samuel nodded, a knot forming in his throat at the sheer happiness he felt. “Yes, Charlotte. I have been afraid of losing you, frightened that what you saw with Lady Grifford and I would have pushed you away. When I realised that, the dread which overtook me was so severe, it felt as though I was crippled in both body and spirit.”

Charlotte reached up and pressed one hand to his cheek, her eyes soft. “How could I step away from you when you have been nothing but compassionate and caring towards me?” Her thumb ran back and forth, ever so gently, but slowly beginning to ignite a fire within Samuel’s heart. “I will not pretend that I was not astonished by what I saw and indeed, frightened as to what that might have meant, but now, I have no fear or doubt.” Her hand ran down towards his heart and settled there. “You love me just as I love you. Nothing could make me any happier.”

It was on the tip of Samuel’s tongue to ask her, right then and there, if she would marry him but a shout from Lord Hesterway broke through his intentions. Sighing, Samuel pulled back from Charlotte gently, longing growing all the steadier as she too let out a sorrowful sigh, clearly a little regretful over moving away from him. Samuel caught her hand and held it still as they made their way back to the carriage alongside Lord and Lady Hesterway, the Yule Log being left for the servants to return to the townhouse.

“I hope we will talk again very soon, Charlotte,” he murmured out of the side of his mouth, as she looked back at him. “There is still more than I should like to say.”

A smile lit her features and she nodded, her fingers squeezing his. “Just as soon as we can,” she answered, quietly. “I want nothing more than to be in your company, Crestwood.”

“Just as I want to be in yours,” he promised, his mind already beginning to whirl over what it was he wanted now to do. There would be Lord Barcsay to speak to, should he still be in London, and with Christmas only a few days away, there was not much time for such a conversation. Determined, Samuel lifted her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to it, before helping her up to the carriage. Soon, he swore silently to himself, he would never have to step away from Charlotte again. Soon, they would be together, for the rest of their days.

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“How beautiful these are!” Charlotte exclaimed, holding up the pearl necklace that Amelia had gifted her. “Goodness, you ought not to have spent such a good deal on me!” She hugged Amelia tightly, her eyes glistening with happy tears. “This has been such a wonderful Christmas day.”

“Made all the better by my presence, I hope?”

Charlotte turned, laughing as Lord Crestwood walked into the room, his eyes finding hers instantly. “Indeed! I am delighted to see you.” She made her way to him directly, only for her sister and brother in law to get to their feet. They greeted Lord Crestwood but then, much to Charlotte’s surprise, quit the room without a word.

She blinked in surprise, then looked to Lord Crestwood who was now flushing just a little, pulling at his collar with one finger. He cleared his throat, then gestured to her. “Charlotte, when I said that there was more that I wanted to say, I meant it.”

The suddenness of his direct conversation made her heart leap, a flood of nervous excitement beginning to wind its way through her veins. She could not pretend that she had not been thinking about what their future might hold, now that they had professed their love for each other but neither had she expected him to come to her so quickly!

“I want nothing more than to be with you,” he continued, coming closer to her, one hand catching hers, his eyes like fire as they swept across towards her, fervency in his voice. “Charlotte, I did not think that I would ever be in love again, did not believe that I would ever be able to let myself do such a thing. And then,” he continued, a hint of laughter in his voice, “I met you and all of my determinations, all of my silent

demands upon myself faded.”

She did not know what to say and so, remained silent though inwardly, her heart was leaping about, praying that this was the moment she had been thinking of, ever since he had told her of his love.

“I cannot think of anything but you. I do not want to be anywhere but where you are,” he continued, his smile beginning to grow as he took another step closer, barely more than a few inches between them now. “In short, Charlotte, I love you desperately and want you to be beside me for as many days as I have on this earth.”

It was as though the world came to a standstill. The fire did not crackle or roar behind her, the winter wind did not rattle the windowpanes. It was as if everything had held its breath along with her, waiting for the final words to be spoken.

“Charlotte,” Lord Crestwood breathed, his head already beginning to lower, perhaps in hope, perhaps in urgency. “Charlotte, will you do me the great honour of becoming my wife?”

Those words sent such a joy through her that she practically leapt into his arms. Her lips found his, her arms twined tightly around his neck, his arms going about her so that he could pull her as close against him as he could. Tears fell to her cheeks as they shared the kiss but they were only of delight, of joy and happiness. Laughing and crying, she framed his face with her hands and nodded, their kiss broken for just a moment.

“I will, Crestwood. Of course I will!”

“Then we shall be husband and wife?” When she nodded, Lord Crestwood leaned forward and kissed her tears away before bending his head to find her lips again. This time, their kiss was longer, sweeter and more tender and Charlotte felt as though she

could not even stand on her own two feet, such was her overwhelming happiness. Lord Crestwood held her tight, the promise in his kiss and his words bringing her heart's happiness to completion. No longer would she spend her Christmases alone, no longer would she suffer loneliness, sadness and confusion.

Instead, her world would be one of happiness, of love and joy as she and Lord Crestwood set out on life's path, together.

THE END

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:31 am

“I have decided that it is time for you to find a wife.”

Joseph looked at his mother sidelong, rolling his eyes when she caught his gaze.

“Do not think that I will be put away from this idea!” she exclaimed, as he returned his attention to the paper he was attempting to read. It had been sent from London and he was eager to read all of the goings-on which had taken place over the Christmas season within society. “You have been the Duke of Yarmouth for five years now and as yet, you have done nothing to secure the family line!”

Barely giving his mother even the smallest bit of attention, Joseph waved one hand vaguely in her direction as the fire in the hearth crackled beside him. “Mother, I have two younger brothers. Both of them are more than suitable to take on the role, should I ever be displaced.” It was not something that he was in the least bit worried about, however, for Joseph was hale and hearty and though he had an intention of marrying some day, he had no desire to do so at present.

“But you must!” she exclaimed, stalking across the drawing room and practically whipping the paper out of his hands. “It is required!”

Joseph scowled, disliking his mother’s insistence. “Mother, that is quite enough. I have already made it plain that I will marry one day but it shall only be at the day and time of my choosing.”

“No, it shall not be.” The Duchess lifted her chin and gazed down at him with such a fire in her eyes that Joseph shifted in his chair, suddenly feeling a little unsettled. “Yarmouth, I have had quite enough of your laziness, your disinterest and your

selfishness. The whispers about you are not good and society is well aware of your present reputation – a reputation which will soon become roguish should nothing change!”

“I have not been in London for the last few months, Mother, so I cannot imagine where you would get such an idea from.” Though Joseph kept his voice mild, he tried to ignore the streak of worry which ran through him. Some months ago, he had decided that a very pretty young lady by the name of Lady Sara would be good for his next conquest and had set about it. The young lady had been rather reluctant, however, and though Joseph knew he ought to have stepped back, his determination to have her kisses brought about such a strength of force within him, he had promised her things that he had no intention of truly seeking out. It had all become rather sordid in the end and though he had managed to keep the truth from society – and had bribed those involved for their silence – he had chosen to return to his estate rather than linger in London. He had not heard if there had been any whispers about him in that time and part of him was a little loathe to find out. After all, he had spent a good deal of time attempting to make certain that the ton did not think of him as an utter scoundrel and he did not want that to change.

“I have heard of what is said of you from my friends and from those connected to our family,” his mother stated, clearly refusing to let the matter drop. “I do not know your reasons for staying back from London but I can imagine they are nothing but selfish.”

Joseph frowned. “That is a little inconsiderate of you, no?”

This did not have the desired effect upon his mother, however. She took in a deep breath, set her hands to her waist and then glared at him. “Either you seek a wife in London this Season in a few months’ time, or I shall make your life nothing short of a misery.”

Joseph blinked in astonishment, for his mother was always quiet and considered,

never once speaking with the fierceness she did at present. “I – I beg your pardon?”

“I hardly think that I need to repeat myself,” she replied, with that same determination in her voice which shocked Joseph utterly. “I am residing with you at present, just as I ought given that this is the house where I raised both your brothers and yourself when your dear father was alive. You know that I will only remove myself from this house when you marry, for I shall have the Dower house.”

Anger flickered in Joseph’s heart. “I could have you removed there whenever I please.”

“Ah, but should you do so, then you will have society looking down upon you and I know very well that you want society – well, certain members of society, shall I say – to think well of you. It is not often that you go to London but when you do visit, you make certain to steal as much attention from young ladies as possible, you throw money away at the card table and yet I know you want the ton to think you an excellent sort, albeit a little rogue-like.”

“I believe that my reputation is my business, Mother!”

She shook her head. “I fervently wish that such tidings were indeed true. You know that your reputation as the Duke is of vital importance and that how you are seen by society will directly impact upon not only myself but your brothers and their families, but that does not seem to concern you! You do not think of us and have seemingly no interest in the responsibilities that being a Duke represents. That is not the sort of gentleman your father thought you would be.”

Joseph’s hand curled into a fist and he thumped it, hard, on the arm of his chair, sending a jolt up through his arm. “How dare you say such a thing? You know very well that I have taken on this title with nothing but thoughts for my responsibilities!”

Despite the obvious upset and strain, his mother did not step back from what she had been saying. “You have thought of a good many things yes, I shall give you that. However, you do not seem to act! The crops, though they do well, should be reviewed in light of the new findings about crop rotation. Your tenants should have their houses reviewed and considered so that improvements might be made. You should consider the new business ventures that have been offered to you, rather than simply continuing on with what you have always known! And you should certainly stop pursuing various young ladies, all of whom will give you their affections until you become bored with them and move away from them!”

“How... ” The anger began to fade as Joseph looked up at his mother. “How do you know such things?”

She laughed but it did not hold any mirth within it. “I have been Duchess for a very long time, my son. I am well acquainted with all that transpires within this household. You believe that the servants are loyal to you and yes, they are, but they also know that I, as mistress of this house, have cause to know all that is taking place. And it does not take much effort to hear from the tenants just how little their houses have been considered these last two years; how the thatch is poor and weakening in some places, how the wind and the rain come through. Society is also very good at informing me of my son’s poor behaviour to the young ladies, both here in our own vicinity and in London. That is a matter which cannot be kept to oneself.”

A flush of shame began to burn up through Joseph’s chest but he looked away rather than let her perceive it. That part, certainly, was true, loathe though he was to admit it. His tenants had not been something he had considered a good deal of late, given that he had become very taken up with his own estate. Joseph very much enjoyed being out of doors and spent a good deal of time there rather than inside in his study or his drawing room. Instead of writing letters, he much preferred to ride as far as he could before, eventually turning around. Business matters were set aside in favor of other outdoor sports and, thus far, Joseph had not seen any issue with it. His estate

ran very well, his finances were good and his business affairs were all in order. Yes, he had not tried any new ventures, had assumed that his crops were doing well and had thought only of himself for much of the time but had that been truly such a bad thing?

“This is preposterous, Mother,” he said, pulling himself out of his many thoughts and instead, determining not to permit his mother to do anything that she had threatened. “You have no right to state such things. I will do as I please and will marry as and when I so wish.”

The Duchess shrugged. “Very well. Then, if you are determined to continue on in such a way, then I shall have no other choice but to do as I have threatened.”

“Which is to make my life a misery.”

She nodded. “Precisely.”

“Then you are willing to manipulate me, to use me as you wish simply so that I will do as you ask?” Joseph got to his feet though his mother still did not move, did not even flicker. “You will force my hand?”

“Yes.” The Duchess lifted her chin. “I am doing this because I must. I am tired of the Duke of Yarmouth being spoken of in society, tired of hearing that I only have two dutiful sons rather than three. No, Yarmouth, you will come to London this Season and you will do as you must.”

Joseph shook his head. “No, I will not.”

His mother gazed back at him but Joseph held his gaze, willing to simply stare her down but, the longer that they looked at each other in silence, the more uncomfortable he became. The Duchess did not falter, gazing at him with her chin

lifted a notch and a sharpness in her eyes which he had never seen before. Swallowing hard, Joseph looked away and then let out a slow breath, despising the situation that he was now facing.

“I warn you now, it will be more miserable than you have ever experienced.”

The whisper from his mother made Joseph shudder though he tried to hide it. He had always known the Duchess to be a sweet-natured lady, had often admired her kindness and her sweetness but now, it seemed, her nature had changed entirely! And all because she has decided I must wed.

“This is unfair,” he stated, swiping through the air between them with both hands. “How can you utter such a thing? You have never comported yourself or expressed such sentiments towards me until now!”

His mother’s lips quirked, though her eyebrows flung themselves down. “I have said nothing for the last five years but now, the time has come for me to be honest with you. I want to know that the family line is secure and that you are taking the responsibility your father gave you with the upmost seriousness.”

“By threatening to injure me?”

The smile returned. “Oh, I did not say that I would injure you, did I? I said that I would make your life a little more... difficult than it has been before. Perhaps then that might take you out of the way of thinking only of yourself and might, I hope, force you to reconsider your responsibilities, yes?”

Joseph did not know what to do. On one hand, his mother had no right to speak to him in such a way as this and he had every right to stop her from doing so but on the other, given that he did not know what it was she intended to do, it would not be as simple as asking her to desist! A thought came to him and with a quirk of his lips, he

held her gaze steadily. This was his mother! His mother, who had never once raised her voice to him, who had always done everything she could to please those within her household and those outside of it also. She could not – would not – do such a thing as this! This was a pretense, surely? It was nothing he could take seriously, not when he knew her as he did. It was only words, words meant to force him into action. “I am afraid, Mother, that I do not believe you.”

This made his mother’s eyes flash and Joseph’s smile stuck to his lips, no longer as confident in his belief as he had been before. “Is that so?”

“I... yes, it is.” Joseph lifted his chin and held her gaze steadily. “I do not think that you would do such a thing to me. I am sure that you have said such a thing in order to force my hand but I will not be moved, I am afraid. Your threats shall not take root with me.”

This brought a lengthy silence between them and, at the end of it, the Duchess began to nod slowly, pulling her gaze away from him. “Very well,” she said, her voice low and quiet as a sense of triumph began to flood through Joseph. Had he been correct in his belief after all? Had she, indeed, said such things in the hope of merely pushing him into action?

“I appreciate that you are concerned for me but I can assure you, you need not be. I am more than able to do what is required of me but it will be at a time of my choosing.”

His mother nodded but then gave him a long look, one finger rubbing lightly across her lips, her thumb at her chin.

“I am glad we had this conversation,” Joseph continued, not quite certain what else to say. “Now, the paper if you do not mind?”

The Duchess glanced away before picking up the paper in her hands and walking across the room, rather than giving it to him. “You presume me to be insignificant, feeble and devoid of resolve,” she articulated, quickly feeding the paper to the fire as Joseph let out an exclamation of upset, half out of his chair again as his mother turned her gaze to him once more. “You will see that I am not, Yarmouth. Your father is no longer here to make certain that you do your duty and therefore, it now rests with me given that you do not do such a thing yourself! I had thought that you, as the eldest, would do what was asked but instead I see that it is quite the opposite and I am ashamed of you. I am shamed by what the ton knows of you; your lack of diligence in business matters, the complaints of your tenants and your fleeting interest in various ladies of the ton . Something must change and if you do not do that for yourself, then believe me when I say that I will force it upon you regardless.”

Before Joseph could say anything, the lady had taken her leave of him, leaving the only sound the crackling of the fire as it burnt up the last parts of the newspaper. It had only been a small act, something insignificant really, but it had shocked Joseph right to his very core. This was not someone that he recognized! His mother had never done or said such things before and now, unfortunately, Joseph was slowly beginning to believe that all she had said, she would do.

“I will not find a wife,” he muttered to himself, his hands curling into fists again as he fought to find a fresh determination within himself. “I have no interest in matrimony, no desire to take a wife.” Lifting his chin, he nodded to himself. “And I certainly shall not be forced into it.”

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“Good evening, Your Grace! How pleasant to see you here this evening.”

Joseph offered his host a smile, all the while feeling himself more than a little heavy-hearted. “Good evening, Lord Umbridge. How very kind of you to extend an invitation to both myself and my mother.”

“But of course, of course!” Lord Umbridge gestured to the ballroom. “I am sure that many within society will be glad to see you present, Your Grace. Allow me a few moments of conversation with your mother before I release her to join you, yes?”

Joseph nodded, his back stiff and his shoulders pulled back as he walked toward the ballroom. He had very little to say to his mother at the present moment and would be very glad indeed if Lord Umbridge wished to talk with her for the rest of the evening! Given what he knew of his mother and what she intended for him this evening, he had no genuine desire to spend any further time in her company.

“Good evening, Your Grace!” A voice filled with surprise caught his attention and Joseph turned his head, looking down into a pair of gentle brown eyes. “I did not think you would be coming to London so early in the Season.”

“Nor did I, Lady Newforth.” Joseph bowed towards the lady, recognizing her to be one of those he had captured in his arms only a few months ago, though given that she was widowed, he did not think that to be particularly grievous. “However, I have come to London to – ” He stopped short, realizing that he had no desire whatsoever to inform the lady that he was here to find himself a wife. The truth was, he had no interest in that at all but it was because of the heavy weight of his mother’s insistence that he had finally given in. “I have come to London to enjoy the good company

found here,” he finished saying, as the lady’s eyes glowed. “I do hope I make myself clear?”

She touched his arm for a moment, moving just a little closer. “Yes, you do indeed,” she murmured, practically purring as a faint stirring in Joseph’s core reminded him about all they had shared. “Mayhap you might –”

“My son is here to find a bride, Lady Newforth.”

Joseph closed his eyes, his jaw tightening as his mother came to stand directly beside him, clearly aware of what sort of conversation she had stumbled upon. “Mother, I think –”

“Did I not hear that you were recently engaged, Lady Newforth?” the Duchess continued, ignoring Joseph completely. “You must tell me his name, for I have quite forgotten!”

A cold hand began to wrap around Joseph’s heart as he looked to Lady Newforth, seeing her turn her gaze away as color hit her cheeks. He had always promised himself that he would never capture a lady in his arms who was already spoken for and yet, now it seemed that he had come dangerously close to doing so.

“Yes, to the Earl of Chesterfield.” Lady Newforth licked her lips, glancing over her shoulder as though she thought to spy the very person she was speaking of. “It was only very recent and –”

“My congratulations to you both,” the Duchess interrupted, shooting an angry look towards Joseph who only shook his head, words of protest on his lips but remaining unspoken. “Do excuse us, Lady Newforth, if you would. My son is to take me to find

Lady Wigton and we must depart here at once.”

Joseph had no other choice but to take his mother’s arm and lead her away from Lady Newforth, though he did find himself a little relieved to no longer be in the lady’s company. He had not known that she was engaged and certainly would not have even thought to engage in any sort of flirtation with the lady had he been aware. He cleared his throat, glancing to his mother who was walking with her head held high but a spot of color in her cheeks.

“I did not know she was betrothed, Mother,” he said quietly, realizing that he had no need to explain himself to her but finding the desire to do so sitting within him regardless. “I was entirely unaware of it.”

She shook her head but kept her gaze directly ahead of her, not looking up at him. “I do not know whether or not I can believe that. Your reputation is not exactly pristine, is it?”

Joseph scowled. “I have always told myself that I would never engage in any manner of flirtation with a lady who was attached to a gentleman. Whether you believe that or not is none of my concern.” He sniffed as she looked up at him, ignoring the anger in her eyes. Things between his mother and himself had become strained the last few months and though he abhorred the weakness within himself which had given in to her demands and had finally consented to find a bride, he also was looking forward to the moment that he would be granted relief from it all.

“There is Lady Wigton.” His mother directed him with a point of one finger. “Now, you know that I am to introduce you to her daughter, Lady Hannah. You will behave well, I hope.”

“You do not have to speak to me as though I am a child,” Joseph muttered, a little frustrated with his mother’s attitude. “I am well able to behave well in society, I

assure you.”

“I am yet to become convinced of that,” came the quick reply, though Joseph could not respond given that Lady Wigton turned to greet them both. He bowed and forced a smile, finding himself a little relieved that the lady appeared to be standing alone and was not with her daughter, only for the lady to then beckon to someone behind him.

“Come now, Hannah, come and greet the Duchess of Yarmouth and her son, the Duke of Yarmouth.”

Joseph had no choice but to turn and look as a young lady detached herself from a smaller group of ladies and came obediently towards her mother. She was, Joseph considered, not particularly beautiful but not overly plain either, which he appreciated. There was no spark in her eyes but her brown curls glinted copper in the candlelight.

“Your Grace, it is a delight to see you again.”

Joseph blinked quickly, then inclined his head as a frown marred his forehead. He had no recollection of ever meeting this young lady and yet, evidently, she seemed to be aware of him. With a cough, he lifted his head and looked back into her eyes, though there was a glint in her eye and a slight pull to her mouth that Joseph did not much like.

“Of course, Lady Hannah.” He tried to smile but his mouth refused to pull into it. “I hope you are enjoying this evening?”

She tilted her head just a little, her mouth flattening. “Very much. Will you be in attendance for a considerable time?”

“I – yes, I intend to be here for some months,” Joseph stammered, his words becoming a little muddled as he hid what he wanted to say, covering it with words he did not truly mean. “I have come with my mother, as you may perceive.”

“And he is here to find himself a bride at long last!”

This declaration from his mother made Joseph’s heart rip apart, dread flooding him as Lady Hannah snatched in a breath, her eyes rounding at the edges.

“That is not... that is to say –”

“Come now, my son, you need not be coy about it,” the Duchess exclaimed, making Joseph’s frustrations leap up all the more. “I shall be searching through the ton for those young ladies who might well be a suitable match for my son. He has deigned to permit me such a responsibility and I am already relishing the task!”

A rush of energy poured into Joseph’s frame, urging him to hurry away, to step away from the conversation before she could say any more. “That is to say, I may consider matrimony,” he added, hastily. “I am sure, Lady Wigton that you understand my mother’s enthusiasm but it is given a little too hastily, I think.”

This did nothing to dampen the excitement in the lady’s expression and Joseph’s heart sank, especially when she turned her head to face her daughter.

“That is most exciting, Your Grace! I am sure that your mother will be of the greatest help to you.” She said all of this as she looked at her daughter, though Lady Hannah said nothing, her expression entirely unchanged. “Should you like to step out for a dance this evening? You will find many willing young ladies, I am sure!”

Joseph swallowed thickly, seeing that the lady was now hopeful – and expectant – that he might dance with her daughter this evening. “I do not think that I –”

“The quadrille, mayhap?” The Duchess broke in this time, sending Joseph a fiery glance which Joseph tried his best to ignore. “Or the cotillion?”

“I am not certain that –”

This time, it was not Joseph who ignored the question but Lady Hannah instead. She drew herself up to her full height, looked back at him steadily and kept her chin lifted. “After what you did to my closest friend, Lady Sara, I have no interest in standing up with you.”

“Hannah!” Lady Wigton exclaimed, only for Joseph’s own mother to drop her head, her eyes closing tightly. There was a clear moment of tension as the small group all stood in tense silence, though Joseph’s heart began to thud furiously, disliking Lady Hannah intensely. This was rudeness beyond measure, he mused inwardly, and from such a mere chit as this! His face began to burn though he kept Lady Hannah’s gaze steadily.

“I do not think that what transpired between the lady and myself is anyone’s business but my own.”

“And you can say that in such a way as to make it plain that you have no responsibility!” Lady Hannah cried, making her mother exclaim again, trying to quieten her but to no avail. “You have tried to keep this to yourself, I know, for you do not want anyone else to be aware of it, but you stole her affections and promised her that you would marry – though you begged her to keep it a secret. And then what did you do? You turned your back on her and instead, found another lady to keep close instead. And this in the full knowledge that she had turned down two other gentlemen’s offer of courtship in the belief that your proposal would soon come!”

There was nothing for him to say. He could not defend himself, not when he had done everything that the lady had just said. Nor could he say that he had truly had an

intention of marrying the lady for that in itself had also been false. Lady Sara had been a distraction for him for a time, nothing more. He had only hoped that the news of this would never come to light.

“You cannot say a word against this, can you?” Lady Hannah laughed without mirth, her face contorted with anger, her eyes brimming with tears. “You are the very last gentleman I should ever stand up with and if I had my way, all of society would be warned about you so that none would ever come near you again.”

With this, she twisted away from her mother and from Joseph, hurrying through the crowd of guests as though she could not move fast enough to remove herself from him. Joseph did not know what to do, glancing around surreptitiously and realizing just how many people nearby had heard what Lady Hannah had put to him. A sense of mortification began to stir up within him, his chest and neck growing warm as he looked down to the ground, the only place he could avoid the gaze of anyone.

“I think I shall take myself to the card room,” he said, in what he hoped was a nonchalant manner. “Do excuse me.”

As he made his way from his mother’s side, Joseph slowly became aware of the whispers which were beginning to spread out around him. It was as though every person present had not only heard what Lady Hannah had said but was now eager to speak about it, making the whispers grow all the stronger. Joseph had never once experienced shame over his behavior for he had always been careful to make sure that society was not fully aware of what he had been doing but now, for the very first time, that sensation began to wash over him. It was a most unpleasant one and Joseph scowled darkly, rubbing one hand over his forehead as he stepped out of the ballroom in search of the card room.

This was not going to be the Season that either he or his mother had anticipated, he realized. Instead, he was going to carry a heavy burden... and one that was entirely of

his own making.

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“Did you hear about the Duke of Yarmouth?”

Louisa continued to sew quietly in the corner of the drawing room as her two sisters chattered mindlessly together. They had been talking about all manner of things in society though she, however, had very little interest in what was being said.

“There have always been whispers that he is nothing more than a rogue but I did not think he would behave as poorly as that!” Rachel continued, as Louisa glanced at her, before turning her attention back to her needle and embroidery thread. “Though he is a Duke, I suppose, so there will be someone within society willing to marry him!”

“Marry him?” Ruth, the youngest of the sisters, let out a quiet laugh. “I am sure that there will be many a young lady eager to do such a thing but their mothers and fathers will be less inclined, I am sure, given what has been said. To know that he would treat that lady with such inconsideration is dreadful!”

“Though I did hear that she is now married and quite happily settled,” came the reply, as a niggles of curiosity began to grow in Louisa’s heart. “I did think it most astonishing that a Duke would think to behave in such a way, however. I thought that gentlemen with high titles were expected to behave with the greatest integrity!”

“It seems as though the Duke of Yarmouth lacks such integrity, unfortunately.” Ruth sighed and shook her head. “It is unfortunate that he is so very handsome, however. A gentleman such as that, with a high title and excellent fortune would be a wonderful match for any young lady... if he had the character to go with it.”

Unable to help herself, Louisa spoke up. “What has happened? Why is the Duke of

Yarmouth now so ill considered by society?" She watched as her two sisters exchanged a glance, only for Rachel to turn her attention to her.

"Of course you would not have heard, I quite forgot that you do not join us when we attend balls and the like," she said, in a tone which was so utterly condescending, Louisa had to squeeze one of her hands into a tight fist so as not to let angry words escape her. "The Duke of Yarmouth has not been present in society for some months, though he was always very frequent in his visits to London before that. Last evening, he was speaking with Lady Wigton and her daughter, Lady Hannah, only for Lady Hannah to tell not only him but, given that she spoke loudly, also the rest of the ton about his actions towards her dear friend, Lady Sara."

"Lady Sara who is now Lady Huddersfield," Ruth broke in. "So she is married and contented. Thankfully, these rumours cannot tarnish her reputation now, though I do hope that her husband knew of it all beforehand otherwise that might be rather difficult."

Louisa glanced from Ruth to Rachel and then back again. "What was it that the Duke did?" she asked, when her sisters did not continue speaking. "Is he something of a rascal?"

"More like a scoundrel, I would say!" Ruth clicked her tongue in obvious disapproval. "The gentleman is more than a little selfish, it seems, for he not only stole Lady Sara's affections by promising her that they would soon marry – though he begged her to keep their connection a secret with reasons that she went on to believe – he then went in search of other young ladies when he grew tired of her! Meanwhile, Lady Sara had turned away two other gentlemen who sought out her company, believing that the Duke of Yarmouth would soon propose and she would be wed."

"But he did not." Louisa frowned hard as her sisters shook their heads. "Lady Sara's heart must have been broken."

“Not only that, but she had turned away those two other gentlemen, making the ton believe that she had no interest in matrimony.” Rachel sighed heavily. “She must have told all of this to Lady Hannah, given that they were dear friends. However, I do not think that the Duke himself ever expected news of his poor behaviour to escape to the ton for I heard that, when Lady Hannah threw those things towards him, he went very pale indeed.”

Louisa’s eyebrows lifted. “But he did not deny anything that was said?”

Both of her sisters shook their heads and Louisa closed her eyes briefly, both relieved and a little concerned. “You both must make certain to stay away from the Duke of Yarmouth. You cannot have him in your company and you certainly cannot ever have him here in the house. Do you understand me?”

Ruth let out a snort of laughter. “Why should the Duke of Yarmouth come here? He is not acquainted with any of us!”

“I am aware of that, but if he should become acquainted with you, I want you both to make certain that you do not linger in his company. It is very important indeed to protect your own reputations, especially since you are both seeking a match this Season.”

Ever since their mother had passed away at the time of Ruth’s birth, Louisa had been almost solely responsible for both of her sisters. With one older brother in line to take on the title and a father who, seemingly caring very little for his children, had thrown himself entirely into his business affairs, it had become Louisa’s responsibility to make sure that both Rachel and Ruth were ready for society. There had been a governess, of course, but her father had seemingly decided that both an older sister and a governess were not required and, therefore, had dismissed the governess once Ruth had reached the appropriate age for her come out and left the rest on Louisa’s shoulders. He had not seemed to be aware of her own need to seek out a match, had simply ignored that part of Louisa’s life and instead, had instructed her to make

certain that both of her sisters found excellent husbands. She was now considered their chaperone and all of society knew of it. In the same way, her own sisters did not seem to think about Louisa's desire for a husband, never once speaking of it or considering Louisa's own situation. To both of them, to her father and even to society, she was viewed as a spinster, even though she was not of age to be so. It was a great and heavy burden and one that Louisa was forced to continually carry alone – and at times, it almost felt too great to endure. Even now, as they spoke of the Duke, Louisa was forced to remind herself that her role was not to do anything for herself but instead, to guide and protect her sisters.

Even when they wed, I shall have no opportunity for matrimony, she thought to herself, sadness building in her heart. I will be considered a spinster by then and what hope shall I have?

A giggle caught her attention, pulling her from her own considerations and she frowned, seeing Rachel quickly adjusting her expression so that she did not smile in even the smallest way.

“We have no intention of acquainting ourselves with the Duke of Yarmouth, I assure you.” Rachel sighed and looked away, though there still remained a glimmer in her eyes. “Though I do wish that he was not so handsome. That would make it a little easier to ignore him.”

A spark of interest flickered in Louisa's heart but she ignored it quickly, dismissing it as only a passing thought and nothing worth her attention. She was not about to let her thoughts linger on a gentleman of ignoble character, especially when she knew him to be nothing more than a scoundrel! It would be quite different if the ton were speaking of a man because of his charitable nature or because of his kindness towards those lesser than him, but to have them speak of his selfishness, inconsideration and general arrogance meant that he was someone they had all to avoid.

“I will point him out to you, if you wish it.”

Louisa looked back at Ruth, seeing the slight flicker in her sister's eyes. "I hardly think that will be necessary."

"You were thinking of him, yes?"

"Yes, but not in the way that you think," Louisa answered, feeling heat begin to burn in her face though she kept her gaze steady all the same. "I was reflecting on the fact that such a gentleman ought not to be worth even a moment of our time, even if he is the most handsome and holds the highest title in all of society, save only for the King." With a slight clearing of her throat, she looked away from her sister. "Now, we should make certain that you are both thoroughly prepared for this evening. The new ballgowns have arrived, yes?"

"Yes, they have." Rachel tilted her head. "Including one for you. I did not know that you had purchased one."

Louisa blinked in surprise. "One for me?"

Her sister nodded, then frowned. "You did not purchase a ballgown, then? You seem to be rather astonished."

"I am, simply because I did not purchase a gown," Louisa answered, all the more confused. "I recall that we had gowns fitted for you both but I..." She trailed off as understanding overtook her. Her eyes closed and she let out a small sigh, though a smile edged up the corners of her mouth. "Julia. Of course."

When she opened her eyes, her two sisters were looking at each other, though Ruth, at least, smiled when she returned her gaze back to Louisa.

"Your friend is very considerate."

"Yes," Louisa agreed, thinking of Julia who had long been her friend and was,

indeed, her closest friend. “How glad I am that she is in London with us at this time.”

“You... you are not thinking about seeking out a match for yourself also, are you?” Rachel blinked quickly, her eyes widening just a little as she turned her gaze to Louisa and then returned it to Ruth, seemingly shocked at the idea that Louisa might herself be considering her future. “You know that father has given you a responsibility for us and -”

A rush of irritation had words snapping from Louisa’s mouth in a manner which she would have never considerably spoken. The shock on Rachel’s face as she thought about Louisa seeking out her own match as well as the touch of horror in her voice – as though it would be truly horrendous if Louisa were to do so – riled her in a way that filled her with a sense of deep frustration and upset.

“You are aware, Rachel, that I am also of eligible age, are you not?”

Rachel hesitated, then looked to Ruth again though her sister merely dropped her gaze to her hands.

“Yes, I am aware but I had always considered that we were to be your sole focus.”

“And for what reason did you think that?” Louisa asked, finding herself on her feet, heat pouring from the tips of her toes to the top of her head. “Yes, father has given me this responsibility, as you have said, but it seems to me that both he and you have seemingly ignored – or forgotten – that I might have some hopes and desires for my own future! What will become of me when both Ruth and yourself find a match, Rachel? You will be happy and settled and contented, no doubt, but what of me?”

Rachel blinked quickly, then shrugged. “You will have a chance to then seek out your own match?”

It was as though something within Louisa broke, hearing her sister’s nonchalant

remark, seeing the shrug of her shoulders. Her hands balled into fists, tears coming into her eyes. “I will be considered a spinster by then, Rachel! Do you not see that? Do you not think of that? Or is everything about this Season – about our life – entirely to do with you and your happiness?”

Silence flooded the room and suddenly, Louisa felt herself very ashamed of the explosion of feeling she had released upon her sisters. She saw them look at each other, saw the wide eyes and the slight paleness in Rachel’s cheeks and felt her own anger fade significantly, leaving only mortification.

“At least Julia thinks of me,” she muttered, making for the door rather than linger here with her two sisters and the tension she had now managed to create. “She is the one who purchased the ballgown for me for she knew that father had not permitted me to purchase one for myself.”

“Wait, Louisa, please!” Ruth got to her feet, hurrying towards Louisa as she continued to make her way to the door. “We did not know that father had refused you such a thing. We thought that you simply did not need or want one.”

Louisa closed her eyes and dropped her head, one hand on the door handle, the other hand now being grasped tightly by her sister. Rachel remained seated on the couch, however, not saying a single word.

“I have carried this burden for a long time, Ruth, and I ought not to have let myself speak with such inconsideration.” Louisa offered her sister a small, rueful smile, aware of the ache in her heart. “Forgive me. I – I shall go and make certain that my own gown fits me quite properly, even though I will not be considered by any gentlemen this evening.”

“Do not say that!” Ruth exclaimed, as Louisa opened the door, tugging her hand out of Ruth’s gentle grasp. “I am sure that many a gentleman would look at you, Louisa. It may be that they simply do not know that you are seeking a match!”

Louisa shook her head, tears in her eyes now which she attempted to hold back, albeit without success. "I have a duty to Rachel and to yourself," she said, her voice nothing but a throaty whisper as she looked into her sister's face. "That must come first. Please, forget all that I have said. It... it does not matter, not really." Refusing to listen to her sister's gentle protests, Louisa stepped out of the door and closed it tightly behind her, ashamed of the way she had lost her composure. She had said more than she had ever intended to say, had railed at both of her sisters without thought or consideration and now, for whatever reason, the weight of her responsibility to them sat all the heavier on her shoulders.

The new ballgown would be wonderful to wear and was very kind indeed of Julia, but it would not take away from the fact that Louisa herself had no prospect of even standing up with a gentleman at the ball this evening. She was a chaperone and one day soon, would be a spinster... and nothing, it seemed, could prevent that.