



A Duchess for a Vengeful Duke (Wives of Convenience #1)

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Category: Historical

Description: If this marriage means anything to you, stop keeping secrets from me.

His Grace, the Duke of Ryewood, returns to London on a mission for justice, determined to avenge his father's ruined legacy. But his plans are thrown into turmoil when he meets Lady Elaine Sutton, a woman as captivating as she is innocent in the schemes of her family.

Drawn to her in ways he never anticipated, Michael faces an impossible choice between duty and love, as secrets threaten to tear them apart.

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London was the last place Michael wanted to be...

He stared out of the bay window on the second floor of his stately London townhouse, surrounded by the recently refurbished and decorated private study. It had taken months of painstaking work to return the townhouse to its former glory and yet he was in no mood to enjoy the fruits of his labour. His mind was in a terrible state, all because of the city he had no choice but to return to.

The city wasn't at fault, in truth. It was its occupants who bothered him. The people who traversed the cobblestoned street, parading in rouge and waistcoats, feigning respectability. The very same people who would willingly frame an innocent man for their own gain, destroying a family in the process. Those were the very individuals he would have to face now that he had returned to London, and he was not particularly keen on it.

But even though London was not where he wanted to be, it was where he had to be. In order to uncover the truth and clear his father's name, he had to do whatever it took. Even if it meant diving into the den of snakes all over again.

Anger simmered deep in the pit of his stomach. It was never far from his grasp. In the past four years, he drew on it whenever he needed motivation to continue on his path of vengeance. And other times, it consumed him without thought, taking over every bit of his senses until he could focus on nothing else. The past reared its ugly head at the worst times and, on several occasions, he nearly turned from his path. The pain, anger, and sorrow were tearing him to shreds piece by piece.

But then he thought of his father and his dying moments.

He recalled his mother who withered away from grief after his father's death.

He thought of his sister, who remained positive and vibrant despite the social disgrace foisted upon their family and the impact it had on her prospects for marriage.

And he remembered very clearly why he was doing this.

Michael turned away from the window, facing the mahogany desk littered with correspondence and documents. Everything—or nearly everything—he required to establish his father's innocence lay scattered across the vast surface of the massive desk. He had spent countless hours poring over them, going through each and every one of them until he knew them by heart. He put the pieces together over and over again, in his mind and with the physical documents, but it was not enough. There was still one missing, one thing that would ensure he left this matter behind him with nothing but fulfilment.

He had to enact his vengeance. And Lady Elaine Sutton of Suthenshire was his key to doing exactly that.

Michael picked up a letter from an old country lord, whose estate he'd recently left before coming to London. It was one of many, of course. He'd gone from smoky coffeehouses to fabulous estates of retired officials all over England, gathering the evidence he needed to prove that the Earl of Suthenshire was guilty of deceit. That the convictions against Michael's father, the late Duke of Ryewood, were false. Just looking at them was enough to stir familiar hatred in his heart.

"Michael?" A soft knock accompanied the gentle voice on the other end of the door. Michael dropped the letter, turning to face his sister as she slipped into the room.

Her small frown smoothed away the moment she looked at him, but Michael knew it was never far behind. He had not been home for very long and Clarissa had taken to

following him around the house with worry written all over her face. It was a far cry from the little girl who had once followed him around in absolute adoration. The person before him was a woman now and she could tell that something was wrong.

Michael had no intention of disclosing the truth of his obsession anytime soon, so he forced a smile. “Yes? Is anything amiss?”

“Oh, nothing is amiss,” she assured him as she came forward. “I am merely here to keep you company, that is all.”

“Oh? Did you think that my years away from this place have turned me into the sort of man who cannot bear solitude?”

“No, I believe it has made you the kind of man who appreciates the company of a sister he holds so dear.”

Michael felt his smile turn genuine at the sparkle of mischief in Clarissa’s blue eyes. They were so much like their late mother’s, from the hue to the shape to the vibrancy it was always filled with. She shared many things with the late Duchess of Ryewood—the same honey-blond hair that cascaded down the length of her back, its fullness an envy of many other ladies her age, the same slim figure, and the same beautifully, pouty lips. Michael always knew that his sister would have men lining up at her feet for a chance to marry her and, now that she’d debuted for her first Season, that assumption was easily confirmed. He wouldn’t be surprised to find a dozen more flowers waiting for her downstairs.

Michael draped an arm around her shoulders, leading her away from the study, away from the desk. “To think that you’ve turned one-and-twenty and you are still so attached to our companionship.”

“I am not attached,” Clarissa denied immediately. “You have been travelling all over

London for four years and you have only returned three days ago. It is no fault of mine that I wish to spend time with you before the Ton catches wind that the Duke of Ryewood is in London.”

“So it is my fault then?”

“Will you not tell me why you were gone for so long?”

Michael nearly darkened at her words and had to remind himself that she was innocent in all of this. “I was attending to business,” he lied.

Clarissa’s frown deepened, her bottom lip jutting in her signature pout. In her youth, that expression was all she needed to get her way. But it wouldn’t work so easily today.

“Pray, spare me such a glance,” Michael chastised easily, pulling away from her as they made their way down the hallway with no destination in mind. He shoved his hands into his pockets. “You know the position of a duke is no easy one.”

“I know,” she sighed. “But I do not want what happened to Papa to happen to you as well.”

“It shall not,” he replied firmly.

“Will you promise me?”

Michael glanced down, noting how she batted her eyelashes at him. He laughed softly, rolling his eyes. “That will not sway me, and you are well aware of it.”

“How do you know it has not already swayed you?”

“Because I have not conceded to your demands.”

“Hm,” she hummed. “Will you be attending dinner with Aunt Beatrice and Uncle Henry? They asked me to confirm your attendance, even though I already assured them you would be there.”

“And why would you tell them such a thing?”

“Because it is the truth.”

Michael sighed. He had more planning to do. He had not been in London very long yet and he knew the rumors of his return were only just beginning. If he was seen out and about, then it would set ablaze all through the Ton. He wasn't ready for that as yet.

“Michael.” Clarissa took his hand, forcing them to stop. She gazed up at him with utmost seriousness. “We have missed you. Not only I, but Aunt Beatrice and Uncle Henry as well.”

The sadness in her voice tore at him a little. Michael was already responding before he gave it another thought. “I shall be there.”

Clarissa's smile was so quick, that he wondered if he had imagined her previous frown. “I shall inform them at once.”

Without warning, she reached up on her toes and pressed a kiss on his cheek before hurrying away with a pep in her step. Michael stared after her, realising a little too late what she'd just done.

He sighed, turning back the way he'd come. He supposed that over the four years they had been apart, Clarissa had only become more adept at getting her own way.

And he was no better at fighting her charms.

Though he supposed spending time with his aunt, uncle, and sister was the least he could do after being away for so long, he wouldn't have to worry about that for now. With dinnertime still a few hours away, he had plenty of time to peruse the documents and go over his plan.

Plenty of time to ensure that when he encountered Lady Elaine for the first time, he would be prepared.

Tears pricked Elaine's eyes for the second time that day. She fought them valiantly but a lone tear escaped, blazing a hot path down the side of her face. She quickly wiped it away before her father could see.

"Right here," she murmured, her throat thick with emotion. She hoped her father would not be able to tell.

With one arm wrapped around his waist, she helped his frail body settle into the plush armchair facing the window of the drawing room. She tried ignoring the fact that the armchair was now fading in colour, as was nearly everything else in the townhouse. The signs of neglect she'd once been able to ignore now showed themselves in every scratched surface, every faded and peeling wallpaper and every worn piece of furniture.

This particular chair had once been her favourite growing up. She would spend hours reading poetry and working on her embroidery in that very spot. But that was before her world came crashing down around her. Now it was the closest, most comfortable chair for her ailing father to rest in the drawing room when he was not confined to his bed.

“It is quite windy today, Papa,” she said softly, grateful that the lump was now cleared from her throat. She forced a weak smile to her lips. “Would you like me to open the windows?”

Lord Edward Sutton, the Earl of Suthenshire, looked up at her with cloudy eyes filled with something she couldn't name. Pain, she realised as her heart broke in two. He was in pain and she could do nothing to help him.

“No wind,” he rasped. She assumed he wanted to say ‘no window’ but couldn't manage the full sentence. His words ended with a fierce, dry cough.

“Very well,” she said. “I shall fetch your blanket.”

Edward clutched her skirt, the closest thing to his fingers, and held as firmly as he could. “Sit...sit with me...”

Elaine swallowed. For a moment, she could only stare at him, fighting the wave of sorrow that washed over her. Her once-proud father who wore his title and prestige like a badge of honour had been reduced to a skinny, frail man bested by illness. Watching him deteriorate before her eyes had only made the last few years far more terrible than it could have been.

Again, she forced a smile to her face but she doubted this one was very convincing. “Very well,” she said gently, claiming the armchair across from him. “I have been on my feet all morning. It would be nice to rest for a spell.”

Edward sank into the armchair as if he had been using the last of his strength to keep her from leaving. Elaine looked out the window. She couldn't bear to look at her father for too long. It always left her in tears.

“Thank you...my dear,” Edward rasped once more.

“Papa, you should save your strength.”

“I have nothing left. But you...”

Goodness, it was far too difficult to keep herself together today. Perhaps it was because today was the anniversary of her mother’s death five years ago. Each year she expected it to get easier and each year she was proven otherwise. Influenza had claimed her beautiful mother far too early and, shortly after, her father’s health began to decline. Their physicians worked tirelessly to figure out the root of his illness but, as their coffers ran dry, so did the help of those they hired. It wasn’t before long that Elaine was left to take care of her father herself.

“That is not quite true,” she replied, striving for a lightness in her voice, though it sounded flat to her ears. “You have Simon. He may be away at Eton but he would forsake it all, should he know you needed him.”

Edward shook his head slightly. His eyes often watered, a side effect of his illness the physicians had said, but the pure pain etched into his face made Elaine wonder if they were real tears.

“And there is Aunt Lorna and James. They are ever at hand to assist us. We are never truly alone.”

Edward shook his head again as the tears fell down his cheeks. Elaine thought he might have something else to say but then his eyes drifted close and sleep claimed him instantly. She paused for a moment, watching the staggered but very real rise and fall of his chest before she allowed herself to relax. She preferred him when he was sleeping, she decided. He always looked more at peace.

But it gave her a moment of peace that she did not want. With nothing but silence as her companion, there was no stopping the waves of emotional memories that

assaulted her. She would never forget the day she lost her mother, the day English Society lost the Countess of Suthenshire. She had been so well loved that nearly all of the Ton came to her wake.

Elaine never knew many of their names. They paid their respects but they did not care about the disgraced Earl and his children. They gossiped about them behind their backs and had little empathy for Elaine and Simon. Of course, Simon went off to Eton shortly after Edward fell ill so he didn't know the extent of their father's state. Nor did he have to suffer the scrutiny of their ruined reputation and a significant dip in finances. That was Elaine's burden to bear and hers alone.

She spent her days in the same manner. Taking care of her father, maintaining appearances in Society, keeping her brother ignorant of the true direness of their situation, and longing for the opportunity to save her family.

There was a gentle knock on the door. Elaine blinked, realising with a start that she'd started crying again. She wiped her tears quickly and croaked, "Come."

The door opened and their weathered butler, Paul, appeared. His loyalty to the family remained unwavering, even though so many of the other servants had left due to their inability to compensate them.

"Lord and Lady Abney to see you, my lady."

Elaine quickly stood. "Pray show them in," she told him hurriedly as she made her way over to the sofas arranged in the centre of the room. "And please prepare us some tea."

He nodded and slipped out of the room just as Lorna and James appeared. As usual, Lorna's presence was like a breath of fresh air, breezing into the room with a pep in her step. Her son, Elaine's cousin, followed closely behind, his expression as grim as

always.

As mother and son, they were always an interesting sight. The Dowager Viscountess of Abney rarely let her feathers get ruffled, a lively spirit capable of improving the mood of anyone she was near. Quite unlike James, the current Viscount of Abney, who viewed life through serious and critical eyes. Despite his austere demeanour, he was one of the kindest, most gentle people Elaine knew.

Then again, she did not know many people, since she spent most of her days cooped up in the house.

“Elaine, my darling.” Lorna swept to her side and placed kisses on both cheeks like she always did. “How is it that each time I see you, you grow more and more beautiful?”

Elaine flushed. “It is such a pleasure to see you, Aunt Lorna. And you as well, James.”

“Elaine,” James greeted gruffly. He ran a scrutinous gaze down the length of her. “Are you well?”

“As well as I can be,” she confessed, settling into a seat. “Though I was curious when I might hear from the two of you again.”

“Mother is to be blamed for that,” James said, sinking into the sofa next to Lorna. “She feels the need to entertain every one of her friends whenever they pay her a visit. And they are always paying her a visit.”

“Oh, do not be envious, James,” Lorna huffed. “It is most unbecoming of you. If you wish to make as many friends as me, you need only say so and I shall gladly teach you my ways.”

“I do not wish to learn your ways.”

“I would beg to differ,” she huffed, laughing. “It is nothing to be ashamed of, you know.”

James gritted his teeth, getting visibly annoyed. Elaine watched in fascination. She couldn’t understand how James was so oblivious to what his mother was doing. Anyone could see that Lorna liked getting him riled and yet he walked into her trap every time.

“Famous last words of an envious man,” Lorna sang and laughed when James grunted in frustration. “He likes to get himself in a huff,” she said to Elaine. “Let us ignore him. We are here for you, after all.”

Elaine smiled. The last time they’d spoken, Lorna had mentioned sponsoring Elaine’s debut for the London Season. Elaine had spent days imagining what that would be like. She’d hoped to debut at the proper age of ten-and-nine or twenty like most ladies of her station but, given her situation, she supposed she should count herself lucky that she still got the chance to do it at one-and-twenty.

As if she heard the direction of Elaine’s thoughts, Lorna said, “We cannot wait any longer. Any older and you will lose half your potential prospects and that simply cannot be done.”

“I am grateful for the opportunity, Aunt Lorna,” Elaine told her. “But I’m afraid I must admit that I am unsure of what exactly I should do.”

“Oh, goodness, it is such a pity that Margaret left us so soon. She should have been here to guide you. It is not fair that she shall not get the chance to see you debut.”

Lorna’s shoulders sagged with sadness and a moment of silence hung heavy in the

room. As Elaine's maternal aunt, Elaine knew how close Lorna had been with her mother. Lorna was still mourning her as much as Elaine was.

As usual, James was the one to bring them back to reality. "There is nothing we can do to change the past," he stated, though his voice was a little softer than usual. "But we can fix the present. And presently, Elaine, you need to grasp every opportunity you can to get married."

Elaine nodded, determination coursing through her veins. She had to get married. It was the only way to save her family. She was their only hope. Even if her brother were to return and claim responsibility for the earldom, he would be managing a husk of a legacy. But she had the chance to make things right.

It no longer mattered that she had once dreamed of marrying for love; that cherished dream was now painfully beyond her grasp.

"I am ready," she said firmly.

"Marvelous," Lorna chirped. "Lord and Lady Jones' ball is upon the morrow—"

"Upon the morrow?" Elaine gasped.

"Oh, don't worry, darling. I have arranged for everything already. I have a number of dresses for you to be fitted in for the ball, but we shall have to make time to visit the modiste shortly."

Elaine glanced worriedly at James. "Is not the morrow a trifle too soon?"

"It is never too soon," Lorna answered her with a dismissive wave of her hand. "The quicker you are out in Society, the quicker you will be noticed by potential suitors. We do not want them turning their attention to other ladies before you show, now do

we?”

“I suppose not...” Yet it did little to quell the sudden burst of anxiousness trembling within her. She had not expected to have to do it tomorrow.

“There is nothing to worry about, Elaine,” Lorna gently reassured her, clearly sensing her apprehension. “You are a beautiful girl with a lovely, demure disposition—”

“Demure?” James echoed incredulously.

“Yes, demure. At least, that is what the gentlemen will think when they meet her. Men love demureness.”

“Is it not best for me to be my true self?” Elaine asked.

“Yes, of course. But in a demure manner, of course. Worry not, darling, I shall be right there to guide you.”

“And I shall spread the word that you are seeking a husband,” James spoke up.

As Elaine balked— for even she recognised how outrageous that was—Lorna sighed. “You shall do no such thing. You would frighten them all away. We do not want anyone to presume she is desperate.”

James frowned. “But she is desperate.”

“But they need not be aware of it!” Lorna exclaimed. She caught herself and drew in a slow breath. “James, my dear, you should simply focus on securing her a respectable dowry and utilising your connections to ensure we remain invited to any forthcoming events.”

James seemed bemused by Lorna's impatience, which only amused Elaine. While Lorna tended to poke James' buttons for fun, James seemed to be utterly clueless when he did the same to his mother.

But he conceded with a nod. "Very well."

"Lovely." Lorna turned her attention back to Elaine, smiling. "Now, is there anything you would like to inquire of us?"

Elaine frowned in contemplation before shaking her head. "I have no questions. Whatever you instruct me to do, I shall do without hesitation. I am merely grateful for all your assistance."

"You are family, darling," Lorna murmured. "How could I face Margaret in my sleep if I allowed her family to fall to ruin?"

Elaine managed a smile at that, somehow. "Truthfully, I wished I was attending the Season under better circumstances. I longed to be free to choose a gentleman with whom I have fallen in love, rather than merely the first suitable match who might aid in saving my family."

Lorna reached out to grasp Elaine's hand. "Perhaps you will be fortunate enough to receive both."

Elaine knew better than to believe she could be so lucky. The past few years had proven that she was not the most favourable person in London. But she hoped that what little luck she did possess would be revealed in the form of a kind husband who could save her from ruin.

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The Earl and Countess of Belington stood facing the front door in their opulent foyer the moment Michael entered. He took one look at their bright smiles and knew that he was in for it.

“Michael!”

Beatrice was the first to break. She flew from her husband’s side, flinging her arms around Michael and pulling him into a warm embrace. The force of her hug was enough to send him staggering back, holding his hands out to steady himself.

“You’re going to topple over!” Clarissa exclaimed as she came up from behind.

“Oh, no I won’t,” Beatrice dismissed easily. “Michael must have grown three feet taller since the last time I saw him. This big, strapping young man is more than capable of keeping us both on our feet, is he not?”

The question was aimed at Michael, he knew. He sighed. “It is nice to see you as well, Aunt Beatrice.”

“Is that how you greet your aunt whom you have not seen in years?” She pulled away, putting both hands on her hips. “Where is love? Where is the excitement? And why must I hear of your return to London from Clarissa and not from you?”

Before he could think of a response, Henry approached from behind her, grinning from ear to ear. “Now, now, dear,” he said placatingly. “I am certain Michael has a perfectly reasonable explanation for leaving his loved ones behind without a proper farewell, while only sending two or three letters every year. Is that not true,

Michael?”

Clarissa giggled behind her hand as she watched the exchange. Michael would have laughed as well, only he knew his uncle was utterly serious.

“I do have a reason,” Michael confessed, though that was the extent of what he intended to say. “I presume you two have missed me?”

“Oh, dear,” Clarissa murmured. “Wrong response.”

Beatrice’s eyes were slowly growing wide. “Miss you? Oh, goodness no! We did not think of you at all in the years you were gone. Not once did we wonder if you were ever coming back. No, not at all.”

“As a matter of fact,” Henry joined in, his tone dripping with the same heavy sarcasm as his wife. “We did not even remember that you were not around. Had Clarissa not told us that you were back, we would have thought you never left!”

“All right,” Michael sighed. “I understand.”

“Does he understand, Henry?” Beatrice asked, turning to her husband.

“I do not think that he does,” Henry played along.

Clarissa finally decided to step in. “All right, you two, don’t be too hard on him. You know Michael is not the type to do anything on a whim. He will explain himself in due time, I’m sure.”

“And I certainly cannot do so on an empty stomach,” Michael chimed in.

Only then did they relent, much to his relief. If given the chance, they would keep it

up for the rest of the night.

“Come then,” Beatrice huffed. “I shan’t disgrace your parents’ honour by failing to keep you fed under our roof.”

“That is the only reason she is feeding you,” Henry whispered to Michael, eyes glinting with mischief.

Michael shook his head, relaxing as he followed behind his aunt and uncle, Clarissa by his side. He knew he’d missed them, but he hadn’t realised just how much until now. They were like his secondary parents and easily slipped into the role when their real parents passed away. Michael thought it fitting since they’d never been blessed with children of their own.

So they would often spoil Michael in his youth. Even though Clarissa was the beloved only daughter, Michael was the firstborn and the heir. He’d received such heartwarming love and adoration from his aunt and uncle that there wasn’t anything he wouldn’t do for them. Which made their sarcastic ribbing sting a little. He should have done more to keep them from worrying about him.

They gathered in the dining room and, before long, the first course was served. Michael was fully prepared when Beatrice fixed him with a hard gaze and said, “Now, pray tell, what you have been up to.”

“Traveling,” Michael answered nonchalantly, prodding at his beans. “Was that not apparent?”

“Why would you not venture beyond England then, like many gentlemen of your age do? I would scarcely deem that a Grand Tour.”

“That is because it was not meant to be one. How could I learn the customs and

cultures of other countries when I do not fully know my own?"

Beatrice didn't believe him. That much was obvious in the way she narrowed her eyes at him.

But Clarissa spoke next, rescuing him from another question. "It is just as well, Aunt Beatrice," she said. "He has not missed much in his absence. And he's returned just in time for the London Season."

Beatrice sat up straighter. "Does that mean you are ready to settle down?"

Michael didn't dare show an ounce of emotion at that. "I am neither ready nor am I against it. Whatever happens, shall happen. It is Clarissa we should focus on this Season, however."

"Clarissa seems to be doing just fine," Henry spoke up. "I have already had several gentlemen approach me with the intention of marrying her."

Clarissa's eyes widened, her fork dropping limply from her grasp. "Already? The Season has just begun! Is it Lord Gregory?"

"How did you know?"

"Oh, goodness." She put her hand to her temples in consternation. "That man is quite persistent."

"Who is Lord Gregory?" Michael asked, grateful that the attention was no longer on him.

"He is the second son of the Earl of Palwood," Henry explained. "And he is quite smitten with Clarissa. The same night he met her, he asked me for my permission to

ask for her hand in marriage.”

“I hope you said no,” Clarissa muttered.

“I did not say no,” Henry admitted with a cheeky smile. “But do not fret; I did not say yes either.”

“That hardly makes me feel any better,” she grumbled.

“Pay that no mind, Clarissa,” Michael told her. “If he wishes to receive any blessing, it will have to come from me. And if you do not like this Lord Gregory fellow, then neither do I.”

Clarissa visibly brightened at that, but Beatrice rolled her eyes. “You do not know him.”

“I do not need to know him. Clarissa does. And she does not like him. So that is that.”

“So will you simply dismiss any gentleman who fancies her merely because she does not fancy him back?”

“Yes.”

Beatrice sighed. “I wish you all the luck in your endeavours.”

“Mayhap I shall find a more suitable gentleman at Lady Jones’ ball upon the morrow's evening,” Clarissa mused aloud. “The men I have met so far are quite lacking. Will you chaperone me, Michael?”

“I believe Aunt Beatrice will be better suited to act as your chaperone,” Michael responded. Just as her shoulders sagged with disappointment, he added, “But I shall

be attending alongside you.”

“You will?” Clarissa squealed. “How wonderful! You will be all anyone will be able to talk about. The much-discussed return of the infamous Duke of Ryewood.”

Even though her words were meant in jest, the reality was far more sombre. He’d planned it all, of course. Lord and Lady Jones were notorious for throwing grand balls, that nearly the entirety of the Ton would be in attendance. If he wanted to be noticed, tomorrow’s ball was the best way to do so.

Yet, his apprehension simmered deep within him nonetheless. Rubbing noses and smiling in hypocritical faces was the last thing he wanted to do.

Thankfully, the conversation centred around Clarissa and her numerous suitors for the rest of the dinner, but Michael knew that it was far from over. Henry kept giving him curious looks and he knew he would have to face his questioning sooner or later.

As it happened, no more questions were directed his way for the remainder of the dinner. But as it drew to an end, Henry seized the opportunity to ask Michael to share a bottle of brandy with him in the parlour while the ladies went to the drawing room.

Michael accepted out of courtesy. He knew that he couldn’t hold the truth to himself any longer. And if there was anyone he wanted on his side, it was his closest uncle.

Clarissa and Beatrice chatted incessantly as they made their way to the drawing room, talking about today’s fashion and whether they were impressed with the new changes. Michael and Henry were quiet, that silence lasting even when they entered the parlour and Henry went about making them their drinks.

Michael sat in a high-backed armchair and waited.

“Tell me what you have been up to,” Henry stated, his voice devoid of any humour. He wasn’t serious very often, but when he was, it was a force to be reckoned with.

Michael sipped his brandy, letting the smooth liquor warm his insides before he responded. “I’m sure you can guess what has consumed my every thought since the day my father was found guilty of treason.”

Henry frowned, his brows drawing together as concern clouded his gaze. “Surely you have not spent all this time chasing shadows? It is such a futile ambition, Michael, to invest one’s soul in what cannot be caught.”

Michael scoffed. “Were it merely a shadow, there would be little to pursue. Yet in seeking to prove his innocence, I have traversed the breadth of England, gathering overwhelming evidence that my father was condemned unjustly, his trial nothing short of a travesty.” His voice lowered, laced with both frustration and fierce determination, the weight of his quest palpable in the charged air between them.

“Then why haven’t you brought this evidence to light?” Henry pressed.

Michael took another slow sip of his brandy, the fiery liquid barely dulling the edge of his simmering fury. “Because it is not enough,” he replied, his voice tight. “I need more than letters and rumours—I need irrefutable proof. I need a confession from the man responsible for Father’s ruin.”

Henry sighed. “Lord Suthenshire is not the man he once was, Michael. He has aged and is ailing.”

“I have no sympathy for a man who would condemn another to rot in a dungeon on false charges for the sake of political gain! Father suffered at his hands—and for what? Eventually, Suthenshire never gained the power he so desperately sought.”

Henry's gaze filled with sadness. Michael knew he was right. The House of Lords was filled with vipers that would easily tear someone down for more power. The late duke had been the last morally upright gentleman in that place and they ensured that his life would be ruined, all so that he could no longer oppose them.

The Earl of Suthenshire would quickly know how wrong it was to play with the lives of others.

"What shall you do then?" Henry asked softly. Michael noticed that his uncle had not yet touched his drink.

"I intend to approach his daughter, Lady Elaine."

Henry's brow furrowed. "You will seduce her?"

"If I must," Michael replied, his voice cold with determination. "But let us hope it does not come to that. For now, I intend to get close to her, close enough to uncover the full truth of what transpired."

"The consequences of such an action may be far greater than you fathom, Michael."

Michael frowned. "All because the earl is ill?"

"The family has been disgraced," Henry explained with a shake of his head, a grave expression settling on his features. "Lord Suthenshire's action after your father's conviction led him down a path of terrible financial decisions. He has far more debt than he will ever be able to overcome and he has severed ties with a number of influential gentlemen because of that. Associating with his family may only tarnish your own standing further."

Michael paused, weighing his uncle's words. He had heard whispers of the earl's

downfall, much to his satisfaction, though he had not realised the full extent of it. Still, he steeled himself...

“The benefits outweigh the risks,” he said determinedly.

Henry’s expression remained doubtful. “The fragile state of the dukedom’s reputation further complicates matters. Our name cannot bear much scrutiny right now.”

“For now I am working to restore that reputation, starting with bringing the truth to light.”

“And what of the earl’s daughter? Do you deem it wise to entangle an innocent in this web of vengeance?”

Michael didn’t dare let his true thoughts on that matter show, saying, “Whether I involve her or not, she will suffer once the truth is revealed. I shall see to it.”

Henry said nothing to that, finally taking a sip of his drink. The silence simmered in the room but Michael hardly noticed it. His fury, which was never too far away, threatened to spill over at any moment. Taking small sips of the brandy was all that calmed him.

He quelled the pinch of guilt at the thought of Lady Elaine. Henry was right. She was not to blame for her father’s errors. However, if she could assist him in uncovering the full truth, then at least she might play a part in her father’s atonement.

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“Michael.”

Michael glanced at his sister, immediately alert at the softness of her voice. They’d left Belington House a short while ago, in mostly good spirits, but now he could tell that something was bothering Clarissa. She stared at him in the dim light of the carriage, hands folded tightly in her lap.

“What is it?” he asked.

Her frown deepened and she drew in a slow breath, as if she was bracing herself for something. “I overheard your conversation with Uncle Henry.”

For a brief moment, Michael only stared at her in bemusement. Then he realised that it meant she’d overheard his plan and had learned of the true reason he had been away for so long.

Quelling his irritation, he looked out the window once more. “I see.”

“Michael...” Clarissa’s hand touched his, squeezing. “You must know that this is not the right way.”

“Do not preach to me, Clarissa,” Michael replied, striving to contain his anger. It was alarming how swiftly he would lose his temper whenever this subject arose. “If you knew of the horrors our father suffered at the hands of that deceitful man, you would be encouraging me.”

“I cannot encourage you to be so deceitful yourself,” she said softly. “I must admit

that it was not proper of me to eavesdrop, but I do not regret it. Hearing you speak with such vengeance in your heart appalled me. This is not the Michael I used to know.”

“The Michael you knew died the day Papa did, Clarissa.” He gripped her hand, facing her fully. “You are kind and pure and far too virtuous for his treacherous world. Leave this to me. Pray, do not burden yourself with thoughts of what I intend to do.”

“I cannot seem to shake this dread,” she cried. “From the moment you departed till the day you returned, I have been consumed with concern. It is clear you are no longer the man you once were, and now I understand why. Have you given any thought to what might become of you should your scheme come to light?”

“It shall not come to light,” he pushed out, releasing her hand. “And I shall get what I want before anyone is any wiser.”

“And the innocent lady you intend on involving? What of her? She may very well be ruined by what you’ll do.”

“It is only what she deserves.”

Clarissa reeled back, shocked. “You cannot truly believe that. Her father’s actions should not reflect on her.”

“Do you know this lady?”

“I do not, nor do I need to. But I know you and—”

“You do not know me, Clarissa! You cannot possibly know me if you fail to comprehend my burning need for vengeance. And you cannot fathom the countless sleepless nights I have endured while meticulously piecing together my evidence,

dispelling the falsehoods woven around our father's name. Our righteous father who has never acted in vindication and yet suffered at the hands of those wolves."

As the carriage rattled past a lamppost, light spilling inside for a fleeting moment, Michael caught tears shining in her eyes.

Still, her voice remained strong. "Papa would not approve of this."

"Papa is not here to stop me. I am doing this for him. For you. For our family. To restore his name and our previous glory. To ensure that those who did such evil will not get away with it." Michael sighed, leaning his head against the seat. His temples were beginning to throb. "This is important to me, Clarissa. More than words can express. I need you to understand."

Clarissa was quiet for a long moment. "I do understand, Michael," she replied softly. "But even so, I cannot, in good conscience, agree."

Michael decided not to respond to that, ignoring the stab of hurt he felt at those words. As his sister, he'd hoped that she would not oppose his plans when she eventually learned of it. But he should have known better. Clarissa was virtuous, her mind and heart uncorrupted by what happened to their family. Michael could not say the same for himself.

He ignored the faint voice in the back of his mind that warned him he was on the wrong path. He had not spent years chasing this vengeance to be dissuaded by the morally upstanding. Getting his revenge was his only reprieve, the only thing capable of bringing him peace.

He would stop at nothing to achieve that.

Edward's chamber was shrouded in darkness, as he preferred, allowing barely enough light for Elaine to see as she helped him to his bed.

He'd spent most of the day in the drawing room, slipping in and out of sleep, murmuring to himself whenever he was awake. Now Elaine wondered if he might have fallen asleep on her again because he felt heavier than usual, his body weight pressing down on her shoulder.

"Nearly there," she murmured, mostly to herself. She could barely make out the shadowy outline of his bed in the darkness.

At last, she felt the cool brush of the sheets against her knees. Bracing herself against the mattress, Elaine helped her father into the bed, adjusting his stiff limbs until he was settled under the sheets. She tucked him in, certain that he must be deep in sleep by now.

As she began to walk away, his hand caught her wrist with surprising strength. It fell a moment later.

"Papa?" she spoke in the darkness.

She could not see his face but a moment later, his gravelly voice broke through. "Sit with me a moment."

He sounded clearer than usual. Tonight must be a good night. Elaine nodded and quickly claimed the chair that was always by his bed. She would often sit there during the day with her embroidery while he rested, or when she would read to him.

"Yes, Papa," she breathed, taking his hand in hers.

He cleared his throat. Elaine held her breath in anticipation. "I am...so proud of you,

my dear.”

Tears rushed to her eyes, much to her alarm. She’d done so much crying today already, she couldn’t believe she had any tears left in her. “Why?” she asked, trying to sound light. “I have not done anything for you to be proud of.”

“You have grown into a beautiful young lady,” he rasped. “You have not left me to rot by myself.”

“Papa! Why would I ever do that?”

“There is so much you do not know, my dear.”

Elaine didn’t like the sound of that. She especially didn’t like how morose he sounded. She tried changing the topic. “I will be attending my first ball tomorrow evening.”

“Ho...how?”

“Aunt Lorna and James have agreed to sponsor me this Season. I am committed to finding a wealthy husband who will be able to help us, Papa. Perhaps I may even enjoy myself in the process.”

“That is good. You should enjoy yourself. You should be happy.”

“I am happy,” she lied, though she couldn’t understand why. It was evident that their circumstances were far from joyful.

“I want you to be happier,” her father pushed out weakly. “I have made so many mistakes during my life. I do not want you to suffer from them.”

“What sort of mistakes?” she asked tentatively, uncertain if she truly wished to know.

Edward said nothing. After a moment, a sob escaped his lips.

“Papa?” Elaine gasped, filled with alarm.

“I am tired,” he told her. “I wish to rest now.”

“Papa...”

“Go now. Rest. You have a lot of preparations to do for your ball tomorrow.”

She wiped her tears and nodded, even though he couldn’t see her. “I shall tell you all about it upon my return.”

“That would be nice,” he said and she hoped that was truly a smile she heard in his voice.

A few seconds later, his breathing grew loud but even, a clear indication that he had fallen asleep. Elaine stayed there for a while longer, thinking about all he’d said. Conversations did not happen often lately and when they did, they were always short-lived and unimportant. This one was different. Her father rarely spoke of his past.

At last, she stood and left the room, when she was certain her tears had dried. But by the time she made it to her bedchamber, they’d returned with full force. Hearing her father speak just now only reminded her of when he had been strong and healthy, when his illness had not turned him into a shell of his former self. When her mother had been alive, her brother had been home, and she’d truly been happy.

There was no changing the past, however. But as she crawled into bed and let her tears lull her to sleep, Elaine resolved to let her present dictate her future.

Grenshaw House screamed opulence, from the white-washed brick walls to the tiered balconies, to the long driveway lined with painted stone and manicured shrubbery. Michael had never attended a ball hosted by Lord and Lady Jones, but he had certainly heard the rumours. He was well aware of what others said about their grand ballroom and their endless wealth, how such balls often ended well into the morning because there was just simply so much to do. As his carriage pulled to a stop near the front of the house, Michael wondered if he would have anticipated such an event if his plan for revenge had not been simmering in his mind.

“Michael.”

Clarissa’s soft voice drew a weary sigh to his lips. He knew what she was going to say simply from her tone.

“Leave me be, Clarissa,” he said to her, watching as footmen approached their carriage. “If you do not intend to support my quest then at the very least, do not lecture me about it.”

“I cannot help but lecture you. It is what younger sisters do.”

“An older sister, perhaps,” he murmured. “But as I am the eldest, you would do well to listen to me.”

She was already shaking her head. “Do not purport to be wiser than me, Michael. Not when you are still on your insane quest for retribution.”

“Insane, she says,” he scoffed.

She sighed. “I only wish for you to see that there must be a better way.”

“There is no better way. And I shall not be convinced to the contrary.”

She sighed again but Michael ignored her. The footman was upon them now, opening their door. Michael nodded absently at him as he climbed out of the carriage and then helped Clarissa out. Right behind them, Beatrice and Henry were exiting their marked carriage as well.

They waited for the two of them to approach before they turned to the house, falling in line with the other arriving guests. The Jones seemed to have an unlimited amount of footmen because they kept pouring out of the house, assisting newcomers out of their carriages and escorting them to the ballroom.

A soft sonata wafted through the hallway as Michael approached, Clarissa on his arm. They were brought to a small flight of stairs that led to a set of double doors. A podgy footman in a black and blue livery bowed at their approach before he swung the doors open.

“His Grace the Duke of Ryewood and Lady Clarissa,” he bellowed to the guests down below.

Michael stepped into the ballroom, his eyes sweeping over the sea of faces that turned to assess him. He did not focus on a single one of them, yet that familiar hum of resentment welled within him as he descended the spiral staircase to the left, slowly so as to accommodate Clarissa’s long gown. He was well aware of their unspoken thoughts: the new duke had returned, seeking to salvage the remnants of his broken title.

“Smile, Michael,” Clarissa whispered to him. “You look downright terrifying.”

“Good,” he grunted right before stepping into the thick of the guests.

The ball seemed to have just begun but the ballroom was already teeming with life. His height afforded him advantages, however. He could easily see over most of their heads, capable of picking out a number of familiar faces. But there was only one person he truly wished to see.

And he had just found her.

Lady Elaine Sutton, daughter of the Earl of Suthenshire, and the key to executing his plan. His extensive research of her and her family made it easy to spot her, but he wasn't as prepared for the gut-punching reaction to the sight of her.

He hadn't expected her to be so beautiful.

Of course, her beauty was unimportant, he reminded himself. He did not intend to seduce her if it could be avoided. Yet, it was quite difficult to ignore how she stood as a beacon of beauty among the common folk. Long auburn hair that sat in delicate curls around her face, most of it pinned up to dangle down her back. He could not see the colour of her eyes but it was easy to see that she had porcelain skin, a small nose, and such lovely, pink lips currently set in a line. Her eyes were round, darting around the room as if she could not figure out what to look at first, yet she held such regal grace in her slim figure that it was hard to believe she'd not done this a dozen times before.

"Michael?"

Beatrice's voice brought him back. He hadn't noticed that they'd approached, hadn't even heard when they were announced.

Beatrice was frowning at him. "What are your thoughts?"

Michael cleared his throat, annoyed by the trance he'd slipped under. "About what?"

“About Lord Hanson.”

Michael blinked at her.

“Lord Hanson,” Henry supplied slowly. “He just approached Clarissa asking for the first dance. Did you not see him?”

“I...hadn’t noticed.”

“How could you not have noticed that?” Clarissa asked incredulously, frowning at him as if he’d just grown a second head.

He didn’t blame her. He couldn’t understand it himself, even though he was well aware of the reason.

“I suppose I was lost in thought,” he answered noncommittally. “Was I to judge the man based upon his request to dance?”

“Well, yes,” Beatrice said. “It is your duty to ensure only the proper gentlemen are given the honour of Clarissa’s time, you know.”

“I hardly think one dance will tell me anything I want to know about him,” Michael said.

“And I am more than capable of determining that myself,” Clarissa joined in. “I happen to find Lord Hanson quite handsome and kind.”

“You say that about everyone,” Beatrice bemoaned.

“Not everyone,” Clarissa protested. “I certainly did not say that about Lord Gregory...”

Michael stopped listening, his gaze trailing back to Lady Elaine. She was in the same spot, still looking around as if she didn't know what to do with herself. At that moment, an older lady approached her. It took Michael a moment to recognise her as the Dowager Viscountess of Abney, Lady Elaine's maternal aunt. The man who stood at her side bore a striking similarity to her and he assumed he must be the current Viscount of Abney and Lady Elaine's cousin.

They seemed close, Michael observed. Lady Abney said something to Lady Elaine, which made her smile briefly. The act lit her face a thousand times brighter than the look of apprehension she wore before. Michael suddenly struggled to breathe.

Lord Abney stood by his cousin's side, not partaking in the conversation between the two women yet hovering in an imposing manner. His gaze skimmed the crowd, falling on Michael. Their eyes met and Lord Abney's narrowed.

Michael did not look away right away, though it bothered him that he got caught staring. He didn't need to draw attention to himself, especially not from someone who appeared to be an overbearing family member of the lady he wished to approach. He would have to wait until Lord Abney was not by his cousin's side before he made his move.

Michael's heart trembled with anticipation at the thought. He had been planning this for far too long, years of painstaking detail all leading to this very night.

At last, the beginning of the end.

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Elaine was entirely unprepared for this.

The room buzzed with sound. The incessant chatter mingled with the soft strains of music, making it nearly impossible for her to think clearly. It felt as though the grand room she had entered was shrinking by the minute, crammed with fan-wielding ladies and waistcoat-clad gentlemen, their voices weaving together into a vibrant tapestry of sound. The man standing by the staircase continued announcing more guests with seemingly no end in sight.

She was hot and she lamented the fact that she did not have a fan on her person. Thankfully, she'd spied a set of terrace doors when she'd arrived. If she needed a reprieve, she could head there.

For now, she tried to be content with standing awkwardly by a large potted plant, pretending she didn't want to hide behind its broad leaves. This environment overwhelmed her senses, making her silent home seem like a monastery.

"Ah, there you are!" Lorna's approach immediately brightened Elaine's mood. They'd arrived together but Lorna had dragged James off to meet one of her friends and her daughter. Judging by the scowl on James' face, he was not very pleased with the interaction.

"Darling, you shouldn't hide in the corner like this," Lorna went on to say, putting a hand on the small of Elaine's back to guide her forward. "You look as beautiful as a blooming flower tonight. You should be seen! Shouldn't she, James?"

James crossed his arms, his gaze fixed ahead. "I have noticed a number of gentlemen

looking your way since we've entered. I would not be surprised if they soon begin approaching to write their name on your dance card."

"And I hope that when they do, you will make yourself scarce?" Lorna asked with a raised brow.

James frowned at her. "Why would I do that?"

"Because your scowl will only frighten them away," Lorna said patiently.

"If they are so easily scared away then good riddance. That will only make my job easier."

Lorna sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. Elaine bit her bottom lip to suppress a laugh.

"It is as James says, Aunt Lorna," she said, rushing to her cousin's defence. "I doubt any gentleman who truly wants my company will be deterred by James' presence."

"You are the last person who should be agreeing with him," Lorna sighed.

"I only see the merit in his argument, that's all." Elaine felt herself relax. Standing alone at a ball where she knew no one had filled her with tension.

At that moment, a hush fell over the ballroom. Elaine looked at the entrance to see a broad-shouldered man with greying temples and a sharp chin step through the door just as he was announced as the Marquess of Grovington. At his side stood a beautiful, blond-haired lady, smiling down at the ballroom like a queen addressing her court. She was introduced as his daughter, Lady Isabella.

The air in the room changed as if everyone was held in a trance. Even Lorna and

James were looking as father and daughter descended the staircase to join the masses. Elaine couldn't understand it. Clearly, they were important people, though she wasn't certain why.

"It has just gotten far more competitive," Lorna whispered to her. "Let us hope you will be seated beside a decent gentleman during dinner."

"Dinner?" Elaine inquired curiously.

"Yes, did I not show you the invitation? There will be dancing, then dinner, then we shall all convene in the drawing room. It will be a long night."

Elaine bolstered her resolve. It didn't matter that the noise and people were overwhelming her. The more time she spent at this ball, the greater her chances of attracting a gentleman willing to wed her. She couldn't waste this opportunity.

"Come." Lorna took her by the arm. "I already have a few gentlemen I could introduce you to. James, you stay put."

"I shall do no such thing."

Lorna sighed, shaking her head but said nothing as she walked off with Elaine by her side and James on their heels. Elaine's heart began to race as Lorna brought her to a group of gentlemen who immediately ceased their conversation upon her approach.

"Lord Penly, Lord Millbury, Lord Thornbush, please meet my niece, Lady Elaine."

Lord Penly, Lord Millbury, and Lord Thornbush all seemed happy to meet her. They were kind, taking her hand individually to kiss the back of it and only Lord Millbury balked at James' towering presence. They asked her simple questions about how her evening was progressing and questions about what she was interested in. Elaine

entertained them with a polite smile, relaxing as the conversation wore on. They all seemed like decent gentlemen, she decided halfway through.

But she felt no spark with any of them. Lord Penly and Lord Millbury were handsome enough, Lord Thornbush bearing harsher features, but she didn't care much about one's appearance. Deep down, she harboured the hope that she would meet a gentleman who made her heart skip a beat, who brought an easy smile to her lips, who made her feel at ease and protected. She felt none of that with these men.

Such things do not matter, she reminded herself as she nodded along to Lord Thornbush's tale of his Grand Tour. I am here to find a husband. Not to fall in love.

But convincing herself of that was harder than she expected.

Lorna observed the interaction, pleased, but she didn't let it go on forever. She slipped in at an opportune time and bade the men farewell before leading Elaine away to another acquaintance.

"They took too long to ask for a dance," Lorna remarked. "They shall return, I am certain. I believe they took a liking to you."

"I would certainly hope so," Elaine murmured, feeling a twinge of nervousness.

"Worry not, my darling. We must make use of our time before the dancing begins so that you are seen by as many gentlemen as possible."

"I cannot help but liken this to a prized pig being paraded at the market," James drawled from behind.

Lorna stopped and sent her son a scathing look. "Pray, go and divert yourself elsewhere, James. I can manage this alone."

James was about to protest, Elaine knew. Yet she recognised it made little sense for him to follow them about, though she appreciated his dedication. Before he could say anything, she said, “It’s all right, James. I will be fine.”

He didn’t look convinced but he finally gave her a stiff nod before walking off.

Lorna let out a breath. “Feels much lighter, does it not?”

Elaine chuckled softly at that, allowing herself to be swept away.

Michael was drawing closer to her. It was strategic at first. He had no intention of approaching her directly and had already devised a plan for making the introduction. Thus, he moved slowly around the ballroom, keeping a watchful eye on Lady Elaine and Lady Abney.

The dowager viscountess seemed determined to introduce Lady Elaine to every gentleman in attendance. Michael felt a bolt of relief when Lord Abney was sent away. That was the first step of his plan and they’d made it easy for him. What troubled him was their eagerness, as they moved from one gentleman to another, capturing the interest of nearly everyone they encountered.

Something about watching Lord Balor’s eyes trail after Lady Elaine unsettled him.

Michael dismissed the sensation and moved even closer. Soon enough, he found himself standing just a few feet away from her, pretending to enjoy a glass of wine. He was close enough to notice her swan-like neck and her tendency to clasp her hands behind her, then in front, then behind. A nervous act, he realised. Above all, he was close enough to overhear her.

“The night has hardly begun and I already feel dreadfully tired,” he heard her say. Her voice was melodic, soft yet firm, carrying easily. Michael straightened, bothered by the way it affected him.

“You will have to get used to that, my darling,” Lady Abney said. “These things are often long and drawn out, though I’m sure Lady Jones will keep us entertained.”

“When will the dancing begin?”

“Soon, I’m sure. Are you prepared?”

Michael slid his eyes to the side, watching as she nodded, then shook her head. “I am not,” she confessed. “It has been so long since I’ve danced. I’m afraid I will not remember the steps.”

“There’s nothing to it, darling. You simply need to let the gentleman guide you.”

“That sounds easier said than done.”

“You shall know soon enough, I am certain.”

Michael watched as she clasped her hands behind her once more, a worried frown furrowing her brow. Before she could say anything, an elderly man approached her.

Michael recognised him, though their last interaction had occurred while he was still the heir to the dukedom. Lord Weatherby seemed as ancient as time itself, his lined, pockmarked face unchanged despite the years that had passed. The only difference Michael noticed was that he was slightly bent now and would certainly do from the use of a cane.

Still, his steps were sure as he approached Lady Elaine and Lady Abney. Lady

Abney's smile was swift, yet Michael's sharp gaze did not miss her fleeting glance of uncertainty toward her niece. Lady Elaine, on the other hand... she looked as if she was staring at a spectre.

Michael smiled ruefully behind his glass. The analogy was not entirely unfounded.

"My ladies," Lord Weatherby greeted in a gravelly voice, bowing deeply. "My apologies for any interruption."

"It is no interruption, my lord," Lady Abney replied smoothly. "Have you had the pleasure of meeting my niece, Lady Elaine?"

Lord Weatherby smiled a little, his lidded eyes disappearing in the act. "I was hoping I could be acquainted. And that I could have the honour of the first dance."

Lady Elaine remained silent at first, her hesitation palpable. Michael almost felt bad for her.

Lady Abney quickly rushed to cover up the uncomfortable silence. "She would love to! Go on, Elaine."

Lady Abney gave her niece a small push towards Lord Weatherby, who didn't seem to mind Lady Elaine's obvious reluctance. Michael watched as she was led towards the centre of the room just as the first set began. His pity deepened when he saw the despondency on her face when Lord Weatherby gathered her closer.

Michael shook his head, clearing his mind of the bothersome emotion. He had to focus. There was no time or space in his life to feel pity for one of the enemies—even if she might not have done anything wrong.

Michael set his untouched glass of wine down and started forward. They danced the

quadrille and, despite her earlier reservations, she seemed to perform flawlessly. Lord Weatherby looked like a bumbling mess next to her graceful movements and she looked at him as if she couldn't believe she was truly dancing with him. It took Michael back a bit. He was so used to polite tightness and barbed words, with no one truly saying what they felt. Yet this lady wore her every thought across her face. He wondered if she was even aware of it.

He spied a gentleman standing off to the side and decided to use him to his advantage.

"Lord Harlington," he greeted smoothly, very aware of how close he stood to the dancing couple. "It has been a while."

Lord Harlington's eyes widened with surprise. "Your Grace! It is a surprise. I was not aware that you'd returned to London."

"I have only been here a few months. I thought to make my presence known at this evening's ball."

"Quite an impression, Your Grace," Lord Harlington chuckled. "You have missed quite a lot since our time at Eton. I think you would be happy to hear that Norton has gotten married, the old chap..."

Michael stopped listening. He spied Lady Elaine in the corner of his eye, watching her twirl about before being pulled back in by Lord Weatherby. He waited until she was released by the aged gentleman. Discreetly, Michael took one step back.

She collided with him, letting out a small 'oof'. The smell of jasmines washed over Michael, emptying his mind for a moment, and he forgot what he was supposed to be doing.

“Pardon me, my lord,” she said hastily.

“No, pardon me.” He turned to steady her, his hand on her elbow, and their eyes met.

For the third time that night, Michael’s breath left his lungs with a whoosh. She had the purest set of eyes, as green as emeralds, as bright as the jewels themselves, bordered by thick, long eyelashes.

“My lady, shall we...”

“A-ah, yes.” She jerked away from Michael, turning to face Lord Weatherby. “Forgive me, I...”

“It is my fault, Lord Weatherby,” Michael stepped in, remembering himself. Remembering what he came here to do. “I stepped in her path.”

Lord Weatherby straightened as he looked at Michael, studying him for a moment. Up close, he looked far older, lines carved deep into every inch of his face. “The Duke of Ryewood,” he said at last. “Michael, is it not? I knew your father very well.”

Michael nodded. This was not how he intended on making his introduction to Lady Elaine but he supposed he had to make do with the situation. “Yes, my lord, I recall that you two were good friends. It is a pleasure seeing you again. And you...”

Lady Elaine, who had been staring at him with wide eyes and parted lips, jolted when he turned his attention back to her. She blinked rapidly, momentarily flustered. “Allow me to make the introduction,” Lord Weatherby said. “This is His Grace the Duke of Ryewood, and this is Lady Elaine Sutton, daughter of the Earl of Suthenshire.” “A pleasure to meet you, Your Grace,” she said quickly. “I am here with my aunt, the Dowager Viscountess of Abney, though I am not certain where she has wandered off to. Perhaps she has stepped out to the terrace for a bit of fresh air.”

Amusement whispered through him. She was flustered, rambling. He certainly hadn't expected that considering her otherwise graceful demeanour.

"Would you care to dance with me, Lady Elaine?"

Her eyes widened further in astonishment. How could that even be possible?

Slowly, she nodded and Michael took her hand, guiding her back out to the dance floor, ignoring Lord Weatherby. That had gone easier than he thought it would. Within minutes, he had her in his grasp. All he had to do was lay the foundation and she would be in the palm of his hands.

Hopefully, his heart would stop its incessant racing by then.

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“Hm, what a surprise. Is that Michael dancing with a lady?”

Clarissa turned at her aunt’s voice, frowning. She immediately spotted Michael in the centre of the room, preparing to commence the dance set. And his partner was Lady Elaine.

Clarissa’s heart sank at the sight. It was one thing to know her brother’s plans but it was another thing entirely to see it come alive right before her eyes. It pained her to see her brother like this. Michael was no longer the same person he had been prior to their father’s death. Prior to their father’s wrongful conviction, for that matter. She lost both her brother and her father that day and she feared she would never get back the Michael she once knew.

“She is quite lovely, is she not?” Beatrice went on, oblivious to Clarissa’s internal struggle. “I have noticed her being carted around by Lady Abney. Do you think they are related? I see little resemblance between the two.”

“I believe she is her niece,” Clarissa murmured.

“Her niece?” Beatrice frowned. “Then would that not make her...”

“Pardon me,” Clarissa mumbled.

She walked away before Beatrice could say anything else. She needed some fresh air, she decided. The knowledge that Michael was about to embark on a quest to ruin another family pierced her heart like a knife.

On one hand, she comprehended his feelings. She understood the hatred and vengeance that consumed his heart, that clouded his judgment. She had once cursed Lord Suthenshire and everyone else involved in the lies that had destroyed their family.

However, she herself had come to embrace forgiveness. The darkness that had eaten away at her peace of mind was not worth it. She only wished that Michael could come to peace with what had happened as well.

Clarissa kept going, eyes set on the terrace doors. She was nearly there and would have made it in record time had her path not been abruptly obstructed by a tall, imposing figure.

She drew to a halt, looking up into his dark, stormy eyes. They were deep wells, boring into her with an intensity that immediately sent her guards crashing to the floor. She should have been unnerved by the fierceness of his stare, but instead, she felt the tension and sadness seep out of her body.

Without considering how rude it might appear, her gaze wandered down his form. She observed the sloped jaw and full lips, set in a firm, thin line. His slim yet toned build clearly spoke of a man accustomed to physical pursuits. As he crossed his arms, a sizable ring sparkled upon his finger, signifying his considerable wealth.

“Are you finished?”

His cold tone sent her eyes racing back to him. Clarissa’s face went hot. She’d just been caught staring—no, admiring—this man with wild abandon. How horrifying!

She swallowed, pulling her shoulder back, scraping together her dignity. “May I help you?”

“Yes, you may. Might you be aware of the gentleman currently dancing with my cousin?”

Clarissa looked helplessly at the dancing couples, then back at this incredibly handsome, incredibly rude, gentleman. “There are a dozen gentlemen dancing with a dozen ladies, any one of whom could be your cousin.”

“The tall one. With dark hair.”

She sighed this time. “I cannot assist you. Perhaps you should simply inquire with your cousin if you are so curious.”

His eyes narrowed. “Then you do not know him?”

“I do not know you . Nor am I obligated to answer any of your questions simply because you demand them.”

He stared at her for a moment, unblinking. “Forgive me,” he said at last. “I have not yet introduced myself.”

Just then, Lord Jones made his appearance, a jovial smile upon his face. “Ah, Lord Abney! I trust you are enjoying the ball, though with that serious expression, it is difficult to ascertain if you are having any fun at all!”

James's lips twitched, but he remained silent.

“Lady Clarissa!” Lord Jones exclaimed, turning to her with a bright smile. “You look positively ethereal this evening. Do the two of you know one another?”

Clarissa shook her head slightly, feeling a touch of embarrassment. “No, my lord. We merely chanced upon one another. I do beg your pardon for my mindlessness.”

“Ah, allow me the pleasure of an introduction,” Lord Jones said with a flourish. “Lord James Abney, Viscount of Abney.” He gestured toward James. “And this is Lady Clarissa Rycroft, daughter of the late Duke of Ryewood.”

The two exchanged polite nods. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance, my lady,” James said, his tone softening.

“Likewise, my lord,” Clarissa replied, her earlier tension easing slightly.

Just as the moment settled, Lord Jones spotted Lady Hannah in the crowd. “Pray excuse me, dear friends,” he said, his eyes brightening. “I must greet Lady Hannah. She is to meet my close family friend, Lord Thornbush.” With a quick bow, he vanished into the throng of guests.

James stared at Clarissa once again. “Well, now that introductions are made, may I inquire about the gentleman dancing with my cousin? I noticed he was standing next to you a short while ago, so I assume you two are acquainted.”

Clarissa regarded him with a measure of suspicion. “If it is indeed the gentleman I entered with, then that would be my brother, the Duke of Ryewood.”

Lord Abney looked back at those dancers, frowning deeply. “The Duke of Ryewood...” he said, clearly to himself.

“Is there an issue?”

“What can you tell me about him?”

Clarissa let out a breath of frustration. “What business do you have with my brother, my lord? Whatever it is, you shall not meet your goal by pestering me with questions.”

“I have no business with him—yet. However, if he persists in this manner...”

She waited for him to finish his sentence but he simply trailed off, his expression deepening into a frown.

Just as she was about to simply give up and walk away, he turned to face her once more. “Would you care to dance with me?”

Clarissa’s eyes widened. She had not anticipated such a proposal. “Dance with you?” she echoed dumbly.

“Yes.” The frown had vanished, and with a slight bow, he extended his hand. “It would be an honour.”

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “Are you certain you aren’t asking to dance simply to question me further on my brother?”

“It is part of my motivation, yes. But I am also hoping that sharing a dance may clear your mind of whatever ails you.” When she frowned at that, he added, “It is obvious that something is bothering you, my lady. Allow me to set your mind at ease, if just for a short while.”

Slowly, she reached out to accept his hand, even though she kept staring at him as if he was about to pounce on her at any moment. “Why would you do such a thing?”

“I am a kind person,” he said simply.

Laughter bubbled up her throat before she could stop it. “And you are clearly an arrogant one as well.”

The moment their hands touched, Clarissa felt a jolt go through her body. Though she

wasn't sure if it had anything to do with his touch or the broad grin that lit his handsome face. She should not have said yes to this. His appearance aside, his crude behaviour should have been off-putting. But she was drawn to him and she couldn't understand why.

"That, my lady," he purred as he guided her away. "I cannot deny."

Clarissa simply smiled.

Elaine couldn't believe what was happening to her.

In a matter of seconds, the night took a sharp turn for the better. She'd gone from dancing with a man who looked twice her father's age to doing so with the most handsome gentleman she'd ever laid eyes on. And his voice! It was smooth and deep, the sound sending thrills throughout her body. When his fingers brushed against her elbow, she felt as if she might melt to the floor.

This was what she'd read about in her novels. This instantaneous spark, the attraction that ran through her bones and shook her to the very core. She desperately hoped she hadn't ruined it with her embarrassing rambling.

"May I confess something, my lady?"

She still could not get used to his voice. Standing this close to him, she felt it reverberate through her chest. How she managed to keep moving to the music was a mystery to her.

"If it will set your mind at ease, Your Grace, it would be an honour to help you."

“How kind of you to say,” he replied softly, “when you do not yet know what I intend to confess.”

She braced herself before peering up at him. She expected her body to react to the sight of his handsome features so close. Yet she had not anticipated the sensation to hit her like a punch to the gut, knocking the breath from her lungs, when their eyes met.

Somehow, she found her words. “I trust that you will not say anything untoward or unlawful. I do not wish to be an aide to any of your offences.”

He chuckled, causing her insides to flutter. “Crimes? I am an upstanding man, though I suppose the same cannot be said for many of our acquaintances.”

“My acquaintances? Contrary to what you may think, Your Grace, I have no acquaintances.”

“A veritable recluse then?”

“Unintentionally so.” She flushed, realising that she was revealing far too much about herself. “But it is your confession that I wish to hear, Your Grace.”

“Ah, yes. The confession.” He paused and she was left with no choice but to look up at him again. She didn’t want the dance to end, she thought impatiently. But it had to, and there was no telling whether he would wish to converse with her afterwards. She wanted to make the best of the time they had.

“I had hoped to get introduced to you,” he said at last.

Now, it was her turn to be quiet, though she was more speechless than anything else. Heat rushed through her entire body. “Why?” she managed to say.

“You caught my eye the moment I arrived, my lady, and I had hoped to make an introduction. I simply did not know how.” He smiled sheepishly. “Pardon me if that seems too forward.”

“Certainly not, Your Grace!” she said hastily. A little too hastily, she realised, when he raised a brow. “I am flattered. For someone like yourself to take notice of me is quite uncommon.”

“Someone like you?” he probed.

“Well...” A little embarrassed now, she cast a glance over her shoulder. Her mother had always chided her on how open she was with her thoughts and Elaine supposed it was to avoid situations like these. “It is of no consequence.”

“Which means it must certainly be of some. Tell me, my lady,” he urged gently. “Or should I make another confession in order to get to know you better?”

“Goodness, there is more?”

“Many more,” he said. “For instance, I despise balls such as these. I merely attend because it is expected of me.”

“That hardly seems like a noteworthy confession to make,” she said in earnest. “I imagine a number of people attend these events simply out of duty.”

“Not anyone within my circle. My sister takes great pleasure in these events, though I think it has more to do with her love for dancing than anything else.” He pulled her closer slightly. Elaine nearly tripped over her feet. “Have I earned your trust?”

“Not nearly,” she answered breathlessly. “It would not be so easy, Your Grace. I hardly know you, after all. What sort of lady would I be if I were to divulge all about

myself during our very first dance?”

“Our first dance?” he parroted with a raised brow. “So we shall indeed have others then?”

Elaine flushed, looking away. “I would not be averse to the idea..”

“Ah, so shall we tempt scandal then? Will you dance with me again tonight?”

Elaine's eyes widened in horror as she gazed up at him. “And ruin my chances of ever getting married?”

“With your beauty, my lady, your chances shall never truly fade even when you are fifty.”

“While your words are indeed sweet, Your Grace, you very well know that is far from the truth. I am almost considered a spinster as it is.” She paused, then sighed. “Perhaps I should not have told you that. Aunt Lorna would have my tongue were she to learn of my candour.”

“Your candour is beguiling.”

“As it is off-putting,” she added. “But I too have something to confess, Your Grace.”

“At last! Something to balance the scales between us.”

She smiled at that. It came so easily, with such abandon, that Elaine realised it had been years since she'd smiled with such carefree joy.

“I fear I do not enjoy balls either,” she said softly. “But this dance with you has rendered this evening worthwhile.”

The Duke of Ryewood stared at her, searching her face, a little frown touching his brow at her words. Elaine's earlier confidence withered when he didn't immediately respond and an apology rushed to the tip of her tongue, though she wasn't certain she should say it.

Then he smiled. "I'm glad, my lady."

That was all he said. Elaine felt her anxiety dissipate, a tentative smile gracing her lips. Thankfully, she was saved from answering when the dance set drew to a close and they were forced to stand apart. She curtsied, hoping he would want to continue their conversation. Hoping that longing wasn't apparent on her face.

"I hope you do not think you can get rid of me that easily, my lady," he said as he immediately bridged the gap between them once more. "I have decided that you will be my company for the rest of the evening."

No matter how hard she tried, there was no suppressing the wide, joyous smile that spread across her face. "Do I not have any say in this?"

"It depends. If you agree with me, then you most certainly do."

"And if I do not?"

"Then I shall make sure that you do. I can be rather persistent."

"Persistent or annoying?"

"They are one and the same, I'm sure. Perhaps I shall simply have to annoy you into becoming friends. I have no qualms with that."

She laughed again. He was flirting with her. Elaine was almost certain of it. She'd

read enough books to know how it sounded and this was it. Even if he mentioned being friends, certainly his interest went deeper than that.

The hope she'd tucked aside came rushing to the fore once more—hope that she may truly find love in her quest to save her family. Could she find it in the Duke of Ryewood?

The thought sent her heart racing as he offered her his arm. She took and together they made their way off to the side, standing close to that potted plant she'd wanted to hide behind before. Elaine had to keep herself from glancing up at him at every opportunity.

“I would like to become friends with you too, Your Grace,” Elaine said boldly. “But I’m afraid it will not be that easy.”

“Oh?” he probed, brows lifting.

“You see, there are two people in my life who may...deter you. And one of them is on their way over.”

She smiled as Lorna appeared. She'd seen her aunt coming from the moment they walked off the dancefloor and Elaine knew it was a matter of time before they were interrupted. Thankfully, it wasn't James. Elaine didn't know how His Grace would stand up against James' overbearing protectiveness but she didn't want to find out any time soon.

Lorna was the first step. She knew the Ton, she knew how to conduct herself during the London Season. She knew who would be the best fit for Elaine. Someone kind, someone generous, and someone wealthy.

Elaine hoped that the Duke of Ryewood was all three.

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Michael exhaled a quiet breath of relief upon seeing that it was Lady Abney and not the glowering viscount who approached them. He could handle the dowager viscountess right now. Lord Abney, on the other hand, may be a little difficult and he was not yet far enough in his plan to take on that challenge.

As the dowager viscountess came to stand in front of them, Elaine said, “Aunt Lorna, this is His Grace, the Duke of Ryewood. Your Grace, this is my aunt, the Dowager Viscountess of Abney.”

“A pleasure, my lady,” Michael replied courteously.

“As it is for me, Your Grace,” Lady Abney said, dipping into a curtsy. Despite her genteel manners, she made no effort to conceal the scrutinous look she directed at him. “I did not know you two were acquainted.”

“Lord Weatherby introduced us just now,” Elaine explained, her voice tinged with nervousness as she rushed to articulate her words. “And His Grace asked me to dance.”

“I had very little choice in the matter, my lady,” Michael replied, his tone sombre.

Lady Abney and Elaine both looked at him with surprise and confusion. “Why do you say that?” asked the dowager viscountess.

“When confronted with such beauty, what choice remains but to request a dance? I simply wished to share in Lady Elaine’s company a while longer and she indulged me.”

Elaine flushed furiously. He'd watched her cheeks grow red a handful of times already and each time was more endearing than the last. The plan was veering off its course. He didn't want to seduce her, didn't need to involve romance if he did not need to. But from the moment their eyes met, he found himself flirting with her as if it were love at first sight.

While Elaine blushed and tried to hide her smile, Lady Abney looked rather pleased.

"How kind of you to express such sentiments, Your Grace," she responded. "It is always nice to meet a charming young man with a silver tongue. Though Elaine's exceptional beauty is indeed common knowledge amongst nearly every man in attendance."

"And quite rightfully so," he heard himself say. "I merely lament asking her to dance so early. I should have saved it for the last set."

"Oh, it is rather fortuitous that you did so, Your Grace," Lady Elaine spoke up. "I was thoroughly unprepared to remain on my feet for such a long time and I am already longing for a respite. I am not certain whether I can handle another dance any time soon."

"Marvelous," he purred, grinning. "You might even share with me that deep, dark secret of yours while we rest."

"I believed I had already done so."

"Would you have me believe that your admission of not enjoying this ball qualifies as a secret? I must confess, this leaves my intelligence feeling somewhat affronted, my lady."

"Not at all, Your Grace," she replied with poise. "I merely wish for you to understand

that I shall not be making any further confessions or revealing any secrets this evening.”

“Mayhap upon the morrow, then? Should I call upon you?”

Her cheeks went red again. “And if I were to decline?”

“Then, I fear, you shall miss the pleasure of my delightful company.”

“I believe I shall survive quite well, even without it.”

Michael put a hand to his heart, feigning distress. “You wound me, my lady. And here I thought we had begun to build a rapport.”

“Oh, we most certainly have, Your Grace. But you see, there is one more challenge you must overcome.”

“I am being challenged? I was not aware of this.”

“Neither did I know I was challenging you, but it appears that I am.”

Michael was intrigued. He couldn’t recall when he had stopped considering his next words and simply fallen into the conversation. He studied her sparkling green eyes as he inquired, “What is the next challenge?”

Lady Elaine smiled, then looked at her aunt. Lady Abney, who had been looking between the two of them with rapt fascination, caught her niece’s eyes and frowned. “Elaine, you would not dare.”

“Aunt Lorna, have you seen Ja—”

She broke off as her aunt caught her by the hand, hauling Lady Elaine to her side. “I think I see Lord Penly looking for you, Elaine. We mustn’t keep him waiting. He did tell me that he is rather smitten with you, after all.”

“Lord Penly?” Lady Elaine sounded bemused.

“Yes, the tall, handsome, wealthy lord who hung on to your every word. I’m sure you recall him. Your Grace, it was nice meeting you. I hope we see each other again during dinner.”

Lady Abney barely gave Lady Elaine the chance to say her farewells before she was dragged off to his Lord Penly. Michael watched them go, feeling...odd.

He’d succeeded, after all. The plan for tonight was to meet her and lay the foundation in order to get close to her. And by all measures, it had gone well. She seemed to like him well enough that she just might open up to him the next time they spoke.

And yet, watching her leave him behind to seek the company of another gentleman left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Michael shook the feeling away, not bothering to question what it was. All he knew was that it was invasive and he had to focus. The night was far from over and he still had much work to do.

But for now, he would leave her be. A part of him wanted to trail after her, not willing to give up on their earlier conversation just yet. But he quelled that insane urge and turned in the opposite direction instead.

“Your Grace.”

The Marquess of Grovington slid into his path. He was a hard gentleman to miss. His

presence commanded attention, his power amongst the Ton and within the House of Lords was nearly unmatched. Even though Michael had never been properly introduced to him, he knew of the marquess as much as anyone else did.

However, he hadn't known that Lord Grovington had a daughter of marriageable age. And judging by the way she batted her eyelashes at him and smiled softly, Michael could already tell where their sights had been set.

"My lord," he greeted, keeping it simple. He didn't want this to drag on for longer than he needed it to.

"I believe I have not had the opportunity to congratulate you on your title," Lord Grovington said, his whiskered cheeks moving as he spoke. "Though I am afraid I may be a few years too late."

Michael tried not to sneer at that. He never liked hearing those words. He'd only received the title because of his father's death, after all. And death was never something to be congratulated on.

But he nodded stiffly instead and said, "Thank you, my lord."

Lord Grovington seemed pleased with that response. He put his hand on his daughter's back, guiding her forward. "Allow me to introduce my daughter, Isabella."

Michael nodded stiffly to her as well. "A pleasure, my lady."

"Isabella was hoping to dance with you. I assured her that His Grace would not mind. Would you, Your Grace?"

Michael gritted his teeth. Lord Grovington had easily backed him into a corner and he saw no way out without being impolite.

“As you wish, my lady.”

He held out his hand and Lady Isabella smiled demurely as she slid her hand into his. The dance would not last forever, he told himself as he led her out amongst the others. It would be over before he knew it and he could get on with his life.

“How are you enjoying your evening, Your Grace?”

Michael tried not to sigh in annoyance. The last thing he wished was to prolong this uncomfortable situation by engaging in conversation. But he supposed it was not her fault he was not interested.

“I find it quite adequate, my lady.”

“As do I, Your Grace. I do enjoy such activities, after all. And you happen to be an exceptional dancer.”

“Thank you, my lady.”

“Do you know my father well?”

“I do not know him at all, save for his name.”

“Ah, I understand. He thinks quite highly of you. I suppose that is merely your reputation at play. It is pleasing to know that you are as kind as they say.”

Michael wasn't fooled by such flowery words. No one would describe him as kind, nor would they think him to be reputable. He was the new duke of a disgraced title. Judging from the snippets of conversations and the curious looks he had been trying to ignore all night, they were wary of him, if nothing else.

“Thank you, my lady,” he said again, his voice bland.

“Will you be taking part in this year’s Season, Your Grace?”

Michael looked at her, surprised. She gazed up at him with natural confidence, the mark of a lady who had gotten everything she had ever asked for. She was quite beautiful, he had to admit, but there was a lack of vibrancy to her features. Like a porcelain doll. Beautiful but lifeless.

“I mean, are you seeking a wife?” she expounded when he did not answer right away.

“I have not given it any thought,” he admitted.

“Have you not? Could this evening serve to alter your perspective, then? Or are you simply waiting for the right lady to reveal herself?”

“Are you curious because you wish to know where you stand, my lady?”

Lady Isabella laughed, the sound light. “I cannot deny it, Your Grace. It is my hope to find a husband this Season. As it is the hope of every other lady here, I’m sure. Surely that does not surprise you.”

“It does not.” Though he had been hoping he was wrong about Lord Grovington’s reason for approaching him. Now there was no denying the obvious.

They lapsed into silence, a rather uncomfortable one though Michael was grateful for it. Lady Isabella seemed to be searching for something to say.

At last, she settled on another question. “What do you like to do in your spare time, Your Grace?”

The question was as mundane and uninspiring as they come, yet Michael found no reason to withhold a response. He indulged her and was not surprised when she responded saying she enjoys poetry and embroidery. He could only assume giving such a generic response was part of a lady's lessons.

Eventually, the dance came to an end. He maintained his politeness until the very last moment, disappearing before Lord Grovington could approach him again. He supposed the proper thing to do was to escort her back to her father, but Michael had other matters occupying his thoughts. Or rather, other people.

He could easily spot Lady Elaine amidst the crowd. As he rejoined Beatrice and Henry's side, he noticed Lady Elaine standing near the terrace doors, nodding along to something Lord Penly was saying to her. But she seemed distracted, torn between paying attention to the man and looking around for someone else.

Was she looking for him?

Why did that make him feel...sanguine? It meant the first step of his plan went better than projected, yet he could not shake the feeling that there was more to it.

"What has gotten you in such a good mood?"

He glanced at his aunt, already posed to answer her question. But then he realised that her attention was on Clarissa. He hadn't even noticed that his sister had approached.

"Hm?" Clarissa answered absently. She was staring at something, or someone, in the distance. Beatrice's words must have just sunken in because she blinked rapidly, head swivelling to face her. "I'm not in a good mood," she protested quickly as her cheeks coloured. "What would make you say that?"

"Perhaps because you have a dreamy look in your eyes," Michael pointed out. "And

you were smiling like a fool.”

“Has one of these gentlemen caught your eye?” Beatrice asked eagerly. She seized Clarissa by the arm, eyes inspecting the guests spread out before her. “Which one is it?”

“It is nothing like that,” Clarissa quickly told her. But she had always been bad at lying. Michael, Beatrice, and Henry all narrowed their eyes in disbelief. She noticed their incredulous stares and, as impossible as it seemed, grew even redder. “It is the truth!”

“It is clear she does not want to talk about him just yet,” Henry chimed in, patting her on the arm. “But when he comes to call on her tomorrow, we shall see him for ourselves.”

“I shall be patient then,” Beatrice said in a tone that implied being patient was the most difficult thing in the world for her to do.

“Do not get your hopes up,” Clarissa sighed. “I do not think it will happen.”

“Oh, so there is someone?” Michael probed. He raised a brow, quelling his humour, when her eyes grew wide.

“No, there is not,” she maintained stubbornly. He nodded slowly, clearly showing her that he did not believe a word she said.

“Oh, do not pretend you are innocent in this.” Beatrice whirled on him. “Who was that lady you were dancing with?”

“Lady Isabella? She is the daughter of the Marquess of Grovington.”

“No, not her. Of course I know who she is. I meant the mysterious copper-haired lady you danced with before Lady Isabella.”

Michael ignored Henry’s eyes boring into him. Clarissa’s as well, for that matter. “She is Lady Elaine.”

“You seemed quite taken by her.”

“It is nothing of the sort.” He knew his aunt would question him like this. He already had a response prepared. “I noticed that she seemed rather lonely and so I thought I would share a dance with her.”

Now Beatrice turned her narrowed eyes of distrust to Michael. “That is uncharacteristically kind of you to do. What was your aim?”

“I only wished to help her relax, that is all. Nothing more to it.”

He supposed he should be alarmed by how easily the lies came to his lips. But he knew Beatrice would not be as accommodating of his plan as Henry and Clarissa. Even though they disapproved of it, they would not stand in his way. Beatrice, on the other hand, would attempt to thwart his every move. Her stubbornness knew no bounds.

Clearly, his lies were not good enough to get her off his scent. She frowned at him and was clearly about to ask something else when a bell rang out and the music came to a stop. Lord Jones went halfway up the stairs and faced the guests to announce that the dinner would now commence.

“Let us go,” Henry told them. “I do not know about you all, but I myself am quite famished. And I would like to put a bit of food in my stomach to face the rest of this long night.”

Michael silently agreed. After all, it was nearly time to proceed to the next phase of his plan.

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“Is something amiss? You have scarcely touched your appetiser, and it is nearly time for the plates to be cleared.”

Elaine blinked, refocusing her attention on her plate. James was right. She’d been pushing around her vegetables for the past few minutes and had not taken a single bite. She made an effort to do so now but it didn’t lift James’ attention from her.

“What is the matter?” he asked again. “Did something happen?”

“Nothing happened,” she assured him, forcing a smile to her face. Elaine realised a second too late that that was the wrong move. The smile was clearly insincere, and she was certain James saw right through it.

“Are you not hungry then?” he questioned. “Would you wish to go home early?”

“No!” she said hastily. And a little too loudly, she realised, when a few heads turned in her direction. She pointedly ignored the person sitting directly across from her, even as a prickly sensation raced over her skin.

They were all seated at a grand table in the dining room and, despite her best wishes, she had not been seated next to the Duke of Ryewood. Instead, he was sitting right across from her.

She tried her best not to look at him and so far, she succeeded. But he was the only thing she could focus on. Ever since she saw him dancing with the beautiful, blond lady, her hope had begun to wither. And now that he was seated between two beautiful blond ladies, that hope was a dead thing in the centre of her chest.

On a brighter note, she had now gathered that the blond-haired lady on his left was his sister. Elaine overheard her call him ‘brother’ and she did notice a few similarities in their features. That didn’t make her feel much better, however, since his attention was almost entirely monopolised by the marquess’ daughter.

“I noticed you dancing with a few gentlemen,” James queried once more, “Do any of them pique your interest?”

Elaine flushed, eyes pinned to her still rather full plate. “Do you genuinely believe this is a suitable conversation to engage in during such a public dinner, James?”

“Why not? If you tell me who you fancy, I may be able to have a talk with them.”

“And why would you want to have a talk with them?”

“To see if they are up to par, of course,” he said as if it should have been obvious.

Elaine sighed. She appreciated James’ dedication to her cause but right now, it wasn’t helping her feel any better. “Tomorrow we shall see if there is any hope left for me,” she said, hoping she didn’t sound as morose as she felt. “For now, I simply want this evening to be over with.”

“Why? You were in a grand mood a short while ago.”

That was before she began comparing herself to the beautiful daughter of Lord Grovington. That was before she saw the duke dancing with her and realising that she could not have been as elegant as her. That was before she was seated across from the duke and Lady Isabella, forced to catch snippets of their conversations even though she was making an active effort to not listen.

“James?”

“Yes?”

“Have you ever had feelings for another person?”

James’s hand faltered midway to his mouth, his fork growing limp between his fingers. For a moment, he didn’t move, staring dead ahead. Elaine frowned, following his gaze. If she didn’t know any better, she would think he was looking at the duke’s sister.

“I have,” he said at last. “But they were fleeting emotions in my past. I have not felt anything close to love if that is what you are truly asking.”

“It would surpass anything I have ever experienced. Can you tell me what it is like?”

James frowned. He seemed to be thinking about it for a moment. “It is...most distracting.”

“How so?”

“You find that you are unable to focus on the things that you should. The person you fancy consumes your thoughts. When they walk into a room, they are all you can focus on. If they are not by your side, the distance between you feels as vast as the ocean. It is...simply distracting.” He resumed his eating. “It is a useless emotion.”

Distracting . James was no poet yet he managed to encapsulate all that she felt in a single word.

Elaine glanced at the duke. Her heart skipped a beat when she realised he was already staring at her. Lady Isabella was saying something to him but he wasn’t paying her any mind. When their eyes met, he tilted his head to the side and smiled.

Elaine's heart thundered against her chest. Blushing furiously, she looked away quickly, then chastised herself for acting so immaturely.

"Do you not wish to marry, James?" she asked her cousin, trying to act normal despite the fact the duke had sent her nerves into a flurry once more.

"I do. It is my duty as a viscount."

"For reasons other than duty," she pressed.

"No. Marriage is simply a mutually beneficial relationship between a man and a woman. If I had no duty to provide an heir for the title, then there would be no benefit for me in the relationship."

"Surely there are other gains to be had between a husband and his wife."

"Such gains can be found outside of marriage."

"Like what?"

James thinned his lips. "This is not a proper conversation for a lady," he said.

Elaine could not quite fathom why. She didn't know much about what happened between a man and woman during marriage other than the fact that the woman was meant to bear children while the man kept a roof over their heads and food on their table. But there had to be more, didn't there?

It shouldn't matter. At least, not for her. She was not one of the lucky ladies who could afford to choose who they married. She was only here out of desperation, out of the need to save her family from further ruination. Elaine knew she did not have the luxury of choosing a husband out of love.

“The Duke of Ryewood seems to have taken an interest in you.”

This time, she managed to hide how startled she was at James' observation.

“He was just being kind.”

“It seemed like more than kindness to me.”

“Would it be so bad if it were?”

“I only want you to be careful. His reputation leaves much to be desired.”

Elaine frowned at him. “What do you mean?”

“I suppose it is not surprising that you do not know, given how little you know about the Ton. Truthfully, I do not know the details myself, though I am aware that he was recently involved in a scandal.”

“A scandal?” Elaine resolutely averted her gaze from the duke's direction, even though she wanted nothing more than to do just that. “About what?”

James just shrugged. “You should pay heed when he approaches you again, Elaine.”

The caution struck something in her. Elaine focused on eating, tasting nothing, her mind spinning as she tried to imagine what sort of scandal could be surrounding the duke's name. Was he a rake? Did he have a habit of ravishing ladies in dark corners? Did he have a gambling habit?

Not knowing nagged at her, even though Elaine knew it might be for the best. She couldn't put her hopes on the duke. It was foolish of her to even think that in the first place. She had to stay level-headed and focus on the only thing she had come here to

do.

But if the duke kept looking at her like that, Elaine wasn't sure how well she would fare in her quest.

“Will this night ever end?”

I was wondering the very same thing .

Laughter pulled Elaine out of her thoughts. She jolted, her spine going ramrod straight as she realised she was not alone and the question had not simply floated out of thin air.

There was a lady standing next to her—the very same beautiful blond lady whom Elaine had marked as the duke's sister.

For a moment, Elaine merely stared at her. And the blond lady stared back. In those few uncomfortable seconds, Elaine came back to the present. The dinner had been over for some time now and the hostess had invited the ladies to the drawing room while the men went to the parlour to play billiards. The last thing Elaine recalled was staring longingly into the retreating back of the Duke of Ryewood before she found a corner in the drawing room and succumbed to her boredom.

She hadn't expected anyone to approach her. In a room full of roses and lilies, she was a wallflower whom no one paid any mind to. If there were men present, perhaps it would have bothered her to know that she was bound to be ignored when surrounded by such beauties. But since there were no gentlemen, Elaine only lamented the fact that she had a few more hours of this to go.

“Oh, don’t get shy now,” the blond-haired lady said, smiling brightly. “It is far more entertaining when I have someone to complain with.”

Elaine blinked. Ah, yes. Someone had commented on how long the night was and...had she spoken aloud? She could have sworn she had agreed in her mind.

“Elaine,” she managed to say as she regained her composure. “Elaine Sutton.”

The lady curtsied slightly, her smile lighting her bright blue eyes. “My name is Clarissa.”

Clarissa approached and positioned herself beside Elaine. Elaine didn’t miss the fact that her dark corner brightened considerably with this new company.

“Tell me, Elaine,” Clarissa went on. “Is it me or have events such as these grown much longer since the last Season?”

“I do not know,” Elaine admitted softly. “I did not attend any events during the previous Season. I have not been to any at all, actually.”

“Truly?” Clarissa sounded genuinely surprised. “So this is your first?”

Elaine nodded. She couldn’t help studying Clarissa’s face and saw no trace of judgment.

“How interesting,” Clarissa mused. “To be frank, Elaine—may I call you Elaine?”

Elaine nodded. She didn’t think Clarissa was the kind of lady who had ever been denied a thing in her lifetime and Elaine did not feel inclined to be the first.

Clarissa’s smile brightened at her permission. “To be frank, Elaine,” she continued. “I

noticed you in the ballroom. And I must say that you carry yourself like someone who is quite accustomed to balls.”

“Shall I take that as a compliment?” Elaine asked uncertainly.

“Yes, please do! That is how I intended it. You are quite graceful, Elaine. And there are quite a few ladies present who cannot claim the same.” Clarissa flushed and a fan Elaine hadn’t noticed before opened before her face with a thwack. “Oh, goodness. You must forgive me. It is rather unbecoming to gossip with someone I have just met.”

Something in the cadence of her voice and the poise with which she carried herself set Elaine at ease. She didn’t even notice that she was smiling until she heard it in her voice. “It is not so unusual, Clarissa. What do you think half the ladies in here are doing?”

“They are likely talking about the latest fashions.”

“And how dreadful Lady Emerson looks with all those feathers in her hat,” Elaine observed. She subtly lifted her chin toward three ladies gathered in the opposite corner of the room, their heads bent close to each other as they laughed and whispered.

“Or how desperate Miss Annabelle seemed to dance with the Earl of Dunkley,” Elaine went on, moving to the other group of ladies gathered just a short distance away from the first. “Or perhaps how odd it was that Lady Jones was given the honour of hosting the first ball of the Season when she was not in the Queen’s good graces.”

“How do you know all of this?” Clarissa asked, surprised.

“You would be surprised how many things you hear when no one notices that you are there.”

Clarissa raised her fan to her lips. It took Elaine a moment to realise that she was hiding her laughter. “What about them?” she asked, eyes turned to the group of ladies sitting in the centre of the room. “What are they talking about?”

That was the group Elaine had been trying her hardest to ignore, the loudest of them all. Sitting in the centre was the marquess’ daughter, like a queen engaging her subjects. The other ladies seemed to hang on to her every word, vying for her approval. But Lady Isabella paid them scant regard while she regaled them with her tales of the night, of how she was certain all the gentlemen she danced with would call on her the next day.

The prospect of the Duke of Ryewood calling upon Lady Isabella left a bad taste in Elaine’s mouth.

“She talks about herself a lot,” Elaine said after a moment, hoping Clarissa wouldn’t notice her lapse.

“I am not surprised. I was seated just one seat away from her during dinner and she would not stop telling my brother how much she excels at all manners of arts.”

“Oh, is that so?” Elaine already knew that. She’d pieced together enough of what she’d heard to come to that conclusion.

“You know my brother, do you not?” Clarissa’s fan moved further up her face, until nothing but her eyes were visible. “I believe I saw you two dancing.”

Elaine fought the blush that overcame her face as hard as she could and lost poorly. She avoided looking at Clarissa instead. Had she noticed how smitten Elaine had

become with the duke in such a short span of time? If she had, who else might have noticed?

“Yes, I do recall the duke,” she managed.

“Ah.” Clarissa’s voice sounded just as strained. “And what are your thoughts of him?”

“He is quite pleasant. Very...teasing.”

“Teasing?”

“Quite so. I do not know what to make of it yet.” It was the truth. She could not discern whether his playful demeanour was genuine flirtation or merely part of his charm.

“I see.” Clarissa’s fan ceased its fluttering for a moment. Elaine didn’t dare look, fearing that the duke’s sister had noticed something in Elaine’s tone. Something to indicate that perhaps Elaine was not as nonchalant about their meeting as she was trying to make it seem.

“Well, enough about my brother,” Clarissa said at last. “I have had enough of hearing about the Duke of Ryewood since the start of this evening. Tell me, Elaine, do you enjoy poetry?”

Elaine released a slow breath of relief at the change in topic. She most certainly did enjoy poetry. More than that, she enjoyed being able to talk to someone with such ease, without silly little emotions about one’s brother clouding her mind.

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The smell of tobacco must have embedded itself into every surface in this room, Michael mused. It was threatening to choke him. He would have left the parlour a long time ago if he wasn't so certain that social disgrace would follow him.

“And that Lady Hannah, oh my! A feisty young thing, she is.”

Michael rolled his eyes, certain that the overly enthusiastic gentleman to his left would not notice. He had been going on about Lady Hannah for some time now. Whenever the conversation shifted, he deftly steered it back to her. Michael would have admired his determination had it not been irritating.

“You and that Lady Hannah,” another one of the gentlemen Michael was sitting with groaned. “Why don't you up and marry the lady if you are so infatuated with her?”

“Perhaps I shall! I shall approach her father with my intentions in the morning. But for now, do you think she will fancy roses or peonies?”

“How on earth are we to know?” drawled another.

The gentleman appeared oblivious to how annoying he was, a fact that Michael found somewhat amusing. He sat in a group of eight men, the others taking turns playing billiards. Between the decanters of whiskey and the snuff boxes being passed around, it was only a matter of time before half of them were too out of it to say a proper sentence.

Lord Blimey, Michael realised suddenly. He had been trying to recall the name of the overly smitten lord since the moment he opened his mouth about Lady Hannah. A

fitting title, he supposed.

“I shall ask her then,” Lord Blimey mused aloud, oblivious. “Shall I go now?”

“Go right ahead,” said Lord Penly, who had been quietly glaring at Lord Blimey without saying a word. “And be sure to return to us and tell us what she says.”

Lord Blimey was already out of his chair. “I shall! Wish me luck, gentlemen!”

Michael shook his head at him as he hurried off. He was an eager young thing. Older than Michael and yet so obviously inexperienced that it was difficult to watch. Though he supposed it would be rather nice if Lord Blimey had the happy ending with Lady Hannah he was so desperately longing for.

“I thought we would never be done with him,” Lord Penly sighed. “What a sap. I hope he does not blame us when he is inevitably sent away from the ball.”

“Good riddance,” Lord Thornbush retorted. They always came in threes, Michael noticed. Lord Penly, Lord Millbury, and Lord Thornbush never seemed to be far from each other.

“Yes, quite so,” said another lord, whom Michael had not been introduced to. Not that he really cared to be. “But Lord Penly, I have been meaning to ask. I saw you talking with a lovely sunset-haired lady just before dinner. Is she new to London?”

“Oh, you mean Lady Elaine?”

Michael straightened in his seat, the whiskey-induced haze lifting immediately.

“She was talking to all of us,” Lord Millbury pointed out but Lord Penly fanned him off.

“Yes, but she seemed far more interested in me than in you two,” he pressed. “And to answer your question, Lord Gringott, she is not new to London. If I recall correctly, she has resided here nearly all her life, but only recently received the chance to debut. I believe she is being sponsored by the Viscount of Abney.”

Michael glanced over at the billiards table. Lord Abney stood there with his cue stick between him, frowning down at the table with a concentration that the game certainly did not deserve. The man seemed to have an uncanny sixth sense about him so Michael made sure to look away before he saw him staring.

“A pretty thing, isn’t she?” Lord Thornbush said with a cheeky grin.

“Yes, I believe I shall keep my eye on her,” Lord Penly agreed with a nod, draining his glass.

“May the best gentleman win then,” said Lord Millbury.

Michael got to his feet. He paid the men no attention as he stalked away, knowing that they were staring after him. Something burned deep in the pit of his stomach, a feeling that only began to grow as the men continued talking about Lady Elaine.

It didn’t matter if someone thought her suitable to be courted, he told himself, making his way to the sideboard. She was beautiful, with a natural innocence that men were bound to be drawn to. He’d seen firsthand how taken Lord Penly seemed to be with her while they spoke. And he had no intention of courting her himself, so why did it bother him so?

Perhaps because they may come in the way of his plans. Yes, that had to be it. He needed to get close to her. It wouldn’t help if there was another gentleman monopolising her time.

Satisfied with that, he proceeded to pour himself another drink.

“Your Grace.”

Michael stiffened. Schooling his expression, he turned to face him. “Lord Grovington.”

The marquess’ lips pulled apart into what Michael assumed was meant to be a smile. “I had hoped to speak with you alone.”

“Is there a matter you wished to discuss, my lord?”

“No, nothing quite that serious,” the marquess said, waving a beefy hand in dismissal.

“I only wished to have a conversation; you see. I was such close friends with the late duke so I do understand the toll his death may be taking on you.”

“Do you truly?”

“Quite so, Your Grace. He left such a legacy behind. I hope his business has retained its reputation?”

Michael took a measured sip of his whiskey, granting himself a moment to gather his thoughts. He had no desire to disclose any details of the matter to the marquess. Travelling all over London to gather information about his father’s wrongful conviction had been difficult enough. Adding managing the affairs of the dukedom and the shipping business had only made it more so. The last thing Michael intended to do was explain all of that to Lord Grovington, especially since he knew the marquess to be a rival in the industry.

“It has been trying,” he said at last. “But I have managed.”

“Managed, have you? That is quite admirable.”

“Yes, well, my father raised me to stand in his stead when the time came. It is only a pity that the time had to come so soon.”

“A pity, yes.” Lord Grovington took a slow sip as well. The silence deepened between them but Michael refused to be the first to break it. “I take it you have returned to London to partake in this year’s Season?”

“Only to support my sister.”

“Did she not debut last year? I would have expected your support then.”

Michael was able to recognise that the questioning was rather intentional. He just couldn’t figure out what the marquess’ aim was. So he had to give careful responses, neither denying nor confirming anything the marquess was insinuating.

“And since I was not present last year, I ensure that I was this time around,” he said at last.

“That is quite admirable, Your Grace. A remarkable trait in a gentleman such as yourself.”

Michael, not trusting the marquess’ intention, only nodded.

“Of course, it is a duke’s duty to marry and bear an heir,” Lord Grovington went on. “Someone to carry on the lineage. I’m sure you know that.”

“I am aware.”

“Marvelous. And advantageous matches are made all the time. After all, the right

alliance can do wonders for rehabilitating one's...reputation."

There it was. Michael gritted his teeth, suppressing a grimace. The last thing he wished was to deal with the marquess's attempts to match him with his daughter.

"That is certainly true, my lord," he answered carefully. "And it is something I shall bear in mind when I do decide to marry. Which, I assure you, shall not be for some time to come."

Lord Grovington's listless smile finally fell, eyes hardening. "You should take care not to let the good ladies slip out of your grasp, Your Grace."

"There will always be more."

Lord Grovington didn't like that response at all. The tension seeping into the air around them would have been enough to stifle him if he'd cared. But it didn't matter to Michael what the marquess thought about him in this moment. The only thing he cared about was ensuring his plan was fulfilled, that he got the chance to taste sweet, sweet vengeance at last. Lord Grovington and Lady Isabella were the last of his worries.

Before any further words could pass between the two men, Lord Jones's voice resonated through the room. "Let us all make haste to the..." He trailed off, eyes rolling to the back of his head in obvious intoxication. Michael was almost certain that he would topple over. But then his eyes returned to its rightful place and he continued. "...to the drawing room."

At long last! That was the only reason Michael hadn't upped and left this dreaded ball already.

The men began to file out of the room, even those who had been in the middle of

playing billiards. As he exited, Michael caught Lord Abney's gaze, attempting to mask his unease at the viscount's penetrating stare.

Everything else fell to the back of his mind as he made his way to the drawing room, led by the stumbling Lord Jones. He had a plan to carry out. It had nothing to do with the odd tingle of excitement he felt at the thought of seeing Lady Elaine again. He'd tortured himself with the sight of her across the table during dinner, so close yet so far, and had thought of a hundred different things he would like to say to her. Now was his chance.

His gaze fell immediately upon her as he stepped into the room. Not to his surprise, she'd pushed herself into the farthest corner she could find. What did surprise him, however, was that she was not alone.

As he approached, Clarissa's eyes fell on him and her smile fell, laughter dying on her lips. She narrowed her eyes at him but Michael paid her no mind. His attention was on the auburn-haired beauty who stood beside her, who didn't seem to know where to put her gaze.

"Lady Elaine," he greeted smoothly. "I've come to whisk you away."

"She is mine for the remainder of the evening," Clarissa asserted, possessively clasping Lady Elaine's arm. "Isn't that right, Elaine?"

"I was not aware I was something to be had," Lady Elaine murmured, rather bemused.

Michael coughed to hold back his laughter at his sister's shock.

"Elaine!" Clarissa gasped. "I thought we'd become quite close already. What a shame."

The stupefied expression on Lady Elaine's face only made it that much more entertaining. Holding back the rest of his laughter, Michael said, "Clarissa, I believe Uncle Henry is looking for you. Something about accepting a proposal on your behalf?"

"What?" Clarissa gasped. She pulled away from Lady Elaine immediately. "How could he?"

And she was off. Michael marvelled for a moment at how little things had changed since their youth. Clarissa was as easy to fool as before.

"Is that true?"

Lady Elaine's soft voice brought his attention back to her. He supposed it would be more mannerable to stand by her side and face the room, rather than have his back to it, but he was quite liking pretending no one else existed in here but them. That way he could focus on ensuring he gained her trust.

"Is what true?" he asked.

She stared up at him with wide, innocent eyes. "Is your uncle Henry truly going to accept a proposal on her behalf?"

For a moment, Michael could only stare at her. And then he chuckled. "You are as easy to fool as my sister."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I thought it was rather obvious that it was a ploy for her to leave us be."

The indignation that filled her eyes for a brief moment fizzled away. "Oh. I see. I

suppose I should have noticed that from the beginning.”

“Don’t worry about it. It is not your fault you’re so gullible.”

“I am not gullible,” she protested easily, making Michael raise a brow at her. “Need I remind you that I only met you and Clarissa just this evening and I do not know your Uncle Henry. For all I know, such a scenario could be entirely possible.”

“Gullible and feisty,” he observed. “Quite the combination. But I must say, my lady, I am very upset with you.”

Again, her eyes widened. No matter how many times he witnessed it himself, Michael couldn’t believe how much of her emotions she displayed on her face. Like she’d opened a window to her inner thoughts. “Upset with me? Whatever for?”

“You have already grown so close with Clarissa that you call her by her given name. I did meet you first.”

“But you are a duke.”

“So?”

“So you should be referred to as such.”

“Then what was the purpose of my given name?”

“For close family and friends, of course. Which I am not.”

“Oh!” He clutched his chest, grinning devilishly. “Another blow to the heart. I do not think I will be able to survive another, my lady.”

Lady Elaine's lips twitched. He could tell she was trying her hardest to remain serious. "You jest, Your Grace, but I am required to maintain the utmost propriety and manners."

"Says who?"

"Says—" She broke off, flabbergasted at his questions. "Says the rules of society!"

"Set by whom? The King? The Queen?"

"Does it matter?"

"I suppose not," he said, leaning against the wall closest to him as he jabbed his hands into his pockets. "Neither of them are here either way."

Lady Elaine said nothing for a moment, studying him openly. He took it as his chance to do the same. The longer he did, however, the more difficult it was to breathe. The more he wondered how bad it would be if he stepped just a little closer, pressing them further into the corner.

"Perhaps you are a rake," she said softly.

Michael raised one brow. "Pardon?"

"Oh, nothing," she said quickly, clearly surprised that he had heard her. Which amused him a little because surely she did not think she had whispered it? "Do you play?"

"Pardon?" he said again and realised that he was repeating himself only when her lips twitched.

Silently, she pointed to a chess table nearby. Michael hadn't noticed it. He hadn't noticed a number of things, he realised, so consumed as he was in Lady Elaine. The crowd had thinned out some, a number of the guests silently declaring that they could not last much longer. He thought he should be amongst them, heading back to the comfort of his study where he could pore over his documents like he had done for the past few weeks. But there was a hopeful glint in Lady Elaine's eyes and he was answering her before he even thought about it.

"Perhaps not as well as you, my lady," he purred and was pleased when she blushed furiously. He hadn't meant to flirt with her just now. Just like he hadn't meant to flirt with her during their dance and afterwards either. It simply came out.

"You do not know how well I play, Your Grace," she said. "I could be absolutely dreadful."

"I do not think that someone who is absolutely dreadful would even suggest it in the first place."

"Perhaps simply for the love of the game?"

"If you loved it so much, I expect you to be good at it by now. Would you like to play a round or two?"

"It would be a pleasure," she answered modestly. "Though I fear my skill may not be up to par."

Michael said nothing, simply gesturing with a swipe of his hand for her to go ahead. She did that, eyes cast to the floor, her cheeks coloured that adorable pink that did something odd to him every time he witnessed it. He made sure to pull out her chair and hastened to the other side while she set the board.

Then she transformed before his very eyes. Her fingers were swift, placing the pieces where they should be with such efficiency one would think she would be hung if she didn't. The smile disappeared, her eyes growing focused and determined. As she made the first move, Michael realised he just might have fallen into her trap.

He was not rusty, however, and he liked a challenge as much as anyone else. And Lady Elaine surely did put up a challenge. They grew quiet, seconds stretching endlessly between their plays. When he made a move that forced her on the defensive, her lips twitched. As if she relished the challenge. As if that was exactly what she wanted him to do.

It was the most endearing thing he'd ever witnessed.

"Checkmate," Lady Elaine stated with a flourish. "My, Your Grace, I thought you would make it harder for me."

Michael blinked when she looked at him, straightening, realising he had been staring for far longer than he should have been. "I have not played in a while," he defended. "Perhaps after a few more plays, I will be able to squeeze a win out of you."

"Shall we go again then?" Lady Elaine asked. She was already moving the pieces back to their starting positions with a fervour he had not seen in her all evening.

"Elaine?"

Lady Abney appeared at her side, touching her gently on the shoulder. "Perhaps we should take our leave now. It is quite late already."

"Oh." Disappointment sank over Lady Elaine like a heavy blanket, hiding that happy little smile of hers. "Forgive me, I had not noticed."

“You needn’t worry. James seemed rather preoccupied with a game of whist and had not noticed the late hour either. I would love to have you two stay for a while longer, but I am falling asleep as we speak.”

Lady Elaine hurried to her feet. Michael stood as well, masking his disappointment. It seemed she was just beginning to warm up to him.

Lady Abney glanced his way before murmuring, “I shall give you a moment to bid your farewells.”

The moment the dowager viscountess walked away, Michael said, “I shall not say goodbye. Not yet.”

Lady Elaine frowned slightly, confused. “You do not seem very keen on minding your manners, Your Grace.”

He could not help laughing at that. It bubbled forth without warning, with a level of carefreeness that he hadn’t felt in years. “I do not mean that I shall turn my back to you while you leave, my lady. I simply meant to suggest that I escort you to your carriage.”

“Oh.” The pink cheeks returned. “If it is not too much, I would enjoy that.”

Michael grinned, offering her his elbow. She took it with a shy smile. He turned towards the door, not missing the eyes that followed them all the way. They were talking about him, he knew.

Poor girl.

The dreadful scandal.

How dare he?

Bits and pieces of scathing gossip floated to his ears but he pretended not to hear them and hoped Lady Elaine was as oblivious to it as she seemed to be with everything else. He didn't dare look at her, just in case.

He didn't actually see when Lord Abney fell in step behind them. Michael only felt an overbearing presence all of a sudden, looming with such fierceness that it was a wonder shadows weren't following in the viscount's wake. He didn't pay it any mind, however. He couldn't pay much mind to anything when Lady Elaine's scent was distracting him.

"I have another confession, my lady," Michael murmured to her as soon as they made it to the foyer. Knowing that their time together was about to be cut short, he suddenly felt as if he couldn't let her leave without saying his next words.

"What's that?" she whispered back. Or at least try to whisper, Michael supposed. Hopefully, Lord and Lady Abney were not too close behind to overhear.

"Meeting you has made my decision to attend this year's Season worth it."

As they stepped out onto the porch, Michael lamented the fact that the dim lighting hid the blush that was certainly staining her cheeks. But he heard abashment in her voice when she asked, "Shall I see you again then?"

The hope in her voice was what stalled him. It shouldn't have. He knew that. Just as much as he knew that escorting her to her carriage was overkill. But Michael was beginning to realise that there were a number of things that felt out of his control since the moment he laid eyes on her. What was one more thing?

"I certainly hope so," he said at last, before bending to kiss the back of her gloved

hand. Her fingers tightened slightly against his and when he raised his head to meet her eyes, he was struck by the sheer depth of emotions simmering within them.

His heart thudded against his chest. Someone—presumably Lord Abney—cleared their throat behind him and Michael remembered to let go of her hand. But he couldn't look away from her. Even when she broke eye contact and climbed into the carriage. Even when Lord Abney passed by with narrowed eyes and Lady Abney looked pleasantly curious. Even as the carriage began its trek out of the driveway.

Michael just stood there wondering what in the world he'd just gotten himself into.

“Well,” Lorna's voice filled the quiet carriage. “The duke seems nice.”

Elaine giggled behind her hand. There was nothing left for her to do at that point. Filled with such delirious euphoria as she was, it was the only thing she could do. Her heart was already racing, her fingers had grown clammy under her gloves, and there was an unusual heat sparking in her midsection every time she thought about the duke.

“Yes,” she answered her aunt, unable to wipe that broad, sappy grin off her face. “He is nice.”

“Do you think he fancies you?” James inquired, his tone as direct as ever.

“Oh, good grief,” Lorna sighed. “There is no need to ruin her night with your speculations.”

“It's fine, Aunt Lorna,” Elaine said gently. “Truly.” She faced her cousin. “What do you think, James? As someone who has possessed such feelings before, do you think

he fancies me?"

Lorna's eyes grew wide at that and Elaine knew James was bound to be questioned on who he'd felt feelings for in the past. His jaw ticked and he narrowed his eyes at Elaine as if he knew it was going to happen as well.

"He does seem to be taken with you," James admitted at last. "As did many other gentlemen there. Like Lord Penly, for example."

"Lord Penly talks about himself far too often," Elaine sighed.

"Then what of Lord Weatherby?"

"He is twice my age!" Elaine gasped. "Perhaps even thrice!"

"He is wealthy and a good man. You cannot ask for anything else when seeking a marriage."

Elaine sank into her chair, sighing softly. Reality crept over her senses, chasing away the dreamy memories of her night with the duke. James was right. But... "Wouldn't it be nice if I married someone who was kind, wealthy, and closer to my age?"

"Certainly. There are several eligible gentlemen available to you in London and I believe you have made your mark this evening."

"But you needn't make your choice so soon, my darling," Lorna chimed in. "Who knows? You may meet someone who is far more charming and more handsome than His Grace. There is no need to put all of one's eggs into one basket."

Except, she might have no other choice. Elaine knew she would not have the luxury of having another Season if she did not find a husband during this one. She simply

had to. Which meant that she had to accept any good card dealt to her.

But the Duke of Ryewood could be that good card. If he was, would James oppose him?

Elaine snuck a glance at her cousin, who was now staring out the window with that tiny little frown always present on his face. She wondered if he was thinking about her future, if he was making a mental list of all the gentlemen she should not get involved with. And was His Grace on that list? Did it have to do with the scandal that apparently surrounded him and his title?

Elaine had caught bits of what others were saying about him as they left the drawing room, but not enough to tell her what he'd actually done to warrant such judgment. Perhaps it would be a good idea to learn that before she let her feelings get out of control.

Thinking about the way his lips brushed against her hand sent those feelings into haywire once more. Oh, she wished she hadn't been wearing gloves. What would that have felt like?

I certainly hope so , he'd said.

Elaine settled into her seat, looking blankly out the window as she made a decision for herself. If he truly fancied her, then he must prove it. Otherwise, she would refuse to entertain any delusions about their relationship.

Tomorrow, at least. For tonight, she would surrender to her dreams.

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Sleep came more easily to her last night. So easy that Elaine couldn't remember arriving at her bedchamber in the first place. She yawned, stretching her arms above her head as she blinked into the hazy sunlight filtering through the partly drawn drapes. For a few seconds, her mind was empty, her limbs sated.

And then there was the duke.

A slow smile crept across her face as she recalled the way he'd looked at her as she'd left. He stayed there, she recalled. She watched his figure fade into a silhouette until she could no longer see him. He stood there like a man clinging to every precious second he had to behold her.

She sat up, hair tumbling down the side of her face. She could not think like this, she knew. It was dangerous to entertain such thoughts about the duke, especially since he was likely just being polite last night. Taking pity on the shy lady standing in the corner of the room watching everything with wide-eyed trepidation. She knew that, deep down. And yet, when she thought of how he stared into her eyes as she spoke, how his gaze dipped distractedly to her lips now again, how could she assume anything else?

What she did know for certain was that she was forgetting something important.

Elaine climbed out of bed, realising absently that she had even managed to change into her nightgown despite her exhaustion last night. She padded over to the vanity table and began running her brush through her hair.

Her father!

Elaine dropped the brush, racing towards the door. Just as she was about to barge through, the door swung open to reveal one of the maids. She was one of the newer ones who had accepted the position despite the growing likelihood that she may have to leave as well. Elaine hadn't had the chance to learn her name, as preoccupied with her father as she'd been.

"My lady!" the maid gasped.

"Father!" Elaine panted. "Is he up yet? Has he eaten?"

"Yes, my lady," the maid hurriedly assured her. "When we saw that you were sleeping in, we dressed and fed Lord Suthenshire. He is resting once more."

Relief washed over her so swiftly that it nearly left her breathless for a moment. Elaine leaned heavily against the door. "Oh, thank goodness. I hadn't intended to sleep in, I...well, I suppose I am not accustomed to being out so late."

The maid gave her a look crossed between pity and understanding. "It does the body good to sleep in now and again," she said.

"It most certainly does," Elaine couldn't help but agree. She made her way back to her vanity table, picking up her discarded brush.

The maid didn't follow. They were short-staffed anyway, so she likely had a number of other things she needed to do. Elaine hadn't had a lady's maid since childhood.

"Lord and Lady Abney are here as well, my lady," the maid informed her.

Elaine paused, frowning at the maid's reflection in the mirror. "So early?"

"Well, it is nearing midday, my lady. They have asked me to inform you so that you

may all have tea together.”

“Ah, I see. I shall join them shortly. Thank you.”

The maid nodded and swiftly left the room. Elaine sighed, turning back to her mirror. She didn't tarry for much longer. She ran the brush through her hair a few more times, twisted it into a chignon, and went about getting dressed. Within the next ten minutes, she'd donned a simple blue morning gown that was wonderfully within this year's fashion—thanks to Lorna—but made sure to wear her sensible brown shoes, rather than the soft slippers Lorna had gotten for her. Elaine hoped there wouldn't be a chance for her to regret her decision.

She made her way down to the drawing room to find Lorna and James already having their tea. Or rather, Lorna sipping hers while James read the newspaper. They were bickering, as usual, and Elaine wondered just how much James could be retaining when he seemed far too busy contradicting his mother.

“Ah, there she is!” Lorna exclaimed as Elaine approached. “Elaine, my darling, settle this row for us, won't you?”

“It is not a row,” James pressed, his voice slightly annoyed. “I am simply disagreeing with you.”

“Which upsets me so now it is a row,” Lorna pressed. She drew in a deep, calming breath, taking Elaine's hand as Elaine chose the seat next to her. “Who do you think is better? Mozart or Haydn?”

“Neither,” Elaine said. “I much prefer Beethoven.”

James snorted in laughter, turning a page of his newspaper. Lorna thinned her lips, blinking rapidly at Elaine as if she could not believe she hadn't taken her side.

“Well,” James drawled. “I believe that brings our discussion to an end.”

“Yes,” Lorna murmured, clearing her throat. “I believe so.”

Elaine smiled as she moved forward for a piece of cake. It wasn't her preferred way of having breakfast but she supposed a sweet treat in the morning once in a while would not do her any harm.

“What brings you two by so early?” she asked before taking a nibble of the cake.

“It is hardly early,” James replied, craning his neck to get a better look at the grandfather clock. “It is nearly midday. Most ladies ought to be up and about by this hour.”

“Oh, right. I usually am, but it has been some time since I've had such a long night. I was quite exhausted.”

“Rightfully so, my darling,” Lorna assured her. “It was your first ball, after all. And Lord and Lady Jones seemed not to have any intention of ending it. Had we not left when we did, I surmise it would have gone on for a few more hours.”

“Are they all like that?” Elaine asked curiously.

She wasn't successful in hiding the apprehension in her tone and Lorna laughed. “Most of them during the London Season are, yes. But you are always free to leave when you deem it fit. There is no need to stay and suffer simply because you believe you should.” A mischievous glint appeared in Lorna's eyes. “Although perhaps you may be far too preoccupied to concern yourself with the late hour.”

Elaine flushed. She avoided her aunt's eyes, making her tea instead. But she knew this conversation was bound to happen again sooner or later.

The knock on the door saved her from having to respond. Paul entered, bowing respectfully before approaching with a letter in hand. “This arrived for you just now, my lady,” he informed Elaine.

Elaine frowned. “For me?”

“Yes, for you!” Lorna exclaimed excitedly. She was already on her feet, plucking the letter of the butler’s hand. “And it bears no seal. Who do you think it is from?”

“Perhaps you should let the person it was intended for open it herself,” James suggested firmly. And just in time too, because Lorna was already preparing to unfold it. She scowled and handed over the letter to Elaine.

Elaine’s heart thundered against her chest as she took the letter in hand. Was it the duke? Was he sending word of his intention to call on her? Or perhaps it was an invitation to dinner this evening? The possibilities were vast, ones that involved the duke and ones that didn’t. Yet, as she slowly opened the letter, Elaine found she couldn’t focus on breathing when her entire body was anticipating hearing from the gentleman who had followed her into her dreams.

She read quickly and each word had her hope deflating out of her. She didn’t think she had masked her disappointment well enough when she said, “It is from Lord Penly.”

“What does it say?” Lorna asked eagerly. James, of course, deemed this far more important than his daily newspaper and he set it aside.

“He says he enjoyed his time with me last night and wishes to see me again. Though in far more grandiloquent words than were necessary.”

Lorna’s shoulders sagged with disappointment. “Is that it? Did he not mention any

plans to call on you? Or for a promenade through the park?”

“Nothing of the sort.”

“How discouraging. A gentleman should never leave a lady wanting. If he intends to seriously court you then, I should hope that he will be more proactive.”

Elaine only shrugged. She didn’t dislike Lord Penly. But she certainly didn’t like him either. Throughout the course of the long night, he was only a blip in her memory, cast to the back of her mind and living in the shadow created by the duke.

The very same duke who hadn’t sent word or called upon her, leaving her heart heavy with uncertainty.

It is still quite early , she reminded herself. There is no need to get discouraged now.

“I know it is your decision, Elaine,” Lorna went on to say. She took a sip of her tea, then continued, “But Lord Penly has landed himself at the bottom of the already extensive list of potential suitors, in my opinion.”

“Extensive?” James repeated incredulously.

“Not Lord Weatherby?” Elaine asked, eyes widening at her aunt.

“Lord Weatherby seems like a decent match,” the dowager viscountess explained. “Despite his age, he is still of sound mind and is rather able-bodied. Not to mention the fact that is wealthy. Though by no means is he near the top of the list. And yes, James, extensive. Elaine was quite a hit last night and I have it on good authority that a number of the gentlemen she met have taken a liking to her.”

“Including the duke?” Elaine couldn’t help but ask.

“Especially the duke; he is at the top of the list.”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake.” James rolled his eyes. “Surely you jest.”

“I do not,” Lorna maintained, straightening her spine. “I know you do not approve but—”

“It is not that I do not approve. I simply believe that there are far better options for Elaine than a disgraced duke.”

“That is because you did not see them last night, James. They couldn’t look away from each other! The energy between them was magnetising.”

“Was it?” Elaine murmured. She felt heat on her cheeks as she thought of the way he’d held her during their dance. She quickly finished her tea and went about making herself another, needing the distraction.

“I felt a little bad pulling you away from each other last night,” Lorna sighed. “And he escorted you to the carriage! How romantic.”

“It is not romantic,” James grumbled. “It is polite.”

Lorna shifted in her seat, fixing her son with a hard glare. “Why are you so against the duke? Is it because of—”

The rest of her sentence was cut short by another knock on the door. This time, Paul entered with nothing in his hands. “Please forgive the intrusion, my lord, my ladies. Lady Elaine, you have a caller.”

Lorna shot to her feet. “She does?”

“Yes. Lord Weatherby is here to see you.”

The hope that had blossomed to the ceiling dissipated into thin smoke. Elaine felt horror wash over her in its stead. Not only was it not the duke, like she’d hoped, but it was the aged Lord Weatherby of all people. She would much prefer to sit and listen to Lord Penly talk about himself for hours than endure another moment with that gentleman.

The silence that followed Paul’s announcement was palpable. James was the first to break it. “Show him in.”

Paul nodded and left the room. Elaine braced herself. She knew she was in no position to turn him away. If things had been different, if her circumstances had not backed her into a corner and turned her desperate, then she would have given Paul an excuse to give Lord Weatherby without a moment’s hesitation.

But sadly, that was not the case.

He entered the room with the help of a cane. Elaine’s heart sank even further. In the light of day, he seemed even older, burdened by the years gone by.

She remembered her manners a second later than she should have. She got to her feet, sinking into a curtsy as Lord Weatherby slowly made his way over. In her peripheral vision, she saw Lorna and James retreat to the corner of the room to act as quiet chaperones.

“Lady Elaine,” Lord Weatherby grunted. “What a lovely sight you are. How have you been, my dear?”

The term of endearment sent shivers across her skin. Elaine fought her disgust from her expression as much as she could. “I have been well, my lord,” was all she could

manage to say.

“Good,” replied gruffly.

She sat and watched as he struggled to take the spot next to her. She wasn't sure if she should help him, not certain if he would appreciate it.

Finally, he sank heavily into the sofa and set his cane aside. “I should have sent word of my intention to call on you, my lady,” he said. “I was busy this morning, you see. Far too many meetings packed into the morning and I did not get the chance to.”

“I find no issue, my lord.” She shifted uncomfortably, glancing over at James. He caught her eye but looked away. She would find no help there.

“Tell me, my lady, how your day has been.”

“Truthfully, it has only just begun. I slept in rather late.”

“Late?” Lord Weatherby's bushy brows lifted in surprise. “Well, that is not very becoming of a young lady. And here I thought you younger ones had far more energy than an old man like myself.”

Elaine laughed nervously, not certain if he was jesting or not. “It was a long night...”

“Ah, yes, yes, it most certainly was. I, for one, could not stay much past the dinner. I take it you are full of energy now that you have gotten so much rest?”

“A decent amount, I suppose.”

“Marvelous. A lady with energy is good.” He did not expound on that. Elaine wasn't sure what to make of it.”

Thankfully, he didn't give her much time to think about her response because he moved on to talking about his meetings and his influence in the textile industry. Elaine tried to pay attention to what he was saying, but it was difficult when all she could think about was that this could be her life. She could marry this man and become the next Baroness of Weatherby, only to spend her days reflecting on what could have been. About who could have been hers.

She was beginning to think that her dreams would never become a reality.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:44 pm

He could hardly sleep last night and his restless tossing and turning were beginning to catch up with him. Michael grimaced at his second cup of coffee, willing it to do something, to give him the energy he needed to tackle the rest of the day. Last night's ball had gone on until well into the morning and the few hours he spent in bed hoping to sleep had been occupied with thoughts of Lady Elaine.

Constant, relentless thoughts of her.

Even now, sitting in his office with his documents spread out before him, he couldn't think about anything else but her.

Michael groaned aloud, running his fingers through his hair in frustration. The first phase of his plan, the introduction, had been a smashing success. He'd sown the first seeds and it was not nearly time for him to start the other phase as yet. So why on earth was he contemplating dropping everything to go and see her?

His frustration had only deepened since last night, and now, as afternoon approached, it threatened to overwhelm him. The previous night, sleep evaded him as he thought back on everything that had happened during the ball. Her smile, the sparkle in her eyes when they spoke, her unexpected beauty. Perhaps it would have been easier if she'd been a little duller with a far more modest appearance. Perhaps then he would not have had to deal with this infuriating attraction to her.

Because that was exactly what this was, he realised. He was attracted to her from the moment he laid eyes on her. Why else would his heart race and his stomach twist whenever their eyes met?

It was a problem, certainly. An unprecedented one. But now that he had recognised the issue, he understood the steps he needed to take in order to fix it.

For now, it was adistraction. He drained his cup of coffee and straightened in his chair, trying to focus.

But before long, Lady Elaine's laughter echoed in his mind and he was gone again.

"Michael?"

"Clarissa!" he answered, a little louder than necessary. "Come in."

Clarissa peeped into the room, frowning at him. "Is everything all right? Did something bad happen?"

"No, nothing bad has happened," he said urgently, getting to his feet. "Why do you ask?"

She entered the room, closing the door slowly behind her. "You are acting rather odd..."

"Am I?" Michael shook his head, shaking off the odd feeling. He was acting odd. All because he was hoping Clarissa's presence may help him forget about Lady Elaine for once.

His question only served to deepen Clarissa's suspicion. She ventured to the side of the room, sinking into the armchair as Michael came to join her. Michael calmed himself, realising that he was indeed acting a little odd.

"Lady Elaine is rather nice."

Michael sighed. That was the opposite of what he'd wanted to hear. How could he distract himself from her when she was now going to become the topic of conversation?

But rather than telling Clarissa he didn't want to talk about her, he said, "Yes, she is."

"And yet you insist on continuing with your plan, don't you?"

"I do not see why her niceness should have any effect on my plan at all. Do you?"

Clarissa sighed. "Michael, while I understand the reason you're doing this, I do not think you should involve an innocent person."

"Clarissa, if you only wished to lecture me on a decision I have already taken, then you are only wasting your breath." He stood. "And as you can see, I have work to do, so if that is all you wish to say, you should simply leave right now."

"Michael..."

He paused, turning back to her. "Yes?"

The abject sadness in her eyes nearly broke him. That was the last thing he wanted to see. He wanted to make her happy, to liberate their family name so that they didn't constantly have an unjust reputation hanging over their heads. But clearly, she could not see it his way.

Whatever she saw on his face had her shaking her head. "Never mind. I see that it will make no sense. And that is not the only reason I came to see you. I wanted to tell you that I have been invited to promenade through Hyde Park by Lord Furnsworth."

"Lord Furnsworth?" Michael frowned. "Do I know him?"

“I do not think so, but he certainly knows you. He’s made sure to ask me not to bring you along.”

“Why not?”

“He would not say,” Clarissa admitted with a shrug. “But I believe he is a little terrified of you. You do have a rather intense demeanour at times.”

Michael was about to defend himself before he realised he quite liked the sound of that. So he nodded, smiling. “I have no complaints. Will you ask Aunt Beatrice to act as achaperone then?”

“I shall bring my lady’s maid,” Clarissa informed him. “There is no need to bother Aunt Beatrice about him. I am not interested in the lord at all.”

“Then why have you agreed to go on a walk with him?”

“I have no other pressing engagements for the day. Perhaps I shall meet someone more worthwhile during my walk.”

Michael could not help laughing at that. “You are going to break Lord Furnsworth’s heart.”

“He will break his own heart if he believes that there stands a chance between us. Though we could always be friends.”

“I wish you all the best then.”

Clarissa stood, smiling. “I wish you the very best as well. Pray, Michael, whatever your intentions may be, do take care.”

Michael took her hand, squeezing it. “You don’t have to worry about me.”

“Easier said than done. I worry about you all the time.”

“That’s my job.”

“That’s too bad. I was always quite good at following your lead.”

Michael chuckled, pulling her close enough to press a kiss on her temple. Clarissa smiled but it only lasted a few seconds, quickly replaced with another frown. Michael didn’t want to hear any more of her lectures and he knew very well that he was likely to be subjected to another if she tarried for too long. So he gave her a gentle push towards the door and Clarissa caught her cue. She sighed, exiting the room without only a single backward glance.

Lady Elaine came racing back to his thoughts.

Michael sighed, glancing back at his desk, feeling far less motivated now. Would it hurt to see her today? Perhaps he could speed his plan along. After all, the quicker he got this over with, the quicker he could be rid of her.

He shook away the thought as soon as it came. No, he had other things to take care of, other pieces that needed to fall into place before he appeared before her again. Lady Abney was hosting a musicale in a few days. Surely he could hold out until then?

Michael gritted his teeth, making his way to the door. She was just one lady, one piece—albeit a vital one—of his plan. Outside of his quest for revenge, she held no value.

He should take care to remember that.

“Is something amiss, Lady Clarissa?”

Clarissa blinked, glancing over at Lord Furnsworth. His pinched features seemed even tighter when he frowned with concern.

“Yes,” she answered. “Why do you ask?”

“That is the fourth time you have sighed since we’ve begun our walk. I can only assume that there is something on your mind.”

Clarissa couldn’t deny it so she fell quiet. She supposed it was a little unfair to Lord Furnsworth for her to be like this. Even though she had no interest in him, she enjoyed his company well enough. That had been her only reason for accepting his invitation for the walk in the first place. And who knew? Perhaps this walk was what it took for her to see his merits as a future husband.

But she couldn’t stop thinking about Michael. She couldn’t stop worrying about Michael.

They ambled down a mostly secluded path in Hyde Park, the more populated area already behind them. Her lady’s maid was a quiet presence on their tail. Clarissa let her eyes wander over the lush grass and large wisterias, landing on a bench sitting near a pond.

“Shall we rest a spell, my lord?” she suggested in the silence.

Lord Furnsworth only nodded, his jaw tight. Clarissa hoped it wasn’t because of her. She hadn’t meant to upset him with her absentmindedness.

They came up to the bench and she quickly sat, brushing away invisible lint from the front of her skirt. It took her a moment to realise that Lord Fornsworth was still standing. And he looked far more displeased than she'd realised.

"My lord?"

"What is your intention with me, Lady Clarissa?" he pushed through gritted teeth, his beady eyes glaring into the sparkling pond.

Clarissa frowned. Surely she'd heard that incorrectly. "My intention with you?" she echoed.

"Do you intend on pulling my heart along on a string like a lovesick puppy?" he spat. "Do you not see a future with me?"

"My lord, where is this coming from?"

"You have not listened to a word I've said since we began our promenade!"

Clarissa blinked. "Lord Fornsworth, there is no need to raise your voice at me. And yes, perhaps I have been a little distracted, but it is simply because there is an issue—"

He was upon her suddenly, so close that she could smell the staleness of his breath. He seized her hand without warning. "My heart burns for you, Lady Clarissa. Ever since I met you last Season, I have thought of nothing else. Of no one else. Can't you see that?"

"My lord, please unhand me." She tried to calm her voice, to keep her panic from showing. All of a sudden, she was aware of the fact that they were alone with only her hapless lady's maid there to witness.

Lord Fornsworth only clasped her hand with both of his this time, squeezing tighter. “Lady Clarissa, would you do me the honour of—”

“I am certain the lady asked you to unhand her.”

Clarissa’s heart leapt to her throat. She recognised that voice—the same deep baritone that had shaken her to her core last night during Lady Jones’ ball. Clarissa watched as Lord Fornsworth’s tiny eyes looked above her head, first with irritation, then surprise, then repentance. He quickly let go of her.

“L-Lord Abney,” he stammered, getting to his feet. “I did not see your approach.”

“Likely because you were too busy accosting a lady away from seeing eyes.” Lord Abney did not come any closer, an overwhelming presence hovering right over her shoulder. And Clarissa didn’t dare turn. “I will give you three seconds to leave here before I make you regret your decision. One—”

Lord Fornsworth took off without a moment’s hesitation, feet kicking dirt up in his wake. Clarissa would have laughed at the sight if she wasn’t so focused on the man standing behind her.

“Are you all right?”

She swallowed, schooled her expression, and hoped she seemed nonchalant before she turned to face him. But even then, she wasn’t prepared for the sight of him. He’d scarcely left her thoughts since last night and now here he was, as if she’d summoned him.

Lord Abney frowned deeper. “Do not tell me you are traumatised into silence?”

“I am not traumatised,” she snapped. “And I was more than capable of handling the

situation myself, thank you very much.”

Lord Abney shoved his hands into his pockets. “I do not doubt it. But I could not simply stand by and watch it happen.”

Clarissa rose, not liking the way she felt at having to stare up at him. “Well, thank you all the same. It was appreciated, even though—”

“Even though you could have handled it yourself. Yes, you made that clear.”

Clarissa narrowed her eyes, not sure if he was poking fun at her or not.

Lord Abney seemed more relaxed than last night. For one, he did not wear that constant scowl, as if he was studying everyone within seeing distance. She decided she quite liked this version of him.

“What were you doing around here?” she couldn’t help but ask. “This is not the usual path taken for strolls.”

“Which is exactly the reason I tend to take it,” he responded. “So imagine my surprise when I come across my dear friend from last night and the rather overzealous Lord Fornsworth in what could have easily become a compromising position.”

Clarissa only heard one thing. “Dear friend? Since when have we become friends?”

“You wound me. Are we not?”

“Is that how quickly you make friends?”

“Not usually. But you are different.”

“How so?” she asked softly.

Lord Abney tilted his head slightly to the side, voice lowering as he said, “It would be far too much to say now. But by the end of our walk, I shall answer your question.”

“But we aren’t on a walk together.”

“Now we are.” He took her hand gently and slowly as if giving her time to protest. Clarissa didn’t think herself capable of doing such a thing. She let him tuck her hand into the crook of his elbow.

She was helpless to his charm, she realised a little too late. But she had a feeling that, with the viscount, that was not such a bad thing.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:44 pm

The cover of dusk was the only thing that gave Michael the courage to enter such a disreputable establishment. Before his father died, when Michael was simply a young heir with nary a care in the world, he would have entertained the thought. He would have chased the adventure that came with frequenting a seedy tavern in the middle of the London slums, simply because he could. But now, he was on a mission.

The stench of stale ale assaulted his senses as he stepped inside, mixing with the faint odour of smoke. Michael tried not to twist his nose in distaste, grateful that he had at least worn a large coat before leaving. Everyone had noticed his entrance, even as they continued drinking and talking as if nothing were amiss. The coat gave him a bit of cover, allowing him to blend into the shadows. He would only have a target on his back if he were to step into the tavern in his usual fineries, immediately dubbing himself a person of wealth even if they did not realise that he was a duke. And the kind of men who frequented places like these were not kind men.

George Horton was that kind of man. The kind who wanted to live in the shadows, who did not hesitate very long to commit immoral acts if it meant food on his plate and a warm shirt on his back. Michael would have had a smidgen of respect for a man like that if it weren't for the fact that George Horton was involved in his father's downfall. At least, that is what he'd learned after his extensive research. Now it was time for him to confirm it.

It took Michael a moment to spot him. George was the only one who didn't seem to notice Michael's entrance, slumped over his table in the corner of the tavern. Michael kept his head low as he headed over to him.

He claimed the chair across from George and rapped his knuckles against the sticky

surface of the table. George groggily opened his eyes, frowning against the dim lighting in the tavern.

“Ye are?” he croaked.

“The man who requested to see you,” Michael said calmly. A storm was brewing in the back of his mind, bolstered by his constant, overwhelming need for revenge. After spending nearly the entire day thinking about someone he should not be thinking about, and doing very little work, he was eager to get to the bottom of something.

George frowned deeper, pulling himself upright. He looked Michael up and down before slurring, “Ye’re not what I expected.”

“That’s odd. You are exactly what I expected.” Though he couldn’t say he expected him to be Scottish.

George only stared at him as if he couldn’t figure out if he should be offended or not. At last, he said, “I’ve been waiting a long time for you. You should catch up.”

He shoved his half-drunken tankard ale towards Michael. Michael didn’t pay it a glance.

“I asked for us to meet at ten o’clock. I cannot be blamed if you decided to start drinking by eight.”

George snorted what must have been a laugh. “Fair enough. I cannae doubt that I have been drinkin’ half me life away from midday. I don’t know why Morris hasn’t kicked me out yet.”

Michael felt his patience fraying at the edges as he fought to maintain his composure. “Let us get to the point.”

“Just ye wait,” George interrupted, raising his hand to stop Michael from speaking. “Before you go on, there are a few thin’s I need to ask.”

“Such as?”

“Such as who ye are. Ye cannot actually expect me to answer yer questions without at least knowin’ who I’m talkin’ to.” George took a large swig of his ale. “It is bad enough ye knew how to reach me in the first place, which means someone has said something they shouldn’t.”

“You aren’t exactly the most secretive person, seeing that you spend half your days in this tavern.”

This time, there was no mistaking that the noise George made was laughter. “Ye got me there. But ye’ll tell me who ye are, won’t ye?”

Michael only stared at him. The silence seemed to be making George uncomfortable because he quickly wiped his smile away and nodded.

“All right,” he mumbled, draining his tankard. “No problem. Morris!” George banged his tankard on the table then raised it above his head at someone Michael couldn’t see. Michael didn’t take his eyes off him. He tried to hold on to the last shred of his patience as he waited for this Morris person to approach. He did so within a few seconds, commenting that George should head home after drinking this last tankard of ale, who which George replied with a colourful curse.

George took three large gulps of his ale, sighing contentedly before he went on. “Now, what were we talkin’ about?”

Michael crossed his arms. “You were about to tell me about your time working with Lord Suthenshire.”

“Ah, yes. Lord Suthenshire. I cannot say that there is much to tell ye. I only worked as his clerk for one year.”

“But that was four years ago, was it not? Right before Lord Suthenshire gained influence in the House of Lords.”

“He’s always had influence,” George said, waving a dismissive hand. “Though he made it no secret that he wished for more.”

“Did he have a plan on how to achieve that?”

“A plan?” George frowned, rolling his eyes to the ceiling in thought. “I cannot say that he did. Perhaps? He didn’t inform me of much. His steward was much closer to him. Ye would be much better off getting this sort of information from him.”

Michael would have done just that if he hadn’t found out the steward had passed away two years ago. “Surely, you must know something?”

“Do I? It was four years ago, ye know. And me memory isn’t that good.” George drummed his bony fingers on the table. “Though I’m sure it can be jogged if needs be.”

The insinuation was clear. Michael reached into the small pocket of his coat and fished out two shillings, sliding them across the table. George waited until Michael removed his hand to snatch them up.

“Let’s see,” he hummed, then took two more gulps of his ale. “What can I remember? Lord Suthenshire was an arrogant man, that was for certain. I think anyone could tell ye that. He liked to think he was better than everyone else and he surely tried to make ye think the same as well. I remember one time he asked me to meet with him and could ye believe he was tellin’ me I don’t dress well enough to be his clerk? Granted

he gave me money to purchase better clothes so I wasn't really complainin', but it is quite impolite, don't ye think? I thought the British only knew how to be polite. I've been here since I was ten-and-five years, haven't been back to Scotland for nearly that many years, and I still haven't met a single British man who had half the manners as me Scottish friends. But I digress..."

This was going nowhere. Michael stared at George, listening to him ramble about how pompous a man Lord Suthenshire had once been. After a while, he began to look right through him, his mind wandering.

What would Lady Elaine be like in a place like this?

He couldn't believe he was even imagining such a thing. A lady such as herself would never set foot in such an establishment. Actually, she would never enter the London slums at all. Michael knew most—if not all—of the ladies in his life would turn their noses up in disgust. So why did he get the feeling she wouldn't?

His gaze drifted to the only empty chair in the tavern, set against a window. He thought of her sitting there with her hands folded in her lap, her hair draped over one shoulder, her feet tucked under the chair. She would be staring at everything with wide-eyed curiosity, much like she had last night during Lord Jones' ball. Would there be distaste in her eyes? Michael couldn't imagine it. He couldn't think of her ever turning her nose up at anything or anyone.

Why? Why did he have such assumptions when he hardly knew her?

Michael tore his eyes away, annoyed with himself for getting distracted once more. But when he began to listen again, George was going on about the clothes he'd purchased for himself, which Lord Suthenshire had not liked, and he stopped listening again.

Time was slipping away, and this conversation was going nowhere. George Horton was the first man who didn't hold influence amongst British nobles Michael had gotten the chance to speak to and he'd hoped the conversation would help put together a few pieces he was missing. But if George continued talking about unimportant things, then it was simply a waste of his time. He would have been much better off progressing in his quest to get closer to Lady Elaine. She would have certainly been better company. Though he supposed her afternoon must have been occupied by a potential suitor or two. A lady like her couldn't possibly go unnoticed after her appearance at the ball last night.

A twinge of something unpleasant pricked him at the thought of another gentleman trying to gain Lady Elaine's favour. That was his job. Even if it came at the behest of trying to tear down her family.

"...and of course, none of the other gentlemen in the meeting liked when I said that so—"

"Wait, what was that?" Michael cut in, refocusing with a frown.

George blinked. "What was what?"

"You said something about a meeting. What meeting?"

"Weren't you listenin'? I was telling ye how Lord Suthenshire had shouted at me in a meeting with the other members of the House of Lords and I told him something they didn't like. I said—"

"What other members?" Michael pressed. "Do you know their names?"

George frowned, slowly shaking his head. "I cannot recall, truthfully."

“How many of them were there?”

“Two? Three?”

Michael didn’t think he could hide his frustration at the lack of clarity. “Do you know the Duke of Ryewood? Was he there?”

“The duke? I knew the duke. I heard he passed away though.” George’s eyes began to widen. “Wait, are ye—”

“Answer the question,” Michael demanded.

“Yes, yes, I knew the duke. But he wasn’t there. That man was the only noble who was ever nice to me so I made sure to learn who he was. I thought it odd that he wasn’t there though.”

Michael did as well. “Do you remember what they were meeting about?”

George shook his head again. “I can’t recall a thing. I do remember the way Lord Suthenshire tried to degrade me, however. I believe I resigned one week later. That was my final straw, ye see. And it was at a good time too because Lord Suthenshire was giving evidence for a trial a few days later and I know he intended to bury me in paperwork.”

Michael nodded stiffly, his mind whirring. He absently fished out another shilling. “I do see. Thank you for your time, Mr. Horton. Have another drink.”

“Ye don’t have to tell me twice!” Again, George was quick to snatch up the coin. “Feel free to reach out if ye ever need more information.”

Michael doubted this man had the information he was looking for, but he nodded as

he stood. At least he was walking away with something. Something small, something that may not be anything at all. But it gave him renewed focus.

He exited the tavern, striding briskly toward his carriage waiting at the end of the dimly lit street. Michael made sure no one was following him before he climbed in and told the coachman to head to Belington House.

Michael barely paid attention to the trip and so was taken by surprise when they arrived. He exited the carriage, realising that it was late at night and that his uncle might have already gone to bed. That didn't stop him from heading inside, however.

The butler admitted him and informed him that Henry was having a drink in the parlour. That was where Michael found him, sipping amber liquid by his bookshelf.

“Have you ever read Hamlet, Michael?” Henry asked him without turning.

Michael made his way to the sideboard to pour himself a glass of brandy. “You know very well that I have, uncle.”

“Then you know what I intend to say next, don't you?”

Michael held back his sigh, joining his uncle by the bookshelf with his glass of brandy in hand. “If you intend to lecture me on the consequences of acting on one's need for revenge, you will be wasting your breath.”

Henry finally looked at him, face softening. “That is no reason not to speak when you know you should.”

Michael couldn't hold back his sigh this time. “That is not why I have come here. I actually wished to share a small tidbit of information I gleaned this evening.”

“Regarding your father?”

“Everything I do pertains to my father,” Michael couldn’t help but drawl. “I spoke with Lord Suthenshire’s former clerk. He did not possess much knowledge, but he did make mention of a meeting Lord Suthenshire had with a few other members of the House of Lords.”

“Did he say who those members were?”

“Unfortunately, not. I shall have to ascertain that on my own. However, he did say he resigned one week later, only a few days before Lord Suthenshire provided evidence in the trial against my father.”

“Do you believe those men were the conspirators?”

“I would wager they are. I need only ascertain their identities. The clerk mentioned that there were no more than three of them, aside from Lord Suthenshire.”

“You still possess very little information to go on.”

“But it is something!” Michael whirled away, unable to contain his restless energy any longer. “All this time, as I gathered evidence, I could not fathom why no one stood in my father’s defence. Yes, it was Lord Suthenshire who came forward with the accusation, but my father had friends in the House, did he not? Yet not a single soul thought to defend him? Lord Suthenshire was indeed influential, but no more so than my father had been, which leads me to believe that their silence was not born out of fear of him. So, why?”

Michael turned back to see his uncle looking at him with a mixture of awe and surprise. “You believe there were others involved,” he said.

Michael nodded, placing his untouched glass aside, unable to remain still any longer. “Indeed, it would answer many of my questions. And It would render everything so much clearer!”

“But the clerk did not possess any further information. And after four years, this is the first time you have received any hint that may support your suggestions. What leads you to believe you will uncover anything more?”

At that, Michael grinned. This time, the thought of the beautiful auburn-haired, green-eyed lady was more than welcome. “Pray, rest assured, Uncle,” he replied. “I know precisely how to obtain the information I seek.”

“The time has arrived, Elaine! Are you ready?”

Elaine nodded a little too rapidly at her aunt’s question, a clear indication that she was far more nervous than ready. And if that wasn’t enough, the fact that she’d been pacing back and forth and wringing her hands together for the past twenty minutes must have given her inner turmoil away.

“What if I am terrible?” she asked, voicing aloud the question that had been playing in her mind all day. From the moment her aunt announced that Elaine would be the opening act at her musicale this evening, Elaine had thought little else, actually. Especially when she’d learned that nearly the entire ton had agreed to be in attendance. Which would most certainly include the Duke of Ryewood. Honestly, Elaine had been too nervous to ask.

Lorna took her by the shoulders, forcing Elaine to stop her pacing. She looked Elaine in the eyes as she said, “You will do wonderfully, my darling, just as you always do. I do not believe I have ever met anyone as talented at playing the pianoforte as you are.”

“You are only saying that,” Elaine immediately dismissed.

“No, I am not,” Lorna pressed, her tone surprisingly gentle. “I promise you, the moment you sit down before that pianoforte, you will forget all about these anxious emotions and simply play.”

Elaine wasn’t convinced. All she could think about was striking the wrong key while the duke stood as witness and shame for the inevitable future went washing over her.

“You’re right,” she murmured, trying to make herself feel better. “I should not be nervous. After all, I will not be the only lady performing.”

“No, you will not. And honestly, I asked you to open the musicale for a rather cunning reason.” Lorna took her by the arm and they began a slow stroll around Lorna’s ballroom, already set up and waiting for the first guest. “You see, this is all a part of my plan. You will play so beautifully that no lady would want to go after you. And all the gentlemen would be so taken by your playing to pay much heed to anyone else.”

Despite the anxiety coursing through her, Elaine managed a smile at that. “Do you honestly believe that my pianoforte playing could win a man’s heart, Aunt Lorna?”

“Who said anyone about securing one’s heart? We only need to capture the attention of a willing suitor. One that will secure your security. The duke, perhaps?”

Elaine’s heart skipped a beat. She kept her eyes trained ahead, knowing that her aunt was watching her every move. “Will he be in attendance?” she couldn’t help but ask.

“Of course. I could not invite all the eligible gentlemen in London without including the duke, could I? I’m sure he will be as enamoured by you as he was last time.”

Elaine flushed. “He may not be as taken with me as you first thought, Aunt Lorna. We have not spoken since Lady Jones’ ball three days ago. I am beginning to think he was simply taking pity on a reserved lady such as myself.”

“Then tonight is the night to show him that you are not simply a reserved lady and that you are more than capable of holding his interest.” Lorna leaned closer to whisper. “Surely you do not want to be stuck with the likes of Lord Weatherby?”

An involuntary shudder raced through Elaine’s body. “Certainly not.”

“Then let us put out our best efforts, lest we have no choice but to accept his interest. Now smile, Elaine. The guests are arriving.”

Lorna swept away from Elaine’s side, heading towards the entrance where the first guests had been admitted. Elaine watched as she welcomed them, turning their bashful expressions—perhaps at being the first to arrive—into bright smiles before they were ushered over to the refreshments table, already deep in conversation. They didn’t pay Elaine much mind but she didn’t mind it. She’d much rather go unnoticed until it was time for others to see her.

The ballroom filled up quickly. Elaine busied herself by reading over her notes for the piece she would be playing and, before she knew it, the ballroom was almost full, the hum of chatter hanging over the air. Her aunt hadn’t been exaggerating about inviting nearly every eligible gentleman in London. At this rate, the unbalanced ratio of men to women would not go unnoticed.

James appeared at her side. “Are you looking for someone?” he asked.

Elaine glanced at him, then back at the door. “Shouldn’t you be with your mother greeting the guests?”

“I do not think she wants me there. Which is just fine since I cannot think of anything worse.”

“Perhaps she would want you there if you would smile once in a while,” Elaine commented.

“I have no reason to smile. And you have not answered my question.”

“What question?”

“Are you looking for someone?”

Elaine gave herself a moment to think about it before she shook her head. “I am not.”

Technically speaking, she was waiting for someone. There was no need to look when she knew the duke was not here. She’d taken notice of that before James’ approach. Now she couldn’t help but stare at the door, willing him to step through.

At that very moment, the duke appeared.

Elaine sucked in a silent breath at the sight of him. Her memory of him did not serve his handsomeness justice. His presence was an imposing one, his demeanour so powerful that she felt drawn to his side. Elaine clasped her hand behind her back, watching as he greeted her aunt and even managed to look polite and pleasant while doing it. A far cry from the broad smile and small embrace given Clarissa, at the duke’s side. Elaine was just as happy to see her. At least there was a friendly face present.

Elaine realised a moment too late that she had been staring. She looked at James, fearing he might have noticed her lapse.

But his attention was on the door as well. And his expression was...soft. Which was rather odd. Elaine didn’t think she’d ever seen him look so pleased before.

Elaine frowned slightly as she followed his gaze. The Marquess of Grovington and Lady Isabella were now greeting her aunt. Surely he wasn’t staring at Lady Isabella like that?

No, she realised with a start. His eyes were following someone. It was almost as if he was staring at Clarissa instead.

“James?”

“I shall be one moment,” he said absently before drifting away.

Elaine watched in wide-eyed fascination as her astute and serious cousin took Clarissa by her hand and kissed the back of it. If the blush on her face wasn't any indication of how enamoured they were with each other, the broad smile on James' face was.

“Elaine!”

She jolted at the call of her name, her aunt suddenly by her side.

“It is almost time,” Lorna told her. “Smile. Smile!”

Elaine could only manage a small grimace as her aunt raced away to stand in the centre of the room. She'd ensured that a wide makeshift dais had been erected for the purpose of the performances, which could easily be removed for later. Standing there, Lorna commanded the attention of everyone in the room with ease.

“Greetings, everyone,” she began. “And thank you for attending. I shan't keep you for too long because I know you are all eager to lay witness to the immeasurable performances we shall have tonight. So, without further ado, I introduce my dear niece, Lady Elaine!”

She clapped and a pitiful round of applause sounded in her wake. Heart thudding against her chest, Elaine made her way up to the dais where her pianoforte had already been stationed. She didn't want to look at anyone in the sea of guests, wanting to pretend that they were not there and she was in her drawing room playing to her heart's content. But she could not help looking for the duke.

She found him immediately, eyes intent on her. He stood alone, to the back, arms crossed. When their eyes locked, she could have sworn something thudded into place. A piece of her heart that she hadn't realised she had been missing.

The duke's eyes softened. Slowly, he nodded in encouragement.

Elaine could have taken on the entire world after that.

She hid her smile and faced the keys. It was so easy, she thought, as she began playing. She did not have to look at her notes or worry about accidentally striking the wrong key. All she had to do was relax and let the music take her over.

She lost herself in the performance, almost forgetting the audience, the world narrowing to just her and the instrument. Just her, the pianoforte, and the duke. Whenever her gaze flickered to him, she felt a rush of warmth. His magnetic presence pulled her deeper into the performance, urging her to pour her heart into the music with the hopes that she may capture his attention, not just as a musician but as a woman.

As the piece approached its ending, Elaine held her breath. She couldn't help glancing at him once more and saw when he leaned closer as if he were fighting the pull of the music. Was she truly captivating him? The thought fueled her, propelling her to deliver the climax with a fervour she hadn't felt in a long, long time.

At last, the last note hung in the air, and silence enveloped the room. Elaine held her breath. Had she done so terribly? It had felt like her best playing to date.

Sudden applause erupted like cannon fire, startling her and sending a thrill coursing through her very being. A smile stretched across her face, breathless, her heart still racing. She rose from the pianoforte with her cheeks flushed and tried not to look at the duke again, not wanting to seem too overeager. But as she descended from the

stage, she noticed the duke making his way to her.

“Lady Elaine,” he began, his voice smooth and warm, “that was simply enchanting. You have an extraordinary talent.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” she replied, her voice slightly breathless. “I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

“Enjoyed it? I was utterly captivated,” he said, taking a step closer. The air crackled with an undeniable tension as their eyes locked. “Your passion for music shines through beautifully.”

Her heart fluttered at his words. “I was just hoping to do justice to the piece,” she said, a hint of shyness creeping in.

“You did far more than that,” he said, leaning closer. “You revealed your very soul through your performance. It was the ultimate gift.”

Lady Elaine’s cheeks burned as she searched for words. “I only hope it resonated with you,” she murmured. She didn’t seem to know where to look. Her cheeks were so hot that she wanted to look away but his gaze held her captive.

“It did, more than you know,” he replied, a teasing glint in his eye. “Perhaps you would allow me the honour of hearing more? Perhaps when there are not so many ears?”

The prospect thrilled her, but it was the way he looked at her that made her pulse quicken. “Does having other ears make my music less enjoyable to listen to, Your Grace?”

“Hardly so. I simply do not wish to compete with others hoping to shower their

praises, though you deserve it tenfold.”

“Perhaps I would have liked those praises,” she countered, a hint of mischief in her tone.

“I shall be those voices then. As many as you need. I shall tell you all the beautiful things you would like to hear.”

If she had fainted at that moment, her smile would have remained fixed on her face. Elaine couldn't believe how quickly she'd let herself be drawn into him again. She'd told herself that she would be more aloof. A man like him was bound to break her heart if she was not careful and she would have no one to blame but herself.

But it was impossible. Not when he was smiling at her like that. Not when they were standing so close she could feel the brush of his breath against her nose. Not when his eyes kept lowering to her lips as if he was thinking the same thing as her.

“I would love that,” she managed, meeting his gaze with newfound boldness.

“Then it's settled,” he said, a smile lighting up his face. “Until then, I shall be thinking of your enchanting melody. I hope you do not mind if I remain with you for the rest of the performances?”

Elaine shook her head. Good grief, she really ought to learn how not to smile at him like a complete sap. “I do not mind, Your Grace. But what of your sister?”

“I do not know where she has disappeared to. She left my side the moment we stepped through the door. Perhaps she has found my aunt and uncle. They are also in attendance, though we arrived separately.”

Elaine didn't bother to point out that she might know where his sister was. She didn't

get the chance anyway when the next performer began approaching the dais. A hush fell over the guests.

Candlelight flickered softly as Lady Madeline sat at the stool of the pianoforte with her violin in hand. She looked a little anxious but then she closed her eyes, set her shoulders, and then began to play.

“Oh, good Lord,” the duke murmured.

Elaine fought her laughter behind her gloved hand. She tried feigning interest in the performance but her attention was wholly on his mischievous smirk.

“Is that a cat or a violin?” he whispered, leaning closer, his eyes dancing with mischief as the poor violinist struggled through a difficult passage. Elaine bit her lip to maintain her composure.

“Your Grace,” she whispered back, trying to sound stern, though her eyes sparkled with amusement. “She is doing her best.”

“Ah, but a fine effort does not make a fine performance,” he replied, his voice low. “If I had a shilling for every off note, I could buy my way to the next soirée.”

Elaine couldn't help but snort at his jest, glancing around to ensure they remained unnoticed. Her heart raced, exhilarated even though she felt a little bad. Lady Madeline winced every time she made a mistake as if she was suffering as much as her violin was.

“You are terrible!” whispered Elaine, though her laughter betrayed her.

“Terrible? Or simply honest?” he quipped, raising an eyebrow. “One must find amusement where they can, especially amid such earnest endeavours.”

She shook her head, biting back her laughter. “You are incorrigible, Your Grace! We should be supporting our fellow musicians.”

“Support can be shown in many ways,” he replied, feigning solemnity. “For example, I could support them from a distance—preferably outside.”

Before she could respond, the Marquess of Grovington and Lady Isabella approached. Elaine’s smile faltered, the humour draining from her expression as she faced the marquess and his daughter. Lord Gorvington ran his gaze down the length of her with a hint of pompousness and had the gall to look a little confused at her presence as if he couldn’t understand what the likes of her were doing here. Elaine tried not to cower in his presence.

Lady Isabella didn’t make her feel any better. She wore a friendly smile but her attention was focused entirely on the duke, ignoring Elaine completely.

“Your Grace,” Lord Grovington greeted with a nod. “My lady. What delightful conversation you two must be having.”

“Quite delightful, my lord,” the duke replied. His humourful tone was gone, replaced by one of polite formality. He paused for a moment and Elaine could have sworn his shoulders sagged as if he was resigning himself to what he was about to do next. “Lady Isabella, are you enjoying this fine performance?”

“Enjoying is a strong word, Your Grace,” Lady Isabella replied, her lovely voice rife with disdain. “I would call it a test of endurance.”

“Indeed,” the duke replied. “Perhaps they could recruit you for an encore. Your expertise would surely elevate the experience.”

Elaine covered her mouth, holding back her snort of humour. She caught the duke’s

mischievous eyes and had to turn away to keep from letting out her laughter.

Lady Isabella's brow arched. If she was aware of the duke poking fun at her, she didn't make it show. "I shall graciously decline, Your Grace. I was not invited to play this evening, nor would I have wanted to. I believe my talents would be wasted when faced with competition such as this."

"Competition?" Elaine couldn't help but say. The marquess and his daughter were doing a grand job of ignoring her but she didn't care. "This is not for sport, my lady. It is simply a way of showcasing one's talents and enjoying music."

"Yes," Lady Isabella murmured. "You would think so, wouldn't you?"

"Come now, my lady," the duke chimed in before Elaine could think of a response. "Surely you must understand what Lady Elaine is saying? Or perhaps you truly do not play unless it is to compete against others?" He turned to Elaine, eyes wide with exaggerated confusion. "Or is that the trend of late, my lady? I'm afraid I have been away from society for too long to know for certain."

Elaine could easily brush aside Lady Isabella's slightly snide remarks in the face of the duke's humorous ones. She fought her smile as she said, "You and I together, Your Grace. I know very little about it as well."

"A shame. We shall be outcasted then. Deemed pariahs if we do not educate ourselves."

"What a pity. I was hoping to become quite popular with the Ton."

"Your Grace," the marquess chimed in, his voice rumbling with irritation. "I trust you are not too easily influenced by this lady's levity? A man of your standing should uphold a degree of decorum."

“Of course, my lord,” he replied. “But laughter does lighten the spirit, does it not?”

“Laughter has its place,” he retorted, “but let us not forget the importance of seriousness in our society.”

Elaine couldn’t help but intervene. “Then I suppose we ought to practice moderation, my lord. But I find that a little levity often leads to more profound connections.”

“Such connections would be better made in the company of others, Lady...”

“Elaine,” she supplied.

He managed to look underwhelmed by her name, yet unsurprised. “Hm.” And then he turned his attention to the duke. “Your Grace, what are your thoughts on the current bill put before the House of Lords? You have been paying attention to England’s political climate, have you not?”

Lady Isabella took Elaine by the arm, surprising her. “Lady Elaine,” she began, “have you seen the new muslin gowns from France? I hear they are simply divine!”

Elaine frowned at her. She glanced at the duke but his attention was on Lord Grovington, completely devoid of any lingering humour. If anything, he seemed irritated at the topic at hand.

Realising that Lady Isabella was still waiting for a response, Elaine couldn’t help but admit, “I have not.”

“Well, I have,” she replied, flicking a lock of hair over her shoulder. “Though I must admit, I find them rather too simple for my taste. The embellishments in our own country are far more—how shall I say? —enlightened.”

Elaine nodded, forcing a smile as she attempted to steer the conversation. “Indeed, but simplicity can often exude a certain elegance, don’t you think?”

“I think not. Such styles are far too dull for a society such as ours. But I suppose you would not know anything about that, would you? Such a shame.”

Elaine pulled away from her. She knew what was happening and she wasn’t going to let herself be caught in the middle of it. “Please excuse me,” she murmured, loud enough for the duke and Lord Grovington to hear. They paused their conversation but she walked away with silence at her back, her face burning with shame. If they sought to monopolise the duke’s attention, they could. Elaine would not fight them. Nor would she let herself be caught in a match between her and Lady Isabella for the duke’s attention.

So she didn’t dare turn around, even though she longed to see if the duke was staring after her.

Meanwhile, James stood next to Clarissa, his gaze fixed on a peculiar painting hanging in the back of the ballroom. It was fresh, he realised, which meant his mother must have gotten it this morning. Like many other of her paintings, its colours were nothing but swirling, chaotic patterns that seemed to defy reason. The artist had clearly intended to provoke thought, but James merely squinted at it, confusion written across his face.

At any other time, he would have simply walked away, deeming the painting utterly senseless. But Lady Clarissa’s attention was fixed wholly on it. And his attention was fixed wholly on her.

She was a beauty this evening, even more so than previous though it had seemed an

impossible feat. The soft candlelight cast a warm glow around her, accentuating the delicate features of her face. Her blond hair fell in gentle waves, blue eyes sparkling with warmth that captivated him.

“I don’t understand this at all,” he admitted at last, simply because he wanted to elicit conversation that would allow him to hear her voice again. “Is it supposed to mean something? Because to me, it looks like a jumble of colours.”

Clarissa smiled, her eyes lighting up with enthusiasm. “Oh, but that’s where the beauty lies! The artist is exploring the tumult of human emotion. Look at the vibrant reds and blacks. Surely, they must suggest passion and turmoil, which could mean that the softer blues symbolises tranquillity and hope.”

James regarded her, a hint of amusement in his expression. “You clearly have a knack for this. But I must confess that I have never been keen on art. I usually prefer more straightforward pursuits.”

“Art can be straightforward too,” she replied, her voice warm. “It is just a matter of finding the right piece that resonates with you.”

“Perhaps, but I find it hard to focus on the art when there’s such beauty before me,” he said, turning to face her.

Clarissa’s eyes widened slightly, and she smiled, a hint of shyness creeping into her demeanour. He adored the slight hint of pink on her cheeks. “You do have a way with words, James. It’s refreshing.”

“I do not doubt that you have heard such compliments before,” he challenged. “What makes me so refreshing?”

“Perhaps the fact that you do not seem to have any intention behind your words. You

simply say them because you mean them.” Clarissa tilted her head to the side in thought. “Though I do wonder if you simply intended to distract me from the fact that you have not revealed your truth to me since our walk in the park. You were supposed to tell me why you thought I was different and you did not.”

“I wanted to ensure that I saw you again,” James couldn’t help but admit. “Is that so bad?”

She smiled broadly, shaking her head. “Not as bad as it should be, despite the fact that I am overcome with curiosity.”

“Perhaps I shall tell you by the end of the night.”

“Do you promise?”

He matched her grin, her playfulness infectious. “I promise, my lady.”

He felt a warmth bloom in his chest, and for a moment, they stood in a bubble of shared understanding, the noise of the ballroom fading into the background. But as quickly as it began, the moment was interrupted by the hearty laughter from a cluster of gentlemen nearby, drawing them back into the revelry. The performances had long since been over, which meant it was his mother’s favourite time of the evening. The time for refreshments and mingling. He could easily envision the viscountess enthusiastically dragging poor Elaine from one gentleman to the next.

James put his back to the painting, his smile slipping as he tried to find his cousin in the throng of people. “I should check on Elaine,” he said reluctantly. He also didn’t want to leave Clarissa’s side. But he hadn’t seen Elaine since before her performance a few hours ago. “But I’ll return to continue our discussion on art—and perhaps some of that beautiful lavender gown you have on.”

Clarissa raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “You seem rather overprotective of her. Is that how you always are with your cousin?”

James hesitated, biting back the truth that had rushed far too readily to his lips. “I just want to make sure she’s safe and happy. She’s been through a lot. Far too much for someone as selfless and as warm as she is. It’s not easy for her to navigate all of this.” He gestured vaguely to the extravagant surroundings.

“I can understand that,” Clarissa replied softly. “But she is a grown woman, James. She has her own strength.”

“Strength doesn’t mean she doesn’t need support,” he countered, his gaze still darting through the crowd of elegantly dressed guests. “I worry that she feels lost among all this pretence. It’s overwhelming. Not to mention the fact that a few unsavoury gentlemen may have already approached her. She is far too nice to send them on their way.”

Clarissa nodded, her expression thoughtful. “Lady Elaine wishes to find a husband this Season, does she not?”

“She does. And I shall ensure she finds the right one.”

“Is it not her decision?”

James looked at Clarissa, surprised at the question. “Of course it is. But she is quite naive when it comes to social situations and she will need my help.”

“Perhaps instead of hovering, you could simply guide her. The London Season is an overwhelming experience for any lady hoping to find a husband. It would not do to add undue pressure on her.”

James paused, considering her words. “Is that how it is for you?”

“It is,” she said, her smile encouraging. “But I have decided not to take everything so seriously. Of course, I would like to find my match, but I would also like to foster worthwhile friendships.”

“Is that why you were going on a walk with the leery Lord Fornsworth?” James asked and she laughed.

“He was rather nice before all that, but yes.”

James only grimaced. “I would much rather Elaine avoided such situations if she could. She is not likely to have a dashing gentleman like myself come to her rescue.”

“I do recall saying that I could handle it myself,” Clarissa hummed aloud in thought.

James’ lips twitched. “Yes, so you say, my lady. So you say.”

He found her. His mother did have Elaine in her grasp as he’d expected, but Elaine seemed to be enjoying a conversation with Lord Harrow. He relaxed a little. He liked Lord Harrow.

“Do you see?” Clarissa chimed in, her voice soft. “She is quite fine. She seems to be enjoying herself.”

He sighed, the tension seeping out of him. “I suppose you’re right.”

“You care for her deeply,” she remarked. She touched him gently on the arm, sending bolts of fire through his body. “I understand what it feels like to worry about someone all the time. I suppose it is not fair of me to chastise you for doing what I have not learned how to cease myself.”

“It is not just about protection,” he said. “It is also about making sure she knows she’s not alone.”

“I’m sure she knows.”

James nodded. He stared at Elaine a moment longer, committing Lady Clarissa’s words to heart. Then he turned back to the painting.

For a moment, he was quiet, staring at the swirling colours before he said, “This is still a complete mystery to me.”

Lady Clarissa’s laughter diffused the last bit of tension he held in his body as she faced the painting again. “I would be more than happy to go through its interpretations, if you are interested.”

He simply wanted to hear her talk. It could be about anything, as long as she kept going. “Please do,” he urged. He was outright captivated.

Lady Clarissa did just that, going on about the emotions drawn from the brushstrokes of the painting. James still didn’t understand but he didn’t need to. He only needed to hear her, to see her, and his night was made.

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The weight of the evening's festivities bore down on Elaine as she slipped away from the lively drawing room, the chatter and laughter fading behind her. The musicale had been a whirlwind of conversations and polite smiles, and while she appreciated her aunt's persistence in ensuring she was never without company, she found herself utterly exhausted. Seeking solace, she quietly entered the neighbouring parlour, a space that she knew would at least afford her a brief respite from the constant need to socialise.

The parlour was dimly lit, a cosy retreat adorned with plush chairs and rich, dark wood. A large bookshelf lined one wall, its shelves overflowing with well-worn volumes. The faint scent of aged books wafted through the air. Elaine always cherished fond memories of this room, a place where she would often find refuge during her childhood. When her parents were preoccupied conversing over tea and Simon seemed far more interested in finding bugs outdoors, Elaine could come here, pick up the first book she could find, and lose herself within it.

Elaine made her way to the bookshelf, her fingers grazing the spines of the books as she searched for something—anything—that could transport her away from the pressures of the evening. Away from the fact that she had not gotten the chance to speak with the duke again since they'd been interrupted by Lord Gorvington and Lady Isabella. She watched him move across the room, watched him watch her, felt her heart race when their eyes met and her cheeks warm when he smiled at her. And yet, they could not find their way back to each other.

Elaine sighed, settling into a comfortable chair with a book of Shakespeare in her hand. She found the first story she could and settled in to read, hoping it would help to clear her mind.

And it did. In fact, she was so engrossed in the story that she didn't notice someone had entered the room until the door clicked closed behind them. Elaine sucked in a breath when she saw that it was the Duke of Ryewood, his presence filling the room with a palpable tension.

"Lady Elaine," he said, his voice rich and warm. "I must admit, I did not expect to find you here of all places."

Elaine didn't know whether to smile or crawl under the nearest table and hide. "Your Grace, what brings you here?"

"I needed to get away from everything," he said, coming closer. "It is quite exhausting when others are always hoping to speak with you."

With each step he took, warning bells rang louder in her head. They should not be alone like this and yet...

"I would not know, Your Grace," she breathed. "I can hardly compare my popularity to yours."

"I beg to differ, my lady. Do not think I have not noticed your many trips around the ballroom, speaking with a number of gentlemen."

Elaine couldn't place the tone of his voice. But his gaze was intent. He stopped just a few feet away from her, hands clasped behind his back.

"Courtesy of my aunt," she assured him, though she wasn't sure what she was assuring him of. Surely that didn't bother him?

He tilted his head, studying her with an intensity that made her heart race. "Are you all right, my lady? I hope you do not feel faint?"

“No, Your Grace!” she denied hastily. “I simply needed a moment away from the... festivities. I thought perhaps I could lose myself in a story.”

He stepped closer, glancing around. “Reading? How interesting. Most would choose to remain amid the chaos.”

“I find solace in literature,” she confessed, closing the book momentarily. “It allows me to escape reality, if only for a little while.”

He ventured over to the bookshelf, leaning against it. Elaine lamented the sudden distance even though she quite admired the duke’s posture and physique. “I share your sentiment. There are moments when the demands of society become overwhelming, and I, too, find refuge in the pages of a book.”

Elaine’s heart warmed at that. “What sorts of stories do you enjoy?”

“Anything with depth,” he replied, his gaze drifting to the shelves. “I have a particular fondness for the classics—those that explore the human condition. I suppose they remind me that our struggles are often universal.”

“Ah, yes! I love those as well,” she said, enthusiasm evident in her voice. She forgot about her book as she stood to face him. “There is something comforting in knowing others have faced similar trials. It is as if we’re connected through time and experience.”

He nodded, a smile forming on his lips. “Precisely. Literature has a unique way of binding us together, doesn’t it? When I read, I often feel as though I am conversing with the author. As if they understand me.”

Elaine leaned forward, intrigued. “And what do you think they would say about our current lives, filled with soirées and societal expectations?”

He chuckled softly. "Perhaps they would remind us of the importance of authenticity. That we should not live for appearances but to experience life to its fullest."

"My, it sounds as if you should put such words to paper, Your Grace. It feels as if I am hearing the words of an inner author."

The duke chuckled. "I shall consider it if you do one thing for me."

"What is that?"

"Call me Michael, so that I may call you Elaine."

Elaine's heart thudded against her chest. "Very well, Michael. I look forward to reading your first manuscript."

"You shall be the first," he assured her with a grin. "Pray tell, what other pursuits do you find enjoyable, Elaine?"

Hearing her voice on his lips filled her with something she couldn't name. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that they were alone, that they were tempting scandal by daring to converse like this without a proper chaperone. Elaine knew couldn't risk ruining her chances of finding a husband. But, despite the warning thoughts in the back of her mind, she stayed right where she was.

"I also enjoy embroidery and playing the pianoforte, as you already know," she answered. "Both allow me to find escape from my reality."

He raised an eyebrow, his interest piqued. "Why would you need to find escape?"

"My life has become a pitiful thing, Michael," she admitted with a sad smile. "But with my embroidery, I am creating something beautiful with my own hands. It calms

me and fills me with satisfaction when I complete one. And when I play the pianoforte, it's as if the music carries me away. Each note is an escape, a way to express what I cannot say aloud."

Michael regarded her thoughtfully as if seeing her for the first time. "You are far more complex than I imagined, Elaine."

"Thank you, Michael," she replied, her heart fluttering at his words. "And I appreciate your understanding. I hope I have not ruined your chance for respite by showing you how pitiful I am."

"Pitiful?" His gaze bore into hers, intense and sincere, as he spoke with a quiet conviction. He moved away from the bookshelf, bridging the gap between them. "I don't find you pitiful, Elaine. I find you... authentic. You are nothing like what I thought you would be and I do not know what to make of it."

Her breath caught at the weight of his words. There was an honesty in his tone that made her heart race, and she felt the warmth of his presence wrapping around her like a gentle embrace. She opened her mouth to respond but the words faltered when his gaze flickered down to her lips, lingering there for a moment that threatened to set her on fire.

In that heartbeat, the world outside faded away, leaving just the two of them. She could feel the pull between them, a magnetic force that urged her to close the distance.

Was he contemplating kissing her? Would she let him? The very thought sent shivers down her spine.

A resounding yes echoed in her mind right before Michael's eyes flicked back to hers. He drew back slightly, breaking the moment. He ran a hand down his face,

suddenly agitated, as if he was trying to compose himself.

Elaine blinked rapidly, also trying to regain her composure as her heart pounded in her chest, echoing the tension between them. Was she mad? How could she consider letting the duke kiss her when she was meant to be focused on more important things, like saving her family? She felt a mix of disappointment and relief wash over her.

“We should return,” she murmured softly. “Before we invite scandal upon ourselves.”

Michael smiled ruefully. “I doubt anyone else would be thinking of going to a parlour to escape the festivities.”

“It is always a possibility,” she insisted.

He nodded, but the air still crackled with what could have been. For a moment longer, they held each other's gaze. Elaine allowed herself to contemplate what could have happened if he had stepped a little closer. If he had taken her cheek in his palm and pressed his lips against hers. If she had given in to the desire simmering deep within her bones.

“You should go first,” he told her. “So that we do not arouse suspicion.”

Elaine said nothing as she turned away, needing the distance before she let herself make a terrible decision.

As the first light of dawn filtered through the window the next morning, Elaine sat quietly at her father's bedside, her embroidery lying in her lap, the needle poised but forgotten. The soft rhythm of his laboured breathing filled the room, a sound that had once filled Elaine with trepidation. Now, she felt relieved that her father was still

breathing at all, considering his condition.

She couldn't shake the memory of her time with the Duke of Ryewood during the musicale—the way he had looked at her, the weight of their shared conversation, the tense moment wondering if he might kiss her at last.

A deep conflict swirled within her. She liked him. Far more than she should have, with all things considered. And her growing feelings for him tangled with her sense of duty to secure her family's future. She needed to find a suitable husband to help her family. Yet the thought of merely fulfilling that expectation felt like a suffocating weight on her chest.

Her father stirred slightly, his eyes opening to meet hers. "Elaine," he murmured, his voice thick with undisturbed mucus. "What weighs so heavily upon your heart, my dear? You look far away."

Elaine hesitated, the words caught in her throat. How could she voice the turmoil that had been brewing within her? But there was something in her father's gaze that compelled her to speak. "I... I'm torn, Father. I find myself drawn to someone, yet I know I must focus on my responsibilities. I cannot bring myself to forsake my duty."

His expression shifted, a flicker of guilt crossing his features. "Your duty to this family?"

She nodded slowly, feeling a knot tighten in her stomach. "Yes, but it is fine, Papa. I know what I must do."

"That is to put your duty before your heart?" he croaked, eyelids fluttering in the hazy lighting.

Elaine refocused her attention on her embroidery with renewed vigour, already regretting saying anything about it. The last thing she wanted was to upset him with her issues, especially this early in the morning.

“I should not have said anything, I did not mean to burden you with my troubles,” she murmured. “Would you like your breakfast now?”

Edward sighed and despite how low it was, it seemed to shake the room. It certainly shook Elaine to her core. “I should never have made you feel like you cannot make this decision for yourself,” he rasped, frowning as if every word he spoke was too painful. “I thought I was protecting you, but I see now how it has weighed upon you.”

Tears were already pricking her eyes. “I don’t wish to disappoint you, Father. I want to do what’s best for our family.”

“And yet,” he said softly, “what is best for you matters as well. You have every right to pursue your own happiness, to choose for yourself.”

The sincerity in his voice brought tears to her eyes. “Could it really be that simple, Papa?”

“Nothing is ever as simple as you think it is,” he replied, his voice thick with emotion. “I only want you to be happy, regardless of what that looks like. The last thing I want is to be a burden to you. And I do not think Simon would like that either.”

Elaine abandoned her embroidery to grasp his fragile hand. “You are not a burden, Papa! Don’t ever say something like that again.”

“My poor girl.” His eyelids seemed to be having a difficult time staying open. “You know so little.

Elaine watched him fight sleep for a few more seconds but his loss was imminent. Before long, he had slipped away once more, leaving her heart swollen with a mix of hope and fear. She'd received her father's blessing but he knew so little about their situation. She was their family's only hope. Would it make sense for her to rest all her desires on a gentleman who has not stated any intention of courting her when there were others who may be exactly what she needed?

"Thank you, Papa," she murmured, leaning forward to kiss him on the temple. "Your words mean everything to me."

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:44 pm

Morning came with nothing but exhaustion and a heavy mind. Michael stared at his untouched plate, fork clinking against the plate. At this rate, he was beginning to realise that Elaine had infiltrated every corner of his mind. The memory of her radiant smile lingered in his thoughts, her soft, expressive eyes dancing in the shadows of his restless sleep.

And he had nearly kissed her.

It was a slip of his mind, he knew. He'd lost himself to his basic desires when he found himself alone with her during the musicale last night. And yet, despite convincing himself that it was simply his male instincts taking over, he couldn't believe that he had almost let it come in the way of his plan. He thought himself stronger than that.

But then, he hadn't expected Elaine to be quite like how she was.

Beautiful, mesmerising, innocent, intoxicating. Last night, Michael hadn't approached her because he needed to complete his plan. He did so because he wanted nothing more than to share her company again after so long apart.

Clarissa's voice broke through the fog of his thoughts. "Michael, will you continue to involve Lady Elaine in your plan for revenge?"

The question hung in the air, heavy with implication. "Yes," he said, his voice steady, though unease coiled in his gut. Elaine was key to his strategy. He had made that clear. Without her, the past four years he had spent gathering information would be for nothing. The very thing that drove him all this time would be for nothing. He

couldn't very well give up on his quest simply because he was growing fonder of Elaine than he thought he would.

Michael ignored the twinge of guilt he felt at that.

Clarissa set her teacup down with a decisive clink, her expression shifting from concern to irritation. "Why must you be so stubborn?"

"I could ask you the same thing, seeing as I told you to leave this matter be."

"I cannot. I like Lady Elaine and this plan of yours is bound to have a greater effect on others than you first thought."

The heat in her voice gave him pause. Michael frowned at his sister. "What are you implying?"

Clarissa's cheeks coloured but she maintained her frustrated frown. "You must see, Michael, that this game you are playing may have consequences beyond your imagination. It could very well affect my chances with Lord Abney." Her voice softened as if revealing a delicate secret. "I am beginning to like him."

For a moment, Michael was taken aback. Like him? The family of the enemy? Was she insane? "When did this happen?"

"It does not matter, does it?" she pressed. "What matters is that I have grown quite fond of his company and it is my hope that he shares my feelings."

"And what of my plans? You cannot expect me to abandon them simply because you are flirting with the idea of a match."

"It is not just flirting!" Clarissa shot back, her cheeks flushed with indignation. "Lord

Abney is a good man, and I would not have my reputation sullied by your reckless intentions. If you persist, the fallout could be disastrous for both of us.”

He leaned back, crossing his arms, the tension radiating from her evident in the way she leaned forward. “And if I do not pursue this course, then what? I simply allow the injustices of society to continue? I cannot stand idly by while those who wronged us go unpunished.”

Clarissa’s eyes burned with intensity, her voice dropping to a whisper that sent a shiver through him. “But at what cost, Michael? The last thing I want is for you to risk losing everything in this insane quest of yours. Surely you do not wish to sacrifice the family you have left for a fleeting sense of vindication?”

Michael turned to the window, staring listlessly into the grass of the garden outside. Her words struck something in him, a flicker of doubt starting to take root. He hadn’t doubted himself from the moment his father was wrongfully convicted. Michael knew that he had to do whatever it took to set things straight.

But now, he wasn’t so sure. Now he wondered if he might only be making things worse, if he may be taking two steps backwards rather than moving on.

He desperately clung to his conviction, still feeling Clarissa’s eyes on him. “You do not understand, Clarissa. It is not merely revenge. It is about reclaiming my dignity, my—”

“Your humanity?” she interrupted, her tone softer yet unyielding. She reached forward to grasp his hand. “This is not the Michael I once knew. My older brother would never let himself be at risk of being consumed by shadows. And I know that is not who you truly want to be.”

Her plea echoed in his mind, and for a fleeting moment, he envisioned a future

unfettered by vengeance. A future where he could let go of the pain that had fueled him for so long. But Michael let the thought be quickly swallowed by the anger that had become a part of him.

“What do you propose, then?” he asked, frustration lacing his words.

“Let go of this vendetta, Michael,” Clarissa pleaded. “Allow yourself to focus on all you do have, rather than what you have lost. And you should allow yourself to truly give in to your feelings for Lady Elaine.”

“I feel nothing for her. She is a means to an end.”

“You are lying to yourself. I watched you last night and the man I saw was not focused on vengeance. I cannot recall the last time you had smiled with such abandonment.”

“That was the point, Clarissa. I was putting on an act, trying to get Lady Elaine to relax so that I may infiltrate her memories.”

Clarissa shook her head sadly. “I wish you could see what I do.”

Her words lingered in the air. He could not abandon his quest. Not now. Not when he had gotten so close to its conclusion. Not when he could finally lay to rest the incessant anger that simmered deep within him.

“And if I cannot let it go, Clarissa? What if I still wish to pursue my course?”

Clarissa sighed. “Then I hope you know that you may be doing so at a grave cost. A cost you may not be so willing to pay. For the both of us.”

Silence met her last words. Michael felt the weight of her eyes on him but he ignored

her, far too many uncharted emotions washing over him at once. He was torn and he hated it. He hated that Clarissa had watered the seed of doubt in his mind. He hated that he may not be able to give his father the justice he deserved and bring the wrongdoers the justice they did as well.

And he hated that, throughout it all, he thought of Elaine and how his quest for revenge may ruin what little balance she had left in her life.

Later that morning, Elaine made her way through the sunlit drawing room, her mind clouded with lingering thoughts of the duke. She held her father by his elbow as he guided him towards his spot by the window, hating the way he winced in pain with every step. Once he settled into the chair, giving her that pitiful look she was growing to dislike, she draped a shawl over his shoulders. She wouldn't ask him what was wrong any more. Edward always gave her more questions than answers when she did.

She needed an escape. The moment he was settled, his eyelids growing heavy once more, Elaine slipped away to the pianoforte on the other side of the room.

Music filled the room, her fingers flying over the keys as the notes soothed her troubled mind. Elaine closed her eyes and let every chord resonate with her, let it replace the doubt and uncertainty that had been plaguing her all morning. She began to rock back and forth, the world forgotten around her.

A sharp knock on the door jolted her back to reality. Paul entered as she cut her playing short. Elaine shot to her feet, her heart hammering against her chest, expecting to tell her that she had a visitor.

But...“Lord Abney has arrived, Miss Elaine.”

Elaine sighed softly, returning to her chair by the pianoforte. She began her playing once more as the door swung open, and James entered, his face as hard as ever. Elaine watched as he approached her slowly as if gauging the atmosphere before speaking.

“Elaine,” he began, his tone low and urgent. “Are you well?”

“Quite so,” she answered, turning her eyes back to the keys.

“And what of Uncle Edward?”

Elaine paused for a moment, then continued. “He has been better. He is sleeping far more often lately.”

“I see.” James was hovering, walking back and forth. Elaine tried to ignore him. “I have been meaning to speak with you about the Duke of Ryewood.”

Elaine’s heart skipped a beat. She tried not to glance at the clock, though she knew very well that it was approaching the fashionable time for a caller. Would the duke show up today? “What about the duke?” she asked, her voice steadier than she felt.

James didn’t stop his pacing, arms crossed. “There are whispers, as I’m sure you know, in certain circles. Rumours about the Rycroft family’s past—about Michael’s reputation for ruthlessness. And the apple certainly had not fallen far from the tree, if you know anything about what his father had done. And when I see you speaking with the duke, I cannot help but worry for you.”

Elaine let her hands fall into her lap, her racing heart echoing James’ warning. “Do you know exactly what he and his family has done? Or are you simply repeating that he is of ill-reputation without knowing the reason why?”

James frowned. "Is that not reason enough?"

"Not for me," she insisted. She knew of the rumors clinging to Michael's name but no one seemed willing to speak anything aloud. How could she ignore the kindness and laughter he had shown her simply because others said that he was not to be trusted?

"I am certain it is simply a misunderstanding," Elaine said as calmly as she could muster. "He is not what you think. I do not doubt that there is a complicated matter surrounding the duke but it should not matter if he has a good heart."

"Complicated?" James echoed, his brows knitting together. "Elaine, I know that you may feel drawn to him, but surely you must have considered the consequences of being attached to his name? It may very well ruin your chances at a good match. For your own happiness—"

"You cannot tell me what will make me happy," she snapped. "Only I can."

James sighed impatiently. "I only want what is best for you."

"I know." She tried to calm herself but it was hard. "I want what is best for you as well. I saw you with Lady Clarissa. It is easy to see that you desire her."

Elaine didn't think she would ever witness a blushing James and yet there he was, blinking rapidly at her as if he hadn't a clue how to process what she'd just said. It was enough to make her smile for the first time that morning.

"James?" she probed, tilting her head to the side. "Has a cat gotten your tongue?"

"I do not know—" He was interrupted by the butler's reentrance to the drawing room.

“Lord Weatherby has come to call on you, my lady,” he announced.

Elaine stood as her heart sank to the floor. Not the duke but Lord Weatherby of all people. She couldn’t resummon her smile no matter how hard she tried.

The door swung open and Lord Weatherby bustled in with his cane, wiping his sweaty face with his handkerchief with nothing but nervous energy. He gave her a genial smile that didn’t quite touch his eyes as he said, “Ah, Lady Elaine! What a pleasure to see you again!”

She curtsied. “My lord,” she greeted. “What brings you by today?”

“To see you, of course. And it is a good thing Lord Abney is here as well. That way I only need to speak once.”

Elaine met James’ eyes, her throat growing thick with fear at what was to come. “Is there something you wished to speak with us about, my lord?” James asked.

“Yes, yes. I think I have waited for far too long.” His stubby fingers fumbled with his cravat and he kept wiping his face. “If I am being honest, I have been considering the merits of a match between us, Lady Elaine. And I believe that such an alliance would certainly prove advantageous to us both. A rather sensible arrangement, would you not agree?”

The floor nearly gave way beneath her. Elaine clasped her hands so tightly behind her she began to lose feeling in her fingers. Discomfort washed over her, prickling her skin with the weight of what he was saying. “My lord, I...I appreciate your thoughts, truly, but—” She glanced helplessly at James, but her cousin was too busy staring at the baron as if he was trying to understand something.

Before she could continue, Paul returned to interrupt them one more time. Relief

washed over her like a cool breeze he announced, “The Duke of Ryewood is here to see you, my lady.”

Something shifted in the room the moment Michael entered. His commanding and confident presence overwhelmed Lord Weatherby’s lacking one. Elaine had half a mind to throw her arms around him and sob in relief for his timely appearance.

He paid Lord Weatherby scant regard as he approached Elaine. “My lady. Lord Abney. I hope I am not interrupting.”

“You are not, my lord,” Elaine said quickly.

Michael raised a brow at that, looking at Lord Weatherby.

“I was just about to take my leave,” Lord Weatherby said, fumbling with his handkerchief. Elaine sighed in relief as he walked slowly out of the room with only a fleeting look over his shoulder.

Michael paid him no mind. “Elaine,” he said, his smile warm. The sight erased all her lingering discomfort. “I was hoping you might join me for the promenade hour later today.”

“Yes!” she said too quickly. Face washing with heat, she tried again. “I would like that.”

“Clarissa will be accompanying us as well,” he added, and after a moment’s hesitation, turned to James, “Would you care to join us too?”

James’s expression shifted, scepticism flaring in his eyes, but he managed a polite nod. “Of course, though I wouldn’t want to intrude.”

Elaine's gaze flickered to James, noting that he wore an expression of skepticism and she wondered what he was thinking. She could sense the protective instincts threatening to overtake him, his worry for her palpable thing standing in between him and the duke. Even when he nodded politely, his posture remained stiff.

If Michael noticed it, he didn't show. His attention was back on Elaine, his gaze warm. "I look forward to seeing you later, then," he said, his voice laced with an eagerness that mirrored her own anticipation.

He reached out to take her hand, placing a kiss on the back of it. Elaine struggled to keep herself upright, her knees threatening to give way on her. It didn't feel as if she was in control of her body when he straightened and smiled at her, her returning grin stretching across her face with ease. Then he straightened, nodding respectfully at James, and turned to leave. Elaine watched him go, her heart thundering in her chest.

Once he was gone, she went back to the pianoforte, a far livelier tune on the tips of her fingers. She didn't pay James any mind when he sighed and went to sit down, reaching for the Times.

"I hope you know what you're doing," she heard him say.

She most certainly didn't. But for once, she did not care.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:44 pm

Elaine stood before her mirror, smoothing the soft fabric of her pale blue walking dress, heart still racing with anticipation now that the promenade hour was upon them. She adored this dress on her and enjoyed the way the light caught the delicate embroidery. She could only hope that Michael liked the way it framed her figure and accentuated her natural grace.

“Ah, my darling!” Lorna exclaimed as she walked into her bedchamber. Her eyes twinkled as she took in Elaine’s reflection. “You look absolutely radiant. Are you excited for your promenade with the duke?”

Elaine’s cheeks warmed at the compliment, a mixture of excitement and apprehension swirling within her. “Thank you, Aunt Lorna. I have been looking forward to it since the moment he asked me.”

Lorna stepped closer, her hands deftly making minor adjustments to Elaine’s hair. Her expression shifted, a glimmer of mischief lighting her eyes. “Now, my dear, while we’re on the subject of gentlemen, I think it is about time we discussed the duke’s reputation. I’m sure you must have heard the whispers and they do say the most scandalous things. But of course, there are always two sides to every story.”

Elaine nodded. “Yes, I am well aware, but I feel there’s so much more to him than the rumours suggest. And...I cannot help but feel drawn to him, Aunt Lorna, despite James’ warnings.”

“Good!” Lorna exclaimed, her excitement palpable. “You must follow your heart, Elaine and never let idle gossip cloud your judgment. You will never know the truth about a man unless you give him the chance to show it. James is simply being too

overprotective.”

“I know there is truth in what James’ says, though. Rumours do not simply appear out of thin air. Perhaps the duke will tell me about it today.”

“Perhaps. But you must understand if he does not.” Lorna kept fussing with Elaine’s hair, even though she could have sworn she’d done it rather nicely. “But tell me—what of Lord Weatherby? Has he not returned? He had seemed rather determined the last time he came to call on you so I was almost certain that he would.”

“Lord Weatherby nearly asked for my hand in marriage,” Elaine managed to say, even though speaking it aloud made her shudder.

“I beg your pardon?” Lorna gasped. “Why am I only hearing about this now?”

“It happened right before the duke arrived. The duke interrupted it, actually, so it was not actually given. I may be wrong.”

“You know very well that you are not. A man as old as the baron will not waste any time when searching for a new wife, you know. He has so little time left as it is.”

Elaine stifled a laugh at those words, feeling a little bad. “The good thing is that I was not able to give him a response.”

“What a relief!” Lorna sighed, shaking her head. “Perhaps the duke will beat him to the pulpit after all!”

Elaine laughed at that, picturing Michael marching into the vows, determined to claim her before Lord Weatherby could even gather his wits. The duke did not seem like the type to do such a thing and yet it filled her heart with warmth. “How nice it

would be if it were that simple, Aunt Lorna. But I do appreciate the thought.”

“But think of it!” Lorna leaned closer, her eyes sparkling. “You read quite frequently so I’m sure it will be easy for you to imagine. The duke, with his mysterious past and undeniable charm, swooping in to rescue you from a dull marriage. Who wouldn’t want that kind of romance?”

Elaine’s heart fluttered at the thought. “But what if he truly has a dark past? What if I mean nothing to him?”

Lorna shook her head, her expression earnest. She took both of Elaine’s hands. “You will not know unless you seek to uncover the truth yourself, darling. You have never been one to shy away from a challenge. Trust your instincts since they have never led you astray before.”

With a determined nod, Elaine straightened her shoulders. “Thank you, Aunt Lorna. That makes me feel a little better.”

“Now come,” Lorna said, tucking Elaine’s hand through the crook of her arm. “Let us not keep our dashing duke waiting!”

Michael and Clarissa arrived at the Sutton residence with a flicker of tension settled in his chest. He stepped inside and was greeted by the butler’s polite nod. The Sutton residence that had once stood as an imposing structure exuding grandeur now wore the marks of neglect. Michael had taken a moment to observe the estate, noting the peeling paint on the shutters and the cracked stone facade. Weeds sprouted defiantly in the otherwise manicured gardens, and the once-pristine pathway was now marred by patches of overgrown grass.

The house had once been a symbol of power and prestige and now it languished in disrepair, much like the reputation of its owner. Simply a reflection of the man who occupied it, Michael thought with satisfaction. It was only fitting.

“Lady Elaine will be right with you, Your Grace,” the butler told him and he disappeared a moment later.

The drawing room was no different. Michael had taken notice of the worn surroundings when he’d arrived earlier to ask for Elaine’s company but he hadn’t stared, not wanting to be rude. Now he didn’t stop himself, even though he saw that he and Clarissa were not alone.

“Your Grace,” Lord Abney greeted, rising from his spot in the middle of the room. “Lady Clarissa.”

“Good day, my lord,” Clarissa greeted breathlessly with a smile. “It is a pleasure seeing you again.”

“I feel the same, my lady.” The viscount’s expression was soft, warm. Michael couldn’t believe what he was seeing. “You must forgive my cousin’s lateness. She will be here soon, I’m sure.”

“It is no worry, my lord. We are in no hurry,” Clarissa smiled gently. “Were you reading just now?”

“I was. Would you like to see?”

Clarissa nodded excitedly and Michael resisted the urge to roll his eyes. How hadn’t he noticed this before? The two of them were talking like a pair of lovesick fools.

He ignored the pang of envy he felt as he watched them approach the bookshelf at the

back of the room, talking about the kind of books they liked. It only brought Elaine back to mind, when they had a very similar conversation last night.

His eyes wandered and landed on Lord Suthenshire, who sat languidly by the window. A sharp stab of anger shot through Michael at the sight of him. This was the man, the one who had wronged him and his family. He had once stood tall and now appeared like a fragile thing being swallowed by the oversized armchair, a shawl draped over his lap. He stared out the window with such an unseeing gaze that Michael couldn't help but wonder if he even realised that there were others in the room.

Michael was tempted to walk up to him and demand justice right then and there. But it wouldn't be enough. He had to bring Lord Suthenshire down to the same level his father had been reduced to.

At that moment, Elaine entered with her aunt, and all thoughts of Lord Suthenshire slipped to the back of his mind. She glided into the room like a breath of fresh air, a smile on her face, her pale blue dress accentuating her figure and illuminating the space around her.

“Good day again, Your Grace,” she greeted breathlessly.

“I thought we agreed on calling me Michael,” he drawled as he approached, taking her hand. He had kissed the back of it before and he couldn't stop himself from doing the same again. “You look lovely, Elaine.”

Her deep flush filled him with the urge to pull her into his arms, forgetting everyone around him. But he couldn't forget Lady Abney smiling broadly at the both of them.

“Good day, Lady Abney,” he greeted politely. “Will you be joining us?”

“Oh, no, of course not! I know better than to impose on such a charming pair. I trust my son will serve as an adequate chaperone.” Lady Abney stepped forward, dropping her voice to a whisper. “Pray, inform me should he attempt to come between you two, and I shall set him straight.”

Michael didn't know whether to laugh or to feel pity for the wrath Lord Abney was likely to incur. He settled on the former before nodding and then turning his attention back to Elaine.

“Shall we?” he asked.

“Just one moment,” she said.

Elaine made her way to her father, kneeling beside him. She began fussing over him, tucking the shawl tighter around him. It was a tender enough moment to tug at Michael's heart, soothing the anger that had flared at Lord Suthenshire. He watched as she spoke softly, her fingers brushing her father's hand with affection. She was nothing but alight that radiated warmth and kindness, a brightness that made him reconsider the darkness he had been harbouring for so long.

For a moment, Michael wondered about the path to the truth. The anger that consumed him did not stand a chance when faced with a lady like Elaine, he realised. He was found lacking in the face of her near perfection. She looked up then, catching his gaze, and for a heartbeat, the world around them faded away.

“Michael,” she said, her voice a melody that sent a ripple through him. She stood, and the sunlight caught her hair, casting a warm glow around her. “I am ready to leave now.”

He swallowed hard, forcing a smile as he shook off his thoughts. “Let us then,” he replied, his heart twisting in his chest. He couldn't shake the feeling that he had just

made a terrible mistake. What mistake that was, he hadn't a clue. But as he took Elaine's hand and they made their way out of the drawing room with Lord Abney and Clarissa on their heels, he knew the mistake couldn't be her.

The sun filtered through the leaves of the cypress trees, casting dappled shadows on the path ahead, as they strolled through Hyde Park. Elaine couldn't contain a rush of exhilaration that mingled with the nerves taking her over. Behind them were James and Clarissa, their soft laughter creating a pleasant backdrop. But Elaine's attention was firmly fixed on Michael beside her.

Well, perhaps not firmly fixed, for she could not help but notice the glances they attracted from passersby—some staring curiously, while many others were filled with veiled judgment. It was an unfamiliar sensation to be observed in this manner, and she understood it had more to do with the duke than with her.

Elaine chose to ignore it. She had been longing for this moment since she met Michael. She refused to let the judgments of others ruin the connection blossoming between them, like the vibrant flowers lining the path.

"Michael," she began, breaking the comfortable silence, "how was your morning?"

He glanced at her, his expression guarded. "Unproductive, I'm afraid. And it is your fault."

"Mine?" she gasped. "What have I done?"

"I could not stop thinking of you."

Elaine's cheeks flushed, warmth blooming in her chest. "Oh! I'm...I'm sorry."

Michael's laughter echoed around her. "Pray, do not apologise, Elaine. I did not intend to cause you any distress. It is merely that you occupy my thoughts so entirely."

How could he say that so casually?

Before she could think of a response, he asked, "How did you spend your morning?"

"I..." She struggled to gather her thoughts, her mind in disarray. "Well, I spent my morning at the pianoforte, attempting to escape my own reflections." A twinge of pride swelled within her as she added, "My father derives great pleasure from my playing."

"Is that so?" Michael replied, his voice holding an emotion she could not quite identify. "What is your relationship with him like?"

"We have always shared a close bond," she admitted. "Even as a child, I favoured my father, though I miss my mother dearly." Elaine hesitated, searching for the right words. "I wish to be able to care for him," she said at last, her voice barely above a whisper. This topic was likely to bring her to tears, she realised suddenly. "After all my father has done for me and my family, I cannot simply sit by and watch him wither away. Now it is my turn to ensure he feels cherished and secure. I know he worries about the future and yet I cannot help but do the same thing. I want to ease his burden as much as I can."

Michael nodded, a flicker of understanding crossing his face. "You are far too kind for your own good, Elaine."

"Is it deemed kindness to care for one's father in sickness?" she couldn't help but ask.

"If one's father is not deserving of that care," he murmured.

Elaine frowned up at him. She couldn't read his expression, couldn't understand the meaning behind his words. "And what about your father? Were you close with him?"

Michael's expression shifted slightly, a shadow crossing his features. "It's complicated," he admitted, his tone heavy with unspoken weight. "My father has always been a man of ambition. But he was also a good man, far too good for his own good. Too good to realise that he was surrounded by a sea of snakes.

"You sound resentful of that," she couldn't help but point out.

Elaine regretted it as soon as she saw a tick in his jaw. "I am. He should have been smarter. Perhaps then he would not have died the way that he did."

Elaine took a steadying breath, her curiosity piqued. "If you don't mind me asking, how did your father die?"

Michael's face grew hard. Elaine wished she could take back her words. "He was betrayed," he replied, his voice thick with emotion. "He died disgraced and that betrayal cost our family everything."

The emotion in his voice nearly made her reach out to take her hand, a wave of understanding washing over her. "I'm so sorry," she said gently. "I had heard whispers about your family's reputation, but I didn't know..."

"It's why we carry such a burden," he continued, his tone steady, his eyes trained dead ahead. "People talk without knowing the truth. But rest assured, I'm actively working on restoring our name, one step at a time. It's a slow process."

She nodded, relief and concern washing over her at once. "Thank you for trusting me with the truth, Michael, even though I am not aware of the entire story."

Michael sighed, the shadows deepening in his eyes. “It is a long story that is filled with politics and deception. I have spent years trying to piece it together myself, and even then, the truth evades me. But I have no intention of letting his legacy die without putting up a fight”

“And at least you have Clarissa. Family can be a source of strength, someone you can lean on..”

“The last thing I want to do is burden her with this matter.”

“Leaving her in the dark may be just as burdensome,” Elaine said.

Michael was quiet for a moment and the silence allowed Clarissa’s and James’ laughter to travel forward. “You may be right,” he said at last.

“I often feel alone in my own family,” she admitted without thought, a sad smile touching her lips. “Though it is no one’s fault but my own. My father is ill and my brother is at Eton. He is off pursuing his dreams, so I hesitate to burden him with my concerns about our family’s standing.”

“It must feel like you’re carrying the world on your shoulders while everyone else moves forward.”

Elaine nodded. She’d never been this honest about her feelings before, not even to James. “I just want to make my father proud. I want to save my family from complete ruin. But sometimes it feels like I’m fighting battles alone, trying to meet expectations that seem impossible.”

All of a sudden, Michael took her hand, tucking it into his elbow. “Enough of this heavy talk about death and family burdens. In two days, my aunt Beatrice is hosting a ball and I hope you will be in attendance.”

Elaine's heart fluttered at the invitation, at the touch, and she couldn't help but laugh. "Only if you save me a dance, Michael."

"I would save you ten dances if I could," he said with a lopsided grin that sent her heart racing again.

She flushed at his words, warmth spreading through her. Just as she opened her mouth to respond, their moment was abruptly interrupted when Lord Grovington and Lady Isabella appeared before them.

Elaine felt a wave of annoyance wash over her. Why were they always being interrupted by these two? It almost felt as if they conspired to intrude on their private moments at every chance they got.

"Your Grace!" Lord Grovington called, his voice booming across the path. He barely glanced at Elaine as he approached, his attention solely on Michael. "A pleasure, as always."

"Lord Grovington," Michael replied, his tone cool but polite. Elaine sensed the tension that creeping in at the edges of their exchange.

Lady Isabella, trailing behind her father, turned her smile toward Michael, her expression brightening in a way that made Elaine's stomach twist. She completely ignored Elaine, as if she were a mere shadow in the background, something of no consequence.

"Good day, Your Grace," Lady Isabella cooed, her voice dripping with sweetness. "What a delight to see you here."

"Yes, and I am here with company, as you can very well see."

Michael tugged Elaine closer to his side. She was certain her cheeks were flushed with colour.

Lady Isabella's eyes flickered disdainfully to Elaine before murmuring, "Yes, I do see."

"And if you two do not mind," Michel went on. "I'd prefer to continue my walk with Lady Elaine in peace."

The polite dismissal hung in the air and Elaine felt a surge of pride. Michael's cool demeanour was bound to bring their ire, she knew but when he looked at her, Elaine didn't care about seeming rude. There was a confidence in his posture that stirred something within her, something akin to defiance.

"But surely you can spare a moment?" Lord Grovington insisted with a hint of annoyance creeping into his voice.

"No, thank you," Michael said firmly. There was a slight edge to his tone. "I would like to return to my walk now."

As Michael turned away from father and daughter, Elaine felt a swell of triumph. Lady Isabella's smile faltered, her cheeks flushed with irritation. They were forced to step back, clearly displeased. Elaine felt Lady Isabella's glare burning into her before she huffily turned to leave with her father.

"They left in quite the huff," Elaine couldn't help but comment.

"It would appear so," Michael drawled. Clearly, he did not care. Elaine hid her smile.

"Now, as I was saying, two dances or ten?"

"One!" she exclaimed with a laugh.

“How disappointing,” he sighed. But humour tinged his voice, lifting the tension that had hung over them from their encounter with the marquess and his daughter.

Elaine let herself fully relax, ignoring the eyes, ignoring the whispers, paying scant regard to the fun her cousin seemed to be having with Clarissa. And the hope she had dismissed began to bloom again.

A hope for a future with the duke, for a love that would stand the test of time.

The air in the dimly lit tavern hung thick with the acrid scent of stale ale and sweat. Michael pushed his way from the door, the floorboards creaking under his boots. Mr. Horton was seated at the same sticky table in the corner, his demeanour noticeably more sober than the last time they’d spoken. The man’s eyes flickered with anticipation and caution as Michael took a seat.

“I’m glad ye could make it,” George said, his voice low. He slid a sheet of paper across the table, the parchment yellowed and creased. “This is what ye were lookin’ for, I think.”

“Where did you get it?” Michael asked cautiously. “I thought you gave me everything you had before.”

“I didn’t remember that I had taken it before I resigned. I thought it would come in handy, ye know. If I needed to blackmail. Maybe it would have if I hadn’t forgotten about it.”

Michael picked up the paper, unfolding it carefully. His pulse quickened as he scanned the contents. It was a letter from Lord Suthenshire dated a month before his father’s trial. It had a list of names that followed a stark message, stating that all the

parties agreed that the Duke of Ryewood needed to be “knocked down a peg.” The letter was a clear indication of collusion, the evidence Michael needed.

But what struck him most was the salutation at the top.

To The O.

The O?

His heart raced. This was the proof he needed, the evidence that could expose the truth of Lord Suthenshire’s lies. But instead of relief, instead of satisfaction, Michael felt a wave of unease washed over him. He couldn’t help but imagine how this revelation would shatter the fragile world Elaine had built around her father. And if he revealed it, it would rip her to shreds, betraying her trust in him. She would find out that she was merely a pawn in a vicious quest for revenge.

Was she still?

“What do ye think?” George asked, leaning in closer, sensing Michael’s hesitation. “This is what ye wanted, wasn’t it?”

Michael clenched the letter, his thoughts a tumultuous storm. “You have my gratitude, Mr. Horton.” He brought out the shillings the other man was clearly waiting for, not missing the gleam that lit his eyes. “If there is nothing else...”

“No, no, that is all I have,” George said hastily, pocketing his earnings. “Nice doin’ business with ye, Mr...”

Michael didn’t answer, simply standing to leave. The letter felt heavy in his pocket. He stepped out of the tavern into the cool night air. Above his head, the stars twinkled brightly, taunting him with the darkness that still simmered within him.

He had a choice to make, he knew. But he had a feeling that no matter what choice he made, it would change everything—a dance between the longing of the heart and the relentless pursuit of justice.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:44 pm

“You’re unusually distracted, Michael. I don’t think you have listened to a word I said. What’s weighing on your mind?”

Michael sighed, swirling his port wine. It was the night of his aunt’s ball and Michael found he couldn’t focus at all. He was seated in one of the parlours with Henry, sharing a bottle of wine before the festivities began. As he recalled, Henry had been talking for the past few minutes but Michael hadn’t heard a word of it. Music drifted in from the adjacent rooms, but his mind was far from everything, focusing on one thing for the past two days.

“Do you recall the contact I told you about?” he asked Henry.

His uncle nodded, brows furrowed behind the rim of his glass.

“He contacted me, saying he had something that would be of interest. It turned out to be a letter with a list of names in agreement with tearing down the late duke, implicating Lord Suthenshire. It was exactly what I needed to prove that it was a wrongful accusation and yet it has left me... conflicted.”

“Conflicted? I thought this was exactly what you wanted.”

“It was. It is but...” Troubled, Michael drained his glass. “I have bitten off more than I can chew, coming to care for someone I should not.”

Henry blinked in surprise. “Oh. I see.”

“Exposing him now comes at a cost that I had not previously foreseen. If I do, it will

undoubtedly hurt Lady Elaine. I know that. I hadn't cared before but now...now, I can hardly come to terms with the thought."

"Ah," Henry said, nodding slowly. "You are in love."

"I said nothing about love."

"You did not have to. It is evident in your conflict and in the way that you speak. You have fallen in love with the daughter of your enemy."

Michael didn't like the way that sounded. He didn't like thinking of Elaine's name being so close to being labelled the enemy. Yet there was also no denying that he did care for her more than he ought to.

"She's different," he admitted. "Kinder and far more genuine than I ever would have expected. I am beginning to regret dragging her into this mess."

"There is always time to stop it before you make a decision you will regret."

That didn't sit well with him either but he didn't bother to voice it. "The letter was addressed to someone called The O. No matter how many times I think about it, I cannot figure out who that was. But I surmise it is someone close to our station."

"Or perhaps that person is closer than you think," Henry mused, his eyes narrowing in thought. "Someone who is not just a noble but runs in the same circle as we do."

"I shall never find out unless I investigate the letter," Michael sighed. "Unless I reveal it to the authorities and let them launch a proper investigation."

Henry sighed as if he shared the weight of Michael's burden. He refilled Michael's glass. "Whatever you choose to do, Michael, I hope you stay true to your heart. Too

often we ignore the truth it is trying to tell us.”

Michael took a sip of his port. “You make it sound so simple.”

“Nothing in life is truly simple,” Henry said with a rueful smile. “You will come to learn that soon enough.”

The music swelled, signalling that the ball was now underway. Henry took that as his cue to stand. “We should head to the ballroom before your aunt comes to drag us both out there. Perhaps when you see Lady Elaine, it will make your decision clear.”

Michael highly doubted it. If anything, seeing her would only make him far more conflicted. But he nodded and stood with his uncle, finishing his glass in one large gulp. By the end of the night, he would decide what to do. Surely, by the night’s end, it would be easier to. He hoped.

As Michael entered the grand ballroom, he only had a single purpose: to find Elaine.

He scanned the crowd and, at last, spotted her engaged in conversation with Lord Penly by the refreshment table. Jealousy seized him at Penly's broad grin as he looked at her. Michael drew closer, his feet propelled by determination as his grasp tightened around his glass.

"Elaine," he interrupted, his tone calm but impatient. "There you are! I think my aunt is trying to find you.”

Elaine turned, her expression brightening upon meeting his gaze. “Michael! Oh, I didn’t know—”

Before she could finish, he gently took her arm and guided her away from Lord Penly. “Come on, let us not keep her waiting. Pardon me, my lord.”

As they moved a few paces away, Elaine laughed, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “You were being quite obvious, you know.”

Michael shrugged, a grin breaking through his feigned annoyance. “I don’t care. I like having you to myself.”

Her cheeks flushed a delicate pink, and she gazed up at him, arching an eyebrow. “Is that not selfish of you?”

“Yes,” he admitted, his tone playful yet sincere. “But I can’t help it.”

Elaine rolled her eyes, though her smile remained. “I am unmarried and make it no secret that I am looking for a husband, you know.”

Michael’s heart sank for a moment, the weight of her words pressing down on him. “And here I am, stealing you away from suitors.”

“You do not do it well enough. Lord Weatherby nearly asked for my hand prior to our promenade.”

Michael’s jealousy surged within him; he hoped it wasn’t evident. “Did he now?”

“Actually, he was quite close before you interrupted,” she said, her tone teasing. “You were my saving grace.”

“Thank goodness for small mercies,” he said, relief flooding his voice.

Elaine laughed, the sound light and musical, and he couldn’t help but join in. “What a declaration,” she teased. “I suppose you’ll just have to ensure I’m always in your company, then.”

“Count on it,” he replied, his heart racing with a mix of exhilaration and determination. “You deserve to enjoy your evening without being pursued by every eligible gentleman in the room.”

“Is that your way of saying I should only dance with you?” she challenged, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

“Absolutely,” he said, his tone earnest. “I’m more than happy to claim all your dances tonight.”

“Let us begin with this one and see where the night takes us then, shall we?”

Her grin was infectious. As Michael took her hand, leading her out into the middle of the ballroom, he realised he would have followed her anywhere tonight. Wherever she wanted to go, whatever she wanted to do.

The ballroom buzzed with the soft rustling of silks and the light laughter of guests, but as the waltz began, Michael and Elaine slipped into their own world.

“Michael, may I ask a question?” Elaine murmured.

“I shan’t deny you your answer,” he responded without thought. Only afterwards did it occur to him that there were far too many truths he couldn’t possibly reveal to her just yet and his heart thudded at the thought of her asking him something he could not answer.

“What do you want your future to look like?” she asked.

Michael slowly released a breath of relief. Then he thought about it and realised that he didn’t know what to say. He hadn’t thought very far ahead of his revenge plan.

“I wish to be at peace,” he responded at last, deeming it a fitting enough response.

Elaine smiled softly. “Peace,” she repeated in a soft whisper. “That is a beautiful dream, Michael.”

“And yet it feels so unattainable at times. What of you, Elaine? What do you wish for your future?”

Her response was quick. “I yearn for security. I want to know that my foundations are solid, that I won’t have to face life alone. A warm, laughter-filled home and a life not worrying about my father and my brother.”

Something twisted in his chest. “I want that life for you as well, Elaine.”

She gazed up at him, the light of the chandeliers sparkling in her eyes. Michael fell into a trance, enraptured by the emotions simmering in her eyes. The music faded into the background and the ballroom disappeared as they focused solely on one another. Time seemed to grind to a halt. And they found themselves ensnared in this tender, beautiful moment.

“Michael,” Elaine murmured. “I think I’m falling in love with you.”

The words hung between them. Michael’s eyes widened in shock; he opened his mouth to reply, yet no sound emerged. He could only stare, mind emptying, struck dumb by her admission.

Elaine blinked, pulling back. Embarrassment washed over her expression, her cheeks growing red. She stepped back a moment before the waltz actually came to an end. She opened her mouth to speak and Michael did the same, wanting to fill the silence before the discomfort carried on for much longer. But again, there was nothing and, before he knew it, she was gathering her skirts and hurrying away from him.

Michael froze, heart racing and mind spinning, watching her disappear into the throng. He wanted to chase after her, but he couldn't think, despite knowing that every second he wasted was ripping into the fragile friendship they had developed. A friendship that had the potential to become more.

And by the time he finally unfroze, Elaine was long gone.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:44 pm

Elaine burst onto a thankfully empty terrace, the cool night air hitting her flushed face like a dozen stings. Her chest heaved with each breath and she pressed a trembling hand to her heart, striving to suppress the pain that threatened to erupt within her.

How could she have let her feelings for Michael slip out so easily? The weight of his stunned silence was all she could think about, a painful echo that left her feeling both embarrassed and utterly exposed. She hadn't meant to say so much, hadn't meant to let her heart speak before her mind could adjust. But the moment had seemed so perfect that she hadn't thought twice about it.

Just when she thought the tears would finally overflow, she heard footsteps approaching from behind her.

"Elaine," Michael's voice broke through the stillness, soft yet urgent. She felt her heart leap in her chest, but the shame of her confession held her rooted to the spot. She turned away, hiding her face from him, unwilling to let him see how deeply his silence had cut into her.

"I'm sorry for the way I reacted," he continued, stepping closer. "I should have said something."

"Your silence was quite telling," she murmured, turning away from him. They were alone once more and she knew it was wrong of them. Anyone could happen upon them and it may only illicit rumours that may ruin her chances with any other gentleman. And now that she knew she stood no chance with him, she couldn't let her chances with others slip through her fingers.

“It did not,” Michael insisted, coming closer still. “It did not say nearly enough. At your confession, I was consumed with so much...such...”

“What are you trying to say, Michael?” she demanded to know, ignoring the pinch of penitence she felt at her sharp words.

Michael stalked away, raking his fingers through his hair. He was a bundle of agitated energy and she should have been unnerved by it, should have been bothered by his obvious frustration. Yet all she could think about was how handsome he was and how easily he could make her heart skip a beat the moment his beautiful—though troubled—eyes fell upon her.

“I do not know what I am saying,” he finally pushed out. “I do not even know why I am here. I just—”

“If you thought that would make this any better, Michael, you are terribly wrong.”

“I shouldn’t want to make this any better!”

Elaine reeled back, pressing herself against the small balustrade of the terrace. “You have no cause to be angry with me,” she snapped.

“I’m not—” Michael broke off, visibly calming himself. “I am not angry with you. It is my own actions that bring me such frustration.”

She crossed her arms, fighting back the tears biting the back of her eyes. She couldn’t believe she had let herself feel hope that he would tell her that he loved her back. He was only making things worse.

“Well, if you do not mind,” she pushed out, grateful that her voice did not crack. “I would much rather you feel such frustration elsewhere. I came out here to get away

from you.”

Michael remained still, his gaze fixed upon her, eyes filled with torment. It tore at the rest of her restraint and she felt a tear escape her eye.

Elaine turned away before he could see it. “If you will not leave, then I shall—”

He caught her wrist, pulling her back to him. Elaine gasped when she hit his broad chest.

“I want nothing more than to walk away from you right now,” he murmured, his soft breath brushing against her lips. “I should not have followed you out here. I should have let you leave.”

“Then why did you not?” she whispered back.

His gaze dipped to her lips, then back to her eyes. “Because I have lost my way. Because no matter how many times I try to remind myself of my purpose, the moment I look in your eyes, I cannot think of anything else but you.”

She didn’t dare breathe, afraid that she might ruin this beautiful moment. But her heart made up for the lack of lung activity, beating a staccato against her ribcage. Or perhaps that was his? In this tender moment, she couldn’t make heads or tails of anything but him.

“Michael...” she murmured. She wanted to say so much more but the words would not pass her lips.

“Elaine, I...” He trailed off, eyes falling to her lips. And then his head began to descend.

Elaine thought she would have collapsed right then and there had he not been holding her. She let out a shuddering breath, her nerves set on fire as his lips came closer. But the moment they pressed against hers, everything disappeared.

It was like she had been a walking corpse all her life and this soft kiss was what brought her to life. Elaine leaned into it, her heart pounding so hard it threatened to beat right out of her chest. His hand came to rest on the small of her back and her hands, oh her hands were acting on their own accord. One was at the nape of his neck, fingers threading through the hair curled right there. The other was creeping up his chest, gripping the lapels of his shirt as if he could possibly be any closer to her. Their lips moved in perfect coordination as if they had danced this dance a hundred times before. As if everything in their life had been leading up to this union. As if she had been born to be his.

“What on earth is going on here?”

The sharp question pulled Elaine out of her beautiful fantasy and plunged her into the cold pit of reality. Michael jerked away from her first then turned towards the terrace doors where a crowd was quickly gathering. She tried not to focus on the fact that he was standing in front of her as if trying to shield her from the judgment of the other guests and instead paid attention to the fact that more and more people were coming to see what the commotion was about.

And among them was James.

Elaine caught his eyes and saw realization dawn in them the moment horror dawned in hers. This was it. This was the moment she lost everything.

James shoved his way to the front, his face a mask of cold fury. Elaine was only vaguely aware of the fact that Clarissa and Lorna were on his heels, bracing herself as she was for what was to come.

But James' anger was aimed solely at Michael. "What in the world do you think you're doing?" he hissed.

"James, please—" Elaine began but Michael took over.

"I was not thinking," he said, oddly calm considering the fact that James seemed just about ready to unleash his anger upon him. "It was a slip of the moment."

"A slip of the moment?" James growled. "You ruined my cousin's honour because you could not contain yourself in the moment?"

"James." Lorna appeared by his side, her voice low but hasty. "You are causing a scene."

"I am not the one causing a scene, Mother." James didn't take his eyes off Michael, his fury rolling off him in waves. "He was the one who could not keep his hands and his lips to himself. I am only doing what any proper gentleman would do when faced with such dishonour."

"Oh, good grief, do not tell me you intend to challenge him to a duel."

Elaine flew forward, squeezing herself between Michael and James. She didn't care that there were so many onlookers. "James, you cannot!"

James didn't even glance at her. "I have no choice, Elaine."

"Yes, you do," Lorna chimed in, her voice firm. "And so do you, Your Grace."

The implications behind her words were heavy. And Michael was silent. Elaine ignored the sharp stab of hurt at that fact, fighting back her tears as she faced her cousin again. "James, enough. It will only make matters worse."

“Being here is what is making matters worse,” Lorna said as she gathered Elaine in her arms.

James didn’t move. He continued staring Michael down, his hands fisted at his sides.

“James, please,” Elaine pleaded again, her voice finally cracking.

That moved him. He tore his gaze away from Michael and finally took her in. Elaine let her guard down. She let him see how fragile she was at that moment, how broken she felt at the fact that she had ruined her reputation for a gentleman who seemed to prefer getting in a duel than asking for her hand in marriage. She’d let herself fall in love with a man who could not love her back. The only thing she wanted to do now was throw herself in bed and cry until there was nothing left in her.

But she couldn’t cry now. Not in front of so many people. Not in front of Michael. She needed to hold on to whatever semblance of pride she had left.

James nodded as if he understood, his jaw ticking. With one last scathing glance at Michael, he turned to leave. He shielded Elaine as much as he could as they took their leave but the damage was done. The Ton would be talking about this for weeks to come, perhaps for the rest of the Season. She was ruined. Her family’s reputation was ruined.

It was over.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:44 pm

At the rate he was going, Michael was certain he would have to replace the rug soon. His feet were soon to wear a hole into it since he could not stop pacing back and forth. His hair stood on end from constantly raking his fingers through it. He had drunk half a new bottle of whiskey in the half hour he'd spent pacing in his study. And he was no closer to settling his erratic thoughts.

“Perhaps we should leave him alone.”

Michael didn't glance over at Clarissa at the suggestion. He wasn't even sure why she—or his aunt and uncle for that matter —were there. Due to his slip, the ball had ended early and they'd found him in here, yet said nothing. They only watched in silence as he drove himself insane.

“Michael,” Beatrice spoke at last. “Why don't you have a seat so that we may discuss this?”

“There is nothing to discuss,” he said, a bit harsher than he had intended.

“On the contrary,” Henry spoke up. “I think there is a lot to discuss. Your aunt had to end the ball early because of your actions.”

“No one asked her to do that.”

“You did not give her much of a choice,” Henry spoke calmly, though there was no denying his frustration with the matter. “How do you expect us to continue when all anyone will be able to talk about is the fact that you were fondling an unmarried lady out on the terrace? Goodness, it was almost as if you wanted to get caught.”

“I’m sure he did not mean for that to happen,” Clarissa chimed in, her worry evident in her voice.

“Of course, I did not mean for that to happen!” Michael snapped. Needing to chase away the ugly feelings creeping over him, he made for the whiskey again.

“I think you have had enough, Michael,” Beatrice said gently.

“I decide when I have had enough.”

“Michael!”

He downed the glass in one go, then set the glass down with such force, it was a wonder it didn’t shatter. “I do not need your judgment right now, Aunt Beatrice. I am well aware of my wrongdoings tonight.”

“Oh, I know you are aware,” Beatrice shot back. This was more like her. Michael didn’t know her to be so gentle when angry. Shouting was far more normal for her to do. “Your pacing a hole in the floor and getting drunk in less than an hour clearly indicates your awareness of the matter. What I am not certain of is whether you understand what you need to do to fix it.”

“I do not wish to hear it.”

“I am going to say it all the same.” Beatrice advanced on him. “You must ask Lady Elaine for her hand in marriage.”

Michael gritted his teeth, hands opening and closing at his side.

“You have no choice in the matter, Michael,” Beatrice went on. “You must either marry her or risk the Viscount of Abney challenging you to a duel.”

“And what is so wrong with that?” he grumbled.

“What is so wrong with—” Beatrice broke off in disbelief. “You may die! That is what’s wrong!”

“Michael,” Clarissa chimed in, her voice soft. “Are you so opposed to the idea of marrying Lady Elaine? You two have grown to be friends, have you not?”

It was more than that. Far more than he cared to admit. Far more than he thought himself capable of. The idea of marrying her did not come with enough abhorrence as it should have and that scared the living daylights out of him.

“What about your plan?” Henry spoke up. “This would be a perfect opportunity for you to get what you want.”

“What plan?” Beatrice asked.

No one answered her. She looked around at them all and then threw her hands up in frustration. “If no one intends on telling me anything then I may as well take my leave since clearly I am not needed.”

“Aunt Beatrice—” Clarissa began but Beatrice stormed out of the parlour before anyone could stop her.

A heavy silence hung in her wake. Michael began to pace again. He couldn’t help himself. When he thought of Elaine’s big, green eyes staring up at him with such love and innocence, when he remembered the way her lips felt against his and how perfect the world had become at that moment, he hated himself.

Henry broke the silence first. “What do you intend on doing, Michael?”

“You heard Aunt Beatrice,” Michael snapped. “I have no choice, do I?”

“You do not seem very happy about it.”

“Oh, no, this is perfect . My initial intention was to get closer to her in order to tear her family down, was it not? If she becomes my wife, that is as close as I will ever be able to get. I will be able to infiltrate her family and use the information I have to rid of what little prestige and pride they have left.” Michael didn’t realise he had made for the bottle of whiskey until it was at his lips. “My plan is going swimmingly, in fact.”

No one spoke for a long moment. Michael brought the bottle with him to the window, staring out into the blackness.

At last, Clarissa said, “I hope you do not truly believe that, Michael. Elaine loves you. That much is obvious. And after seeing you two tonight, I thought you loved her too.”

“You thought wrong.”

“That is apparent.”

Michael listened to their departure. He waited until the door closed, until the silence closed in on him, to truly let go. He did not cry. He did not shout or throw the bottle of whiskey across the room as he longed to. He simply let the guilt consume him, until he was nothing but a husk of his former self, until he had diminished all his self-worth and had questioned everything he’d done since returning to London.

By the end of it, his mind was made up, but his heart was still torn.

Elaine drew in a deep breath, letting it out past her lips. She patted her cheeks and prayed that the rose water she'd washed her face with had helped in lessening the redness of her complexion, due largely to the fact that she'd spent all night—and most of the morning—crying her eyes out. She'd styled her hair, put on one of her nicest dresses, and dabbed a bit of perfume behind her ears and on her collarbone. All because, one hour ago, Lorna had come to tell her that the Duke of Ryewood was here to see her.

Elaine had prayed for this. Then she'd hated herself for praying, hated the hope she still harboured despite the fact that she knew what would happen. But now that he was here, she couldn't stop that hope from blooming again.

She brushed her sweaty palms against the front of her dress and steeled herself before opening the door. Her eyes immediately fell on Michael. He stood upon her entrance, a troubled expression written across his face. She didn't know what to make of it so she turned her attention to the others in the room.

James sat across from Michael, his overwhelming anger still taking over everything in the room. Next to him was Lorna, who seemed to be the only one bringing warm hope to the tense atmosphere. She smiled, reaching a hand out to Elaine and Elaine was happy to go to her side.

Elaine couldn't meet Michael's eyes. She took the spot next to Lorna, eyes remaining on the floor.

"Will Lord Suthenshire be joining us?" Michael asked, breaking the silence.

"He is resting," Lorna told him. "He is in no position to partake in this conversation."

"I will simply have to do," James said, the threat in his voice evident.

Elaine's heart skipped a beat. That hope began to dwindle and the hostility between the two men didn't help.

"Why have you requested to see us, Your Grace?" Lorna asked.

For a long, tense moment, there was silence. And then, "I have come to make things right."

"To make things right?" James scoffed. He shot to his feet. "We shall make things right at this very moment. Fetch your pistol and meet me at Putney Heath so that you shall understand the error of your ways."

"I do not want to duel with you," Michael stated in a firm voice. "That was not my intention."

"No, your intention was to compromise my cousin and ruin any of her future prospects!"

"James," Elaine cut in. "I am as much at fault as anyone—"

"Hush now, my darling," Lorna chimed in. "Let the men have their row so that they may get it out of the way and begin to think logically."

"I am thinking logically, Mother," James snapped, though he hadn't taken his glare off Michael for a moment. "And the only logical thing for me to do is to make sure His Grace understands the error of his ways."

Slowly, Michael stood. Despite her best efforts, Elaine could not keep her eyes off him for long. He was imposing, calm, furious, yet completely in control. It was as mesmerising as it was terrifying.

“I am well aware of my faults, Lord Abney,” he said slowly. “And that is why I have come to ask for Lady Elaine’s hand in marriage.”

The world spun around her. Elaine eye’s immediately filled with tears. She’d been hoping to hear those words for so long but now that she had, she couldn’t help but feel nothing but sadness.

He was not doing it because he loved her, after all. He did it because he made a bad decision and was trying to make up for it. She should be happy. Even if he did not love her, this was what she wanted. Marriage to a wealthy gentleman so that she could help her family escape destitution. In the end, she was achieving exactly what she’d hoped for. And yet...

James crossed his arms. Elaine half expected him to turn the proposal down, simply because he wanted to work out his rage, but then he said, “That is the smartest thing you have said since you’ve walked in this room, Your Grace.”

“I do pride myself on my intellect,” Michael said wryly.

Elaine stood, blinking her tears away. She braced herself for a moment and then she turned to face Michael. “Would you like to go for a walk in the garden?”

Michael searched her face. She tried to wipe it clean of any sadness but didn’t know how well she fared. Slowly, he nodded. “I would love to.”

Lorna stood as well. “I shall—”

“Alone,” Elaine pressed gently. “If we are to be married, I’m sure it will not be such an issue. Especially since we have shocked the Ton enough already.”

Lorna must have heard the underlying despair in Elaine’s voice because her

expression softened. She touched Elaine softly on the arm as she nodded. “You’re right. And James does not mind either.”

“You do not speak for me, Mother,” James grumbled.

“In this instance, I do. Go on, my darling.”

Elaine nodded. She ignored the arm Michael began to offer her and turned towards the exit. But she listened as he fell in step behind her. She pulled her shoulders back, reminding herself that she needed to be strong. If not for her, then for her father, for her brother, and for the future of her family.

They said nothing to each other as they made it out to the gardens. Elaine didn’t know how to broach the topic. She could cry about her situation later. For now, she had to bear her responsibility like she always did.

“I wish to ask a favour of you, Michael,” she said at last.

“Anything.”

Another piece of her heart splintered off at that. He wasn’t making this any easier on her. Somehow, she managed to keep herself together.

“My father,” she began. “You know the fragile state he is in. You have seen it for yourself.”

“I have.”

“I do not wish to add any additional strain on him. As such, I would be much obliged if we were to keep the circumstances of our betrothal a secret.”

He was quiet for a moment. Long enough for her to look up at him with a frown. But he was staring dead ahead, a troubled frown on his face.

What reason did he have to be troubled? Was he so perturbed by the thought of them joining families that he could not stand the thought of their future marriage?

Elaine gritted her teeth, chastising herself for having such thoughts in the first place. She had to come to terms with her position soon before it ate her alive.

“Michael?” she broached again when he did not respond in time. “Will you not honour my request?”

“I shall.” He came to a halt. “But I believe the time for you to give your father an explanation will come sooner rather than later.”

“What do you mean?” she inquired, looking up at him. He didn’t look back at her, thinning his lips, eyes trained over her head. With a frown, Elaine turned and her heart skipped a beat.

Her father stood on the balcony of his bedchamber, his frail hands gripping the railings. Despite the distance, Elaine could see his expression very clearly, one that tore her to pieces. He looked horrified. She could only imagine what he must be seeing on her face.

Elaine turned back to face Michael, her heart skipping a beat once more when she saw that he was already staring at her. The intensity of his eyes made her falter, made her forget what she intended to say. She looked away, shaking her head as if that would be enough to shake off the effects of his heavy eyes.

“I know this is not what you intended for your future, Michael,” she said, eyes boring into the white stones beneath their feet. “But I thank you all the same. Had you not

made this decision, my future would have been ruined.”

“Had I not lost control last night, it would have remained intact.”

She didn’t try to decipher his tone, didn’t dare look up. Her heart could not handle it.

“I thank you all the same.” She managed a curtsy. “Good day, Your Grace.”

“Elaine—” He caught her wrist before she could leave. She made the mistake of looking up at him. But he said nothing, looking tortured.

With a soft sigh, Elaine pulled her wrist free and walked away, hating herself for how much she wished he could come after her.

The last thing Michael wanted to do was walk away. And because of that, he’d forced himself. He’d watched Elaine leave him behind and he’d quelled the overwhelming urge to run after her and beg for her forgiveness.

Beg? He had no reason to beg. He was doing this for his family, to finally lay to rest the false judgment that had been placed on his father and the dukedom. It didn’t matter that a silly lady got hurt in the process. It shouldn’t.

And yet, as he stared into the empty brandy decanter, he couldn’t help but feel the complete opposite.

“At this rate, you will drink us dry, Michael.” Henry sank into the armchair across from him, crossing his legs. Michael ignored him.

The only reason he had come to his uncle’s residence to wallow in his recent

decisions and not his own was simply because Henry had called him over. Otherwise, Michael would have been locked up in his office, drapes drawn, drinking his own sideboard dry.

Henry cleared his throat, adjusting himself in the armchair. “Were you coming from Suthenshire House?”

“I was.”

“And I assume it went badly, judging from the dour look on your face.”

Michael shook his head. The slight movement showed him just how inebriated he had become in the short amount of time. Perhaps drinking his sorrows away was not the right decision after all.

“They accepted the proposal,” he told his uncle. “They really had no choice in the matter.”

“And yet, that is not what you wanted to do?” Henry probed.

Michael did not know how to answer that question, so he chose not to. “Why did you ask me to come here?”

“Because of this.” Henry held out a folded piece of paper.

Michael frowned as he took it. He unfolded the paper, realising that it was a letter from some Lord Blainey to Henry. “What is this?” he asked, skimming through the first few lines. It only spoke about plans to meet with each other for the Epsom Derby.

“It is a letter from a friend of mine, Lord Blainey,” Henry explained. “When you

came by the other day to tell me about your recent revelations from your source, you mentioned The O. And it struck me as familiar, though I couldn't fathom why. As it happened, that thought bothered me for quite some time after you left. So, I decided to go through my letters to see if anyone might have made mention of The O in one of them."

"You keep all your letters?" Michael asked incredulously. "This is dated five years ago."

"Deem me sentimental," Henry said with a shrug. "It is a good thing that I do because, if you continue to read, you will see that Lord Blainey refers to The O."

Michael did so and, just as Henry said, Lord Blainey made mention of The O near the end of the letter. It was done with much enmity, mocking the moniker. "But it does not say who The O is."

"No, it does not," Henry agreed. "Nor did it need to. You see, Lord Blainey is a good man. A likeable and passive man who did not have any enemies. There was only one gentleman in London Lord Blainey did not like and that was..."

Henry trailed off, raising a brow. Michael held back his groan of frustration.

"That was whom?" Michael pressed impatiently.

"The Marquess of Grovington," Henry revealed at last.

Realization dawned instantly. "Oliver Hargrove."

"The O," Henry confirmed. "Of course, this is speculation. And Lord Blainey, rest his soul, is not able to tell us if there is any truth in our presumption. But I thought it was important enough for you to know, given the facts you have already revealed

yourself.”

It was important. In fact, it made more sense than anything else Michael had thought of. Lord Grovington had benefitted greatly from his father’s conviction, but Michael had always thought it was a coincidence. If the most influential man in the House of Lords took an embarrassing fall from grace, then it only made sense for the second most influential man to take his spot, wouldn’t it? It didn’t mean the marquess had anything to do with it. He had no connection to the matter at all. During Michael’s four years of investigation, the marquess’ name had not come up once.

Not until now.

“This is a heavy accusation,” he said at last, staring at the letter.

“It is. And it has no evidence to stand on. I only offered it to you because I thought it might help.”

“It does. I had hit a wall but this may be exactly what I needed to point me to the truth.”

“I’m glad I could help.”

Michael gave his uncle a dubious look. “I thought you were against all of this.”

“I was against your plan of revenge and your involvement of an innocent lady,” Henry stated calmly. “But I wish for the truth to come to light as much as you do. Not to mention the fact that nothing I do or say will deter you from your path of vengeance, so I may as well help keep you off the wrong path.”

“I was on the wrong path from the moment I met her.”

“Pardon me?”

“It is nothing.” He stood, carefully tucking the letter into his waistcoat. “Thank you, Uncle Henry. This truly helps.”

Henry stood with him, putting a hand on Michael’s shoulder. “No matter what happens, Michael, your aunt and I stand with you.”

Again, he didn’t know what to say. For a moment, he nearly let his inner thoughts slip, nearly told Henry the mental turmoil that had been plaguing him for days now. But he held his tongue just in time and simply nodded.

As his carriage made its way to his house, Michael read over the letter again and again, until he’d almost committed its contents to memory. It served as a decent distraction for a while. Even as he locked himself in this office and began pouring over his evidence to see if he might have missed something, Michael did not think about Elaine once. For a few hours, he felt like himself again, like he was still being driven by a purpose.

But she was never far from his mind. She lingered there, waiting for him to slip. And as soon as he did, nothing else mattered.

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They would be married by special license. Elaine had not seen or heard from Michael in four days except for a small note stating that he had obtained the license and they could be married in a couple of days. The remaining pieces of Elaine's heart had broken at that. Lorna, however, took that as a reason to host a dinner with the two families.

Elaine had no desire to attend. She told Lorna as much but Lorna was insistent, saying that the families would have to get along sooner or later. So Elaine knew there was little choice left in the matter and that she would have to face Michael the day before her wedding.

She stared at herself in the mirror of her vanity table and sighed. She looked dreadful. Days of crying and moping around the house had done very little for her complexion and her hair was a lifeless mess that she had no choice but to wrap into a chignon at the nape of her neck. Her dress even hung a little looser than it had when she'd first purchased it. She wore her despondency quite poorly, and Michael was sure to notice it.

What did it matter, though? He did not want her. He was only going through this because he was being a gentleman. She might have gotten what she wanted in the end but this certainly was not what he wanted.

Elaine pulled herself to a stand and trudged out of her bedchamber. Everyone had already arrived she knew. She should have tried to be early and tuck herself into a corner, becoming that wallflower once more. Now, when she arrived, everyone would be looking at her.

She tried to gather her courage as she made her way to the drawing room. It was uncharacteristically quiet. Lorna's dinner parties always began with hearty conversation and laughter in the drawing room before making their way to the dining room. But the silence was so profound that Elaine wondered if anyone was present at all.

She slipped into the room and indeed six pairs of eyes fell on her. Unable to help herself, her gaze went directly to Michael.

He was by the window, a deep frown gradually fading as their gazes locked. Elaine broke eye contact before he made it to his next expression, not wanting to see it. She lowered her head, stepping deeper into the room.

"Pardon my tardiness," she apologised in a soft tone.

"It is quite all right, darling," Lorna quickly chirped. "Shall we all make our way to the dining room then?"

Her energy was met with a decisive lack of it. Elaine felt a twinge of pity for her aunt, the sole source of positivity in the tense room. Even the Earl and Countess of Belington seemed not to know what to do with themselves.

Clarissa came to her side as they began filing out of the room, laying a gentle hand on Elaine's arm. "Good evening, Elaine," she greeted with a soft smile. "How are you faring?"

Elaine managed a smile but it fell just as quickly as it came. "I am well, Clarissa. It is nice to see you again."

Clarissa's smile slipped as worry set into her blue eyes. "Are you certain? You do not look well. Perhaps it would be best if you rest for this evening, I'm sure your aunt

would not mind.”

“On the contrary, she would be quite upset with me if I did not attend this evening,” Elaine confessed. She’d hoped her words would be taken in jest but she couldn’t even manage a forced laugh.

Clarissa, bless her heart, laughed for the both of them. “I understand. My brother was quite adamant that I attend.”

The brother in question was an overbearing presence behind Elaine. It took every ounce of her strength to keep from turning and looking back at him.

“Would you not have wanted to attend without his coercion?” Elaine asked. “Perhaps for another reason?”

“What do you...” Clarissa trailed off, following Elaine’s eyes. Her cheeks turned pink the moment they landed on James, who was oblivious to their conversation. “Oh.”

This time, her smile came easily to her lips. “I wish you two the best.”

Clarissa only blushed further, clearly not knowing what to say. She was saved from having to think about it much longer as they arrived at the dining table. Elaine moved quickly, wanting to claim the seat next to James. But Lorna had other plans.

“Why don’t the future married couple sit together?” Lorna suggested loudly, with a broad grin.

Elaine gritted her teeth. Perhaps she should just take Clarissa’s suggestion and feign illness. She could manage a convincing fainting spell if necessary.

Then the smell of his cologne washed over her and all those thoughts fled her mind. Elaine froze as Michael brushed by her and pulled her chair out. He said nothing and simply waited for her to take the chair. He was so close she could almost feel his breath brush against her neck.

“Thank you,” she breathed, sinking into the chair, every nerve in her body sparking with life.

He didn’t respond. He simply claimed the seat between Elaine and James, a bold decision considering that James had been shooting daggers at him the entire time. The quiet and observing Lord and Lady Belington sat next to Clarissa.

“Well,” Lorna began in a cheerful tone. “Isn’t this lovely? I think this is the first time our families have gotten the chance to sit and have a meal together. And considering that the wedding is on the morrow, it is long overdue, wouldn’t you say, Your Grace?”

“Pardon me,” Michael responded, his voice polite. “I found myself rather busy during these past few days.”

“We understand, Your Grace. The duties of a duke must keep you rather occupied. Hopefully, some of that responsibility will be relieved once Elaine becomes the duchess.”

“Aunt Lorna,” Elaine murmured but her aunt wasn’t listening. It was as if Lorna would stop at nothing to stop the uncomfortable silence that would inevitably descend if she stopped talking.

“She is quite dependable, you see,” Lorna went on, daintily poking the beans on her plate. “Ever since her mother’s death and the decline of her father’s health, she has shouldered the burden of the house. Of course, James and I do whatever we can to

assist but she can be quite stubborn and she rarely ever asks for help.”

“That sounds oddly familiar,” Clarissa spoke up. “Wouldn’t you say, Michael?”

“Oh, His Grace is the same?” Lorna asked in surprise. At Clarissa’s nod, her eyes began to sparkle. “Well, that is wonderful to hear! That would mean they have something in common.”

“I do not think stubbornness is a good trait to share, Mother,” James spoke up. Or rather, grumbled, since he seemed to care more about glowering at Michael than eating his meal.

“I’m sure they will balance each other out,” Lorna answered with a dismissive wave of her hand.

Elaine held back her sigh. She glanced at Michael, noting the fact that he did not seem to be paying them any mind. Gathering her courage, she leaned slightly towards him and whispered, “It seems they are content to talk about us as if we are not in the room.”

Michael paused for a second so brief, she thought she might have been mistaken. He didn’t respond immediately and Elaine straightened, blinking back the tears of shame. But then she heard, “It would appear so.”

He resumed eating without sparing her a glance. Elaine’s heart sank. He might have answered her but he clearly did it to be polite.

“I hope she is not making you uncomfortable,” Elaine spoke again, bracing herself for the inevitable rejection.

Michael’s movements did not falter this time. But his response came far quicker. “I

am used to this kind of banter. It does not bother me.”

“That’s good. My aunt—”

“You should eat, Elaine.”

He may as well tell her he wanted nothing more to do with her. A lump formed in her throat. She forced beans into her mouth and struggled to swallow, struggling to hold back the tears.

Stilted conversation hung over the dining table throughout all three courses, led mainly by Lorna. Clarissa tried her best not to make things too awkward but Michael’s obvious reluctance to take part in the conversation did not help things. Elaine couldn’t care less about the conversation. She put all her energy into keeping her tears at bay.

After a seemingly endless dinner, Lorna suggested that they retire to the drawing room, much to Elaine’s dismay. She wanted this night to be over. She wanted to get the wedding over with. She wanted to wallow without the man who caused her pain lingering around her.

But she dragged herself to the drawing room all the same, knowing that she had little choice in the matter. She began counting the seconds, hoping that it would make the time pass quicker. Lorna settled into the middle of the drawing room with Lord and Lady Belington, speaking quietly to each other, clearly about the wedding judging by their looks of concern and the furtive glances they sent Elaine’s way. Elaine was too focused on Michael, watching as he slipped out onto the balcony. After a few minutes, Clarissa followed behind him.

“You are oddly quiet.”

Elaine nearly jumped at James' voice by her side. He watched her steadily.

"That is because I do not have anything to say," she explained calmly. From the way James looked at her, she doubted her words would ring true.

"Is that why you have been looking at the duke so longingly?"

"I have not!" she protested heatedly, cheeks growing warm.

"I watched you two over dinner," James continued. "And at first, what I saw infuriated me. To think he compromised you then had the gall to look put out by the fact that he has to marry you to make things right. I had half a mind to draw him across the table and give him a piece of my mind."

"Thank goodness you thought better of it," she mumbled.

"Only because I began to realise that perhaps the duke's trouble does not lay in the fact that he has to marry you."

Elaine frowned up at him. James wore an oddly thoughtful expression. "What do you mean?"

"You two seemed uncomfortable with each other during dinner, that is for certain. But I noticed something in the duke's eyes when he looked at you."

Elaine hadn't realised Michael had looked at her at all. "What is that?"

"Yearning."

Her heart skipped a beat. "For me?"

“I do not know what for. I hope that is the case. And I suppose you cannot find out until you ask.”

She couldn't ask Michael that. She couldn't run the risk of his standoffish coldness again. It would shatter what was left of her self-esteem.

But that persistent hope began to bloom once more. If James could see something between them, then perhaps all was not lost after all.

Elaine caught James' eyes and felt a glimmer of surprise when he tilted his head towards the balcony doors as if telling her to go to speak with him. Her heart began to race at the thought but she willed herself to move all the same. If James didn't think it a bad idea, then maybe there was some hope after all.

She stepped silently past Lorna and the others, quite aware of the fact that they were watching her go by. Her heart pounded in her ears as she stopped at the door and took a deep breath.

“You cannot go through with this wedding, Michael.”

Elaine sucked in a quiet breath. That was Clarissa. Had she been against this wedding this entire time?

“I thought this was what you wanted, Clarissa,” came Michael's unmistakable voice of derision.

“This was not what I wanted. I wanted you to put aside your foolish quest, not marry someone on nothing but lies and deceit. Especially not someone like Elaine.”

“Well as you can see, Clarissa, I am given no choice in the matter. I must right my wrongs and this is the only way to do so.”

“That is an excuse and you know it.” The sharpness in Clarissa’s voice surprised Elaine. “Perhaps that is the reason you must marry her but there is no reason for you to do so without first telling her the truth.”

Elaine inched closer to the door and realised that it was ajar. She could see a bit of Michael’s profile, his face contorted in frustration.

“The truth will not make this go away, Clarissa.”

Clarissa scoffed. Elaine could barely see her, only a hand flailing in exasperation. “You were the one who deliberately approached Elaine because you wanted to seek the truth. The truth is as important to her as it is to you. You simply do not want to admit it because you are beginning to realise how wrong you have been this entire time.”

“It is too late for any of that, Clarissa!” Michael hissed under his breath. “Tomorrow, Elaine and I will be married. That is the beginning and the end of it. She does not need to know that I only befriended her to learn more about her father’s involvement in the scandal, nor does she need to know that I intend to use it against her and her family. If you cared about her, you would know that she is better off without such knowledge.”

“And if you cared about her, Michael, you would see how wrong you are.”

Elaine didn’t hear his response. Blood roared in her ears, the world tilting around her. She staggered away from the door, desperate to get away yet unable to do anything on her suddenly leaden feet. She didn’t realise that tears had spilled over her cheeks until she felt them drip onto her chest.

Then the door opened fully. Michael’s eyes went wide with shock at the sight of her, then horror dawned. “Elaine, did you—”

“I cannot marry you.”

He started forward. “Elaine—”

“I cannot possibly marry you!” Her scream cut through the drawing room. Elaine flinched away from him, shaking. The despair in his eyes was unfair, she thought. He had no right to look at her like that.

“What is the meaning of this?” James was suddenly before her, shielding her from Michael. Sobs racked her chest and she turned in her desperation to get away. She collided into Lorna’s chest as her aunt’s arms went around her.

“What happened?” Lorna asked her. “What is the matter?”

“I cannot marry him,” Elaine repeated. She said it over and over again. She pulled herself out of her aunt’s arms, unable to stand there any longer. The only thing she felt was the pound of her heart and the sharp twisting knife lodged into the centre of her back. She couldn’t be near him right now.

Elaine hurried towards the door, ignoring her aunt’s calls. This morning, she’d thought that she couldn’t possibly feel any worse. Oh, how wrong she had been.

It had all been one big mistake.

That played over and over in his head like a dull roar as Michael watched Elaine race out of the drawing room in tears. The others moved around him like vague blurs in the background while his mind sunk further into the deep pit of despair and regret. He kept thinking about how she’d flinched away from him, how she’d looked at him with such betrayal, and it felt as if he was losing a piece of himself every time.

“Answer me!” Lord Abney seized him by the collar, jerking him out of his thoughts. “Or I shall make you regret that you were ever born.”

“Unhand him!” Clarissa lodged herself between them and successfully managed to push the viscount off him. Michael staggered back, dazed. “Violence is not going to solve anything. We should all sit down and talk about this like reasonable beings.”

“That would be a wonderful idea, Clarissa, if the duke was inclined to talk at all.” The sarcasm dripping from the viscount’s voice would have bothered Michael had it not been for the fact that he registered his words a few seconds too late.

“Right,” Michael murmured, running his fingers through his hair. “An explanation.”

“I believe we are owed one,” said Lady Abney. She stood by her son and crossed her arms, looking serious for once. Behind her, Beatrice hovered with a frown of worry and confusion while Henry simply looked sad.

“I had to,” he said at last.

Clarissa slowly turned to face him, her face crumpled in complete outrage. “You had to?” she repeated incredulously. “After everything that just happened, Michael, you still think you are justified in your actions?”

“Clarissa...”

“No, I do not want to hear anything more!” she cried. “It is clear to me that you are a lost cause. I begged and pleaded with you not to go down this path and you did not care to listen to me. Now, look where it has gotten you, Michael. Your selfishness and your unwillingness to see past your hatred has turned everyone you love against you.”

He felt the need to sit down; otherwise, he was certain the floor would come up to meet him.

“I warned her against speaking to you,” Lord Abney seethed. “I know of your scandalous past and I had a feeling your intentions were far from honourable. But I let myself believe that perhaps I was being overly cynical. I even began to think that you may actually harbour affections for her.”

Michael buried his head in his hands. He knew this was the time to explain himself, to set things right, but he couldn't get Elaine's horrified cry out of his head. “I had to do it,” he murmured, mostly to himself. “It was the only way to get the truth.”

“You approached her deliberately!” Lord Abney roared. “You toyed with her affections but to what end? What purpose did you have in breaking her heart? I never should have let her go near you!”

He broke her heart. He broke her heart.

“James, please.” It was Clarissa again, sounding markedly calmer this time. “Perhaps it is best if we leave.”

“Yes, please! Or else there is no telling what I may do if he is in my sight any longer.”

Clarissa touched Michael's arm, a quiet request for him to stand. Michael pulled himself out of his head long enough to look Lord Abney in the eye and bow his head slightly. An apology was ripe on his lips but he knew there was nothing he could say to fix this situation right now. So he simply turned and left.

He was wrong about everything. The last four years, the last few weeks, the last few days. He'd made bad decision after bad decision and the only good one he managed

now wanted nothing to do with him.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:44 pm

To think that her father's laboured breathing would be the only thing capable of calming her mind. Elaine watched as he slept, undisturbed by the emotional turmoil of his daughter sitting at his bedside. It had been days since the dinner with Michael and his family, days since she had discovered his plan and called off the wedding. And this was the first time she could reflect on it without tears welling in her eyes.

Of course, it still felt as if her heart was being ripped from her chest. Her eyes were still puffy from her nights crying herself to sleep and the only relief she felt was when she was tending to her father. He was a constant, steady and anchoring presence that kept her from slipping completely into despair.

Elaine blinked rapidly, fighting the tears burning the back of her eyes. Seeking to distract herself, she began tucking the covers around Edward's frail body. When she was done, she moved to make sure he was not feverish.

Elaine gasped when she realised that he was no longer asleep. He was watching her steadily, eyes boring into her.

"Papa," she breathed, sinking back into her chair. "I did not realise you had awoken."

"How could I not when you fuss over my covers so?" he rasped then began struggling to sit up. Elaine rushed forward to help. She bit her lip, fighting another wave of tears when she realised just how much frailer he had become in the past few days. Was it because of her neglect? She'd been so caught up with the Season and the duke that she had left much of her father's care to the maids. Was that the reason he seemed to have lost some weight?

Edward must have seen the guilt on her face because he reached out a trembling hand. Elaine reached out to grasp it. “What troubles you, my dear?” he asked.

Elaine forced a smile onto her face as she shook her head. “Nothing, Papa. I am just happy you are awake now. Perhaps I could read to you?”

“That is not the face of a happy person,” he remarked slowly. There was a pause and then, “I saw you with the Duke of Ryewood.”

Elaine’s heart skipped a beat. Of all the places, she hadn’t expected Michael to be mentioned here. “That’s right, you did,” she breathed. “That day in the gardens.”

“Have you two become friends?”

Elaine lowered her eyes. There was so much her father didn’t know and she suddenly felt bad for keeping him in the dark. “He...was. But then we were betrothed.”

Edward’s eyes flared. “Betrothed?”

“It is over now. The wedding was meant to be a few days ago but...” Guilt pulled the truth to her lips and all of a sudden, she was apologising. “Forgive me, Pa. I should have told you sooner.”

“It is all right, my dear,” he assured her, resting another frail and shaky hand atop hers. “My condition keeps me asleep most of the day, you would hardly have a chance to tell me. I am not angry with you. I am simply...surprised.”

“Surprised?” she echoed. “Why?”

“The Duke of Ryewood...do you know his past?”

Slowly, Elaine shook her head. “I know he was involved in a scandal, but I do not know what it entailed.”

“And yet you agreed to marry him?”

“I did not have a—” She broke off, then tried again. “I fell in love with him. It did not matter.” Elaine wiped a stray tear, gathering her strength. “But it was not meant to be. It seemed His Grace had more pressing matters on his mind and...well, I shall find another suitor so—Papa, why are you crying?”

“I have failed you, my daughter.” He squeezed her hands, tears rolling down his face, eyes filled with despair and regret. “I failed this family.”

“Pa, don’t talk like that!”

“You are so oblivious to the truth, Elaine. You do not understand anything.”

“How can I possibly understand anything when no one deems it fit to enlighten me?”

The tears kept coming. Sobs hitched in his throat. Elaine stood, worry replacing everything else.

“Pa, you can explain it later, when you are calmer.”

“I must tell you now,” he tried to get out. He attempted to resist her efforts to tuck him back under the covers but it was futile. “I have held on to this for long enough.”

“You have tired yourself out. Rest for a while and when you awaken, you may tell me everything.”

Elaine saw the struggle on his face, fighting the exhaustion that had clearly come

over him. She hated to see him upset like this. Not only did it break her heart, but it only lessened their time together because it always tired him out. It may be hours before she gets the chance to talk with him again.

Fatigue ultimately overcame him, and Edward fell into a deep slumber. As soon as it did, that heavy weight of sadness fell over her once more. Elaine struggled to keep it at bay but her father's last few words had only made it worse.

Was everyone keeping something from her?

“Where are you headed?”

Michael drew to a halt at Clarissa's appearance. She crossed her arms and gave him a stern look, not moving from the threshold of his study. He tried not to sigh.

“I shall be back shortly,” he answered noncommittally, attempting to step around her. But she didn't move.

“I hope that means you are going to Suthenshire House,” she said. “It has been days and you have been holed up in your office ever since.”

“That is because I had things to do,” he explained as calmly as he could. Right now, Clarissa stood between him and the conclusion of his four-year investigation and he was seriously considering removing her by force.

“Are you still plotting your revenge?” she asked with wide eyes. “Michael, haven't you learned your lesson?”

He'd learned enough to last him a lifetime. He knew the truth of everything now. The

truth in Clarissa's warnings, the truth of what happened four years ago, the truth of his heart. He'd spent days without leaving his office, crossed between berating himself and seeing it through to the end. And he came to realise that he couldn't possibly give himself fully to Elaine if he still had this hanging over his head. He had to lay it to rest. He had to make sure it was set aside so that there was nothing standing between him and the lady he loved.

And he loved her. With all his heart and soul, he was deeply in love with Elaine. And he hated himself for how long it took him to realise that.

"I understand your worry," he said to his sister. "And because of what happened, I am committed to putting this all behind me. I poured over everything I had and found a clue that I missed. I intend to settle this right now."

"And then?" Clarissa asked, raising a brow.

"And then, I shall mend things with the woman I love."

Her frown finally cracked into a smile and she stepped out of the way. "May I accompany you when you do?" she asked. "There is something I need to do as well."

Michael would have questioned her about it if he hadn't been in such a hurry. Instead, he pressed a chaste kiss on her temple. "I'm sorry, Clarissa. For everything."

"You were already forgiven, Michael. Now go and win her back."

He nodded seriously and hurried out the door. He knew there was a chance that all was lost. The hurt he had caused Elaine may never be remedied. She may never trust him again. He might have ruined the only chance he had at true love.

But he wasn't going to listen to those thoughts. He had to focus on his current course

of action first.

Nearly thirty minutes later, his carriage pulled up to the modest house of Mr. Thomas Plauser. Mr. Plauser had no clue Michael was coming. Michael suddenly realised that he might not even be home.

He trudged up to the front door and knocked. Then waited. After a minute, he moved to knock again when a middle-aged man opened the door, blinking in surprise.

“May I help you?” he asked.

“Are you Mr. Plauser?”

Wariness filled the man’s eyes. “Yes, I am. Who are you?”

“I am Michael Rycroft, Duke of Ryewood. May I speak with you?”

Mr. Plauser’s eyes went wide. “Your Grace, of course. Come in, come in!”

Michael let himself be ushered into the small foyer and then to a sitting room to the left. It was small and quaint, but there was not much room for Michael’s long legs as he claimed the sofa. Mr. Plauser, now flustered, sat on the opposite armchair.

“Oh, I should offer you tea!” Mr. Plauser said suddenly, shooting to his feet.

“There’s no need,” Michael said quickly. “I shan’t be long. I only wished to ask you a few questions, so I hope you will be kind enough to indulge me.”

“Of course, Your Grace.”

Michael pulled out the sheet of paper he had brought with him. When he’d first

received it four years ago, a list of higher servants who worked for those who had testified against his father. In passing, he'd received a few for Lord Grovington but had dismissed it as unnecessary. After all, Lord Grovington had not testified nor had there been any indication that he was involved at all. Michael had been so focused on Lord Suthenshire that he hadn't remembered that he'd received the information of Lord Grovington's former clerk.

"I believe you worked for the Marquess of Grovington in the past, haven't you?" Michael began. "What can you tell me about him?"

Mr. Plauser frowned. "May I ask what this is about, Your Grace?"

"I shall be frank with you, Mr. Plauser. The former Duke of Ryewood was wrongfully convicted for treason four years ago and I have been searching for evidence to prove it. Now, I have reason to believe that Lord Grovington may have been involved, though I cannot pinpoint how."

"Oh. Yes. The late Duke of Ryewood. I do recall his trial, as speedy as it was."

There was something in the man's tone that made Michael sit up straighter. "Were you interested in the trial, Mr. Plauser?"

Mr. Plauser fidgeted with his hands, his brow sweaty. "I was. I was given little choice considering the fact that Lord Grovington used me to gather information on the outcome of the trial."

"Why wouldn't he do so himself? He was a part of the House of Lords and so no one would find it suspicious."

"He wanted to remove himself from the matter completely." With shaky fingers, Mr. Plauser reached into his waistcoat and fished out a handkerchief, dabbing his

forehead. "I knew this day would come."

"Do you know something, Mr. Plauser?"

"I know far too much," he sputtered. "Lord Grovington gave me a hefty sum to make sure I was quiet but the guilt was too much for me, so I resigned. Had I known that my involvement would have led to the conviction of an innocent man and his death, I would never have let him use me."

Michael gripped the armrest to keep his emotions at bay, blood roaring in his ears. "Please tell me what you know, Mr. Plauser."

Mr. Plauser licked his lips. And then he broke. He told him everything, every sordid detail, every missing piece that now made the puzzle whole. By the time he was finished, Michael was filled with hatred for the marquess and anger at himself for not realising his involvement sooner. But there was still time to set things right.

"Thank you, Mr. Plauser." Michael stood. "Your honesty will help liberate an innocent man's name."

Mr. Plauser shot to his feet. "Forgive me, Your Grace. Had I known the implications of my actions, I never would have done it. I swear to you."

"I am not angry with you," Michael assured him. "It is Lord Grovington I have my qualms with."

Mr. Plauser did not seem convinced by that and followed Michael to the door sputtering his apology. Michael was barely able to convince him that he did not have any intention of acting against him. His attention was on one person.

Elaine lingered in the back of his head. Before coming to London, he'd wanted the

truth for the sake of him and his family. Now, he needed the truth for her as well. To finally put aside the insane need to bring justice to light and give himself to her. And when he brought the truth to her, he would do so completely.

Another hour and two important stops later, Michael learned that the Marquess of Grovington was in his office and would see him shortly. So he was ushered to wait for him in the grand drawing room that betrayed the marquess' overwhelming wealth. Bitterness bled through Michael as he took in his surroundings, wondering just how much of this had been earned by his father's downfall.

"Your Grace!" Lady Isabella swept into the room with a broad grin and her lady's maiden on her heels. "How lovely of you to visit!"

"I am not here to see you, my lady," he stated curtly. "It is your father I wish to speak with."

Lady Isabella was not perturbed by his coldness. She came closer, batting her eyelashes. "May I inquire what it is about?"

"No, you may not."

Still, she was not snubbed. "If you wish to know, Your Grace, I have not accepted the affections of any other gentleman this Season. You are completely unopposed."

Michael sighed heavily. He stared at her, wondering whether he should be blunt or let her down gently. Before he came to a conclusion, Lord Grovington walked into the room.

He bore an identical grin to his daughter, arms spread as if readying himself to embrace Michael. "Your Grace, I see you have come to your—"

“My lord, what was your involvement in the conviction of the late Duke of Ryewood?”

Lord Grovington froze, arms falling to his side. He frowned. “What is the meaning of this?”

“Answer the question, Lord Grovington.”

The marquess’ face distorted with rage. “You do not come into my home and demand such things of me. I shall have you forcibly removed!”

“You may do so,” Michael responded calmly, a miraculous feat considering the fact that his own fury was roaring through his body. “But I shall only return with the constables so you may as well save yourself the embarrassment and confess to your involvement now. Rest assured that I know enough to know if you are lying or not.”

“How dare you—!”

“No, how dare you!” Michael’s roar had Lady Isabella backing away from him in fright. He didn’t care. “I have spent years and years trying to prove that the Earl of Suthenshire had given a false testimony that led to my father’s wrongful conviction. He died a despairing and disgraced man and I harboured resentment and hate for the earl, making a promise to myself that I shall see justice served. Now I know that all that anger and hate should have been aimed at you, Lord Grovington.”

“You do not know what you are talking about,” Lord Grovington spat, his face going red. “You were young when it all happened.”

“I was old enough to know the truth. I was old enough to know that my father would never do the things you all accused him of.”

“My father would never do such things either!” Lady Isabella chimed in, but she squeezed in terror when Michael whirled on her.

“Lady Isabella, I suggest you leave or else you’re going to learn of all the terrible deeds your father committed all in the name of power.” Then he turned back to the seething marquess. “Do you truly think I would come here if I did not already know what I am accusing you of? Do you truly believe that I do not have the evidence and testimonies I need to convict you of your own crimes?”

That seemed to knock the wind out of the marquess’ sails and his face fell. “You are bluffing,” he pushed out.

“Dare me, Lord Grovington,” Michael growled. “And I swear, if you do not start confessing, I shall ensure that your name is dragged through the mud until there is nothing left of your legacy, until you suffer a worse fate than my father and my family ever did. Take my kindness, Lord Grovington, before it is too late.”

“Father?” Lady Isabella’s voice was barely above a whisper but it caught the marquess’ attention all the same. “Is this true?”

Lord Grovington looked back at Michael and then at his daughter. Michael crossed his arms, rage reverberating through his stance. For a moment, he thought the marquess was going to continue denying it. He prepared himself for it and even relished the thought of doing worse to the marquess than what had been done to his father.

But then, the marquess cracked. “Your father brought this upon himself!” he hissed, pointing a podgy, accusing finger at Michael. “He thought himself so high and mighty, simply because he was well-loved. One man did not deserve so much power and yet his influence grew by the day. He had to be knocked down a peg.”

“And you were the man to do it,” Michael concluded.

“Of course not! I would never sully my hands in such a manner. But there were more than enough people willing to undertake the dirty work in exchange for a little more prestige and wealth. Lord Suthenshire was simply foolish enough to lead the charge. Had he not had me telling him what to do, he would not have been able to pull it off.” Lord Grovington barked a laugh. “Idiots, the lot of them! Testifying against the late duke and lying right through their teeth.”

“You wanted to replace him,” Michael taunted. “You wanted the top spot and needed to get rid of my father to get it. You were envious of him.”

“I envy no one! I am the Marquess of Grovington!”

“And yet you would not have received half of your influence if you hadn’t gotten rid of my father first.”

Lord Grovington spluttered in his fury, hands opening and closing at his side. Michael remained calm as the marquess fell apart in front of him.

Then Lord Grovington barked a laugh. “Say what you want, Your Grace. No one will believe you. My reputation is impeccable while yours certainly leaves much to be desired.”

“You may be right about that,” Michael answered. “Even if I were to publish all I know, it will only implicate the Earl of Suthenshire while you remain unscathed. Which is why I ensured that your confession was heard by men of the law.”

“What do you—”

The door opened behind him. Michael watched with immense satisfaction as the

marquess' butler appeared wearing a fearful expression on his face. And behind him were two powerful names in the House of Lords—the Duke of Hainbury and the Earl of Lowely.

Michael had met with these men during his investigation years ago and, as men of honour who had not believed in the late duke's conviction, had promised to aid Michael when the time came for him to reveal the truth. The time had come. The only difference was that he was at Lord Grovington's residence rather than Suthenshire House.

“What is the meaning of this?” Lord Grovington roared.

“It should be quite simple,” said Lord Lowely in his slow manner of speaking. “His Grace brought us with him, stating that we were finally going to learn the truth of what happened four years ago. I must say, Lord Grovington, I should have known you were behind this.”

Lord Grovington whirled on Michael. “You tricked me!”

“Wrong, my lord.” Michael smiled a little. “I liberated you.”

“Nicely done, Your Grace,” said the Duke of Hainbury. “Now that we know the truth, Lord Grovington shall be brought before the House of Lords for his crimes. I assure you, he will not get away with it this time.”

Michael nodded. He made his way to the door, resisting the overwhelming urge to ram his fist into Lord Grovington's stomach as he went by. It would have been satisfying but he was bigger than that.

“Thank you, Your Grace, my lord,” he said. “Finally, justice will be served.”

“You cannot do this to me! No one will believe you!”

Michael looked over his shoulder at the marquess. He was a pitiful thing, shaking in his rage and horror. “This is the end for you, my lord. You may as well say goodbye.”

The marquess might have thrown something at him in his departure but Michael was already out of the room. His steps felt lighter than ever, a perennial weight finally lifted from his shoulders.

Now, he only had one last thing to do.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:44 pm

Michael and Clarissa walked through the front door of Suthenshire House at the same time. Time seemed to slow. Elaine held her breath, the rest of her sentence fading the moment her eyes fell on Michael. And James seemed to do the same, his attention going straight to the blond-haired beauty by Michael's side.

But then he seemed to remember his anger a moment later and stepped forward, "What are you doing here?" he began but Clarissa slid between him and Michael.

"James, may we speak alone?" she asked. Elaine scarcely heard her and she certainly didn't hear James response. All she knew was that, within seconds, she and Michael were alone.

He didn't come any closer. But his eyes...oh, the look in them made it so hard to maintain her anger.

"May we speak?" he asked gently.

She put on a mask of neutral wariness, knowing her response before she allowed herself to speak it aloud. "Very well."

"I wish to speak with Lord Suthenshire first," he continued. "And I need you to be there."

Elaine frowned. "Why do you want to speak to my father?"

"Because it is time you learned the truth."

She didn't know how to respond to that. So she simply nodded, turned, and began making her way up the staircase. A shiver washed over her skin as he followed. He was close enough for her to smell his cologne, close enough that she knew he would collide with her if she stopped suddenly. Her heart thundered against her chest but she didn't allow herself to consider what he could possibly want to say to her father.

As it happened, Edward was awake when they entered his room, being fed his afternoon meal by one of the maids.

"Leave us please," Elaine ordered softly and the maid quickly complied. She kept her eyes on her father, watching as bemusement turned to panic.

"Pa." She approached slowly, her tone soft. "The Duke of Ryewood would like to speak with you."

Behind her, Michael approached as well. "Good day, Lord Suthenshire."

Edward's eyes remained wide, as if he was looking at a ghost. And then tears were suddenly streaming down his face.

"Pa!" Elaine flew to his side. "Michael, you should leave. I do not know what you've done, but you're only upsetting him."

"No, it's fine," Edward pushed out. He laid a hand on Elaine's arm as if trying to push her away. "I want to speak with him as well."

Michael was as still as a statue, his face unreadable. "You knew this day would come."

Jerkily, Edward nodded. "My sins were bound to catch up to me eventually."

“Pa, what are you talking about?”

Edward grasped Elaine’s hand tightly in his own. “There is something I have been keeping from you and your brother, Elaine. Something that has been eating me alive for years now.”

“I’m sure it couldn’t be that bad,” she tried to assure but the sadness in her father’s eyes only deepened.

“Four years ago, I stood before the House of Lords during the trial of the late Duke of Ryewood and committed a heinous act. I told numerous lies against the late duke so that he may be convicted for treason and sentenced to punishment in the colonies.”

Her world rocked around her. Elaine couldn’t breathe, couldn’t move, couldn’t see anything past the tears already blurring her vision. “Pa...why?”

Edward was slowly coming undone before her. “Because I was a foolish man who craved power. Because I envied what the late duke possessed. Because I allowed myself to be led rather than committing myself to my morals.” He turned his watery eyes to Michael. “That is the reason you are here, isn’t it? Because you know the truth and you intend to ensure I pay for my crimes.”

Elaine gasped, whirling to face Michael. She waited for him to say that wasn’t true but he simply stared at her father without a word.

“Michael?” she whispered. “Is that why you’re here?”

Slowly, Michael turned his eyes to her. “That was the reason I returned to London, yes. My father died a sad and disgraced man because of the lies your father and other members of the House of Lords told. I wanted justice. I wanted revenge. And that is why I approached you that day.”

Her knees gave way. Elaine sank onto the edge of her father's bed, tears streaming down her face.

“My intention was to befriend you so that I could learn the secrets of your family and use it against you. You were never the object of my vengeance, yet I was willing to use you and discard you as I deemed fit. I had the plan worked out in my head and everything was going as intended.” He swallowed thickly. “That was, until I spoke to you. The moment you spoke your first word to me, I forgot my plan. I forgot that I was supposed to make you like me so that you could trust me with your secrets. I forgot about my plan of revenge. When I was with you, I felt more like myself than I have in years. I relaxed, I laughed, I felt...happy. And then when we were apart, I continued the vicious cycle of convincing myself I was doing the right thing for my family. I never intended to fall in love with you.”

She didn't know what to do with herself. Part of her wanted to flee the room, unwilling to hear any more; the larger part clung to hope.

Michael stepped forward, his brow creasing slightly. “I was wrong. For my plan, for wanting to use you, for not being honest. I was wrong and I came to that realization far too late. Because of that, I did the one thing I hadn't realised I wouldn't be able to handle. I hurt you. I lost your trust. And I lost the chance to tell you how much I love you.”

“Michael...” She wiped her tears, searching for her words. “But what about what my father did? How can you love me when you still harbour such resentment towards him?”

“I do not anymore. Not now that I know the full truth.”

“The full truth?”

Michael looked at Edward. “You were the face behind the lies but not the mastermind. The Marquess of Grovington was the person who orchestrated everything, wasn’t he?”

“It does not matter,” Edward murmured. “My crimes remained the same.”

“That is true. However, I see that you have recognised the error of your ways, and with time, I shall find it in my heart to forgive you. Besides, there is no honour in kicking one who is already down.” Michael moved to his side, putting a hand on his shoulder. “And that is not the only reason I wished to see you. I would like to ask you something important.”

“What is that?”

“If she would have me, may I have your blessing to marry your daughter?”

Elaine thought she might collapse at any moment. She met her father’s eyes and then watched as he nodded at Michael.

“You do,” Edward told him.

Michael straightened. He paused a moment as if preparing himself before he began to turn. “Elaine—”

Elaine launched herself at him. Michael caught her in time, steadying them both.

“I should hate you,” she said hastily. “I tried to. Truly, I did. But given everything you just said, how can I?”

Michael searched her eyes, hope washing his expression. “Does this mean you forgive me?”

“Do you truly want to marry me? Do you truly love me?”

“More than anything in the world. I intend on spending the rest of my life ensuring that you know it.”

Elaine smiled, kissing him soundly, not caring that her father was watching. “Then yes!”

“Yes to what?” Michael asked with a laugh.

“Yes, you are forgiven. And yes, I shall marry you.”

Michael let out a shout of joy, picking her up and twirling her around. Elaine laughed through her tears.

“I love you too, Michael,” she told him as he set her down. “But I do hope you know you will have to explain yourself to James as well.”

“I have already prepared for it.”

As it happened, by the time they made it back downstairs, James and Clarissa were making their way back from the gardens, grinning from ear to ear. They all went to the drawing room. Elaine and Clarissa sat together while James and Michael stood—James with his arms crossed and a scowl on his face while Michael ached him with the full explanation of everything that happened.

James was not happy. And he certainly had no issue with stating that. But it took one word from Clarissa—something about forgiveness—for him to give Michael a chance. And when Elaine inquired about why they were so happy, Clarissa announced that James had asked for her hand in marriage.

Celebrations were in order, that much was certain. Elaine's mind swam with everything she would have to do. Informing Lorna, who would certainly want to throw an engagement ball. Planning the wedding. Informing her brother at Eton.

But for now, she was content to enjoy the moment, to bask in the love from her future husband and tease James about his obvious affection for Clarissa.

For now, she was happy to forget everything that had happened and finally, for the first time in a long while, believe that she truly could have a happy ending.

Three Months Later

“I have a surprise for you, Elaine.”

Elaine sighed, a smile touching her lips. She stood, her ivory gown flowing around her body like the soft wings of a butterfly. Unable to help herself, she glanced at herself in the full-length mirror of the spare bedchamber where she had chosen to prepare at Ryewood House.

She was a vision. She could hardly believe it. Within a matter of hours, she'd been scrubbed clean by doting maids, garbed in layers of undergarments to preserve the beautiful wedding gown, and sat down at the vanity table for her hair to be curled and her cheeks adorned with a touch of colour. By the end of it, Elaine felt like the most beautiful lady in all of England, a feat she never thought possible.

Of course, Lorna had played a significant role in making this possible. She'd gifted Elaine the lovely pearl necklace and matching earrings already. To think she had yet another surprise for her.

“Aunt Lorna,” Elaine began, facing her aunt who stood at the door with a bright smile. “You have already done so much for me.”

“Well, you needn't worry because this surprise is not from me,” Lorna told her.

Elaine frowned. “What do you mean?”

Lorna's smile widened and she stepped away from the door, opening the door. Elaine

gasped.

Her father stood there, leaning heavily on a cane, dressed smartly with a broad grin on his face.

“Pa,” Elaine breathed. She wanted to rush forward to help him, to get him to the nearest seat so that he could rest. But the fact that he was standing at all, the fact that he was smiling at her—and she had not seen him smile in years—left her speechless. Tears gathered in her eyes.

Slowly, Edward started forward. His movement was stilted, relying heavily on his cane. But as slow and awkward as it was, he managed to make his way all the way to her.

“May I have the honour of leading you down the aisle?”

Elaine crumpled to the floor, sobs hitched in her throat. “Pa, I...I can’t believe that you...”

“As much as I would love to, Elaine, I am not certain I will be able to rise again if I lower myself to the ground.”

She managed a laugh through her tears, pulling herself to a stand. “H-how?”

Lorna appeared by Edward’s side, wrapping a supportive arm around his waist. “Do you recall when I suggested that you wait until the Season has almost come to an end to have your wedding?”

Elaine nodded, sniffing. “You said you wanted Michael and I to enjoy our courtship a while longer.”

“Which is true. But it is also to help Edward prepare for this day. He wanted nothing more than to walk you down the aisle, so I hired a physician to help him each day.”

“How didn’t I notice that?” Elaine gasped. “I was by your side for most of the day.”

“And when you weren’t,” Edward said with a conspiratory grin, “that was the time to strike.”

“Michael was aware of it as well,” Lorna informed her. “We needed his help to keep you away for a few hours during the day and he was more than happy to oblige.”

“I cannot believe this.” Her sobs tore from her mouth. She reached out, embracing her father as gently as she could. “I’m so happy. I didn’t think anything could make me any happier.”

“Then perhaps I should not bother entering.”

Elaine gasped, eyes flying to the door. There, looking older, more rugged, but still with that cheeky grin, was her brother.

“Simon!” Elaine gently released her father before flying across the room and into her brother’s arms. “You have gotten taller!”

“I did not think it possible either,” he confessed with a laugh. “I am happy to see you, Elaine. And even happier to learn that you have found love.”

Elaine wiped her tears, looking up at her younger brother. “And what of you? Do not tell me you are still committed to your bachelorhood?”

“I am committed to my studies,” he said with mock seriousness. “So committed, in fact, that many of my peers were surprised to learn that I asked for a leave of absence

to be here. But I could not miss this day.”

Elaine smiled, turning to Lorna. “I presume you were behind this as well?”

Lorna shrugged. “Guilty as charged.”

“I was wrong,” Elaine said. “I couldn’t possibly be happier than this moment right now.”

“Perhaps you should wait until after the ceremony to make such a statement,” Lorna suggested. “And if we do not go now, we shall be late. Come, darling, we should not keep your future husband waiting.”

Elaine left the bedchamber, walking slowly so that she could do so by her father’s side, even if it meant being a little late. The ceremony was to take place in the gardens of Ryewood House, a private and intimate occasion. The wedding breakfast would take place there as well, after which Elaine and Michael would leave for Scotland for their honeymoon.

At last, they made it to the gardens. The harpist began to play upon her appearance and the small amount of guests claimed their seats. Elaine’s eyes fell on James and Clarissa near the front. The past three months had been full of nothing but private smiles and adoring looks between the two of them, though James always seemed to get flustered when asked about his feelings for Clarissa. They were an adorable couple, clearly in love, and their wedding was set for two months away.

Elaine smiled at the other guests before her eyes fell on Michael. And then everything else disappeared.

Lorna was right. It was far too early to say how happy she was because this moment beat them all. Walking down the aisle with her father by her side, heading towards

the love of her life, with her family watching. Tears touched her eyes once more.

As she reached Michael's side, she watched him look at her father and nod. Edward said nothing, only nodding back. Something passed between them, something Elaine could not decipher but could tell they had come to an understanding.

"You look beautiful," Michael breathed.

"You took the words right out of my mouth," she whispered back. "I cannot believe the day is finally here."

"Is that why you have been crying?" he asked, brushing a tender thumb across her cheek.

"No, I...I'm just so happy."

Michael brought her hand to his lips, kissing the back of it. "Save your tears, my love. Because I intend to make you happier for the rest of your life."

"Do you promise?"

"With all my heart."

She believed him. So, she put her heart in his hands once and for all. From the moment their eyes met for the first time, from the day she realised she had fallen in love with him, she was his. But now, as the priest told Michael he may kiss his bride, she knew that he was completely and wholly hers.

The End

Five Years Later

The door banged open. “I have returned!”

Victoria, who had been in the process of showing Elaine how advanced she was in her reading, screamed and leapt off the sofa, throwing arms around Elaine’s neck and knocking the wind out of Elaine’s chest. Victoria’s scream was all it took to send Robert crying out in fear, his small legs carrying his three-year-old frame across the room and into his father’s arms.

The screaming only disturbed the sleeping child tucked into the corner of the main drawing room of Ryewood Estate. The governesses who had been taking a well-needed break immediately got to their feet to tend to the crying six-month-old toddler. Little Elizabeth, who had been playing by her brother’s previously sleeping frame, simply looked around in confusion, calm despite the chaos.

Lorna was no different. She leapt halfway off the floor in fright, clutching the front of her dress. Henry, who had been engaged in conversation with Lorna and Beatrice, pressed his fist against his mouth to keep his laughter at bay while Beatrice slapped him lightly on the arm in an effort to get him to stop.

The only person who didn’t seem bothered by the sudden disturbance was Edward. He still slept soundly by the window.

Simon blinked, scratching the back of his head. “Perhaps I should not have made such a loud entrance,” he murmured apologetically.

Elaine didn't know whether to laugh or scold him. She focused instead on soothing Victoria, who seemed determined to squeeze every bit of oxygen out of her. Despite the fact that, at five years old, Victoria liked to say she was mature, moments like these proved otherwise.

"It's all right," Elaine soothed. "It is only your Uncle Simon."

"Uncle Simon?" Victoria paused her crying to actually look at the door. The next second, she was all smiles. "Uncle Simon!"

"Victoria!" Simon bent to scoop Victoria into his arms. "I'm happy to see that someone is glad to see me return."

"Forgive us for trying to mend the chaos you caused in your outburst," Michael drawled as he went to Elaine's side, still soothing the crying Robert. Elaine smiled a little at the sight. Robert and Victoria were the spitting image of Michael, much to Elaine's happiness. They shared many similar traits as well. One might think Elaine had played no part in their creation, but she did not mind.

"I'll take care of him," said James to the governess holding his crying baby. "Hush now, Harry. You shall soon grow accustomed to such outburst now that your uncle has returned from his Grand Tour."

"You act as if you did not miss me, James," Simon said as he went to Lorna's side and pressed a kiss on her temple.

"He missed you, all right," Lorna told him. "Every day he asked me when you were scheduled to return."

"Lies," James drawled and Clarissa laughed.

“Oh, don’t hide it, dear,” she told him gently, brushing her hand over Elizabeth’s curls, who had gone back to playing. “It is adorable.”

“It is nothing of the sort and I did nothing of the sort,” James protested.

“Come here, Simon,” Elaine called. She would have gotten up to greet him herself if she wasn’t so heavily with child.

Simon was on his way over when he noticed her rotund stomach. “Good grief! When did that happen?”

Elaine laughed. “I have only just begun to show.”

“You look just about ready to pop!”

“Watch it,” Edward spoke up. Elaine looked over in surprise but her father’s eyes remained closed. “That is your sister you’re talking to.”

Simon laughed. “Thank you for the reminder, Pa. And I’m happy to see you too.”

Edward waved a hand. “I’m going back to sleep. Keep it down, won’t you?”

Simon shook his head, then sank into the vacant spot next to Elaine. “Have you two decided on a name for this one yet?”

“Well,” Elaine rubbed her belly. “Since Victoria was named after Michael’s late mother, I thought we could name this one Emilia after Mama, if it is a girl.”

Simon nodded, smiling. “And if it is a boy?”

“Perseus,” Michael told him. Clarissa shook her head at that, laughing to herself.

“Why Perseus?”

“Because I always liked that name,” Elaine stated as if that should be reason enough. No one argued but they certainly exchanged looks.

Simon was wise enough not to pass any comments. “Well, whether it is Emilia or...Perseus, they shall fit right in.”

Elaine smiled. “How was your Tour, Simon? I thought you would have spent longer than two years considering how eager you were.”

“I almost did, but I grew homesick. But I did see someone interesting during my trip to the colonies.”

“You went to the colonies?” Henry asked in surprise.

“Only to observe. And I happened to see the Marquess of Grovington working on one of the plantations. Hard labour does not become him.”

“It only serves him right,” Michael commented. Elaine noted that he spoke with no resentment. They’d learned of the marquess’ punishment a year after they had married but by then, Michael claimed he had laid such thoughts to rest. His focus was now on his family and dukedom.

“It is a pity that his daughter had to suffer,” Simon said.

“She fared well enough considering the scandal,” Clarissa informed him. “She married Lord Weatherby and has since bore him a son. They reside in the countryside.”

“Do they now? Well, at least she was not affected too much by the scandal.”

“Is that why you have returned?” Elaine asked him with a raised brow. “To learn of society’s recent gossip?”

“Of course not,” Simon gasped in mock shock. “I came because my darling niece missed me. Didn’t you, Victoria?”

Victoria, who seemed content to stay in her uncle’s arms, nodded with a broad, mostly toothless smile. Elaine smiled at the sight.

On days like these, when everyone simply gathered for gathering sake, she felt at peace. Sometimes she could hardly believe that, only five years ago, she had been so alone, burdened by the need to save her family. And now she had more family than she had ever dreamed of.

“What’s got you smiling like that?” came Michael’s voice in her ear.

Elaine smiled down at her stomach as she rubbed it fondly. “I think Perseus wants to join the fun. He is kicking quite a lot.”

Michael placed his hand over hers. “So, we are determined to go with Perseus, are we?”

“I am. Are you?”

He sighed heavily and she laughed. “Anything you wish, my love. Once you are happy, so am I. Now, I do feel inclined to say that our darling son may not be happy with such a name.”

“I am certain he shall come to love it,” she giggled.

Michael joined in with the laughter but then it faded as he looked into her eyes.

“Have I told you that I love you today?”

“You have,” she confessed softly. “But I have no qualms with hearing it again.”

He leaned closer, brushing a soft kiss against her lips. “I love you, Elaine. Forever.”

“I love you too, Michael. Always.”

There was more she wanted to say but was interrupted by Simon’s regalement of his Grand Tour, everyone gathering closer to hear. So, she leaned into Michael’s arms, brushing her fingers over Robert’s dark curls as their son fell asleep in Michael’s arms.

And she was happy. So happy that tears welled in her eyes. So happy that, as she listened to her brother’s story, she wished it would last forever.

The End

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:44 pm

Four years ago...

Hmmm, something is not quite right...

Verity couldn't pinpoint what wasn't working with her current painting, but it all felt a little... off. She cocked her head to one side, examining the coloring and the brush strokes across the canvas from a different angle, but still nothing jumped out. The landscape she was painting from memory did not depict the view outside her family's London town house, so it wasn't like she could remind herself of what the image should look like. She had to do it from memory, which was only making everything so much more challenging.

The painting was a scene she had seen a while back, from her previous trip to Bath. The countryside had truly captivated her, which was exactly what she wished to capture now. So, why was it not working?

"Perhaps it's the greens," she muttered to herself. "Maybe I don't have them quite right."

She pursed her bottom lip as she squinted her eyes, trying her absolute hardest to imagine what her work would look like with varying greens, but still it felt strange. Perhaps it was more a feeling deep within her, rather than something to do with her work. Verity wasn't feeling quite right in herself that morning.

With a deep sigh, she placed her paint brush down and stepped back away from the canvas, running her eyes over everything, still trying to see what was wrong...

“Lady Sinclair.”

Verity jumped as her footman’s voice ricocheted through the room, shaking her from her deep contemplation.

“You have a visitor. Lord Cedric Fitzwilliam.”

A smile spread across Verity’s face. She might not have been expecting a visit from her fiancé today, but she always appreciated his presence. Ever since he had started courting her, Verity had found herself feeling a lot lighter and a lot happier. She kept envisioning her new life as a wife, and she knew it was going to be wonderful.

“Good morning, Cedric,” Verity declared the moment she laid eyes on him. “How wonderful it is to see you.” Heat burned in her cheeks. Cedric was so handsome, with his high cheekbones and piercing blue eyes. The sight of him always made Verity’s heart flutter with excitement.

“Verity, thank you for meeting with me.”

The somberness of Cedric’s tone struck Verity. He wasn’t a man often struck with morose thoughts.

“Please, take a seat,” Verity offered, hoping that she would be able to lift his spirits somewhat. “I will get us some tea.”

Cedric shook his head, but Verity would not hear of it. She had ordered some tea and cake from the maids before he could say another word.

She would be his wife soon, and absolutely needed to be able to cheer him up, no matter what his woes were.

“Cedric, something’s wrong. What is it?” she asked when he had settled into a chair.

“I...” He paused for a moment, seemingly with something heavy on his mind. Verity’s heart raced as she waited impatiently for him to start talking. “I have something that I need to discuss with you, Verity. Something that affects us.”

Verity’s smile faltered just a little. “What’s the matter?”

A sense of unease settled over her. She did not like the look on Cedric’s face. He seemed different, somehow. She could not work out why he appeared to have something heavy weighing down on his shoulders. What on earth could it possibly be?

“I need you to know that I have fallen in love with another.”

Shock reverberated through Verity.

She could not believe what she was hearing.

Perhaps she had misheard those words because there was no way Cedric really meant that. Not when they were due to get married very shortly.

She blinked a few times, trying to adjust to the moment.

“What do you mean?” She asked breathlessly.

He hung his head low, like he could not meet her eyes any longer. “I have fallen in love with Lady Daphne Cavendish.”

Daphne?

No, there was no way.

This had to be a cruel trick of some kind. Daphne was her best friend. Verity could not work out what the point of this prank was, but it made her feel utterly sick to her stomach.

“Me and Daphne...” Cedric continued as if he could not sense her inner turmoil at all. “We have developed an undeniable connection. It wasn’t something that either of us meant to happen, but it has happened regardless. There is nothing that I can do to change it. I am truly sorry for that.”

Verity’s heart thundered so hard she feared it might burst free from her chest at any given moment.

Was he actually being serious?

This could not be.

“But... we are too be married,” she insisted, hating the crack of emotion that shone free in her voice.

Cedric shook his head slowly. “I am afraid that I cannot marry you, Verity. I can’t do it. I must follow my heart and marry the one that I love. I truly hope that is something you can understand.”

Verity fought back the tears as the devastating news washed over her. This was the worst betrayal that she had ever experienced. Not only was this coming from the man that she was supposed to marry, but her best friend and closest confidante as well.

All the plans that she had made with Cedric... the future that they had envisioned... a future that she had discussed with Daphne as the giddiness of love overcame her... it

was all crumbling before her very eyes, and she could hardly breathe.

Was this a nightmare? Something that she could wake up from? If only her emotions were not so unbearably strong, she might be able to convince herself that none of this was really happening.

But it was happening, and there wasn't anything that she could do to stop it. There was no way that she could escape this however hard she tried.

Verity's mind reeled. The bright future she had imagined lay in ruins at her feet, each shattered fragment cutting deeper in to her heart.

"How could you?" she whispered, more to herself than to Cedric. "How could she?"

Cedric reached out as if to comfort her, but she recoiled. His touch was unbearable now, a reminder of the love she had lost and the friend who had betrayed her. She never wanted to lay eyes on either of them again. In fact, in this moment, she never wanted to lay eyes on anyone again.

"I never intended to hurt you," he said softly. "I do care for you, Verity. But I cannot deny what my heart feels."

Verity stared at him, searching for any sign of the man she thought she knew. But he seemed a stranger now, his words hollow and unrecognizable.

"What am I supposed to do?" she asked, her voice trembling. "You were my future, Cedric. You were everything I dreamed of."

He sighed, the weight of his decision evident in his eyes. "You will find someone who loves you truly, Verity. Someone who will give you the life you deserve. I am not that man, and it would be unfair to pretend otherwise. We would be doing

ourselves a disservice if we marry. It would be a wasted life for both of us.”

The door opened, and the maid entered with a tray of tea and cake.

The mundane normality of the scene struck Verity as absurd. She forced herself to smile, a brittle mask of composure, as the maid set the tray down and exited quietly.

The maid probably knew. She had likely overheard everything which only made Verity’s chest ache more. Soon, she would not only be a laughingstock in her home, and of the ton as well.

How could she get through this with any semblance of dignity?

“Thank you for being honest,” Verity managed to say, though the words tasted bitter. She knew that she had to say something to allow her to hold her head up high. “I suppose I should be grateful for that.”

Cedric nodded, his expression solemn. “I hope, in time, you will forgive me.”

Forgive him?

“I will try,” she replied, though she doubted the sincerity of her words. “But you must take your leave now, Cedric. I need time to process this. As I am sure you can imagine, this has come at quite a shock and I need some time to think about things.”

He stood, casting one last, regretful look at her before he turned and walked out of the room, leaving her very much alone, stewing in sadness.

The silence that followed was deafening, the emptiness he left behind vast and consuming. How was she going to tell her mother about this? What about her brother? Verity shuddered at the thought of Henry’s reaction to this sorrowful,

shocking news.

She sat in the chair, staring blankly at the tea and cake. Her appetite was gone, replaced by a gnawing ache that settled in her chest. The painting on the easel caught her eye, and she let out a bitter laugh. No wonder it felt off. The greens, the landscape. It was all a reflection of her own disquiet, her own unsettled heart.

How could she have been so blind? That was probably the hardest thing of all. To have been in the dark and not known what was happening behind her back.

When had Cedric and Daphne fallen in love? What had they talked about behind her back?

Had they been laughing at her? Joking about how blind she was to what was happening between them?

The idea that they were mocking her the whole time cut deep.

Verity knew that Daphne had an unkind side. She relished in gossip and liked to talk about other ladies behind their back, but Verity was supposed to be her best friend. She never thought that she would be saying terrible things about her behind her back. Did that make her a fool? Did everyone else think that she was a fool? Was she the only person who did not know that she was a fool?

As the tears finally started to roll down her cheeks, Verity was sure that they would never stop coming. She allowed her head to fall into her hands as the sobs wracked through her whole body. Without Cedric and their marriage, she had no idea what her future looked like. Everything that she had planned revolved around him. Her whole life was going to be him...

Now it just stretched out in front of her as a big black hole with nothing in it.

Nothing at all.

“I will never allow myself to be vulnerable again,” Verity muttered under her breath as a surge of determination ricocheted through her. “I will never allow myself to get close to another.”

She did not just mean in romantic relationships, although she was certainly going to keep her heart locked away, never to be touched once more, but in friendship as well. Clearly her judgement could not be trusted.

Instead, she was going to focus on what made her happy. She would find solace in her art... once she could get over this pain. She would throw herself in to her creativity because that was the only thing that she could rely on.

Romance was clearly not for her, but she would not let this betrayal define her life.

She was just going to have to find a way to break this terrible news to her family first...

Present day,

London, Spring

The brush dangled in Verity's hand as she examined her half-finished landscape as the upcoming Season flooded her mind.

She could not ignore the intense sense of trepidation that washed over her as she thought of what was to come. The balls, the musicales, the high society teas... Verity wasn't looking forward to any of it. She had not done so over the last four years. Ever since her engagement had been called off she had hated to be under the scrutinizing eyes of the ton. Especially now, because she was considered a spinster and not worth even looking at.

It seemed like an utterly unnecessary waste of her time, with a terrible impact on her self-esteem, but still it was something she must do. She did not have any choice in the matter.

Knock, knock.

Verity spun around quickly to find the butler standing in the doorway in his typical stoic fashion.

"You have a visitor, Lady Sinclair."

Those words always filled Verity with dread.

“Who is it?” she asked breathlessly.

“Lady Faye Barrington.”

Warmth spread through Verity as a smile crept up on her lips. A visit from her cousin was welcome news.

“Please, show her into the drawing room.”

As soon as she caught sight of her cousin, who was glowing with happiness and smiling widely, Verity beamed from ear to ear.

“Oh, Faye, how are you? You look wonderful.”

Faye grinned back. “I’m just fine thank you very much. You are looking lovely yourself, Verity.” She always complimented Verity’s appearance, though it was no question that Faye was the more attractive cousin. Verity appreciated the condescension, anyway, glowing under the praise of her beloved friend.

“How is your husband?” Verity asked happily. She had always enjoyed the company of Lord James Barrington and thought he was a wonderful man for her cousin. “It has been a while since I have last seen him.”

“Oh, he is quite busy with his work,” Faye chuckled, smoothing her skirts as she relaxed into an armchair. “I have hardly had time to see him, if I am honest with you. But I have to admit, the fever of the Season is catching up with me, and the memories of being a carefree debutante are hard to ignore.”

Verity’s smile faltered. “I am not sure that I feel the same way at all.”

Faye furrowed her brows. “What do you mean?”

“While I must attend, I am afraid that I find little joy in the prospect of endless social gatherings.”

Verity hung her head low, her eyes brimming with tears that she refused to let fall. She could not continue to weep over what happened four years ago, but at the same time, it had affected her life terribly ever since.

“Oh, Verity, I am so sorry to hear that.”

“I just cannot envision how I am supposed to enjoy myself after everything that has happened...”

Faye’s expression was full of sympathy. “Oh, Verity, I know it’s terribly hard for you. But you can’t allow the past to hold you back forever. It may still be a painful memory, but all of that happened four years ago. It may well be time for you to consider opening up your heart once more.”

Verity sighed heavily and allowed her eyes to drift to the window, almost as if she was seeking an escape of some kind. “It’s not that simple, Faye. It will not be easy for me, especially after the scandal that Cedric caused me. Not only am I unsure if I am willing to risk my heart once more, knowing what kind of pain I might face, but I also have to accept that I am a spinster now. My age puts me on the shelf, which will make it impossible to compete with all the beautiful young debutantes.”

Tears filled her eyes as she remembered her debut season, when she was flush with the advantages of youth and blooming under newfound attention from men.

If only she had given other gentlemen a chance and not fixated on Cedric so much.

If she had known what he was going to do to her, then everything would have been very different.

Faye reached out and took Verity's hands in hers, bringing her attention back towards her.

"I understand, Verity, I really do. I know that you find yourself in a very challenging situation, but I still don't think you should close yourself off to the idea of love I am sure that you can find happiness."

Verity bit down on her bottom lip, trying to fight the tears. "I would love to find the sort of love that you have with your husband, but I suppose it will never happen for me. Remember, you met James in your second Season. I stand far less of a chance."

The things that were said about Verity after her broken engagement still sent painful chills down her spine. The ton could be so cruel with their gossiping. It wasn't something she ever wished to face again. She was going to have to find a way to face all of this, whether she was ready for it not. She would have to face all those judging eyes, even if she would have much rather hidden away at home forever.

"I appreciate your words more than you know," Verity said softly, squeezing Faye's hands. "But the thought of facing all those people again, of enduring their whispers and judgments, it terrifies me. Every year I get older and the comments become more cruel. How can I ever move past that?"

Faye gave her a gentle, encouraging smile. "You are stronger than you think, Verity. Remember, the ton's opinions are fickle and ever changing. You are not defined by their judgments. You define yourself. You can use this Season to define yourself however you see fit."

Verity nodded, trying to absorb the strength in Faye's words. "I will try, Faye. Truly, I will. But it feels like such a daunting task."

Before Faye could respond, the maid entered with the tea, setting it down on the table

between them. The familiar, soothing ritual of tea helped to ground Verity, if only for a moment.

There was a strange atmosphere around the dining table.

Verity glanced at her mother, but Elizabeth did not look like she had any idea that anything was going on. But when her eyes traveled towards her older brother, Henry, she felt it... a strange prickle tearing down her spine.

Once upon a time, Verity had been very close to Henry. They got along well, so much so that they even seemed to know what the other was thinking. But that all changed four years ago, when Cedric shredded her heart, and she felt Henry distancing himself from her. It seemed to her that the disappointment was too much for him to bear and he did not want to get all caught up in her bad luck.

Sure, the broken proposal had affected her whole family, but it was hard for Verity to feel that blame when she did not think that she had done anything wrong.

All she had done was trust the wrong people.

Henry seemed to sense her eyes upon him, and he glanced her way sharply. Verity sucked in a deep breath as he started to speak.

“Today I made a new acquaintance,” he declared with pride tinged his tone. “Lord Ambrose Aldford, a wealthy widower with several young daughters.”

“Oh, I have heard of him,” Elizabeth chimed in. “I have heard that his lordship is on the marriage mart, seeking a wife to care for his children and provide him with an heir.”

“Exactly,” Henry agreed. “Which is why I have found him such an interesting gentleman.”

Elizabeth screwed up her face in horror. “Oh, I don’t know about ‘interesting’. I have always heard that he is quite conceited.”

Henry shook his head, ignoring his mother. Then it was time for his attention to turn back to Verity.

He cleared his throat. “We have actually been invited to dine with Lord Ambrose and his family in three evenings.”

“We have?” Verity rasped back. Her stomach churned with fear because she had no idea where this was headed, but she was certain that she did not like it one bit.

“I suppose he could be a potential suitor for you.”

Verity’s heart sunk.

These were the words that she had been absolutely dreading, and hoping would not come out of Henry’s mouth.

“You cannot be serious,” Elizabeth jumped in before Verity could say anything. “That is not the sort of man that you want your sister to be married to. He only wants a wife to become a mother to his children...”

But Henry silenced her by holding up his hands. “The matter is not up for debate, Mother. Verity cannot remain a spinster forever. I will stop all this gossip around our family name. We must consider her future. Sometimes I think that I am the only one who cares about our reputation. I am the only one thinking about the future for all of us, with no support from you at all.”

Verity could not say a word.

How could her brother want to do this to her? Did he not recall the pain that she had been through? It truly felt very cruel to put her in such a position where she was trapped in a corner, unable to escape.

Her father would never have been so cruel...

Verity had missed him every single day since he passed away, but now that pain was acute. He would have cared for her, he would have ensured that she found love, he would have never allowed her heart to break like it did. But with her father gone, and her brother the man of the house, was Verity in a position to argue?

Henry paid for all of her living costs, so of course he wanted her to get married. He wanted her out of the house so he would no longer be responsible for her.

There was a heat coursing through her body, but somehow, she felt all icy and cold at the same time, like her body wasn't quite sure how to react. She wasn't sure that she could keep looking at Henry anymore. Not when it seemed like he was about to betray her as well.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:44 pm

“You must remarry, Philip, you cannot stay in mourning forever.”

Philip shook his head as he tried to forget his mother’s words.

The wind blowing through his hair as he rode his favorite horse, Midnight, through Hyde Park was supposed to help clear his mind, but as Philip cantered, he found himself more burdened than ever.

He had not bothered with the ton for many years now. He had successfully avoided socializing with high society for the last five years, but now that his younger sister Georgina was ready to make her debut, he knew that he was going to have to face it all again. This Spring, he would be deeply involved with the ton once more, trying to ensure that his sister made the right match during the Season. It wasn’t a burden that he relished having on his shoulders, but he was fiercely protective of Georgina and would not trust her future to anyone else.

He could only hope that he would not find himself the center of attention. He did not want anyone to try and set him up with a match because that was far from what he wanted.

If only he could make everyone else understand that...

With a deep sigh, Philip turned his steed around, knowing that he could not avoid the problems that awaited him at home forever. Much as he would have loved to continue riding until the sun set, he knew that it would change nothing.

Philip rode Midnight to the stables and handed him off to the stable boy, before he

took confident strides towards the house. Maybe he did not feel as confident as he looked, but that was hardly the issue.

“Ah, good afternoon, my lord.” Philip was immediately greeted by Mr. Jameson, his butler, with a solemn vow. “You have a visitor.”

“I do?” Philip wasn’t expecting anyone. But perhaps he should have known what was to come.

“The Dowager Marchioness awaits your presence in the drawing room.”

Mother.

Of course.

It was coming again; he just knew it. The closer the got to the start of the Season, the more relentless she became. When Adelaide, got something in her mind, it wasn’t often that she did not get her way. She was stubborn, but so was Philip.

He forced a smile on his face and went to greet his mother cordially.

With a nod to Mr. Jameson, Philip headed towards the drawing room, dreading what was to come. His mother was seated on the sofa, her posture regal and her expression determined, which could only mean one thing. She was here to get what she wanted

“Philip,” she declared the moment she caught his eyes. “Your butler said that you were riding through Hyde Park.”

“I was,” he replied stiffly. “Midnight needed to stretch his legs. As did I.”

“Splendid. It’s good to see you out in society. Especially with the Season coming up.”

Philip sighed, steeling himself. It was coming again; he just knew it. He could almost feel the intensity of the pressure weighing down on his shoulders.

“I suppose we should discuss how we are going to handle the Season...”

“Is this not something that you should be talking about with Georgina?”

Adelaide narrowed her eyes at Philip. “I have already discussed my plan with your sister. She knows exactly how she is going to tackle the Season. It’s you we need to focus on now. This will be the perfect chance for you to find yourself another bride.”

“But, Mother, I don’t wish to remarry. I have already expressed my intentions. Your relentless efforts to see me remarried are a waste of time. I don’t know why you refuse to understand.”

Adelaide smiled softly. “I know that it was hard for you to lose Julianna, Philip. I understand that you loved her very much. The illness that took her from us was absolutely tragic, and nothing will ever take that pain away from you.”

“So then why are you trying to force me to find a bride?”

His mother rose from her seat with her eyes fixed on Philip. “It has been five years since you lost your wife, Philip, and there are other things you need to consider.”

“Such as?” he asked exasperated.

“Such as the importance of fulfilling your duty to the family by securing our future through matrimony and of course producing an heir.”

Philip resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Perhaps he would not have to deal with any of this if he and Julianna had born children, but it simply had not happened for them. When Julianna had died, so had his hopes for a family and legacy. Why could his mother not seem to understand that?

“I have compiled a list of suitable young ladies for you to consider...”

“Mother!” Philip snapped as guilt flowed through his veins. “Please, that is quite unnecessary.”

Why would she even think to do such a thing when he was still grieving Julianna? Why would she want to put so much pressure on him? It was horrifying. It was almost as if she wanted him to forget all about the woman he loved, purely for societal reasons. It was base. It was wrong.

“There are some lovely women on this list,” Adelaide continued as if she had not heard him. “Lady Rosalind Fitzwilliam for example. Now she is a rather beautiful debutante, who I believe would make a wonderful marchioness. She is graceful, beautiful, of course, and a very well-mannered woman who has been bred for society. It would be a shame if you did not even give her a chance. One dance might really change your mind about her.”

Philip clenched his jaw, trying to rein in his frustration. His mother’s persistence was relentless, and it seemed nothing he said could deter her. “Mother,” he began, trying to keep his tone calm, “I appreciate your concern for the family and our lineage, but I am not ready to consider another marriage. Julianna was irreplaceable to me, and I don’t wish to dishonor her memory by rushing in to another union. Especially one with a Lady that I don’t even know.”

Adelaide’s expression softened, but her resolve remained firm. “Philip, I feel your grief, truly, I do. But you must understand that life goes on. Your responsibilities should go beyond your personal feelings. The estate, our family name, and the future

all rest upon your shoulders. We cannot forget that.”

Philip ran a hand through his hair, feeling the weight of his mother’s words. He knew she had a point, but his heart wasn’t ready to open up again. Perhaps that would change in the years to come, but not right now.

“I need more time, Mother. Please, respect my wishes on this matter,” he said, hoping to appeal to her sense of compassion.

Adelaide sighed, her eyes filled with a mixture of sympathy and determination.

“Very well, Philip. I will give you some more time, but the Season will not wait. You must at least attend the social events and be seen. Your sister’s future depends on it as well. We cannot afford to have rumors spreading about your absence and about our name!”

Philip nodded, relieved that his mother was willing to give him a bit of respite, even if it was temporary.

“I will attend the events for Georgina’s sake. But please, don’t press me about marriage for now.”

“Agreed,” Adelaide said, though Philip could see she wasn’t entirely satisfied. “We shall discuss this further when the time is right. For now, let us focus on ensuring Georgina has a successful debut.”

Before Philip could get another word out, his sister swept into the room. She always had such impeccable timing, Philip often wondered if it was intentional. She had some intuition that allowed her to know when he needed her the most.

There would be no arguing with Georgina in the room. No one wanted to cause her any distress, especially during this very important time of her life. Making her debut

in society had to be such a weight on her. There was no way he wanted to make it worse.

“How are you, Georgina?” he asked his sister kindly. “How are your preparations for the Season coming along?”

Georgina’s eyes sparkled with excitement as she replied, “Oh, Philip, everything is falling into place perfectly! My gowns are being finished, and I have already received invitations to several important events. I am so eager for it all to begin. I cannot wait to spend time with other Ladies and perhaps some Lords as well.”

Philip smiled, genuinely pleased to see his sister so happy. “That is wonderful to hear. I am sure you will dazzle everyone and make a splendid impression.”

“Thank you, Philip,” she said, beaming. “I have no doubt you will be the most supportive brother, at my side at every event.”

“Of course, Georgina. I would not miss it for the world,” Philip reassured her, though the thought of enduring the endless social whirl made his heart sink.

Adelaide, still standing, watched the exchange between her children with a mixture of pride and urgency.

“Philip,” she urged, “Remember that your presence will also be important for Georgina’s prospects. A strong familial presence will reflect well on her. It will show the ton that we are a united and well-respected family, worth getting to know.”

Philip nodded, knowing his mother was right but still dreading the attention. “I understand, Mother. I will do what is necessary.”

Georgina’s face softened, and she touched his arm gently, sympathy radiating off of her in waves. “Philip, I know this is difficult for you, but we will get through it

together. And who knows, perhaps you might even enjoy some of it.”

Philip chuckled softly. “We shall see about that, Georgina. For now, let us focus on making sure you have the best Season possible.”

They discussed their plans for a little while longer, with Georgina clearly thrilled about the dances that were coming her way. But eventually, Philip slipped away, using his work as an excuse.

He most certainly needed a moment alone in his study away from all the stress and pressure that he was currently under.

His mind was racing with conflicting emotions. He longed for the solace and companionship that his loving marriage had once provided him. He loved Julianna and promised to love her forever. Could he really just abandon that promise because she had died? It did not seem right.

Everyone could remind him that she would have wanted him to move on, but that did not mean he had to do it. That did not mean he had to just love another... or even worse, marry without love. What was the point of that?

With a heavy sigh, Philip settled into his chair, determined to find a way to balance his own desires with the expectations placed upon him as the Marquess of Eilendale.

Philip leaned back in his chair, staring at the stacks of correspondence that awaited his attention. They were a stark reminder of his responsibilities, both to his family and to his estate. He needed to ensure everything was in order before the social whirl of the Season engulfed him entirely.