



A Duke to Restore her Memory

Author: *Lucy Langton*

Category: Historical

Description: Faced with forced marriage, Lady Christina Whitford flees home. Reaching the perilous Cornish cliffs, she stops to rest, but accidentally falls over... When she finally regains consciousness, a handsome gentleman is the first thing she sets eyes on. Can Christina give him her heart, when she cannot even remember who she is?

Sebastian Cavendish, the Duke of Newquay, hails from an old mining dynasty, on the Cornish coast. Aggrieved from his parents passing, he is strictly business and has no romance. That is until he finds a beautiful woman lying unconscious in one of his mine shafts. Can he stop himself from falling for the amnesiac, nameless stranger?

As Sebastian takes Christina in his care, the two of them draw closer. However, when his sister returns, she is set to drive them apart, believing she is a fraud. Can their blooming bond survive the cruel wedge and the skeletons hidden in Christina's closet or will that be the end of their unlikely romance?

A Duke to Restore her Memory is a historical romance novel of approximately 60,000 words. No cheating, no cliffhangers, and a guaranteed happily ever after.

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Draycott Manor, Cornwall, 1812

“Christina.” Viscount Draycott’s voice was unusually tense as he addressed his daughter. “We must talk. Can you join me in the parlour after you have led your horse to its stable?”

Lady Christina Whitford nodded her head uncertainly as she gazed at her father. She had just returned from a ride along the rugged coastline of Cornwall, near Exmouth, and her heart was still pounding with exhilaration from the wild ride.

Christina loved to ride with abandon, taking in the beauty of this corner of England, her eyes feasting on the wild cliffs, the vast sea, and the tall ships sailing in the distance. There was nothing like it in the world.

“Of course, Papa,” she replied, trying to ignore the stab of misgiving in her chest at her father’s tone. “I will be along presently.”

The viscount nodded tersely, turning and striding back to the grand house. Christina frowned as she led her beloved black horse, Romulus, to the stable. What was going on?

Her sense of unease increased when she finally walked into the parlour. Her father was leaning against the mantelpiece with an abstracted, faraway expression. He turned at her footsteps, visibly starting, gesturing for her to sit down.

What is going on? Papa is usually so genial and easygoing. I cannot recall the last time I saw him looking so distracted and tense.

Christina sank into the plush velvet settee, her riding habit rustling as she smoothed her skirts. The parlour, usually a warm and inviting sanctuary, suddenly felt oppressive. Heavy drapes blocked much of the afternoon sunlight, casting long shadows across the Persian rug. The ticking of the ornate grandfather clock in the corner seemed unnaturally loud in the tense silence.

Her father cleared his throat, his fingers drumming an erratic rhythm on the mantelpiece. "My dear," he began, his voice rough with emotion, "I am afraid I have some rather distressing news to impart."

Christina's heart began to race. She had never seen her father so discomposed. "What is it, Papa? Please, you are frightening me."

"There is no easy way to say this, Christina," he replied. She noticed a small vein twitching in his right temple. "Our family is experiencing severe financial difficulty. We are, to put it bluntly, in debt. We are in great debt."

Christina gasped, her eyes widening in shock. "But ... how? How could this have happened? We are one of the first families in Exmouth! I believed our fortune was rock solid ...?"

The viscount sighed heavily, his shoulders sagging as if under an immense weight. He sat beside Christina, taking her trembling hands in his own.

"My dear girl, I have failed you, failed our family," he said, his voice cracking with emotion. "It began innocently enough with investments in shipping ventures, but the lure of quick profits blinded me to the risks. I was so certain of success, so eager to increase our fortune ..."

He paused, swallowing hard. Christina could see the sheen of unshed tears in his eyes.

"At first, the investments paid handsomely," he continued. "I was intoxicated by the success, convinced of my financial acumen. I began to invest more heavily, borrowing against our estates to finance ever-grander schemes."

The viscount's gaze drifted to the heavily cloaked window. "Then came ruin." His voice choked. "There is hardly anything left in the coffers anymore." He hesitated, slowly turning back to look at her. "And I am afraid that I must ask you to solve this situation now ... even though it pains me to do it."

"Me?" Christina's voice faltered. "How can I solve it?"

A deathly silence fell for a moment, and Christina could barely breathe.

"I am afraid that I must ask you to make a great sacrifice, my dear," the viscount continued, his voice barely above a whisper. "To save our family from complete ruin, I have ... I have arranged a marriage for you."

Christina felt as if the air had been sucked from her lungs. "A marriage?" she repeated faintly, her mind reeling. "To whom?"

Her father's eyes dropped, unable to meet her gaze. "To Lord Bertram Powell, the Earl of Cheltenham."

The name hit Christina like a physical blow. Lord Powell? The very thought made her skin crawl.

She had encountered the gentleman at various society functions, and each encounter had left her with an overwhelming desire to scrub herself clean.

His eyes were cold and predatory, his smile cruel and mocking. Worse still were the whispered rumours circulating about his treatment of his servants. Christina had

heard that the earl beat them – they were always running away.

Christina took a deep breath, trying to fight the panic within her, which felt like a tiny, wild bird trying to escape her chest.

The earl owned many copper mines along the Cornish coast, and she had heard rumours that he was an unscrupulous businessman, in addition to his rough and coarse way with his inferiors.

And apart from all that, the gentleman was twenty years her senior. Her very soul shrivelled at the mere thought of marrying him. She had always dreamt of a love match. Now, that dream was slipping through her fingers faster than sand.

Christina leapt to her feet, her heart pounding. "No!" she cried, her voice ringing through the parlour. "I cannot marry Lord Powell, Papa. I will not!"

The viscount's face darkened, his jaw clenching. "You have no choice, Christina. The arrangements have already been made." He paused. "Lord Powell will be arriving at Draycott Manor next week, and the betrothal will be officially announced then."

"No choice?" Christina's eyes flashed with defiance. "I am not a piece of property to be bartered away! I am your daughter – your flesh and blood!"

She paced the room, her riding habit swishing wildly around her ankles. The afternoon light, now golden and fading, cast long shadows across the floor through the curtains, mirroring the darkness creeping into her heart.

"Lord Powell is a brute, Papa! A cruel, heartless man who cares nothing for anyone but himself. How can you even consider such a match for me?"

Her father snorted with derision. "You exaggerate, Christina! Lord Powell is a fine

man, an earl, an exemplary figure in our community.” He shook his head angrily. “Would you see us cast out onto the streets? Our ancestral home sold to pay our debts?”

Christina whirled to face him, her green eyes flashing. "And what of my happiness? I did not create any of this! Would you see your only daughter consigned to misery forever?"

Her father’s face tightened. “You will do your duty by your family, daughter. You will be a countess, one of the finest figures in this district. What more do you want?”

“I want love!” cried Christina, her hands balling into fists at her side, her eyes fiery. “I want respect! And I want to respect my life partner. I cannot respect nor ever admire such a man ...”

“You will do it,” growled her father. “You have no choice. It is my final word, Christina.”

Christina glared at him amid a tense impasse, where they stared at each other, neither willing to back down. Christina felt a wave of pure anger but also intense sorrow.

She and her father were so rarely at loggerheads that this dreadful scene – to witness his transformation from a loving, doting father to this cold, implacable stranger ordering her to marry the Earl of Cheltenham – was truly shocking.

She knew, with sudden, crystal clarity, that he would not capitulate. She would be wasting breath entirely if she kept trying to convince him.

“I feel unwell,” she said in a choked voice. “I am going to my chambers.”

“Christina ...”

But she was already sweeping out of the room, running as fast as she could.

The thought briefly crossed her mind to appeal to her mother, who would be resting in her chambers with her embroidery patch as was her usual habit at this hour, but she knew that was useless.

Mama would always side with her husband, and besides, Mama would not see anything wrong with her marrying the earl. The viscountess wanted her daughter to find a good match, and in Mama's eyes, an earl was one of the finest matches there was – even if this particular earl was an utter brute.

She ran up the staircase to her chambers, bursting into the room and falling across the bed. She could no longer contain the tears – they burst like a torrent.

She grabbed a pillow, sobbing hard. She was so distraught she didn't even hear the door opening and someone entering the room until she felt a gentle hand on her shoulder. She stopped, mid sob, staring up at the kind, warm face of Harriet, her lady's maid, who was also her friend and confidante.

"My Lady," soothed Harriet, her brows knitting together in concern. "Whatever is the matter? Why are you so distressed?"

"Oh, Harriet," cried Christina, her voice thick with tears. "My life is over! It is over!"

"But why? What has happened?"

"My father is forcing me to marry Lord Powell," she replied, her face contorting with grief and anger again. "He is a brute, Harriet." She shuddered. "You know, more than anyone, how much I longed for a love match. And now, that hope is lying in ashes around me."

“I am so very sorry, milady,” said Harriet solemnly, shaking her head. “It surprises me that Lord Draycott would do such a thing. He dotes upon you. He has only ever wanted your happiness.”

“Yes, well, things have changed,” said Christina, unable to keep the thread of bitterness out of her voice. “He invested heavily in a shipping scheme that went wrong, and our fortune is greatly diminished ... and now, he wants me to marry the earl to save our family.”

“That is a heavy burden to carry,” said Harriet, shaking her head ruefully. “But I suppose you have no choice now, milady. You are compelled to do your duty by your family—”

“No!” cried Christina, pushing her hair from her face as she jumped to her feet and started pacing the floor. “There must be a way ...”

She stopped suddenly, staring at her reflection in the mirror. A pale face gazed back at her, streaked with tears. Through the shimmering mist they created, her green eyes looked brighter, almost catlike.

Her hair had dislodged from its neat chignon and had fallen, soft golden curls framing her face, tumbling down her back.

I am only twenty years old. My whole life was ahead of me. And now, I feel as if I am about to be enshrouded in a tomb. As if I am about to be buried alive.

“Papa may change his mind with time,” she said faintly, her heart beating erratically. “If he loses me for a short while, he might realize how much my happiness means to him and that I will never compromise it.”

Harriet stared at her. “What do you mean, milady?”

Christina took a deep breath. A plan was starting to formulate in her mind. A plan so daring, so wild, that she was shocking herself even as it was crystallizing.

“My dear friend Lady Penelope Duvall lives in Edinburgh,” she said breathlessly. “I know that ships leave for Edinburgh from Plymouth ... if I can get to Plymouth and get on a ship that sails to Edinburgh, I know, without a shadow of a doubt, that Penelope’s family will give me sanctuary ...”

“Oh, no,” Harriet said, shaking her head vigorously. “You are contemplating running away? It is so dangerous, milady! Thieves could beset you, highwaymen, cutthroats – you might never even make the ship, or if you do, be ravished upon it!”

“No one will notice me,” interrupted Christina breathlessly, staring at her maid. “Not if I look like you, Harriet ... and not myself at all.” She hesitated. “If I journey as a maid, not a lady, no one will look twice at me. It will be the perfect disguise to aid my passage.”

Harriet’s face blanched. She looked shocked.

“You must help me, my friend,” continued Christina faintly. “You must give me one of your gowns to wear.” She turned, gazing out the window at the wild blue sea beyond. “There is no time to tarry. From this moment, Lady Christina Whitford no longer exists ... at least, not for a while.”

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“Just a little while longer, Romulus,” said Christina wearily, leaning to whisper into the horse’s ear. “Not too much further, boy.”

The horse whinnied, his ears flicking at the sound of her voice. Christina could feel the tremble in the horse’s limbs and the sweat permeating his body.

They had been riding for over two hours, hugging the cliffs along the coastline, galloping like the wind. She had headed out at first light, clutching a small bag, trying to get to the stables before the stable hands roused for the day and set off the alarm.

Her heart gave an almighty throb. She was really doing this. She was heading towards Plymouth to set sail on one of the tall ships heading north to Scotland. She was running away from home and marriage to the Earl of Cheltenham.

It is just as well that I acted before contemplating further. I may have lost the courage entirely to do this.

She had watched the sun rise slowly over the sea, casting burnt orange and yellow flames on the water. If she hadn’t been riding for her liberty, she might have stopped to admire its breathtaking beauty.

Now, grey mist had descended over the sea, giving the landscape an otherworldly, ethereal quality. But it also made it difficult to see anything and the path more perilous.

She didn’t have time to acknowledge what was around her, anyway. Draycott Manor would be aware by now – or very soon – that she was missing, and she didn’t have

time to spare, even though Harriet had promised to delay the inevitable as long as she could, telling her parents and the other servants that she was feeling sick and would be lying in her bed longer than normal.

Christina sighed heavily, pulling in the reins and stopping the horse abruptly. Romulus needed a short break, and so did she – she knew she was getting closer to Plymouth and her destination.

Her mouth was dry from thirst. Quickly, she dismounted, talking soothingly to the horse for a moment, before wandering towards the cliff edge, gazing out over the sea.

A slight breeze lifted the ribbons of the old bonnet she was wearing, courtesy of Harriet, as she opened the water canteen, drinking thirstily.

She glanced down at the faded gown she was wearing. It was pale grey and coarse, rubbing and scratching against her skin. She had no idea what she looked like – she hadn't even bothered to glance at herself in the mirror before she fled Draycott Manor.

But she knew she didn't look like herself. If any of her acquaintances happened to be out riding this morning, they wouldn't recognize Lady Christina Whitford, the only daughter of Viscount Draycott. They would assume she was a maid or another kind of servant in this plain garb.

She sighed again, her heart contorting wildly, as the enormity of what she was doing hit her with the force of a brick in the face. Uncertainty swept over her. Was she acting prematurely? Should she return home and keep trying to convince Papa to change his mind? Would it work?

You know it will not work. At least not now. Papa is adamant. The only way he might be persuaded to change his mind is if he faces losing me. And if he never

changes his mind, then I must forge my own path, estranged from my family forever.

She took two little steps towards the cliff's edge, lost in her thoughts. What if Penelope's family refused her sanctuary?

She knew her dear friend would advocate for her to be allowed to stay, but what if her family resisted the entreaty? What would she do then? She didn't have much money in her purse. She would be forced to try to find work to support herself – something she had never contemplated in her life and was ill-equipped to do. She had been born and raised a noble lady. She couldn't be anything else ...

Suddenly, she heard a faint squawk emanating from below. She peered down, leaning over the edge of the cliff, spellbound.

There was a bird's nest perched on some craggy rock – she could clearly see it, with three shiny large eggs nestled in the twigs and branches and a large bird hovering over it, staring at her suspiciously with black beady eyes.

“Oh, you are magnificent!” she cried, the wind catching her voice. “Do not be afraid. I mean you no harm ...”

Suddenly, the bird took flight, sweeping towards her. Christina stepped back hastily, flailing, realizing too late that she was too close to the edge and the ground was slipping and crumbling beneath her feet.

She put her arms up to ward off the bird, feeling it brush against her head.

The ground gave way beneath her, and she fell down the cliff, bumping and colliding violently with the rocks into an old, abandoned mining shaft. She hadn't even realized it was there. She hadn't even seen it.

She screamed, her hands desperately trying to break her fall. With a rush of sickening certainty, she knew it was too late. She felt the sharp, jagged bump of her head colliding with a rock, the agonizing pain, white-hot and overwhelming, before everything faded to black.

Sebastian Cavendish, the Duke of Newquay, took the reins of his horse, leading it along the shore, and frowned. The mist had grown thicker, and it was difficult to see.

For the umpteenth time, he wondered why he had felt compelled to head out for a ride so early this morning. He had lived in this area of Cornwall his entire life and knew that the early morning mists made visibility almost impossible.

I will head back to Newquay Hall soon. I will meander for just a little longer.

Sebastian felt the sea breeze lifting the curls on the nape of his neck before it grew harsher, threatening to take his hat off his head and send it into the sky.

He put a hand on his head to stop it taking flight, squinting his eyes and trying to see through the mist. The lone cry of a seabird sounded into the silence as he picked his way carefully over the rocks.

Suddenly, the mist lifted like a veil, and he realized he was almost upon an abandoned mining shaft. His heart shifted – the shaft belonged to him, one of the many abandoned shafts that dotted this coastline.

He frowned. The wooden boards nailed across the entrance were broken and scattered haphazardly along the ground, which was dangerous. How had it happened?

Abruptly, he stiffened. A black horse was wandering along the clifftop, peering

down. A saddled horse without a rider. At that moment, the beast let out a whinny of distress.

Sebastian's heart skipped a beat. A strange feeling stole over him. Slowly, he stepped towards the opening of the shaft, peering down into the inky darkness. It was as black and silent as the grave.

"Is anyone there?" he called, hearing his voice echo and bounce off the walls.

There was no response.

Sebastian's frown deepened. There was no reason to think that anything was amiss in the shaft ... except for the fact that there was a riderless, distressed horse wandering just above, and the boards were broken. He hesitated for a moment before dropping the reins of his horse and climbing down the old ladder into the darkness.

He swore beneath his breath. He couldn't see a thing ... but he knew he had some matches in the jacket pocket if he needed them.

He called out again, but there was no response. He hesitated. Was he being foolish? Was this strange instinct that something was amiss in the shaft entirely baseless?

He swore again as his boot missed a rung, righting himself. He heard crumbling dirt falling to the bottom.

His heart seized. A low moan from below. Had he imagined it?

He quickened his pace, reaching the bottom. With trembling hands, he found the matches, lighting one with difficulty. He looked around, finding an old lantern, lighting it, and holding it high. A pool of light illuminated the space, and he gasped.

A woman was lying there, not moving, dirty and dishevelled. His eyes raked over her, taking in the distressing scene.

She was wearing a faded, plain grey gown, the type that women servants wore, and a battered old bonnet lay next to her head, with her hair spread around her like a river of gold.

He rushed to her side, putting his arms around her and turning her around. She was as limp as a ragdoll, and her eyes were firmly closed. He could see she was deathly pale and there was a large, bloody gash on her forehead.

“Madam?” His voice was filled with trepidation. “Madam!”

There was no response. His heart filled with trepidation again. Was she dead?

But no. At that moment, he saw the rise and fall of her chest – almost imperceptible, but definite. She was alive. She had survived a fall down the shaft. She was injured and unconscious, but she was still breathing.

Thank you, Lord.

“Can you hear me?” he said loudly, shaking her a little. “Can you open your eyes?”

His eyes flickered over her face for any sign that she could hear him. He realized, quite suddenly, that she was beautiful.

Her skin was as flawless and pale as milk. Her cheekbones were high and sweeping, her lips parted slightly, full and luscious below a button nose, with a tiny smattering of freckles across the bridge. She had long, dark golden eyelashes. He guessed she was in her late teens or early twenties.

Suddenly, her eyes opened, quite dramatically, staring straight into his face. He gasped again. Her eyes were dark green, the colour of moss, with golden flecks within them. Quite beautiful. But they were clouded with confusion and pain.

“Where ... where am I?” she gasped in a low, ragged voice.

“You fell into a mine shaft,” he whispered, unable to take his eyes off her face. “You are injured.”

“Oh,” she whispered, her lips starting to tremble. She screwed up her face as if she were about to burst into tears. “I ... I cannot remember anything ...”

“Ahoy down there! Is there anything amiss?”

Sebastian jumped at the rough male voice, squinting up. He could just make out a dark figure peering over the edge, gazing down at them, but he couldn't see who it was.

“I am the Duke of Newquay,” he called. “And there is an injured woman here. She fell down the shaft.”

The figure swore loudly. “Your Grace! It's Abraham Barstow, one of your tenants. I saw your horse and thought that something was not right ...”

“I know who you are now, Barstow,” said Sebastian, his heart lurching with gratitude. “We need to get this woman to safety immediately. Can you assist?”

“Aye,” called the man. “I will get some more men. We will find something to gather her and pull her up. And I will send for the physician ...”

“Thank you, Barstow,” called Sebastian, almost slumping with relief. “Go now.

There is no time to waste.”

“Aye, Your Grace,” said the man tersely. Then he was gone.

Sebastian turned back to the woman in his arms. Her eyes had closed again. Her brief moment of consciousness was gone. A sliver of fear pierced his heart. Would Barstow find help in time? Or was this beautiful woman on the verge of death ... and about to slip over the threshold entirely?

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Christina's eyes fluttered open. She was lying on the ground outside, and faces were peering intently at her. She narrowed her eyes, squinting, trying to make out who they were and where she was.

The blue of the sky was behind the figures and the sun was shining brightly – so brightly that she couldn't see properly.

She gasped loudly as she felt a searing pain in her head. Her mind was whirring. She reared up as a wave of nausea threatened to overwhelm her.

“Whoa,” said a deep voice, clutching her tightly. “Try not to move. The physician will be along presently. You have suffered a head injury from a fall.”

She tried to focus on the voice, her eyes fixing on the man's face.

“Who are you?” he whispered. “How did you fall into the shaft?”

Christina bit her lip in confusion. Her mind was spinning.

“I was ... I was ...” Her voice was fading in and out. “I ... I cannot remember ...”

A stab of pure terror gripped her. For she realized, as she stammered, that she really couldn't remember a thing. Not how she came to be lying here with this handsome man attending her, but who she even was, or what her life was. It was all a great, gaping blank in her mind.

The man's dark eyes flickered over her face. “Do not push yourself,” he whispered in

a kind, gentle voice. “You are injured and have had a great shock.” Suddenly, he looked up, his face crumpling with relief. “Here is the physician now.”

Gently, he placed her down on the ground, taking his arms away from her. She felt the removal of them was a loss. Another man was there now, peering into her face. An older man with steel grey hair and jowls. He was wearing gold-rimmed spectacles.

“My name is Dr Watson,” said the man in an assured, comforting voice. “And you have hurt yourself, young woman, quite badly.” He put his hands on her head, peering at her forehead. “That is a nasty gash. I will clean it up, and then we will get to the bottom of this.”

As the physician cleaned her wound, she winced, gritting her teeth. It hurt. And not only that, but her head was also throbbing mightily.

Covertly, she glanced to the side. The handsome man who had rescued her was there, observing, a look of concern on his face.

She noted the fineness of his features, and her eyes widened. He was handsome, with dark brown eyes, a strong jawline, and a straight, commanding nose. He had black, curling hair, which was tousled. He frowned as he gazed at her.

He had a very commanding presence and was well-dressed in tan britches and long black boots. An ermine-lined black cape wrapped around him, moving slightly in the wind.

She realized, quite suddenly, that she was lying on sand and that the vast blue behind the handsome, kind man was the sea.

She was on the beach. How on earth had she got here? What had happened?

And who was she?

Another wave of terror swept over her as the physician dressed her head wound. No matter how hard she tried, she just couldn't remember.

She didn't even know her own name. It was all a complete blank, as if her mind was a slate, and had been wiped clean entirely.

After the physician had attended her, checking for other injuries and finding that she was in generally good condition despite the head injury, with no broken bones or the like, he stepped back, gazing at her thoughtfully.

"And who are you, young woman?" he asked slowly. "Can you tell me where you live?"

"I do not know," cried Christina, her voice filled with anguish. "I cannot remember a single thing. I do not know why I am here or how I fell down the shaft ... and nor can I even remember my name or any details of who I am and my life." She gazed at him, her eyes stricken. "What is wrong with me?"

The physician sighed heavily, shaking his head in sorrow. "I was afraid this might happen," he said tersely. "You hit your head quite badly, and sometimes, memory loss accompanies such an injury."

"She cannot remember who she is?" The handsome man's voice was filled with incredulity. "How is that possible, Dr Watson?"

The physician sighed again. "We do not know how or why it happens," he replied slowly. "But it does. If the blow to the head is sufficient, then memory loss can occur, ranging from minor details being lost ... to full-blown loss of memory of the person's entire life leading up to the accident. It appears that this is what has happened to this

young woman.”

“I will never know who I am?” Christina’s mouth went dry from terror. “I will never recover details of my life or know my own name?”

The physician gave a bark of laughter. “You must be a local, young woman, and so someone will be bound to recognize you around here,” he replied dryly. “But in any case, the memory loss usually does not last forever. It may take some time, but you have an excellent chance of full recovery.”

“But what are we to do with her?” asked the handsome man, kneeling beside her, his brow furrowed. “Not one of the men who assisted in pulling her from the shaft knows who she is. None of them have ever seen her before.”

“That is a concern,” admitted the physician, frowning. “She must be looked after. She has suffered a major injury to her head and cannot even recall her own name. She cannot be simply allowed to walk away.”

Christina blinked, her mind whirring again at the enormity of what the physician was saying. She had no home to go to ... because she couldn’t remember her own home. She was utterly adrift in the world, like a ship without an anchor. It was a truly terrifying feeling.

Who am I? Where do I live? What is my name?

“I will take responsibility for her,” said the handsome man abruptly. “I will care for her at Newquay Hall. She can stay with me until she recovers her memory or someone recognizes her and takes her to her home.” He hesitated, his face contorting. “I feel responsible. I own that abandoned mine shaft, and somehow, it was unsafe. It should have been boarded up properly. The accident would never have happened if proper procedures were in place.”

Christina gaped at him. “Thank you,” she stammered, feeling overwhelmed with gratitude. The gentleman was kind as well as staggeringly handsome and commanding. “May I ask ... who are you?”

The physician snorted with laughter. “You are addressing his grace, the Duke of Newquay, young woman,” he said in a dry voice. “You are on his land. His grace owns over one hundred acres of this coastline.”

Christina’s eyes widened in shock. “Oh,” she said slowly. She knew a duke was a noble figure, almost as high as a prince. “I am very sorry, Your Grace. I meant no disrespect ...”

“I am not offended,” said the duke with a slight smile. “There is no need to apologize at all. You are injured, and this is no place to think about correct protocol.” His smile widened. “You are willing to accept sanctuary at my home, then?”

“Of course,” said Christina, overcome. “I accept with gratitude.”

“I wish I knew your name at least,” said the duke, gazing at her steadily. “What can I call you?”

“How about we call her Georgina for now,” suggested the physician, shrugging his shoulders, “for the sake of King George. Would that be acceptable?”

“Perfectly,” said the duke, looking amused. “As long as it is acceptable to the young woman. Do you like the name?”

“I suppose,” said Christina, having no particular opinion on the name. “It is as good as any name ... until I remember my own.”

A wave of sorrow swept over her. It felt enormous. The loss was so great that her

mind reeled again. She couldn't even remember her own name. It was the most basic thing anchoring her to her life and who she was.

Without it, it was as if she were nobody. It was as if she had as much importance as a shell lying on this beach.

Now, I am someone called Georgina. I have become a new person. It is as if I have been born again.

"Can you stand?" asked the duke, stepping towards her. "If you are agreeable, I will tie your horse to my own, and you can journey with me. It will be much safer."

The physician and the duke helped her to her feet. She staggered a little before correcting herself. "Yes, I can stand." She blinked rapidly, gazing around. "Did you say I have a horse? I can ride?"

"Apparently, you can," replied the duke, his mouth twitching with amusement. "At least, I assume the beast belongs to you. It was wandering along the top of the cliff, looking quite distressed. It seemed to be concerned for you ... and no one else has claimed it."

Christina shook her head incredulously. She knew how to ride. When had she learned such a skill? Who had taught her how to do it?

But her mind drew a complete blank. She simply could not remember a single thing about her past life. It was so disconcerting. She could be anyone ... but at the moment, she was no one. She was a woman called Georgina who had no past. She was a blank slate entirely.

The duke helped her mount his horse, then got on himself after tying a large, sleek black horse to his own. She stared at the beast. It was beautiful and spirited, stomping

its hooves, tossing its mane.

She wondered what its name was. She wondered if she indeed did own it, or whether she had borrowed it from someone to journey here. She wondered why she was here at all.

“We found a small bag, as well,” said the duke, putting his arms around her to take the reins. “I took the liberty of going through it, to try to discover your identity, but there is nothing within it to indicate who you are. Just some items of clothing, a small amount of coins in a purse ... and an apple.”

Christina drew a deep, ragged breath. “Well, I know that I like apples, at least.”

The duke laughed mirthlessly. “Indeed. Are you ready? Shall we go?”

“As ready as I will ever be,” replied Christina grimly.

The duke shook the reins, spurring the horse onward. Suddenly, they were flying like the wind across the top of the cliffs. Christina closed her eyes in pure terror for a moment, frightened that she would fall off the beast. Her head throbbed with pain.

But then, she felt the wind upon her face, as soft and cooling as a caress. Slowly, her eyes fluttered open. She leaned back against the duke, gazing around, taking it all in.

She gasped. It was stunningly beautiful. The high cliffs dropped dramatically, standing guardian over the sea, which was so intensely vast and blue that it almost hurt her eyes to take it in.

The sky vaulted over it, almost the exact same colour. The sun was a golden orb in the distance.

This is my home. These cliffs, this sea, this sky. And yet, I cannot remember it. It is as if I am seeing it for the very first time.

She gasped again. She was going to the home of a stranger. A very handsome and seemingly kind stranger who happened to be a duke. But still, she didn't know him. A pang of fear shot through her. Was she safe? What was going to happen to her?

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Sebastian tightened his arms around the woman on the horse, sensing her fear, scared that she would topple to the ground in fright. But then, she slumped against him, her head turning left and right excitedly.

She is starting to relax at last. That is good.

His heart contracted. He had been impulsive, offering to care for her, but what else could he have done in the circumstances? She was injured, and she had lost her memory.

No one knew who she was. She had nowhere else to go. And she had suffered her injury on his land, in one of his mines, which hadn't been boarded up properly. He was duty-bound to offer her care and sanctuary.

She could be anyone. She might be a thief. She might be a local confidence woman. I simply have no idea. It is a risk.

Georgina. The physician had given her a temporary name. He wasn't entirely sure it suited her, but it was good enough for the moment. He was suddenly consumed with curiosity. Who was she? Why had she been riding along the cliffs so early in the morning ... and how had she fallen?

He glanced back at the black horse he was leading. He knew his horseflesh – it was an expensive animal, which would indicate that she had considerable status. It wasn't a common carthorse.

But on the other hand, she was dressed so plainly, like a servant or someone without

much wealth, and her small, faded bag hadn't contained anything of value.

His heart contorted again. Had she stolen the animal? Was he harbouring a thief?

His frown deepened. Then there was her voice. She spoke with the clear vowels of the upper class – she didn't have a local accent. That suggested she was a gentlewoman of some sort. But no gentlewoman would have been riding alone at that time of day dressed in such clothing. It was a great puzzle.

Georgina was a mass of contradictions. She was a paradox.

“How are you?” he called, the wind threatening to snatch his voice entirely. “Are you comfortable?”

She turned slightly in the saddle. He noted the perfect line of her profile. She really was a very beautiful woman. He felt warmth enter his body, and his arms tightened around her. Somehow, it felt natural for her to be sitting against him in such a way.

“I am well,” she replied. Her green eyes were alight. “I am enjoying the ride. It is very beautiful here.”

He smiled. “It is. It is the most beautiful pocket of England ... but then, I am biased. I was born here and have lived here for my entire life.” He took a deep breath. “Do you recognize anything we have passed? Any farmhouse or landmark, perhaps?”

She shook her head. “No. Not at all.” He heard the dejection and confusion in her voice. “It is as if I am seeing it for the very first time.”

He sighed. “Give it time, just like the physician said. Your memory will return. In the meantime, you are very welcome at Newquay Hall ... we are approaching it now.”

“Where?” she asked, swivelling her head around. “Where is it?”

He pointed towards the left. “It is there, on the top of that hill, in the distance.” His heart filled with pride as he gazed at the house. “It is the finest home in the district. Even if I do say so myself.”

Georgina laughed. “Clearly, you love your home, Your Grace.”

“I do,” he replied, his mouth twitching. “I have never wanted to be anywhere else. I have spent time in London and abroad over the years, but nothing compares to Cornwall’s wild, untamed beauty. I miss the cliffs and the sea if I am away from them for too long.”

He realized he was speaking from his innermost heart as he uttered the words. It was true. He was always restless and sad if he was away from here for too long, yearning to return. It was an urge he couldn’t control. Something was always pulling him back to Cornwall and Newquay Hall.

“That is your home?” Her voice was filled with awe. “It is ... magnificent. I have never seen anything like it.”

“How would you know?” he asked, his voice tinged with amusement. “You cannot remember. Perhaps you work in a great manor house just like my home.” He frowned suddenly. “You are a puzzle, Georgina. Your clothing suggests you are a servant or perhaps a farmer’s daughter ... but you speak like a gentlewoman.”

She sighed heavily, looking distressed. “I wish I knew. But the harder I try to remember, the more it evades me. It makes my head pound so hard ...”

“Do not distress yourself,” he said in a quiet voice. “You have suffered an injury. You need rest. The truth of who you are will reveal itself in the fullness of time, just

as Dr Watson said.” He paused. “Do not try to push it.”

She nodded, but her eyes misted with tears. He felt a defensive urge sweep over him – a desire to protect and help her, which was so intense that it was astounding. He had just met this woman, after all. He had no idea who she was. He knew he must remain cautious, but it was proving hard.

“You are so very kind, Your Grace,” she said, visibly swallowing. “To open your home to a stranger like this is so very generous. Thank you ... from the bottom of my heart.”

“You are welcome,” he said, his eyes lingering on that perfect profile before flickering to the angry gash on her head, cleaned and dressed now. “Here we are. Newquay Hall. My home.”

They rode through the high, imposing gates. The house loomed ahead of them. He felt her stiffen in apprehension, and the impulse to soothe and reassure this mysterious woman swept over him again.

Who was she? Was someone looking for her at this very moment? Would she recover her memory, as the physician had assured her ... or would she stay as Georgina forevermore? And if so – where would she go, and what would she do?

Christina’s eyes swept over the grand house called Newquay Hall as they passed through the high, ornate metal gates towards the property. She hadn’t lied to him – it really was magnificent. And very daunting.

The estate surrounding the house was sprawling, with immaculate lawns, formal flower beds, and hedges. The house had thick stone walls, large windows, and turrets.

Workers were scurrying among the gardens, pushing wheelbarrows and the like. It was a hive of activity.

She swallowed a painful lump in her throat. “This ... this is really your home?”

He laughed, pulling up in front of the house. A servant sprang forward, taking the reins of the horse. The duke dismounted, helping her down.

She tried to ignore her pounding heart at the feel of his arms around her. She had been supremely conscious of them for the entire journey here. They were so strong, and the heat emanating from him had made her feel quite weak.

“Thank you,” she stammered, hastily stepping back.

They entered the house, Christina trying not to gape as she followed him down a long hallway towards the back of the house. A middle-aged woman dressed in a pristine grey gown and frilly white cap stepped forward as they entered the kitchen.

“Your Grace.” Christina felt herself blushing as the woman’s eyes swept over her, taking in every small detail, from the bandage on her forehead to the dirt and grime on her gown and skin. “Can I help you?”

“We need your assistance, Mrs Sollock,” he replied in a commanding voice. “This young woman suffered a fall down a mine shaft, hitting her head badly, and needs attention.” He turned to Christina, his eyes resting on her. “She has lost her memory entirely, and we are calling her Georgina. I believe a hot bath is in order and rest. Could you handle it?”

“Of course, Your Grace,” replied the woman quietly, as if he had asked her to fetch him a drink, and it was nothing out of the ordinary at all. “I will take care of her.”

The duke nodded, turning to Christina again. “Mrs Sollock is the housekeeper at Newquay Hall. You are in good hands.” He hesitated. “I will check on you after you have settled. You need to bathe and rest.”

Christina nodded, biting her lip as she gazed at him. She didn’t know what to say to him now. The kitchen was teeming with people, all gazing at her, their eyes burning with curiosity as they went about their business.

Her blush deepened. She knew she must look quite a sight in her torn, dirty gown, with a large bandage on her head.

“Come along, miss,” said the housekeeper in the same quiet but oddly commanding voice. “This way.”

The duke smiled at her, inclining his head, before sweeping out of the room. The housekeeper took her elbow, steering her towards a stairwell. They climbed it, walking down a long hallway, entering a room with a large, four-poster bed and a window overlooking sweeping flower beds, topiaries, and rolling green hills beyond.

After she had bathed and was dressed in a long, plain white nightgown, the housekeeper assisted her to the bed, staring at her.

“You really have no memory of who you are?” she asked, cocking her head to the side as she looked at Christina. “No memory at all?”

“None at all,” stammered Christina, slipping into the bed. Her eyelids suddenly felt heavier than lead. “It is like a blank in my mind every time I try to think. I cannot even remember my own name.”

She blinked back sudden tears. It was so distressing. And it was so disconcerting being here, in this unfamiliar place, being tended by strangers. A sudden yearning for

the reassuring presence of the handsome duke swept over her, which was strange, given the fact he was as much a stranger to her as the rest of them.

“You talk like a lady,” mused the housekeeper, frowning slightly. “But that gown you were wearing belongs to a working woman.” She hesitated. “Could you perhaps be a governess? A gentlewoman down on her luck who was forced to work?”

“Perhaps,” replied Christina, shrugging her shoulders. “Are there any families in this area who have governesses?”

“Aye,” replied the housekeeper. “There is. The Acton family have a governess for their children, as does Lord Babington, who is a neighbour.” She paused. “I can make enquiries as to whether they are missing anyone in their households and at the other grand houses in the district. Do you want me to do that?”

“Yes, I would be very grateful,” said Christina, smiling tremulously at the woman. “I feel terrible imposing like this ... but I had nowhere else to go. The duke was very kind.”

“Aye, he is a kind master,” agreed the housekeeper. “And quite a catch. All the young ladies in the district want to become his duchess, but he has never seemed inclined to marry, even though he is nearing thirty now and needs an heir.” She sighed. “We all think he must have suffered a broken heart. Anyway, you should rest. I will come to check on you in a few hours.”

Mrs Sollock turned, leaving the room without another word, closing the door firmly behind her.

Christina gazed around the strange room, which was as silent as the grave, thinking about the duke: the handsome, kind duke who might have suffered a broken heart and needed an heir. Then, she slipped into a deep slumber, losing herself entirely.

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“Would you like a brandy, old chap?” Sebastian turned to his old friend, Daniel Ealing, the Marquess of Falmouth, who had just arrived unexpectedly at Newquay Hall. “It will give you some warmth after the long ride.”

Daniel nodded. “A brandy would be just the ticket, Newquay. Thank you.”

They settled by the fire in the study, nursing their brandies. Sebastian took a long sip. The drink was very welcome after the shock of the day – finding the injured young woman in the mine shaft and bringing her back to his home to recuperate.

He hoped she was resting well – it had been hours since they had returned. Mrs Sollock had told him Georgina was sleeping like a baby when the housekeeper had checked on her an hour ago.

Her name is not really Georgina. I wonder what it is? Is she Jane, or Kitty, or Amelia? Who is she?

“I have had quite an adventure today,” he announced suddenly, gazing at his friend. “A young woman suffered a fall into one of my abandoned mine shafts. I discovered her on my morning ride. She hit her head badly and has lost her memory entirely.” He paused. “I brought her back here. She is sleeping upstairs as we speak.”

Daniel choked on his brandy. “What? How intriguing! She truly has no knowledge of who she is? She cannot remember a thing?”

Sebastian nodded. “She cannot even remember her own name,” he replied, his heart shifting in his chest. “Dr Watson attended the accident and dubbed her Georgina for

the King. So Georgina she is ... until she recovers her memory and can tell us her real name – or someone comes forward to claim her.”

Daniel shook his head incredulously. “She is a mystery! What is she like?”

Sebastian felt his face flush and warmth spreading through his body as he thought about Georgina. The same warmth he had felt when he had held her in his arms as they had ridden to his home.

“She is quite beautiful,” he replied, taking a long sip of brandy. “She has flaxen gold hair, the brightest green eyes I have ever beheld, and a smile that could break your heart.” He hesitated. “But she is quite a puzzle, Falmouth. She was riding an expensive horse and spoke like a gentlewoman, yet she was dressed like a servant. I have sent letters to all the grand houses in the district already, asking them if any of their households are missing. We shall see if any of them respond.”

Daniel’s jaw dropped. “This is becoming even more intriguing by the minute. Who could she be? A governess or lady’s companion, perhaps?”

Sebastian frowned. “Her gown was too plain for even those occupations,” he mused. “I would expect a governess or lady’s companion to wear a more expensive gown to indicate the status.” He hesitated. “But then again, it would make more sense than any other explanation. She does not look or speak like a maid. Apart from her great beauty, she just has a presence that is quite striking ...”

“You sound like you are smitten, Newquay,” said Daniel, in an amused tone, crossing his legs. “It sounds like this mysterious young woman has already wormed her way into your affections. Why else would you have brought her here to recuperate?”

“I was merely doing my duty,” said Sebastian gruffly, his colour deepening. “I was honour bound to do it. She suffered her injury in one of my mine shafts.” He

glowered into his brandy. “I am angry that it was open. The wooden boards covering the entrance were broken, Falmouth. It is sloppy. I pay people to ensure those old mines are safe ... and someone was not doing their job.”

His hand tightened on the glass of brandy. His reputation in the district would be bound to suffer because of this. Word would spread that there had been an accident in one of his old mines.

“Heads will roll for this,” he growled, draining the glass in one gulp. “I am going to move heaven and earth to find out who was responsible. I will leave no stone unturned.”

“Good for you,” said Daniel. He hesitated. “I do not know if it is connected, but I have heard rumours of instability in many of the mine shafts in the district – and that there have been other accidents and unexpected delays.” He paused, his expression solemn. “It is beginning to stir unease in the workers and the mine investors. I know that the Earl of Cheltenham, one of the primary investors, is expected to arrive in a few weeks to assess the situation.”

“Cheltenham?” Sebastian’s frown deepened. “Lord Powell? I loathe that gentleman.” He stood up, refilling his brandy, feeling disconcerted. “That is unwelcome news. He will barge in like a wounded bull, demanding explanations, putting everyone offside. The man is a brute.”

“Agreed,” said Daniel, shaking his head. “But there is nothing you can do about it, Newquay. He is a primary investor and has a right to know that his investment is secure.” He paused. “If he decides to pull out, the effect might be catastrophic on the workers and the estate ... especially with the price of copper falling.”

Sebastian winced as he sat down again. “You are right, of course. It is such a delicate situation.” He exhaled slowly as his sense of disquiet increased. “I feel that

something is brewing. There is a feeling in the air, a sense of unease, that I have never felt before.”

“You can thank the Hester family for that,” stated Daniel, rolling his eyes. “Particularly the oldest son, Walter Hester. He is threatening to buy all the mines in the district to wipe out the competition. The workers are scared for their livelihoods, as Hester hints that he will bring in his own workforce and cut them out entirely.”

“Damn Hester,” growled Sebastian, glaring into the fire at the mention of his main rival in the district. “Has he no respect for the workers and the generations of men in this area who have risked their lives going into the mines? How could he even contemplate bringing in outsiders to work the mines and turf out the locals?”

“Because he knows he can bring in a cheaper workforce,” said Daniel, his face darkening. “Hester does not care for the men. To him, they are simply disposable, to be thrown on the scrap heap when they are used up. All he and his family care about is profit ... and they will do anything they need to do to line their own pockets. You know that.”

Sebastian swore softly, anger sweeping through his veins. He had always viewed himself as a caretaker of the mines and the estate – that he was merely the latest in a long line to carry the mantle.

His late father had schooled him well in his responsibilities to his workers, telling him that it was a sacred duty, that the miners and all the workers on the estate depended on him. They had families to feed.

But the Hester family did not see it the same way at all. They had always been mercenary, caring more about the money they made than their workers, cutting corners with safety, and laying off men for the slightest infraction, even if they had many children to feed and no other means to support their families.

“I would rather die before I see that happen,” he vowed. “I will protect the workers. I always have, and I always will.”

“Perhaps it will settle down,” said Daniel in a hopeful voice. “It may blow over. Hester might be full of bluster.” He took a deep breath, gazing at his friend. “Do not blow your top quite yet, Newquay. Keep an eye on it, but do not be rash.”

Sebastian sighed heavily. “I will keep my eye upon it like a hawk.”

“On to lighter matters.” Daniel put down his glass. “When is Lydia returning to Newquay Hall? She has been gone for quite a while.”

Sebastian turned his mind to his older sister, Lydia, who was unmarried and still lived here. He couldn’t help smiling. Lydia was a force of nature, full of energy and gusto, with a will of iron. No wonder she had spurned suitors and never found a gentleman who could match her.

His sister also took her role as the eldest in the family very seriously, especially since their parents had passed away. To Lydia, he was always her baby brother, even if he was a duke, and he ran the entire estate now.

Sometimes, her high-handed manner towards him irritated him, but mostly, he let it pass by. He knew that she acted out of love and concern for him and nothing else.

“Lydia will be back in a week,” he replied. “And she will be accompanied by her good friend, Lady Frances Lewis. Apparently, they cannot bear to be separated yet, even though Lydia has been staying with the Lewis family in London for the past month.” He rolled his eyes. “Lydia and Frances have always been as thick as thieves.”

“You will have a full house, Newquay,” said Daniel, smiling broadly. “The ladies

will overrun the place.” He paused. “And you have your mysterious guest, as well. Will the beautiful Georgina be joining the household activities?”

“Hardly,” said Sebastian. “We have no idea who she is. She could be the daughter of a tinker or a thief. I do not think Lydia would take it very well at all if she was forced to entertain her in the drawing room or Georgina joined us for games in the parlour.” He paused. “And Georgina would probably feel awkward, as well.”

“Yes, you are in a bit of a quandary,” agreed Daniel, with a short laugh. “On the other hand, your mysterious guest might be a princess escaped from a tower and not a pauper at all. Who knows?”

“Who knows indeed,” said Sebastian dryly. “In the meantime, I will assume she is not an escaped princess and exercise proper caution.” He frowned. “I will tell Mrs Sollock to send her meals to her room for now. She probably does not have the strength to dine elsewhere regardless. At least, that is the excuse I will give if she asks.”

“You may not have her as a house guest for very long anyway, Newquay,” said Daniel, shrugging his shoulders. “You may get a response to those letters you sent sooner rather than later. Someone must know who she is and come to claim her. She may be gone before Lydia and her friend even arrive.”

Sebastian nodded. “Yes, that might be true.”

The conversation drifted on to other subjects. Sebastian tried to focus but couldn’t stop thinking about the mysterious house guest again. The beautiful young woman who was sleeping upstairs and had no memory of her life or even who she was.

He shifted in the chair, filled with restlessness. He wanted to see her again. He tried to tell himself it was only because he was concerned for her – that he was exercising

his duty of care to ensure that she was comfortable and had everything she needed. She had suffered a head injury after all.

Anything could happen. He needed to keep his eye on her and send for Dr Watson promptly if her condition deteriorated.

Mrs Sollock can do that. It is her job. Any of the servants can do it. You do not need to involve yourself with her at all if you do not want to.

He shifted in the chair again. The plain fact was he did want to involve himself. She had stirred his curiosity ... and something more. Something that had lain dormant for a long time. Something he had thought he would never feel again ...

A sense of unease stole over him. He really must be very careful. For he knew nothing about her at all. Georgina, the mysterious woman, could indeed be anyone.

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“How beautiful,” whispered Christina to herself as she gazed towards the sea from the vantage point of a high balcony at Newquay Hall. She shook her head incredulously, almost unable to believe what she was seeing. “It is truly breathtaking.”

She inhaled deeply, unable to tear her eyes away from the stunning vista beyond. The sun was setting, appearing to melt into the sea, spreading orange and yellow into the water like paints smeared.

The sky was an intense orange and red, streaked with purple and a touch of blue. The dramatic, craggy cliffs appeared starkly black against the sky.

She shook her head again. It seemed that she would never tire of this view. She had been coming here every day since the duke had brought her to Newquay Hall just over a week ago. She had discovered the private balcony at the side of the house as she had wandered around, exploring. She was left to her own devices for most of the time. Mrs Sollock and the other servants were polite but distant – it seemed like they didn’t quite know how to handle her. Was she one of them or a part of the duke’s world? Was she a servant or not? Who exactly was she – and where did she fit in the world?

I wish I knew the answers to those questions. But my mind is still a complete blank. It is like I was born anew when I awoke in that mine shaft. It is like I didn’t exist at all until that moment.

Her eyes misted with tears. She was trying so hard. Dr Watson had called and examined her again, asking her questions to try to prompt her memory, but it hadn’t

worked.

The physician had shaken his head and looked concerned, but he didn't say anything except he would call again next week. It seemed there was nothing more he could do to help her.

What is to become of me? Where will I go, and what will I do if I never recover my memory? I cannot remain here as a houseguest of the duke forever. I have already imposed on him far more than I like.

Her cheeks reddened. She hadn't seen much of the duke at all – he was keeping a firm distance from her. Or perhaps he was just very busy and didn't have the time to check on her. Whatever the reason, he seemed content to leave her to her own devices, as well, roaming his home like a ghost.

She ate all her meals in her room. It seemed that no one could decide if she should eat with the servants or with the master of the house, and so it was as good a compromise as they could find.

“Are you enjoying the view?”

Christina spun around, her heart pounding. The duke stepped out onto the balcony, the wind catching his dark curling hair. Her heart started to pound harder still. This was the closest she had been to him in days, and it was as if she had quite forgotten how handsome he was. She gazed at his patrician profile, the straight line of his nose, the firmness of his jawline, the sweep of his cheekbones, as he gazed out to sea.

“Very much,” she replied in a faltering voice. “It is stunning. I have never seen anything quite like it.”

“Ah, but you do not know that, do you?” His voice was filled with amusement. He

turned to her, his brown eyes flickering over her. “Have you recovered any of your memory? Anything at all?”

“No, I have not,” she said, her cheeks burning. For some reason, she felt embarrassed or ashamed, as if she were just not trying hard enough – as if it were some kind of moral failing on her behalf that she couldn’t remember a single thing about her own life. “I am sorry ...”

“There is no need to apologize,” he interjected, raising his eyebrows. “It is no trouble having you here at all.” He hesitated. “Is there anything I can do to help? Anything at all?”

Christina laughed mirthlessly. “You can help me to forget that I have forgotten my entire life.”

The duke snorted with laughter, his brown eyes gleaming with amusement and admiration as he gazed at her.

“Very well,” he said, a teasing smile playing around his lips. “I can do that for you. What would you like me to discuss to distract you?”

Christina took a deep breath, turning back to the view. “You can tell me about your life here,” she said, her heart lurching. “You can tell me why you love this area so much that you never want to live anywhere else.”

“Very well,” he said, rubbing his chin with one hand. He turned and stared again at the sea in the distance. “I played on that beach often as a child, exploring every nook and cranny on the cliffs, every rock pool ... there is not a part of that stretch of coastline that I am not familiar with.”

“Did you explore by yourself?”

He smiled slowly. “Sometimes. But I often went exploring with my older sister, Lydia, if I could persuade her to get her head out of her books.” He smiled at the memory. “And then there was my best friend, Daniel – now the Marquess of Falmouth. We would meet at the beach and whittle swords from stray driftwood, playing elaborate mock fights up and down the length of the beach. The caves in the cliffs were our secret lairs.”

Christina laughed, charmed by the vision of him as a small boy, playing swordfights with his friend on the sand. “It sounds like you had a good childhood.”

“I did,” he said, smiling broadly at her. “I did not want for anything. My parents were wonderful. The whole coast and cliffs and beyond were my playground. It was really idyllic.” He took a deep breath. “But my father also drummed into me that I was going to inherit the duchy one day, and I must be responsible. He would take me to the mines and talk to the workers. He was conscious that I needed to develop a sense of duty towards our tenants and workers and that it is a sacred bond.”

Christina’s eyes flickered. “You own many mines in the area, then? I remember you saying that you own the abandoned mine I fell into.”

He nodded. “I do. The mines are scattered along the coastline. We mine for copper, and when the mine is exhausted, it is abandoned. That is just the way it works.”

He frowned. “That is why I feel so responsible for you, Georgina,” he continued. “That mine should have been secured safely – there should have been no way you could have fallen into it.” He hesitated, his frown deepening. “Someone did not do their job properly, and that responsibility falls on me. People are bound to start saying that I do not safely secure my mines after they are abandoned ... which, in turn, affects my business reputation.”

“So, you did not rescue me purely out of concern for me, then,” she teased. “It was

about your reputation, as well.”

He laughed ruefully. “Of course, I am concerned for you!” His eyes flickered over her again, filled with warmth. “How could I not be concerned about the well-being and welfare of such a beautiful young woman?”

Christina felt a spark glimmer between them, catching fire. Her breath caught in her throat, and her heart started to pound again. The air was filled with such thick tension that she almost felt she could reach out and touch it.

“Am I beautiful?” she murmured, her heart skipping a beat. “I ... I hardly know.” She exhaled slowly. “But I am glad that you believe I am.”

Their eyes met and held for a moment. She felt the sharp tug between them as if a cord had been yanked. There was silence.

“Would you like to explore that section of the coast with me tomorrow?” he asked quietly. “It might jog your memory. It certainly could not hurt ... and it would be good for you to leave the house for the morning and go on an excursion.”

“I would like that very much,” she said breathlessly. “Thank you.”

“Very good,” he said, inclining his head. “Make sure you are ready by ten ...”

His voice faded away as the sound of feminine voices, loud and shrill, reached them. He stiffened, peering into the room beyond.

Christina’s heart skipped another beat, trying to mask her fright, as two ladies emerged onto the balcony, gaping at them and looking as shocked to see them as she felt.

There was an awkward silence. One of the ladies was petite and dark-haired, with deep brown eyes. With a start, Christina realized she looked very much like the duke. The other lady was taller and willowier, with auburn hair and quite startling blue eyes. She was very beautiful.

“Lydia.” The duke collected himself, shaking his head and staring at the ladies. “I did not hear the carriage pull up!” He turned to the tall, auburn-haired lady, inclining his head. “Lady Frances. Welcome to Newquay.”

The lady curtseyed. “Your Grace.”

There was another awkward silence. The dark-haired lady looked at Christina pointedly, her eyes raking over her from head to toe. The assessment was cold and a bit rude. Christina felt herself redden.

“Oh, I am so sorry,” said the duke with a short laugh. “Please forgive me.” He turned to Christina. “This is my sister, Lady Lydia Cavendish, and her friend, Lady Frances Lewis. They have journeyed all the way from London. I did not realize you were arriving today, Lydia.”

His sister smiled brightly. “We were going to break the journey at an inn but then decided to push on.” She turned back to Christina. “And you are?”

“This is Georgina,” said the duke, his cheeks colouring. “She ... she is staying with us while she recuperates from a fall in one of my abandoned mines.” He smiled. “She lost her memory, you see, and cannot even recall her own name ...”

Lydia arched her eyebrows. “How do you know your name is Georgina, then?”

“I do not,” said Christina, her colour deepening. “That is just the name that the physician gave me to call me something.”

A sudden, tense silence ensued, whereupon Lydia stared at her quite openly, with naked curiosity but not much warmth. The taller lady – her friend, Lady Frances – smiled at her, though.

“How extraordinary,” said Lady Frances. “You truly cannot remember anything about your life at all?”

“Nothing,” replied Christina, feeling mortified. “I feel utterly lost. I have no idea of who I am.”

“We should go inside, ladies,” said the duke, looking embarrassed. “You must be tired after the long trip. I will send for tea.” He turned to Christina, his eyes flickering over, looking rather regretful. “You are welcome to join us if you like ...”

“Oh, no,” said Christina quickly. “I am tired and need to rest anyway. But thank you.”

The ladies inclined their heads to her before walking inside. The duke followed them. Christina was left standing there alone.

She took a deep breath, turning back to the view. The sun had almost set entirely now. Dusk was falling across the sky, a cacophony of purple and pink intermingling with the orange. Her breath caught in her throat.

It was so beautiful here. But this was not her home. And now, the duke’s sister was here, along with her friend. A feeling of panic assailed her. She needed to find out her background and her life. Who was she? What was she going to do?

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“Do you remember anything?” The duke stared at her intently. “Anything at all?”

Christina sighed heavily. “Nothing yet.”

He nodded. They kept walking along the top of the cliffs. A soft breeze lifted the bonnet’s ribbons tied beneath her chin, cooling her enflamed cheeks.

They had been walking here for the past twenty minutes, gazing out over the sea, watching tall ships on the horizon. The duke hadn’t spoken much – he had simply watched her.

I wonder what his sister and her friend are doing this morning. I wonder if his sister knows about this excursion and if she would approve of it.

“Are your sister and her friend visiting Newquay Hall for a while?” she asked suddenly, turning to him.

The duke gave a short laugh. “Oh, Lydia lives at Newquay with me,” he said with a lopsided grin. “I forgot that you did not realize that. She has been staying at Lady Frances’s London residence with her family for a month ... and then the ladies decided they could not bear to be separated, so Lady Frances returned with my sister.”

“Oh,” said Christina, feeling surprised and a little unsettled. “And how long will Lady Frances be staying for?”

The duke shrugged. “An indefinite period. Newquay Hall is large enough to

accommodate many guests for a long time.” His grin widened. “She will leave when she and Lydia grow tired of each other, I suppose.”

Christina nodded, biting her lip and turning her gaze back to the sea. The feeling of disquiet increased. She was sure that Lady Lydia Cavendish did not like her at all.

The lady’s gaze had been very cold. But then again, Christina could hardly blame her, could she?

The lady had returned home from a trip away to find a usurper in the house, a strange woman who couldn’t remember if she was a servant, a governess, or the Queen of England herself. She couldn’t blame the lady for being a bit suspicious and wary of her.

Lady Frances seemed friendlier towards her and genuinely curious. But Lady Frances was a guest at Newquay just like herself. She had limited sway there. She glanced back at the duke.

Lady Frances was very beautiful, with her shining red-gold hair, sparkling blue eyes, and willowy figure. Surely the duke must have noticed that before? Was there something between them?

Quickly, she turned away, her heart beating hard. The feeling of disquiet increased. For some reason, she didn’t like the thought of it. Was it a small knot of envy that had lodged in her breast and stuck there?

But how could that be? She was a stranger to the duke. He owed her nothing. And there was no way he could ever contemplate her in that way. He didn’t know who she was. She didn’t even know who she was!

He is a duke. He would be attracted to a great lady, not a strange, bedraggled woman

who fell into a mine and has forgotten who she even is. A lady like Lady Frances.

“This must be the spot where you fell,” said the duke suddenly, interrupting her reverie. “Think, Georgina. Is anything coming back to you?”

Christina sighed heavily, looking down. The cliff face reared dramatically. Hesitantly, she took a step forward. It was a dramatic drop. Her head started to spin a little. Was she suffering from vertigo ... or was it something else?

She gasped, feeling her body go hot and then cold. She felt a sweat break out, small drops running down the back of her neck. What was happening to her?

She saw a bird ... a large bird ... and then, she was falling, tumbling, over and over, as if it would never end ...

“What is it?” The duke put his hand on her arm, gazing at her intently. “What is it?”

“I ... I do not know,” she stammered, feeling as if she were going to be sick. “I ... I see a bird in my vision, and then I am falling ... I cannot recall anything else!”

The duke looked pained. “Well, at least it is a start.” He turned, peering over the cliff. His face clouded as he pointed downwards. “Look, Georgina. There is a bird’s nest. Maybe that is what you are referring to? Maybe you were looking over the ledge at the bird’s nest ... and lost your balance?”

“Perhaps,” she whispered, staring at the nest, feeling rather mesmerized by it. There were three shiny eggs in it, but no sign of the bird that had laid them. Perhaps it was out foraging for food. She frowned. “But that is all I can remember.” She turned back to the duke. “You think that was the beginning of it? The moment when I fell?”

“Most likely,” he replied slowly. He smiled at her. “Do not look so solemn. It is a

good thing that you are remembering that, at least. It means that your whole memory may be returning ... and you will soon recall who you are and where you live.”

Christina gulped hard. “No one has come forward to say they know who I am?”

He shook his head slowly. “I am afraid not,” he replied, gazing at her with a look of sympathy. “I wrote letters to all the neighbouring estates, and Mrs Sollock has asked around as well. No one knows who you are, Georgina.”

Christina felt a pang of sorrow and pain. She really was nobody. She didn’t belong to any of the families or places around here. She frowned, her mind starting to spin in confusion again. But how could that be? How could no one know who she was?

Hesitantly, she touched the wound on her forehead. It was healing well. Dr Watson had told her she would have quite a scar, but otherwise, it was fine. The same could not be said for the interior of her head, however.

It was still a barren landscape devoid of the details of her life and who she was. She frowned. No, that wasn’t true – all those details were still in there. They must be. She just couldn’t access them anymore. They were completely out of reach.

She shivered in the breeze. She really was tabula rasa – a blank slate.

She gazed down at the gown she was wearing. It was a plain grey gown, in the style of a nun, with no adornment.

Mrs Sollock had given it to her, along with two other similar gowns, to replace the ripped, dirty gown she had been wearing the day of the accident. The gown told the world that she was someone of little importance.

Her frown deepened. She had gone through the bag found on the cliff along with the

horse she had apparently brought with her that day.

It contained a faded dress, some undergarments, a shawl, a battered leather purse containing a few coins, and the apple the duke had told her about. The apple was large, shiny, and glossy. A snack for a long journey?

She had stared hard at it all, praying it would evoke something in her mind, but there was nothing. Not even a flicker of recognition.

“I must have been on a journey,” she said suddenly, turning to the duke, her heart thumping hard. “Why else would no one in this area know who I am?”

He nodded slowly. “That is what I have been thinking, as well,” he said hesitantly. “But England, although an island, is large enough that it will take quite a while to comb the length of it to find out where you are from, Georgina.”

She felt a pang of pain. “Yes. I know.”

She turned away so he couldn't see the tears in her eyes. Did she have a family? A mother, father, and siblings? Did she have friends ... and maybe a sweetheart?

She gazed down at her hand. There was no ring on her wedding finger. She knew she wasn't married, at least. There was no husband in some house somewhere wondering where on earth she was.

Did I run away? Was my life intolerable? Or was I merely on a journey to visit someone?

She strained her mind, trying to remember, but there was no use. She shuddered, passing a weary hand across her forehead.

“Come on,” said the duke in a gentle voice. “Let us go and visit some of my mines. I will introduce you to the workers. And then we will take a long walk on the beach.” He hesitated. “Try not to get discouraged, Georgina. It will not be like this forever.”

Christina nodded, but she didn’t know whether she believed him. Perhaps she was destined to be stuck in this limbo forever. Perhaps she would never remember who she was ... and she would remain Georgina for life.

They walked along the beach, gazing into the distance, the soft hiss of the waves against the shore lapping against their feet.

Christina couldn’t help smiling to herself. The visit to the mines had been so interesting and informative. She had chatted with some of the miners, who were friendly towards her.

She had felt the duke’s eyes upon her the whole time, gazing at her approvingly. The only disappointment was the fact that none of the workers had any idea who she was, either. They had never seen her before in their lives.

Suddenly, she stopped, gasping for breath. The duke rushed to her side.

“Georgina, what is it?” he demanded. “Are you quite well?”

“I just remembered something,” she stammered. “A grand ball ... dancers twirling around a ballroom ... the sound of laughter and chatter ...”

“Anything else?” he asked, staring at her. “Is that all?”

Christina slumped. “That is all.” She took a deep, ragged breath. “What does it

mean?”

The duke shrugged. “It means you were either attending that ball or in service at it,” he replied. “You truly cannot remember any other details? You cannot remember if you were dancing or perhaps standing on the edge of the ballroom as if you were a servant observing it?”

She shook her head mournfully. “No. It is just flashes of memory. That is all.” Suddenly she brightened, turning to him. “You said that I was riding that horse you found? That the horse is mine?”

He nodded. “I believe so ...”

She gripped his arm without thinking, quite tightly. “But the horse was wearing a saddle! It might have an identifying mark or insignia on it!”

A slow smile spread across his face. “You know, you are right. It might have.” He paused, grinning down at her. “I did not even think of that! You are clever, Georgina.”

She blushed. “It just occurred to me. The thought just lodged into my mind.” Hastily, she took her hand away, gazing up at him. “Should we head back to Newquay Hall and check?”

His grin widened. “Yes, let us do it now.” He hesitated, his brown eyes shining, as he gazed down at her. “Although I am loathe to end this excursion. It has been such a wonderful morning, Georgina. I have enjoyed it immensely.”

“As have I,” she replied, suddenly feeling shy.

They kept gazing at each other. She felt the air tense around them as if the breeze had

changed suddenly. A shadow fell across the sand, and she blinked, gazing up into the sky.

It was a large bird gliding on outstretched wings. She watched as it circled overhead before heading towards the cliffs. Her heart lurched as she watched it approach the nest, settling atop the eggs. It let out a squawk.

Christina shivered. She remembered that bird. It was true – she had seen it the morning she had fallen into the mine shaft. She could almost feel the beat of its wing brushing against her head ...

“Georgina?” The duke touched her arm. “Shall we go?”

She took a deep breath, nodding. They kept walking. Her heart was beating erratically. She was starting to remember things. Small things, but at least it was a start. And perhaps the clue to who she was might be on that saddle. She couldn’t wait to look at it now.

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Sebastian glanced covertly at Georgina as they walked into the stables at Newquay Hall. She was flushed – there were two bright pink spots on her cheeks, which brought out the green in her eyes quite brilliantly.

She is excited that the saddle might hold the clue to her identity. And she is excited that she is starting to remember vague things about her life. It is a good start.

He rubbed his neck ruefully. They had been out for the entire morning with the sun beating down on them, and his neck was a bit burnt.

Still, he wouldn't change it for the world. He had enjoyed wandering along the cliffs with her immensely, and she had been so warm and friendly towards his workers, asking them questions, seemingly genuinely interested in them. But none of them had recognized her.

She is a kind, clever woman, along with being a beautiful one.

His breath caught in his throat as he gazed at her. She had so much energy and spirit. She was trying so hard to tackle her lack of memory.

She could have been still lying in bed, giving up, depressed and dejected that she had lost her entire life's memories. But instead, she was vibrant, and her suggestion that there might be a clue on the saddle to her identity was a good one.

“Can I see the horse first?” she asked quietly, her face tightening. “For some reason, I really want to see it.”

Sebastian nodded. "Of course."

They walked along the stables slowly. The horses put their heads out expectantly, looking for a scratch or an apple, but Sebastian didn't stop until they got to the very end, where a sleek black horse was enclosed.

"Here we are," he said jovially. "Here is the horse."

Georgina hesitated, visibly gulping, staring at the horse. Something flickered in her green eyes, and Sebastian's heart shifted.

"Do you recognize the horse?" He stared at her. "Are you having a memory of riding it that day ... or any other day?"

"I ... I do not know," she whispered, tilting her head to the side as she gazed at the beast, her eyes wide. "I feel that I recognize the horse ... and as if its name is on the tip of my tongue ... it is so maddening ...!"

At the sound of her voice, the horse pricked up its ears, then turned to her. Slowly, it walked towards her, placing its nose over the stable gate, whinnying loudly. Sebastian could barely breathe. It was patently obvious that the horse recognized her.

"Greetings, she said in a faltering voice, holding out a hand and scratching behind its left ear. "You are very beautiful. You are a beautiful boy."

The horse whinnied again, nuzzling her. Georgina looked surprised, then gratified, giggling warmly, and Sebastian grinned.

"It appears you have a friend," he said, reaching out and patting the horse. "This horse knows you well, Georgina."

“If only it could speak,” she said ruefully. “If only it could tell me who I was ... and lead me towards my home.”

He sighed heavily. “Yes. But at least we know that the horse does belong to you. You were definitely riding it that day.” He frowned. “You must have dismounted for a short break in your journey ... and that is when you fell into the mine shaft.”

She kept murmuring to the horse, nudging her with its nose. She seemed lost in a reverie or a silent communication with the beast and appeared to have forgotten about him entirely.

“I will get the saddle,” he said, smiling slightly.

She jumped slightly. “Oh! Yes, of course.” She took a deep breath. “We must look at the saddle.”

They walked together to the small room where the saddles were kept.

A strong smell of leather hit him in the face when he opened the door. He knew where the saddle the horse had been wearing that day was – the stable master had placed it in the far corner of the room, and it hadn’t been moved at all.

“Here it is,” he said, grabbing the saddle and hauling it out of the room. It was heavy.

He placed it on the ground. They both bent to examine it. It was made of the finest, most expensive leather, embossed with a fine, swirling pattern.

His eyes narrowed as he examined it closely, looking for any mark or insignia – a brand of some kind – which might indicate where this saddle had come from or even who made it. But there was nothing.

His lips thinned as he turned it over, examining its underside. Nothing. His heart plummeted in disappointment, so he could only imagine how she felt. He glanced at her. Tears were swimming in her eyes as she shook her head.

“How disappointing,” she whispered, running a hand through her hair. “I had such high hopes.”

Sebastian shrugged. “I know. But it was worth a try, at least.”

He picked up the saddle, taking it back to the room. When he returned, she had walked over to the horse again, petting it and whispering to it. The horse obviously relished the attention.

“Do you like getting your ear scratched?” she whispered to the beast. “Do you?”

“It is a fine saddle,” said Sebastian with a sigh. “A very expensive saddle ...”

She jumped, seemingly startled. “I did not steal it, if that is what you are implying,” she interjected in a defensive voice. “I know you are going to ask me how I know that I did not ... but I just do.” Her eyes filled with tears. “I know that I could never do such a thing.”

Sebastian’s heart shifted in his chest. She sounded and looked so vulnerable. She leaned against the horse as if seeking reassurance and comfort. The horse obliged, nickering softly, butting its nose softly against her.

“I was not implying anything of the sort,” he said gently. “It was just a general observation. That is all.”

She slumped, exhaling slowly, turning to look at him.

“I am sorry,” she said, her bottom lip trembling. “I know that I spoke rashly.” She took a long, deep breath. “It is just so terribly frustrating. I had pinned such hopes on the saddle revealing something about me ... or where I am from. I did not mean to take my frustration out on you, Your Grace.”

He smiled slowly. “I am not offended, Georgina. You do not need to apologize. I understand how frustrated you must be.” His eyes flickered over her. “Your memory will return, you know. Give it time. Be patient.”

She stifled a sob. “How can I be patient? I am here because of your kindness and generosity ...Newquay Hall is a wonderful place, but it is not my home.” She hesitated. “I am your guest, but where do I fit in? I am not a servant, but nor am I an equal to you ...no one knows how to treat me, for they cannot pin me in place without knowing my status in the world ... I feel as if I am stuck in a netherworld. A strange limbo.”

He gazed at her steadily, noticing that she was gripping the horse’s head so tightly that her knuckles had turned white.

Oddly, the horse didn’t seem to mind. In fact, it was gazing at her, its velvet brown eyes filled with softness. The horse knew her well – the horse loved her. It was as plain as the nose on his face.

The horse is expensive. And it belongs to her. If she had stolen it, it would not be acting this way towards her. And if it loves her, then that tells me that she may indeed have been born a lady ... very few people can afford a horse like this.

“I understand your confusion,” he said in a gentle voice. “You do not need to feel as if you are here under sufferance, Georgina. I said that I would look after you until you are well and have fully recovered your memory, and I meant it.”

She gazed at him. “You are so very kind,” she said in a faltering voice. “I am a complete stranger to you. You have no idea who I am, yet you have opened your home to me. I am so grateful.”

A warmth stole over him. Embarrassed, he coughed into his hand, shifting on his feet. There was an awkward silence, and tension filled the air. He noticed that her cheeks had turned pink again.

A stable hand walked towards them. “I have a message from Lady Lydia, Your Grace,” said the boy. “She asked if you would care to join her and Lady Frances for luncheon on the far balcony, as it is such a nice day.”

Sebastian sighed. He really needed to spend some time with his sister and her friend. They had only arrived last night, and he had been out all morning with Georgina.

“Tell Lady Lydia I will be along presently,” he said.

“Very good, Your Grace.” The boy bowed and left.

Sebastian turned back to Georgina, hesitating. He wanted to ask her to join them for luncheon, but he knew his sister wouldn’t approve.

Georgina had told the truth – she was walking in a strange limbo, a twilight world where no one knew how to act towards her. No one knew her position in the world.

If she were a servant or a governess, then she could not be invited to sit down and dine with a duke and ladies as an equal. It was not the done thing at all.

A feeling of regret stole over him. It was a pity. He wanted to spend more time with her. He didn’t want to leave her. It was most curious.

“I will be fine,” said Georgina, smiling at him as if she had read his mind. “Please, go and have your luncheon.”

He hesitated again, feeling a bit ashamed. “I can accompany you back to the house if you like ...?”

She laughed, shaking her head. It seemed her good mood had been restored. “I want to spend some more time with the horse,” she said slowly. “For some reason, it feels good being with him. He calms me.”

He nodded. “I understand. If not for your injury, I would suggest taking him for a ride around the estate. But it is probably not a good idea in the circumstances. I would be fearful you may fall.”

“Yes, I would be fearful, too,” she said, her face twisting. “It is enough just to be with him for now.”

Sebastian nodded again. “Well, I will leave you to it, then.” He paused, looking at her intently. “I am sorry that the saddle proved to be a dead end. And that taking you to the scene of your fall did not unlock your memory fully. We will try again.”

“Thank you,” she said shyly. “For everything.”

He hesitated, nodding, then turned, striding away. Then he stopped, gazing back at her. She wasn’t looking at him. She was looking at the horse, speaking softly to it again, caressing it. She seemed lost in her own world entirely.

His heart contorted with emotion. There was something so sweet and heartwarming watching the beautiful young woman with the horse and the obvious bond between them. Reluctantly, he turned away, striding out of the stables. Georgina was quite remarkable. He just wished he knew who she truly was.

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A few days later, Christina sat on a bench in the beautiful gardens at Newquay Hall, mesmerized by the bees hovering around the flowers, when she was startled by the appearance of Lady Frances, the willowy, beautiful auburn-haired lady who was staying here, who suddenly emerged on the path.

The lady looked just as startled at encountering Christina, her blue eyes widening. “Oh,” she said, biting her lip. “I am so sorry. I have disturbed you ...”

Hastily, Christina stood up, dropping into an awkward curtsy. “My Lady.”

“Please, do sit down,” said Lady Frances, with a warm smile. “Actually ... would you mind if I join you for a moment?”

Christina tried to stifle her shock. “Of course, My Lady. I would be honoured.”

They both sat down on the bench, gazing at the flowers. There was an awkward silence. Christina didn’t know what to say at all – the lady was a complete stranger to her, and she had no idea how to address her.

It seemed presumptuous to start talking to her as if they were equals. She shouldn’t presume. And yet, the lady herself wanted to sit with her. It was a conundrum.

“I must say, you do fascinate me,” said the lady abruptly, turning to Christina. “It must be so disconcerting to lose your memory in such a sudden, violent way.” She gazed at her curiously. “How do you feel?”

“It is disconcerting,” agreed Christina, with a grimace. “I am totally adrift in the

world, with no idea who I am or my place within it ... and relying on the kindness of a stranger.” She took a deep, shaky breath. “His Grace has been so generous towards me. I am so grateful.”

“He is a kind gentleman,” said Lady Frances with a small smile. “I have always thought so. And he feels responsible for you. You suffered your injury falling into one of his abandoned mine shafts, did you not?”

Christina nodded. “Yes. But he did not have to open his home to me like this.” She lapsed into silence for a moment. “He is going above and beyond his duty towards me. I feel quite bad about imposing on him in this way.”

“Do not feel bad,” insisted the lady, with another kind smile. “You should take the opportunity to heal fully. You still remember nothing at all about your life or who you are?”

“Not much,” replied Christina, her heart shifting. “I had a flash of memory about falling, and I remember being at a ball in my previous life ... but both memories were so brief and fleeting.” Her hands balled into fists upon her lap. “I feel as if I am seeking a key to unlock my mind, and once I do, it will all come tumbling out.”

“Extraordinary,” said the lady, shaking her head incredulously. “You seem quite refined to me, Georgina. You speak like a lady and do not have the manner of a servant.” She hesitated. “I wonder why you were alone that day, riding along the cliffs with just a small bag. Do you think you were running away from something?”

“Perhaps,” said Christina, feeling a prickle go down her spine as she shrugged her shoulders. “No one in this district knows who I am. No one is missing from any of the houses around here. That suggests to me that I was in transit, making a journey from wherever I lived ... but I do not know the reason why.”

A wave of uneasiness swept over her like a dark shadow. It felt like something was hovering on the very edge of her mind, some truth waiting to reveal itself.

She squinted into the distance, straining her mind, trying to grasp it. But the more she tried to grab it, the more elusive it was, floating away entirely.

“I am sure you will recover your memories soon,” said the lady kindly. “All will be revealed. In the meantime, do not feel as if you are a burden here. His Grace is kindness personified, as you say, and will give you the time you need ...”

“There you are, Frances! I was wondering where you had got to.”

They both jumped at the voice. Christina turned. Lady Lydia, the duke’s sister, stood there watching them intently. Her hands were clasped and folded tightly in front of her. There was an uncomfortable silence.

“I must say, I am surprised to see you being so ... familiar with our house guest, Frances,” said Lydia in a condescending tone. “Considering we have no idea who she actually is at all.”

Christina felt as if the lady had reached out and slapped her across the face.

“I think that Georgina was born a lady, Lydia,” said Frances fervently. “She has such a refined way about her and speaks beautifully. I am quite convinced of it.”

Christina stood up. This was so very awkward. As kind and welcoming as Lady Frances was towards her, it was equally clear that Lady Lydia did not like her at all. The duke’s sister was suspicious of her.

She had sensed it from the first moment they were introduced to each other. Christina did not blame the lady, but still, it rankled.

“Thank you for your kindness towards me, My Lady,” she said to Frances with a small smile. “I should return to my room. Good day.”

She curtsied to both ladies, walking quickly down the path towards the house without another word. Her eyes stung with tears. The duke and Lady Frances might be fine with her staying here, but Lady Lydia didn’t feel the same way.

“Georgina!”

She stopped, turning around, still feeling confused and uncomfortable whenever anyone addressed her by the strange name. It was Lady Lydia, running towards her, trying to keep up with her. Christina waited, a feeling of unease creeping over her. What did she want?

“My Lady,” she murmured when the lady was close enough to hear her properly. “Can I help you?”

Lady Lydia stopped, staring at her openly. And the gaze held contempt. Once again, Christina felt like the lady had slapped her across the face.

“I do not like you being in my home,” said the lady, without preamble. “I find it very odd indeed that you cannot remember a single thing about your life and must seek sanctuary here.” She paused, her eyes raking over Christina in an insolent way. “What are your intentions? Why are you here?”

Christina flushed fiercely. “I have no intention,” she said, anger and indignation sweeping through her veins. “The loss of my memory is genuine, My Lady. What are you implying?”

“Only that you are a complete stranger, and I am not certain you can be trusted,” replied the lady bluntly. “You have just appeared out of the blue. No one knows you

from Eve. We have no idea of your place in the world. If you intend to deceive and dupe my brother, think again.”

“I do not intend to do any such thing,” said Christina hotly, trying to ignore the tears springing into her eyes. She was determined not to show this lady that she was upsetting her. “I do realize how lucky I am to be here and that his grace is giving me sanctuary and as soon as I recover my memory or someone tells me who I am and where I live, I will leave Newquay Hall and not impose on you any longer.”

The lady smiled slowly. It wasn’t a pleasant sight. “I believe that you are deceiving my brother,” she said, her eyes hard as flint. “I believe you have done it to gain access to our home and our family. I do not trust you as far as I can throw you ... Georgina.” She paused. “I have my eye upon you. I am going to uncover the truth of this.”

Before Christina could respond, the lady turned, walking away quickly. Stunned, Christina felt frozen to the spot. The unpleasant encounter had left a very bad taste in her mouth. Slowly, she lifted a hand to her face, appalled to find it was shaking.

She turned, suddenly recovering the ability to move, running down the path towards the house, flying like the wind. The gardens whizzed by, and she saw servants staring at her, but she didn’t stop until she had reached her room, flinging herself across the bed and bursting into tears.

I must leave. I must leave Newquay Hall immediately. I cannot stay with that lady thinking the worst about me. But where can I go?

She sat up, wiping away her tears, gazing mournfully out the window. She simply had no idea what she could do or where she could go.

She didn’t have much money – the small, battered purse in the bag contained only a

few coins. And she couldn't ask the duke for any money to aid her. That would only confirm Lady Lydia's suspicions about her.

I will be sleeping in a ditch tonight if I leave this place. I have no family or friends ... or none that I can remember. I have no one to turn to.

She pressed her hands against her head, desperately willing herself to remember her life, but there was nothing. It was still a great, gaping blank.

All she knew was that she had once been at a ball and was riding the black horse along the cliffs that day and had seen a bird when she had fallen. She hadn't recovered any more memories since the day the duke had brought her back there.

The door opened. Mrs Sollock, the housekeeper, came into the room carrying some fresh linen. The woman stopped abruptly, gazing at Christina.

"Why are you crying?" she asked, tilting her head to the side and examining her closely. "Why are you upset?"

Christina wiped away the last of her tears, turning to the housekeeper. Her heart was beating hard.

"Do you think I am making it up?" she said, her voice catching. "Do you think I am pretending not to remember anything about my life?"

The woman was silent as she contemplated the question. Christina's heart skipped a beat. Mrs Sollock was a woman of few words, but she was kind in her own way and very efficient at her job. Christina liked her.

"I must admit I was sceptical of you at first," said the housekeeper eventually, in an even voice. "There was never any doubt that you hit your head badly, but I thought

you might be hamming up the memory loss to stay here in the lap of luxury.” She paused. “But I believe you now. I can tell you are genuine. I feel sorry for you ... it cannot be easy being adrift in the world with no kin or friends.”

“Thank you,” stammered Christina, feeling overwhelmed. “Lady Lydia thinks I am a fraud. She does not believe that I am genuine ...”

“She is just being protective of the duke,” said Mrs Sollock firmly. “He is her younger brother. She feels as if it is her job to watch out for him. Take no notice of her. If the duke says you are welcome to stay, then that is all you need. Lady Lydia cannot throw you out, you know. This house belongs to the duke – not to her.”

Christina nodded slowly, but she still felt uneasy. The housekeeper spoke the truth, of course, but that didn’t mean that Lady Lydia couldn’t make her time here a misery, even if she weren’t the official mistress of the house.

She sighed deeply. The bitter truth was she had nowhere else to go for the moment. She was stuck here, like a fly in amber. She would just have to work out a way to deal with Lady Lydia and her unpleasantness. Her heart twisted with distress.

Please, Lord, give me back my memory. Give me back my life. I implore you.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:41 am

“Watch your step,” cautioned Sebastian, taking Georgina’s hand as she stepped down from the carriage. “There are broken stones, and the road is uneven here.”

She nodded, smiling at him, jumping carefully over the broken stones. He let go of her hand, gazing around the village.

On impulse, he had sought her out this morning, suggesting she accompany him to the nearest local village to see if it might jog her memory, even though he truly didn’t think she was a local anymore.

He turned his gaze back to her. He would lie to himself if he insisted that was the only reason he had asked her to come here. He felt drawn to her like a bee towards a flower.

He didn’t see her very often at Newquay Hall, but she was often on his mind.

When he was breaking his fast in the morning or having luncheon with his sister and Lady Frances, he thought about Georgina, wondering what she was doing ... and wishing he could ask her to have her meals with them in the main dining room.

He noticed the gash on her head was healing well and that her colour was better. She wasn’t as pale anymore. Her cheeks were pink with health, and her green eyes were clear and sparkling.

His eyes slid over her plain grey gown, noting how it complemented her slender figure. She was a beautiful woman ... even in a plain, coarse gown.

“Does anything ring a bell for you?” he asked abruptly. “Do you recognize anything?”

Georgina gulped, gazing around the village at the quaint stores and cobblestoned main road. It was a pretty village built in the Tudor style with overhanging eaves, thatched roofs, and a large central square.

A few villagers were walking along the road, doing their daily shopping, carrying wicker baskets, heading from the butcher to the baker and every other store in between. In the distance, he heard a pack of dogs barking excitedly; otherwise, it was as quiet as the grave.

“Not yet,” she replied hesitantly, looking disappointed. “I am sorry.”

“There is no need to apologize, Georgina,” he said. “We will go for a short walk. You never know – someone might recognize you.” He paused. “And then we might take luncheon at the local inn. They serve a good Cornish pasty ... and the local ale is delicious.”

Her eyes brightened. “That sounds wonderful.”

They started walking down the road, passing people, who all greeted him deferentially. He was well known in this village, of course – he had been coming here since he was a small child.

But while they gazed at Georgina curiously, there was no flicker of recognition on their faces. It was patently obvious that no one knew who she was.

Eventually, they reached the end of the road where the Thistledown Inn was located. He opened the heavy door, letting her enter first. It was cozy and warm inside, with only a few locals scattered around.

They looked up, nodding at him. Sebastian led her to a private table near the large fire, which was crackling merrily, the flames roaring, casting a luminous heat around the room.

“This is pleasant,” sighed Georgina, gazing around. “What a lovely inn. Do you come here often?”

He shrugged. “From time to time, if I happen to be passing through the village,” he said, raising a hand to catch the innkeeper’s attention. “It is the type of place where everyone goes occasionally, ranging from the local miners to the gentry. It is the hub of the community.”

“It must be so wonderful to live in such a close-knit community,” she said in a slightly wistful voice. “To know your place and where you stand within it.”

He stared at her. “I am sure you have a place in your own community, Georgina. We just have to find where it is.”

“No one knows me,” she said, smiling sadly. “No one recognizes me here. I do not belong to this area. That is very clear to me.” She lapsed into silence for a moment, gazing around. “I wonder now why I was riding alone that morning. It seems an odd thing to be doing carrying a bag. Do you think I was really running away from something?”

He hesitated. “It does appear that way. But I can hardly say for certain.”

The bartender arrived to take their order. They both ordered the famous local Cornish pasties along with glasses of the local ale.

They talked sporadically while they ate, keeping the conversation light, avoiding the charged topic of her lack of memory. When they were finished, he sat back, gazing at

her.

It had been such a pleasant morning, and he felt like he never wanted the day to end. But then, he always felt like that in her company.

Georgina was a good conversationalist – clever, amusing, and witty. Apart from the fact that gazing at her always took his breath away. She was such a beautiful woman.

I am certain that she is a member of the gentry now. She is far too refined to be a servant. But why then was she dressed so plainly when I found her? It doesn't make any sense at all.

He was so engrossed in the mystery of her that he didn't notice the gentleman standing at the bar, waiting for service, until he heard the strident voice. He stiffened, turning around. It was a rival mine owner and his nemesis, Walter Hester.

His eyes flickered over the man. Walter Hester was only a few years older than him, around two and thirty, but he looked much older due to his great girth.

He was a large, thickset man, overfond of fine meals and red wine. His face was so florid it was as if his cheeks and nose had been set alight. Sebastian noted that his sandy hair was thinning and that he was combing it over now.

“Newquay,” boomed the man, noticing him at last. He strode over to the table. “Fancy seeing you here!”

Sebastian smiled tightly, nodding. “Hester.”

“And who is this?” asked Hester, his eyes sliding to Georgina. “Is this the waif who has lost her memory who I have been hearing about? The one who you dragged out of one of your unsafe mines?”

Georgina flushed, staring at the man, and Sebastian's face tightened. The man was such an obnoxious boor.

"Yes," he replied. "We have called her Georgina. I thought that bringing her to the village might unlock her memories." He paused. There was an uncomfortable silence as he took a deep breath. "And how are you, Hester? How is business going?"

He didn't want to know. He didn't want to talk to the man at all. But now that the man was here, he had no choice but to engage him in polite conversation. Hopefully, Hester would pick up on his reluctance to talk to him and just drift away.

"It is booming," he declared, in a confident voice. "And we have grand plans to expand, Newquay. We have many plans." He paused, staring at Sebastian, his eyes filled with barely concealed contempt. "One day, my family will own this whole area of Cornwall. We will own all the mines ... including the ones that belong to you."

Sebastian felt a flash of pure anger. "You will never take the Newquay mines, Hester," he hissed, his eyes narrowing. "And even if you become the wealthiest man in the district, it will never buy you respectability. Do not forget you do not have a title ... and you cannot ever buy one. You and your family will always be upstarts."

"If you say so, Your Grace," retorted the man in a mocking voice. "But I would not underestimate my family's influence. Nor our determination to increase it, along with our wealth." He paused. "One day, you will be bowing to me, Newquay. Believe it."

Sebastian had had enough. Abruptly, he stood up, his hands balling into fists at his sides. If he stayed here for another minute, he might do something he would regret ... and barroom brawls were beneath him. Hester wasn't worth it.

"Come along, Georgina," he snapped. "It has suddenly become quite chilly in here."

Georgina scrambled to her feet, and they left the inn. Sebastian didn't look back. He looked at her, suddenly feeling ashamed of himself for the throwaway comment he had just made to Hester about being lowborn.

"I am sorry," he said, turning to her and taking a deep breath. "I did not mean any offence against you by putting that man down for not having a title." He ran a hand through his hair, trying to control his anger. "I do not really believe that having a title makes a person any better than anyone else. That man makes my blood boil. That is all."

She stared at him, her eyes filled with concern. "I could tell you did not like him," she said slowly. "To tell you the truth, I did not like him, either, and I do not even know the man." She hesitated. "He insulted you. I do not blame you at all for saying what you did to him ... and I took no offence."

"Shall we keep walking?" he asked abruptly. "I find I wish to put as much distance between me and Hester as possible."

She nodded, and they walked silently down the cobblestoned road momentarily. Then she turned to Sebastian, staring at him.

"Who is he?" she asked.

Sebastian sighed deeply. "His family owns mines in this area," he replied slowly. "They have always been in rivalry with my family's business." He paused. "The Hester family started out owning just one ship, but then they grew rich by selling grain to other countries ... at the expense of selling it to their own countrymen, who were starving at the time. They have always been mercenaries and thieves."

She shook her head, looking shocked. "I see."

“Eventually they expanded into the local mining industry,” he continued, his face tightening. “They bought mines from owners who were struggling at cheap prices. That was the last generation ... and now Walter Hester is determined to expand further. I have been told that he is trying to buy more mines - and he will sack the local miners and bring in a cheaper workforce to increase the family’s wealth even more.”

“But ... that is unethical,” she breathed, her eyes widening. “They cannot take away the miners’ livelihoods!”

“Exactly,” he said, shaking his head. “But unfortunately, the Hester family has no morals and are greedy. It is always about lining their own pockets with them, and they do not care who they hurt in the process.” He hesitated. “I am worried, Georgina. My mines are not producing vast amounts of copper any longer. I may be forced to sell some of them ... but the thought of selling them to Hester makes me quite ill.”

“I am sorry for it,” she whispered, her eyes wide with concern. “I wish I could help you.”

He shrugged, feeling a bit embarrassed. He didn’t usually talk about his business problems like this – or only with very close, trusted people like Daniel and Lydia. But something about this woman made him feel like he had known her forever ... and that he could trust her with his life.

“Careful,” he said suddenly, grabbing her arm as they approached a large puddle on the ground. “Do not slip ...”

She stopped, turning to him. Their eyes met and locked. He felt the attraction towards her again, stronger than ever before. He suppressed the urge to pull her into his arms with difficulty. What would her lips taste like?

A man pushing a small cart almost collided with them, and they both jumped, laughing uncomfortably. The moment was broken. They kept walking in silence. He covertly watched her, his eyes lingering on her speculatively.

Who is she? And how will I be able to let her go when the time inevitably arrives ... regardless of who she is?

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“Sebastian.” Lady Lydia’s voice was filled with surprise and disapproval as she addressed her brother, but her eyes flickered beyond his shoulder to where Christina stood. They were filled with coldness. “I see you have been out on an excursion.”

Christina flushed hard, feeling awkward and embarrassed. It wasn’t just the contempt in Lady Lydia’s eyes as she beheld her.

It was also the fact that a tall gentleman was standing next to the duke’s sister and Lady Frances on the front steps of Newquay Hall, who was a complete stranger to her. She had never seen him before, and he was gazing at her intently, clearly very curious about her.

What a pity we ran into the ladies and this gentleman on the house steps after returning from our outing to the village. It is rather awkward, and I am not sure what to do at all. I do not think the duke knows what to do, either.

“Yes,” said the duke, in a loud, uncomfortable voice, addressing his sister. “I took Georgina for an outing in the village. We had luncheon at the Thistledown Inn and wandered around a bit. I thought it might jog Georgina’s memory.”

“Really,” said Lady Lydia, in a patronizing voice, staring at Christina rudely. “And did it? Did you recognize anything?”

“No, I did not, unfortunately,” replied Christina, shifting on her feet, feeling uncomfortable with the blatant, rude scrutiny of the lady. “I did not recognize anything at all, My Lady.”

There was another awkward silence, with Lady Frances smiling at her kindly. The gentleman, a stranger to her, looked at the duke expectantly. The duke started, looking embarrassed.

“Oh, I do apologize,” he said quickly. “Daniel, this is Georgina, who suffered the fall at the mine and is staying with us until she recovers her memory.” He looked down at Christina. “This is Lord Falmouth.”

“My Lord,” murmured Christina, dropping into a low curtsy.

“What a terrible thing to have happened to you,” said Lord Falmouth, staring at her with sympathy and curiosity when she straightened. “You truly have no idea who you are or where you were going that day?”

Christina shook her head. “None at all, My Lord. It is a complete blank.” She drew a deep breath. “I wish I could remember. I feel terrible about inconveniencing his grace like this.”

“It is no trouble, as I said,” said the duke quickly, with a small smile. “You should not feel that way at all.”

“Indeed,” said Lord Falmouth, smiling at Christina. “The ladies and I were just about to take a turn around the gardens. Would you both care to join us?”

Christina glanced at the duke, not knowing how to respond. Lady Lydia had a sour look on her face. She was sure the lady would not be happy if she accepted the gentleman’s kind invitation.

“Actually, I would like to speak to my brother privately,” said Lady Lydia, her voice filled with acid. “You and Frances should still go on the stroll though, Daniel ... and perhaps Georgina should rest after her excursion. She looks rather tired.”

Georgina blushed hard. “Of course,” she said quickly. “It is true. I am rather tired.” She turned to the duke, her heart skipping a beat. “Thank you for the outing. I had a wonderful time ... even if I could not remember anything.”

“You are welcome,” he replied quietly, his eyes lingering on her. “I hope you rest well.”

Georgina smiled at them, curtsying again, before walking quickly away, towards the back of the house and the servants’ entrance.

She knew better than to march into the house via the front door. She was sure that sour-faced Lady Lydia would have a conniption if she did anything of the sort.

Her face burnt deeper as she thought about the lady and how she had just dismissed her so contemptuously.

She does not like me at all. And she does not want me associating with any of them. She will never trust me.

She sighed deeply. She couldn’t help if Lady Lydia disliked and distrusted her. She could do nothing about it – she just had to endure it. Hopefully, she would recover her memory sooner rather than later and not have to endure it for too long.

But then, her heart shifted a bit at the thought of leaving Newquay Hall ... and the duke. Hastily, she pushed the thought aside.

He was a duke, and she ... she was no one at all. It wouldn’t ever be possible to keep in contact with him or be friends with him beyond this time – never mind anything else.

Dukes do not consider strange waifs they have temporarily adopted as candidates to

court. And I have no idea who I am or my social standing in this world.

No wonder Lady Lydia is wary of me and doesn't want her brother getting close to me. I hardly blame her.

Her heart filled with an odd, almost tender regret, which she pushed down, as well, as she entered the house. She didn't belong here, and the sooner she recovered her memory and moved on, the better.

Sebastian followed Lydia into the parlour, feeling a bit irritated with his sister.

He had been wanting to talk to Georgina a bit more before they separated, and he would have liked to have caught up with Daniel, as well, but his sister had insisted on talking with him privately as if he were a recalcitrant child she must reprimand.

He understood why Lydia was the way she was toward him, being his older sister and protective.

But it is starting to wear a bit thin.

Sebastian wished she would start courting and find her own home soon.

He didn't like the way she had dismissed Georgina, as well. It was done in a rude, patronizing manner. Clearly, his sister didn't like their unexpected house guest at all, which mystified him. Lydia wasn't even giving Georgina a chance.

"What do you want to say to me?" he said abruptly, sitting on a chaise longue and throwing an arm across the back. "I rather think you had better spit it out, Lydia."

His sister stood in front of the fire, glaring at him. “You are growing too close to that woman,” she said curtly, raising her chin. “She is a complete stranger to us, Sebastian. You have no idea who she is or her place in the world. More than likely, she is a commoner. You cannot afford to get close to her.”

Sebastian frowned, his irritation with his sister increasing. “I rather think I can make up my own mind about who I become close with, Lydia! You are being far too presumptuous ... and overreaching your position.” He frowned. “I am the Duke of Newquay, you know. Not you.”

Lydia flushed hard. “Actually, I do realize that, thank you very much,” she said in a clipped tone. “Perhaps you should start acting like the Duke of Newquay then, brother.

The duke should not grow close with waifs like Georgina. The duke has a sacred duty to keep to his lofty position ... and not indulge his personal feelings.”

Sebastian’s cheeks coloured with embarrassment. “I took her into the village to see if it would help jog her memory. That is all.”

“I know it is more than that,” retorted Lydia. “Do you think I was born yesterday? I can see the way you look at her. She is a beautiful young woman, so I do not blame you for looking ... but you must see that she is completely unsuitable and you must focus on pursuing ladies of a certain calibre ... like Frances.”

Sebastian’s flush deepened. He hadn’t realized that his deep attraction towards Georgina was so obvious to all and sundry ... or, at the very least, to his sister. And while he still didn’t like Lydia scolding him like this and addressing him in this high-handed manner, he had to admit his sister did have a point.

He took a deep, ragged breath. Georgina was one of the most beautiful women he had

ever met, and she was charming, elegant, and spoke in a refined manner, but he had no idea who she was at all.

She couldn't be considered a suitable candidate for serious courtship. The next Duchess of Newquay had to be a lady of exceptional breeding and class. A lady who was a cut above all others.

"You should spend more time with Frances while she is here, brother," continued Lydia, frowning. "Her many attributes are so obvious that I find it difficult to believe you cannot see them for yourself. She is beautiful, charming, and clever ... and she is also the daughter of a viscount. Her breeding is impeccable."

"I am well aware of Lady Frances's obvious attributes," he said in a tart voice. "I am also well aware that she is your closest friend, and you are a bit biased, Lydia." He hesitated. "To tell the truth, I would feel rather awkward courting her. I have always seen her as a younger sister, like you ... probably because you have always been as thick as thieves with one another."

"Frances is five years younger than me," said Lydia, raising her eyebrows. "She is still young enough to produce the heir the duchy desperately needs, Sebastian. And you are thirty now. It is time that you took that duty seriously. Do you want to be an old man before you start a family?"

"Of course not," retorted Sebastian, feeling mortified. "I just have not met a lady who has inspired me to propose to her yet. That is all."

"Frances is a prime candidate for the position of duchess," said Lydia, her jaw setting in a stubborn line. "You should try to forget that she is my closest friend and simply focus on her attributes. And you should do it sooner rather than later, Sebastian. Time is ticking. There is no time to lose."

“I am hardly at death’s door,” snapped Sebastian, a bit stung by his sister’s vehemence and dogged persistence on the subject. “I am a gentleman in the prime of my life. There is still time to find a lady who pleases me in all aspects and has the necessary attributes, Lydia. It does not have to be your closest friend.”

He stood up. “Is that all? I think I will try to find Daniel and Lady Frances in the gardens ... if that is acceptable with you, of course.” He couldn’t keep the slight thread of sarcasm out of his voice. “Sister?”

“Oh, there is no need to be a fool about it all, Sebastian,” said Lydia, rolling her eyes. “I have said my piece and need say no more for the moment. Just promise me that you will contemplate what I said. You need to focus on all your duties and not be distracted. That is all.”

Sebastian nodded curtly, sweeping out of the room. His sister really did overstep her position with him. But she spoke the truth – a truth he might not like to hear at the moment, but which was necessary he did hear.

His heart somersaulted in his chest. He must try to stay away from Georgina, and he should definitely stop confiding in her about his business problems. It wasn’t appropriate at all. She wasn’t appropriate at all. No matter what his feelings were towards her, that fact was obvious.

A strange sadness entered his heart. A beautiful, mysterious young woman who had no idea who she was and couldn’t remember a single detail about her life was not a candidate to become a duchess. And that really was the end of that.

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“This is my favourite view over the district,” declared Lady Frances, her green eyes shining like jewels, as she gazed over the hill, sitting astride the horse. She turned to Christina. “It is wonderful country here. I always enjoy the break from London.”

Christina breathed the pure, fresh air, feeling it lifting the curls falling down her neck. She patted the horse’s neck, murmuring to it reassuringly.

It was the sleek black horse that she apparently owned, of course. When Lady Frances had surprised her by suggesting this ride together over the hills surrounding Newquay Hall, she had known that she could not consider any other horse.

The only reason she knew that she could ride was the presence of the black beast in the stables, after all.

She knew she had made the right choice as soon as they headed out over the fields beyond the house, cantering briskly. Oddly, the black horse seemed like an extension of her own body. As soon as she tightened the muscles of her legs or drew the reins in a certain way, the horse responded. Riding the horse was like a dream.

I wish I knew the horse’s name. I wish I could remember riding it and our relationship. But this is the next best thing.

“Do you want to get down and walk for a bit?” asked Lady Frances, smiling at her. “It might be nice to let the horses rest and drink from the stream.”

Christina nodded. “That would be nice.”

When the horses were drinking from the stream, and they were sitting side by side on a rock overlooking the sea, Christina turned, studying the lady covertly. She still couldn't quite believe that Lady Frances had invited her to ride with her. Apparently, Lady Lydia was out for the day, visiting a friend near the village and Frances hadn't wanted to accompany her.

Christina knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that this would never have happened if Lydia were around. That lady still distrusted and disliked her as much as ever. There was simply no way she would have gone riding with her.

Her heart contorted. Apparently, the duke was at home today, but she hadn't seen him at all, and Lady Frances hadn't mentioned him.

In the two weeks since their visit to the nearby village, he had been avoiding her, keeping his distance. But strangely, Lady Frances had been approaching her instead, with overtures of friendship completely at odds with the attitude of her hosts.

When, oh when, will I finally get my memory back? When will I be able to leave Newquay Hall and begin my real life again?

"How are you?" asked Frances, turning to her and looking at her intently. "Have you any indication of your memory returning yet?"

Christina shook her head sorrowfully. "No. Not at all." Her jaw tightened. "It is so frustrating! I sometimes feel as if it is at the edge of my mind, but it just will not emerge."

"It will," said Frances in a kind voice. "It will happen when it is time." She hesitated. "I wonder what your place is in this world. It must be rather liberating to have no place and not be anchored to a position or station in life, though. Sometimes, I feel like I would like to escape mine."

“Why?” asked Christina, surprised as she gazed at the lady. It was the last thing she had expected her to say. Lady Frances seemed to have it all – position, beauty, charm, and kindness. “Why do you wish to escape your life?”

Frances sighed. “Oh, I do not know! I sometimes feel constrained. That is all.” She reached down, picking a daisy on the edge of the stream and twirling it around in her hand. “Lydia is always hinting that I should encourage the duke and try to become the next Duchess of Newquay. But I have no stomach for it. The duke has always been like a brother to me ... but I just cannot seem to get Lydia to acknowledge that.”

Christina reddened, not knowing how to respond at all. It was obvious to her now, even if Frances hadn’t spoken about it, that Lady Lydia was fierce in her intention to play matchmaker with her brother and best friend.

“I will confess it to you,” whispered Frances, her cheeks turning pink. “There is someone else I have my eye upon ... but I am unsure whether he returns my affection. Lydia would be appalled.”

Christina laughed. “Lady Lydia does not control your life and who you fall in love with. You do not need her permission.” She hesitated, thinking about the other lady and how much she disapproved of her. “I think I have well and truly overstayed my welcome at Newquay Hall. But I have no idea what to do or where else to go. It is so frustrating.”

She picked up a pebble, throwing it into the stream, watching it skip along the water’s surface. Her heart contracted again.

The duke was probably heartily sick of her presence in his home, as well, judging by his avoidance of her – and despite their closeness on the day they had visited the village. Lady Lydia wanted her gone for good.

A small kernel of panic lodged in her chest. What was she going to do? How could she keep imposing on the duke and his sister ...especially since they both clearly wanted her gone?

“A brandy, Lord Powell?” Sebastian picked up the bottle, looking at the other gentleman, who had just arrived at Newquay Hall out of the blue and was now ensconced in an upholstered chair near the fire in his study. “Have you journeyed far today?”

The gentleman shifted in the chair, nodding his head. “A brandy would be welcome, Newquay. And yes, it has been a long journey to get here.” He paused, his eyes narrowing, as Sebastian passed him a tumbler of brandy. “But I am hoping that this visit will be fruitful.”

Sebastian sat opposite the man, sipping his own brandy, wondering why on earth Powell was here. They weren’t close friends despite the gentleman being a major investor in his mines.

In fact, Sebastian secretly despised the man, almost as much as he despised Walter Hester, and that was really saying something.

He ran an eye over the gentleman. Powell was a large man in early middle age, with a bulky physique, coarse silver threaded black hair, and a bulbous nose. His small black eyes were almost opaque, giving nothing away about the man’s thoughts. Sebastian knew him to be a tyrant, treating his servants and workers with utter contempt, and he also had a reputation for ruthlessness in business, although he hadn’t seen that side of the man. Yet.

“Perhaps we should get straight to the point, Powell,” said Sebastian, putting down

his drink and gazing at the gentleman. “Why exactly are you here?”

Powell gave a bark of laughter. “You know that falling prices for copper are affecting many mines in this area of Cornwall,” he said slowly, as he swirled the brandy around in the tumbler. “Including your own, Newquay.”

“And?” Sebastian’s voice was edged with tension. “What is your point?”

“I am about to marry into the Draycott family,” stated Powell with a smirk. “I plan to leverage Viscount Draycott’s name to raise funds for my own business ventures.” He took a deep breath. “My ultimate goal is to acquire total ownership of your mines, Newquay ... but if you refuse to sell to me, then I will invest in the Hester mines instead.”

“Is that your way of trying to butter me up to sell to you?” Sebastian couldn’t keep the acid out of his voice. “I do not much like your manner, Powell.”

Powell smiled slowly. “I came to you first because of your noble lineage, Newquay.” He paused, taking a long sip of his brandy. “The Hester family are nothing but filthy merchants. I would much rather own your mines and the noble association they have rather than acquire the Hester’s mines, which are tainted by their filth.”

“You certainly call a spade a spade,” remarked Sebastian, raising his eyebrows, trying not to show how much he despised the gentleman.

Powell was still a major investor in his mines, and he didn’t want him to pull out entirely. It would leave him in a very vulnerable position indeed. He must play this encounter very carefully, even if he did want to ram his fist into the other gentleman’s smug face. He suppressed a wave of anger and indignation. There was no way he would sell his entire mines to the man ... but Powell didn’t need to know that yet.

“I certainly do,” said Powell, with a small, smug smile, looking proud of the fact. He finished his brandy, slamming the tumbler onto the table, and stared at Sebastian. “I will give you until the end of the month to decide, Newquay. I must keep going ... for I have other business to attend to.”

“And what is that?” asked Sebastian, despising the man and the fact he couldn’t tell him to go to hell outright and take his offer to hell with him.

“I am searching for ... a relation,” he said in a vague voice. “You do not need to concern yourself with it. But I must keep on with it. Time is ticking.” Abruptly, he stood up. “Until we meet again, Newquay. I would ponder my offer very carefully if I were you. You will not get another one so good.”

Sebastian drained his glass, got to his feet, and faced the man. “I will ponder it. That is all I can promise.”

Powell nodded, inclining his head curtly, before turning and leaving the room without another word.

Sebastian walked to the window, watching the gentleman climb into his carriage before it started rattling away down the long driveway and through the high gates. His stomach was churning unpleasantly.

He would rather die than sell outright to Powell, but the gentleman had spoken the truth – copper prices were falling and with other instabilities in the industry, he knew he was in a precarious position, indeed.

Suddenly, he jumped. Two horses were cantering towards the house from the other direction and were close enough now that he could clearly see the riders.

His eyes widened in shock. It was Lady Frances ... and Georgina. There was no sign

of a third horse carrying his sister, but then he remembered she was away for the day, visiting a friend in the district.

His heart started to pound as he fixated on Georgina, who was riding the black horse. Every time he saw her, even from afar, he was struck by her beauty anew.

His breath caught in his throat as his eyes roamed over her avidly. He had been avoiding her these past weeks after his sister's lecture about her, but it hadn't been easy. Every fibre of his being wanted to approach her, speak with her, and be in her company.

He frowned. It was odd that Lady Frances had befriended her like this and clearly knew to do it when his sister wasn't around, for Lydia wouldn't approve of their outing at all. In fact, Lydia would be outraged.

A deep sense of shame entered his heart. He was being just as snobbish towards Georgina as his sister, despite the fact he yearned to be with her. He consoled himself that he was doing it for the right reasons. He was drawn to the mysterious, beautiful woman and couldn't afford to indulge the attraction.

She will be gone presently. Her memory will return shortly, and I will never have to see her again. This torment will soon be over. And a part of me cannot wait for the day.

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“Frances looks particularly lovely in blue,” said Lydia, turning to Sebastian in the landau, as they trotted along the edge of the cliffs, gazing out to sea. “Do you not agree, Your Grace?”

“Pardon?” Sebastian turned from his contemplation of the sea to his sister, frowning slightly. “What did you say, Lydia?”

Lydia sighed heavily, rolling her eyes. “I was complimenting Frances on the shade of her gown, saying that it suits her,” she said. “You must see how well the colour matches her complexion, Sebastian.”

“Oh, indeed,” said Sebastian hastily, turning to the lady, who looked very embarrassed at being the centre of attention. “You look quite lovely, My Lady.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” murmured Lady Frances, her colour deepening. “You are most kind.”

There was an awkward silence, and Frances bit her lip. Sebastian drummed his fingers on the edge of the landau’s door, wondering why he had let his sister talk him into this outing at all.

But Lydia had been particularly forceful this morning over breakfast, telling him that it was going to be a beautiful day and reminding him that they hadn’t been anywhere together in a long time.

A ride along the coastline, in the open-air landau, would be so refreshing, wouldn’t it?

Eventually, Sebastian capitulated, just to stop Lydia from going on about it. And now, his sister kept forcing him to compliment Lady Frances, which was just embarrassing for both of them.

Lydia, however, remained oblivious to their mortification, smiling brightly at them while chattering away like a starling.

I wish Georgina had come on this outing. Seeing her sitting in the landau, taking in the air would be wonderful. It would be wonderful just to see her at all.

His heart flipped just thinking about her. But, of course, there was no way he could suggest that she accompany them. Lydia would have thrown a tantrum. No way would she would have accepted Georgina's presence on the ride ... and his sister's displeasure was not to be endured.

His heart almost stopped as they passed by the spot where Georgina had fallen into the mine.

He had made sure that it was fixed properly now – the wooden boards at the entrance had been nailed into place, and he had checked it just the other day to make sure his will had been done.

He was also investigating how the boards had been broken in the first place, leading to the accident, but so far, he hadn't found who was culpable, much to his annoyance and frustration.

It had been three weeks since the accident. Three weeks since he had found her unconscious in the mine and taken her home with him. But she was no closer to getting her memory back.

Every day, he asked Mrs Sollock how Georgina was faring, and every day, the

housekeeper shook her head sorrowfully, telling him the young woman still didn't have a clue who she was or remember anything about her life.

He sighed. She was a stranger to this district. No one knew who she was. And no one was missing any member of their household. Georgina must have been running away from her home on the horse – it was the only explanation for it.

I must disseminate information about her further from home. Perhaps get some posters made and tack them onto walls in villages and towns. Someone must know who she is.

His heart clenched. As much as he wanted Georgina to recover her memory and return to her life, he was also reluctant for it to happen.

He was getting used to having her presence at Newquay Hall, to seeing her in the distance as she walked around the estate or sat reading in the library, even if he didn't actively approach her or seek her company any longer. Just knowing she was there was enough for him at the moment.

“Frances wants a large family, you know,” said Lydia abruptly, turning to him with a knowing look. “She wants at least half a dozen children.”

Frances looked mortified, flushing a deep brick red and glaring at her friend. Sebastian passed a weary hand across his forehead. Lydia was truly relentless.

“That is nice,” he said politely, inclining his head. “A large family is always a joy.”

“You always said you want a large family as well, Sebastian,” stated Lydia, nodding her head emphatically. “Newquay Hall is so large, after all. It has so many rooms that it can easily accommodate many children ... and the grounds are particularly impressive! So much space to run, hide, and jump for the little ones ...”

Sebastian tuned his sister's voice out of his mind as she kept rattling on, talking about animals and children and climbing hills as if she were trying to sell his own estate to him.

He had to admit that Lydia was impressive – if she had been born a man, she might have run the world. He hadn't met many people as efficient and doggedly determined as his older sister.

He turned to Lady Frances, watching her covertly. She really was a beautiful woman, with her auburn hair, willowy figure, and bright blue eyes. And her background and pedigree were impeccable.

A part of him really wished he could seriously consider her, for Frances had all the attributes that the next duchess must possess, but even if he could have contemplated courting her, he knew he could never follow through with it.

She is like another sister to me. There just isn't any spark between us, no matter how much Lydia wants there to be. I wonder how long my sister will persist with this before she gives up.

His thoughts turned to Georgina. He started to grow warm. He felt plenty of sparks between him and the mysterious woman staying at his home. Too many. He felt a pang of regret consume him.

It was such a pity he had no idea who she was and her place in the world ... and if he could indeed contemplate courting her.

Lydia had spoken an unpleasant truth again – there was a high probability that Georgina wasn't a lady at all. There was probably no way he could ever contemplate her. And that was the end of that.

Christina gasped, rearing up in the bed, her heart pounding hard. She blinked, gazing around. All was darkness – she couldn't see a thing. It was as if the darkness was consuming her entirely.

She was standing, facing an older man, who was well dressed and had thinning grey hair. A man who was very angry with her. The man's eyes were bulging, and she could see a vein throbbing in his right temple.

His face was flushed with rage. He raised his voice to her, shouting at her, telling her she must obey him. She ran out of the room ...

She blinked rapidly, trying to process it. She knew she had been in the midst of a very vivid dream. It was so vivid she felt as if she were still within it, as if the smell was still in her hair, the feel of it still crawling on her skin, and the sound of it reverberating in her ears.

She frowned, trying to slow her breathing. Her heartbeat was starting to regulate a little now, but the vision of the older man, who had been so angry with her, was still at the forefront of her mind.

It was hovering in front of her – so close she felt she could reach out and touch it.

Who was he?

A sickening, cloying feeling overtook her. She felt as if she really did know the man – as if he was a figure from her past and not just a figment of her imagination, a product of her dreams.

And if that were true – that she really did know the man – then perhaps there had

been a good reason she had been riding the horse that day along the cliffs, with only a few clothes stuffed into a bag, along with an apple.

Her heart lurched with sudden fear.

Was he real? And why was he so angry with me?

She rubbed her temples with the tips of her fingers, slowly massaging them, trying to formulate the man's face in her mind again, to conjure him from the depths of her mind. But all she could see was his figure from her dream.

If the man were a part of her life – if she did actually know him, and what had occurred in the dream had actually happened – then her mind didn't want to reveal it to her yet.

She slipped out of the bed, padding to the window, the long white nightgown she was wearing swishing around her bare legs.

Her teeth started to chatter a little – it was cold at this time of night, whatever the time was. The dead of night, probably. Her mind still felt foggy with sleep and the dream, so real that it was as if it were real life, and her waking life was the dream.

She reached the window, pulling back the thick curtain, gazing out.

The sky was inky black, and the moon was full and high in the distance, a creamy, pearlescent dream of a moon casting light over the gardens and the hills beyond. Suddenly, she was beset with the urge to feel the cold air on her face.

She undid the latch, pulling up the window and gasping. The air was cold and bracing, hitting her like a frigid slap to the face.

She gulped, feeling her hair lifting, streaming behind her. She leaned out the window, closing her eyes and relishing the feel of it. It felt like she was swimming – as if she had just dived into cool water.

Who was that man? And why was he so angry with me? Why can't I remember? Why is my mind refusing to tell me? What is my mind hiding from me?

A wave of frustration swept over her. It had been over three weeks since the accident. Dr Watson had told her she had an excellent chance of fully recovering her memory, and yet the basic details of her life, even her real name, still eluded her.

A feeling of dread entered her heart. Perhaps she was never going to recover her memory and her life. Perhaps she was going to be stuck in this dreadful limbo forever. And if that were the case, then what was she going to do? Where was she going to go? She couldn't stay here as a house guest of the Duke of Newquay forever.

Slowly, she opened her eyes. She gasped. As if she had summoned him she suddenly saw the duke striding along a garden path in the distance, his hands clasped firmly behind his back.

Christina's heart shifted as she watched him. What was he doing wandering the grounds alone in the dead of night? What demons had driven him from his bed and were causing him to wander in such a manner?

Abruptly, he stopped, turning around. He was looking straight at the window she was leaning out. Quickly, she drew herself back into the room, closing the window and pulling the curtains shut. Her heart was hammering, and she was finding it difficult to breathe.

She pressed herself against the wall, trying to compose herself. She didn't know if he had actually seen her or not – perhaps he had just been looking in the general

direction of this wing of the house.

The Duke of Newquay was enigmatic. She was living under his roof, but he was still a mystery to her. But she couldn't deny she was drawn to him, like the moth towards the flame. Irresistibly.

It was dangerous, for his sister didn't trust her and was watching her like a hawk, waiting for her to slip up and throw her out.

Christina took a deep breath. It was probably prudent to avoid him entirely, and since he was keeping his distance anyway now, that wasn't hard.

Still, would she be able to do it forever? And what would happen if she didn't?

She felt like she was leaning on the edge of a precipice and might fall at any given moment ... just like she had fallen from that cliff into the mine. She had lost her memory that time. What did she stand to lose now?

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Sebastian stopped walking, his heart seizing, as he saw the trail of a pale blue gown vanishing along a path in the garden. He knew it was Georgina. He had spotted her from his chamber window this morning and admired her in the pale blue gown, thinking how much the colour suited her.

She is the reason you decided to go for a walk in the gardens. Do not deny it. You are hoping you will run into her.

He rubbed his neck ruefully before continuing, knowing it was true. She had been on his mind even more than usual today because he had seen her leaning out of her bedroom window last night when he had been walking this very path in the middle of the night.

For some reason, he hadn't been able to sleep at all and had impulsively decided to take a midnight ramble through the grounds, thinking it would calm his mind. When he had seen Georgina, her eyes closed and her golden hair loose and streaming behind her in the wind, his heart had shifted in his chest, filling with a sensation he had never experienced in his life.

He quickened his step, turning down the path, and his heart almost stopped again.

There she was, at the end of the path, framed by an arbor of climbing red roses, as red as rubies, contrasting vividly with the gold of her hair and the blue of her gown. She looked like an angel from a Botticelli painting.

He had never seen anything more beautiful in his life.

Their eyes met and locked, and he felt a frisson down his spine. Slowly, before he even realized he was doing it, he started walking towards her. She didn't move. She looked as if she were frozen to the spot.

“Georgina,” he said, clearing his throat. His voice was hoarse and cracking. “I thought it was you.”

She swept into a curtsy, the blue gown spilling around her like paint onto the ground, before slowly rising, staring him straight in the eye again.

“Your Grace,” she said, her voice high and melodious, flowing like honey. Her eyes were impossibly green – as green as his lawns on a clear, bright day, and seemed to peer into the very depths of his soul. “You are walking very early this morning. I do not usually see you out this early.”

He raised his eyebrows. “It seems I was drawn out this morning.” He hesitated. “I was drawn out last night, as well. The middle of the night. I think I saw you leaning out your bedroom window.”

She blushed fiercely. “It is true. Her voice faltered. “I ... I had a most vivid dream, and I was having a hard time shaking it from my mind. I thought the night air might help me.”

He gazed at her curiously. “You can tell me about it if you like. Shall we walk together?”

She hesitated. His heart almost stopped again as he waited for her to decide. Eventually, she nodded her head, smiling at him shyly.

“I would like that very much, Your Grace,” she said.

He nodded, feeling inordinately pleased. He was on the verge of asking her if he could take her arm, then decided against it. They started walking, taking the path that veered to the right and led towards the lake at the bottom of the estate.

“What was your dream?” he asked eventually, turning to her, admiring the purity of her profile. “Why were you having a hard time shaking it?”

Georgina sighed heavily. “I was arguing with a man,” she replied slowly. “He was ... very angry with me. But I did not know why.”

“You feel that this man is part of your life?” He held his breath as he waited for her reply. “You feel that he is someone you know and that the dream really happened?”

She shrugged helplessly. “I hardly know,” she replied in a breathless voice. “It just seemed so real! And the anger was almost visceral – I could see, feel, and hear it. It was enshrouding me like a cloud.” She hesitated. “I raked my mind, tried so hard to recall the man, but there was nothing – as always.”

She hung her head, looking so dejected that he had to resist the impulse to reach out and take her hand to offer comfort.

“You know what Dr Watson advised,” he said. “He told you not to try to force it at all. The memories will come when they are ready.” He paused. “And it sounds to me as if that dream was a memory surfacing. You must see it as a good sign and not place too much expectation on it.”

“You are very kind,” she said in a halting voice, her eyes sliding to his face. “But I feel under immense pressure to get my memory back.” She exhaled slowly. “I cannot stay here taking advantage of your hospitality forever, Your Grace. If the memory of my previous life is fated never to return, then I shall be forced to move on and start my life anew ... wherever that may be.”

He gazed at her steadily, feeling acutely how vulnerable she felt, how adrift in the world, without anchor or harbour. Unconsciously, he took a step closer to her. Her eyes widened as she gazed up at him.

“I am sorry you feel that way,” he said gently. “You do not need to feel such pressure, Georgina. You may stay at Newquay as long as you need ... do not feel as if you are being pressured to regain your memory and move on. That is very far from the case.”

She looked doubtful, biting her lip, but nodded. “You are very kind. Hopefully, I will not need to intrude on your generosity for very much longer.” She paused. “We should not dwell on it. How are things with your mines? Are you still under pressure to sell?”

Sebastian hesitated. He really shouldn’t be discussing the family business with her – Lydia had reminded him that Georgina was a complete stranger to them, no matter how sincere and warm she appeared to be.

But at that moment, he was well and truly under her spell, and he couldn’t believe that she would ever betray his confidence or use whatever he might tell her against him.

His mind turned to the Earl of Cheltenham’s surprise visit and how the odious man wanted to buy all his mines on top of Hester’s threats.

The worst of it was that if things didn’t improve soon, he might be forced to consider selling. And the thought of that made him so distressed he could barely function ... so he was trying very hard not to think of it all.

“There is a lot of pressure,” he admitted, his face twisting. He paused. “I need to go over my ledgers with a fine toothcomb and see if there are any discrepancies and

unnecessary expenses ...”

“I could help you,” she said quickly. “I am good with numbers ... and have worked with business ledgers before.”

He gaped at her, stunned. She gasped, her hand flying to her mouth, looking as shocked as him at what had just emerged from her mouth.

“Really?” He stared at her. “How do you know?”

“It just popped into my head,” she said, shaking her head incredulously. “I had a clear notion that I have worked with ledgers before ... and that I know what to do with them.” She stared at him, her eyes widening. “It is uncanny. Do you think it is true?”

He shrugged, not knowing what to make of the odd statement. “We could find out,” he replied, his heart skipping a beat. “You could look at my business ledgers and see if you know what they are about. We would discover the truth fairly quickly – they would look like hieroglyphics to anyone unfamiliar with them.”

“You would be willing to do that for me?” She stared at him. “Truly?”

Slowly, he nodded his head, unable to believe himself that he was offering it. “Truly. It might help unlock memories of your life, Georgina ... and besides, you might be able to help me tidy them up a little, as well.” He shrugged. “It could be a win-win situation.”

“Alright,” she said hesitantly. “I would be willing to do it ... it might be a key to unlock my memory as you say, and I would greatly enjoy helping you if I can.” She paused. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

He smiled at her. “It appears that you might be well educated, Georgina,” he said, his

curiosity piqued. Who exactly was she? “Have you had any other flashes of memory or strange, vivid dreams that might indicate your past?”

Slowly, she nodded. “Yes, I have. Ever since that dream, I have had flashes of memory that flicker briefly and then fade entirely. They seem unconnected.” She paused. “I have seen a long hallway with a vivid tapestry on the wall depicting a battle from mediaeval times. Some beautiful gowns. And the face of a woman – a kind woman, who I trust implicitly – who is wearing a maid’s white cap. Nothing else.”

“Well, it is a start,” he said, his smile widening. “It is very promising indeed.” He hesitated. “Perhaps I should throw a grand ball to see if anyone recognizes you ...even though I do not think you are from this district now. What do you think?”

“Are you trying to get rid of me?” she joked, her face twisting.

“Not at all,” he said, his heart skipping a beat. “I just dislike seeing you suffer so much, and I feel responsible for your suffering.” His voice lowered. “I feel as if I owe you the world because of it, Georgina.”

Their eyes met and held. The flame between them flared to life again.

Suddenly, there was the sound of a frothy woman’s giggle coming from behind the hedge, followed by the low laugh of a man. They both jumped. Sebastian put a finger to his lips to indicate she shouldn’t speak, gesturing for her to follow him.

They walked on tiptoes towards the sounds. Sebastian smiled slowly. It was Lady Frances Lewis and his friend Lord Ealing whispering together. He watched in surprise as Daniel took Frances’ face between his hands, slowly leaning forward and kissing her.

“Well, well, well,” he whispered, shaking his head incredulously. “Wonders will never cease.” He paused. “My sister is going to be very disappointed. She had earmarked Lady Frances for me.”

Georgina giggled. “Oh, dear. It looks as if the lady’s heart belongs somewhere else entirely.”

They turned to each other, still laughing. His heart turned over in his chest. He realized he really wanted to kiss her – just like Daniel was kissing Frances.

Awkwardly, he turned away, his heart thumping harder still. He must be very careful indeed. How was he going to manage this fierce attraction towards her? He had tried staying away from her and failed miserably. What was going to happen?

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“There you are.” Lydia stood in the doorway of Sebastian’s study, gazing at him intently. “May I speak with you?”

Sebastian sighed, pushing away the ledger on the desk and gazing at his sister.

“Of course,” he said, trying to smile. “Come in. I am due for a break anyway. I will call for some tea.”

After the tea arrived and they both had a cup, Sebastian looked at his sister. Lydia had that pinched, sour look, which meant she was displeased about something. He recognized it well.

His sister was here because she had a bee in her bonnet, and he would hear about it, come hell or high water.

“What is it?” he asked shortly. “I can see you are disgruntled about something, Lydia. Best get on with it. I have a lot of work to do today.”

“That is exactly why I am here,” replied Lydia, placing her cup down and gazing at him with a determined look. “I have heard some alarming reports, Sebastian. I have been told that you are letting our mysterious house guest look at the mine ledgers.”

Sebastian sighed, rubbing his neck ruefully. He should have known that word would get back to Lydia about Georgina looking at the business ledgers. It had only happened twice since she had offered, but clearly, Lydia had spies in the household, and they had informed her.

He suppressed a smile, thinking about Georgina poring over the books, a slight furrow in her brow, and her mouth slightly open, a picture of concentration.

It appeared that her instinct that she knew how to work ledgers was indeed correct – it was as if her entire being came alive as she pored over the books.

She was clever – she had offered a few good suggestions about reducing expenditure, which he had never contemplated before, and her eagle eye had caught two costly mistakes.

Georgina was very good at arithmetic. She was a highly educated woman. She had worked in her family's business or as a bookkeeper. He tapped his chin thoughtfully.

Could that be a way to locate someone who knew her? Should he visit some bookkeepers in the district and ask if they were missing an employee? Surely, there wouldn't be many young women working in that capacity. It was usually the job of men.

"Sebastian?" Lydia stared at him expectantly. "Did you hear me?"

He jumped guiltily, forced out of his reverie. "Yes, I heard you." He took a deep breath. "Georgina has been helping me, Lydia. It seems she is very good at arithmetic and is familiar with business ledgers. Why should you begrudge her for lending a hand? It makes her feel less guilty for being a prolonged house guest at Newquay Hall as well – as if she is contributing to the household in some small way."

Lydia looked pained, rubbing the bridge of her nose, before gazing at her brother again, staring at him as if he was six years old and had upended the butter tray.

"You are being foolish, Sebastian," she scolded. "We know nothing about her at all. She could be anyone." She took a shaky breath. "It is a family business. She is an

outsider. You are letting her look at very sensitive financial information. How do we know what she will do with that information?”

He frowned. “I am sure you are overreacting, Lydia. She does not have an agenda for being here, and she is very grateful that she is here, and we are helping her.” He paused, studying her closely. “You truly believe that she is not to be trusted?”

Lydia sighed heavily. “I know nothing about her – I do not know who she is, where she is from ... and what her background is. And all of that makes me very cautious of her.” Her eyes flickered. “I understand you feel responsible for her because she was injured in one of the family mines, but you are being reckless, Sebastian. You should not be showing her the business ledgers. For all you know, she might be a spy. She might be trying to find out information about the business.”

Sebastian gave a bark of incredulous laughter. “A spy? Now you are being entirely fanciful, Lydia! And rather paranoid.” He exhaled slowly. “What motive could she possibly have? And you are inferring that she is pretending to have lost the memory of who she is in order to be here, which is erroneous. I found her myself. She really did hit her head badly. Ask Dr Watson if you do not believe me.”

A wave of intense irritation swept over him as he stared at his sister. Lydia was being ridiculous. She had taken an instant dislike to Georgina, which bewildered him. Anyone could see that Georgina was well-bred, even if she had presented in the clothes of a working woman.

He understood his sister being a bit wary of her, but the dislike was irrational, and not kind. Georgina was vulnerable ... and she didn’t even want to be here. To suggest the injury and her loss of memory was a ploy to infiltrate the family business was ludicrous in the extreme.

There was a tense silence. Lydia picked up her cup, sipping her tea, and after a

moment, Sebastian did the same.

“You do not know who she is,” she repeated eventually, her face solemn. “The only person who looks at those books aside from us is Mr Jenkins, the estate’s bookkeeper, who has served the duchy faithfully for over twenty years ... just as his father served the duchy before him.”

She exhaled slowly. “My point is that Mr Jenkins is entirely trustworthy and has proved worthy of that trust. You have known this young woman for five minutes by comparison, Sebastian. It is foolhardy ... and I believe you do know that, deep down.”

Sebastian felt a flash of guilt. His sister was being a bit over the top in her reaction towards Georgina, but she did have a very valid point.

He had been swept away by his strong feelings towards the mysterious young woman and his desire to help her recover her memory. But the business ledgers were confidential, and he shouldn’t have let her look at them, even if she had ended up helping him.

“I take your point,” he conceded ruefully in a sheepish voice. “I will not let her look at the ledgers again. I promise.”

“Thank you,” said Lydia, draining her tea and getting to her feet. She looked down at him. “You are growing rather too fond of her, Sebastian. I really think that if she does not recover her memory soon, then we should look into placing her somewhere.”

“What do you mean?” Sebastian gaped at her. “Place her where?”

Lydia’s face darkened. “She cannot remain as our house guest indefinitely,” she said in a tart voice. “Do you imagine that she will still be here as an old woman, unable to

remember her life?”

Sebastian reddened. “Of course not ...”

“If she is as clever as you say, then we should have no trouble placing her as a governess in the district,” she said loftily. “Or perhaps even as the mistress of a local school. I am certain that Georgina would like it, as well since she cannot wish to remain idle here forever. Can she?”

Sebastian shrugged awkwardly, not knowing what to say. Lydia gave him a dazzling smile before sweeping out of the room. His face was still burning. The next time that Georgina dropped by his study he would have to tell her that she couldn’t look at the books any longer. How was she going to take it?

Christina knocked on the study door, her hand shaking a little. The knock came out as a small rap. The door was wide open, and the duke was seated behind his desk, but he looked distracted and preoccupied. In fact, he looked rather grim indeed.

“There you are,” he barked, his eyes flickering over her. “Come in, Georgina.”

She entered the room, curtsying deeply, before straightening, her hands clasped together in front of her. She had been here twice to look at his ledgers ... and she had found, to her joy, that she knew how to read them. In fact, she was very good at it. He had been happy, too, with her suggestions to improve the business. More than that, it helped pass the time. She didn’t feel as much of a burden on the household. It gave her a sense of purpose ... and even helped her forget she had no idea who she was.

She bit her lip. She had to admit that she liked being here and doing this because it meant she was near him, too.

The duke was an extremely attractive man, and her attraction towards him – and connection with him – seemed to be growing exponentially. In fact, she couldn't seem to stop thinking about him.

“I have something to tell you,” he said curtly. His eyes flickered over her. “I will not be needing your assistance with the ledgers any longer. But thank you for your help, just the same.”

“But ... why?” Her voice was threaded with disappointment. “I thought I was helping you ...”

“You were,” he said with a slight smile. “And I have appreciated it, as I said.” He hesitated. “It was pointed out to me, quite correctly, that there is some sensitive information in the ledgers ... and that it is not your place to be privy to such information. Do you understand?”

“Of course, Your Grace,” she said in a small voice, feeling a stab of pain and dismay. “I understand completely.” She hesitated. “I am sorry that you feel that way. I would never betray your confidence in me. I just want you to know that.”

He reddened, looking uncomfortable. “Thank you. I do appreciate it.” He exhaled slowly. “I am sorry, I am rather busy at the moment.”

“I will leave you,” she said quickly, flushing. Hastily, she curtsied. “I am sorry I disturbed you. Good day.”

She turned and fled from the room. Her heart was thumping uncomfortably, and she felt tears burning behind her eyes. She didn't feel like returning to her room, deciding to walk in the gardens instead, heading outside into the cool air.

Angrily, she brushed away the tears, walking quickly down the path towards the

gazebo. She knew she had no right to be angry or indignant about it.

It was his decision if he let her look at his business ledgers ... and she understood that he didn't know her very well and there was sensitive information within them.

She exhaled slowly, staring at the lake shimmering ahead of her. No, it wasn't that. It was the fact that his attitude towards her had changed so dramatically. He had looked so uncomfortable and had spoken to her so brusquely, dismissing her utterly.

It was a far cry from how he had looked at and spoken to her over the past week. He had looked at her as if he was truly enamoured with her ... and had spoken to her as if he truly respected her opinion and admired her.

He does not owe you anything. He is a duke ... and you are a nobody. A woman without a name or a past. Why are you so upset that he has reminded you of that fact?

But the truth was, she was upset. Her chest was heaving and tight. Tears were stinging behind her eyes. There was a tight knot in her stomach, filled with pain. And no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't dismiss it.

Why had he suddenly dismissed her in such a way? What had changed between them? If only she knew.

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“Where are you going?” Lady Lydia took a quick step, blocking Christina’s entrance to the parlour in a very rude way. “What do you think you are doing?”

Christina took a deep breath. “Lady Frances invited me to afternoon tea,” she said tremulously, feeling hurt. “I have been invited to the parlour, My Lady.”

There was an awkward, painful silence as Lydia looked her up and down insolently. Christina took another deep breath.

“So,” said Lydia, with an unpleasant smile. “You have been told to keep your hands off the family business ... so now you are turning your attention to my dearest, oldest friend? Do you want to get your grubby mitts on her, as well?”

Christina flushed hard. “I do not know what you mean, My Lady,” she said in a low voice, feeling like she was about to burst into tears. “Lady Frances invited me to afternoon tea, not the other way around. Why are you being so hostile towards me?”

The lady’s nostrils flared. But before she could respond, Lady Frances appeared, a slight furrow in her brow.

“What is happening?” She turned to Lydia. “I invited Georgina for tea, Lydia. Just tea. There really is no need to overreact.” She gave her a dazzling smile. “Come and join us.”

After another awkward pause. Lydia smiled tightly, then nodded. They all turned and walked into the parlour, where the tea service was already laid out – hot scones with jam and cream, cucumber sandwiches, seed cake, and a steaming pot of tea.

They sat down, and Lady Frances poured the tea, handing the cups around. Christina tried not to look at Lydia, perched on the edge of an upholstered chair, with an odd look on her face, as if a bad smell had just wafted under her nose.

Now I know why the duke dismissed me from helping him with the ledgers so coldly. I suspected it anyway. His sister put her foot down and told him not to let me do it anymore. She truly despises me. But I already knew that, as well.

“The tea is a bit cold,” announced Lydia suddenly, looking offended. “I am going to the kitchen to talk to Mrs Sollock. I will be back directly.”

She got up, striding out of the room with a determined expression. Christina bit her lip as Frances sighed heavily, picking up a cucumber sandwich and nibbling on it before placing it back on her plate.

“I apologize on behalf of Lydia,” she said quietly. “She is the most loyal person in the world, and once she loves you, she will love you forever ... but she can be rather suspicious and prickly towards people she does not know.”

Christina shrugged, feeling mortified. “I am sorry. I did not mean to cause you any distress. Perhaps I should leave ...”

“No, do not leave,” interjected Frances. “Lydia will just have to get used to the fact that I like you and want to spend time with you. That is all.”

Christina softened, smiling at the lady. Frances was so lovely, and an unlikely friendship had sprung up between them, but she didn’t know if she could endure Lady Lydia’s wrath. It was most unpleasant.

“I notice that you have been spending a lot of time with the duke,” continued Frances, her green eyes gleaming with mirth and a small, wicked smile. “Do I detect that you

admire him?”

Christina blushed fiercely. “I ... I do like him a lot,” she admitted. “He is so very handsome, commanding, and kind.” She shrugged, feeling self-conscious. “But I do realize that it is impossible, of course. He is a duke, and I am ... well, I have no idea who I am at all.”

“I think you are a lady,” stated Frances firmly. “You are so refined and talk so well, Georgina, that it seems impossible to think otherwise ...”

Her voice faded away as Lydia marched back into the room, followed by Mrs Sollock, with a fresh pot of tea. Lydia took her seat again, glaring at Christina. The housekeeper left the room, following which, there was another strained silence.

“You should have declined this invitation,” she stated in a flat, cold voice. “A woman of questionable rank, who is most likely a commoner, should not be having tea like this with the daughter of a viscount. It is most improper.”

“I invited Georgina to tea, Lydia,” said Frances patiently. “You know that. Why are you persisting with this?”

But Lydia ignored her entirely, not even acknowledging that she had spoken, keeping her eyes firmly on Christina, whose flush had deepened with humiliation at the cold contempt of the lady.

She hesitated, wanting desperately to flee the room. She had been looking forward to having tea with Lady Frances – the interaction was going to be the highlight of her day.

It had been especially important to her since the duke’s snub. Once again, she felt like bursting into noisy tears. This was intolerable.

But then, as Lydia kept glaring at her, a wave of anger rolled over her. She raised her chin, returning the lady's glare with steel in her gaze.

"You are being exceedingly rude," she scolded, ice in her voice. "A true lady is polite and gracious to her guests, regardless of their station. It seems odd to me that you are unaware of that, My Lady."

There was a shocked silence, and Lydia looked affronted. Frances gasped, looking at the ground. But Christina kept staring at the lady, refusing to drop her eyes and back down.

"How dare you," spluttered Lydia, shaking her head incredulously. "How dare you lecture me on how to behave towards guests in my own home! Who do you think you are?"

"Clearly, I do not know who I am," shot back Christina with some heat. "But I do know what is required of a lady in her home ... as to how I know it, I really have no idea." She exhaled slowly. "You should be ashamed of yourself!"

Lydia gasped, standing up, her hands balling into fists at her side. "What ... what did you just say to me?"

Slowly, Christina stood up as well, refusing to break her gaze. Her heart was thumping uncomfortably, and she felt slightly sick at the unpleasant confrontation, but something stronger had stirred to life inside her that refused to be cowed by this rude woman.

She knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that she was speaking the truth, although she had no idea how she knew that she did. A lady of any calibre should never make her guests feel inferior or unwelcome.

She felt it had been drummed into her from when she was a small child, even though she couldn't recall who had told her or when. That was entirely beyond her.

"It is gauche to make a guest feel unwelcome in one's home," Christina said in an icy voice, arching her eyebrows. "It is a sign of ill-breeding. You really should know better, My Lady."

"You are insolent!" huffed Lydia, looking affronted. She had turned pale, and her eyes were glittering dangerously. "I never invited you to stay in my home, and nor did my brother! You simply barged your way in here by virtue of falling down a mine shaft." She took a deep, shuddering breath. "And the jury is still out on whether you did it deliberately or not."

"What are you insinuating?" Christina couldn't believe what the lady was saying. "Are you saying that you think I pretended to be injured just so the duke would offer his services to me and take me into his home?"

"Perhaps you did," replied Lydia, in a voice filled with contempt. "How would I know? I have never seen you before in my life! You may have staged the whole thing to gain entry to Newquay Hall and create all manner of mischief." She paused. "You could be lying about losing your memory entirely. You might know exactly who you are and where you have come from."

They had edged closer to each other as they fought and were now standing mere inches away from each other. Christina's heart flipped over in her chest in distress. This was truly dreadful.

A part of her wanted to end this conflict now and back down, telling the lady that she had been wrong to challenge her in such a way.

But another, more obstinate part of her refused to do any such thing. Lydia had been

spoiling for this fight since the beginning. The lady had been dismissive, rude, and unpleasant towards her. She had made the duke not like her anymore. She was trying to make Frances dislike her, too.

But that wasn't the end of what Lydia was trying to do. Now, the lady was trying to discredit her entirely by claiming that Christina was a fraud, that she had set up the entire thing as a way to gain entry to Newquay Hall to ... cause mischief.

She still had no idea what Lydia thought she was trying to do here, but whatever it was, it wasn't good.

She was hurt. No matter what she did, she couldn't win Lydia's approval. The lady had decided to distrust her right from the very start. And there was nothing she could do to convince her that she was wrong about her.

"I am not a liar," insisted Christina, in a low, angry voice. "I am not lying about losing my memory. I fell into that mine shaft and hit my head badly." She drew a deep breath, her eyes glittering with angry tears. "That is the truth of it, My Lady. I never asked his grace to bring me here to recover. He did that of his own volition ... and I am truly grateful for his generosity and hospitality. What more do you want from me?"

"That is enough, Lydia," said Frances, who had sprung to her feet and gingerly approached them. "This unpleasantness must stop. Let us sit down and have our tea in a civilized manner – before we all say something that we might regret."

An uncomfortable silence, filled with anger, descended upon the room. Christina could barely breathe. Lydia glared at her, but she turned away, walking back to her seat, picking up her cup of tea and sipping it slowly, staring frostily ahead.

Christina hesitated, biting her lip. After what had happened, she didn't want to sit

down, sip tea, and nibble on cucumber sandwiches. She wanted to collapse across her bed and never leave the sanctuary of the room again.

Except that it isn't my bed, nor is it my room. I do not belong here. I am a stranger.

Her eyes filled with helpless tears. She wanted to go home to a place where she was welcome ... but she had no idea where that was.

She was stuck here, in the lap of luxury, like a fly in amber, despised by the mistress of the house. And the worst of it was she had no other options at all ...

Suddenly, there was an almighty rumble, like the loudest thunder Christina had ever heard. Confused, she took a step back, gazing around.

The room walls were shaking – they were warping and twisting in front of her face. Her eyes widened in horror, and a low, distressed moan escaped her lips. What on earth was happening? Was it an earthquake?

Frances, who was seated next to Lydia, cried out in alarm. Lydia had turned deathly pale again, gazing around the room, looking as dazed and confused as Christina felt.

“Oh, dear Lord,” she cried, springing to her feet, gazing around her frantically. “There has been a mine explosion!”

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“What was that?” Daniel’s face was white and stricken with shock as he turned to Sebastian. “It sounded like a blast from hell itself.”

Daniel had only just called at Newquay Hall. The two gentlemen were taking a turn around the gardens.

Sebastian had been about to start teasing his friend, asking him about stealing kisses from Lady Frances Lewis when the explosion occurred, causing the ground to shake beneath them and a statue to topple over in front of them, crashing into two clean pieces.

“There has been an explosion at one of the mines,” said Sebastian, in a grim voice, starting to run towards the house. “Heaven knows what damage has been done. We must get there immediately.”

Daniel nodded, matching his stride, his face set in a determined line. That was one thing about his old friend – he was fiercely loyal and wasn’t afraid to get his hands dirty.

The ladies were running out of the house by the time they reached the front door. He noted that Georgina was with them, which was unusual. Lydia looked sick and stricken – his sister was deathly pale with fright.

“The mine?” she cried, rushing to him. “An explosion?”

He nodded grimly. “Yes. We must get there as quickly as possible, assess the damage ... and help where possible.”

“I will go to the kitchen and get Cook to make some baskets,” said Lydia. “The volunteers who come to help will need sustenance.”

“Good,” said Sebastian, already rushing towards the stables to get on his horse, with Daniel in hot pursuit. He kept shouting over his shoulder to her. “Make sure there is hot, sweet tea as well, Lydia, for the surviving miners. They will be in shock.”

The gentlemen got on their horses and were about to start riding out when Sebastian pulled in his reins tightly. Georgina had just run into the stables, looking frantic.

“What is it?” cried Sebastian.

“I must come with you to help,” she cried, gazing up at him, her eyes wide with distress. “I will do whatever I can. You will need every bit of help you can get, Your Grace.”

He hesitated, frowning, as he gazed down at her. A fallen mine was dangerous and no place for a woman, really. It was unstable and might collapse further. He was just about to tell her to go back to the house and perhaps help in the kitchen with the baskets when she reached up, taking his arm, gazing at him intently.

“Please, Your Grace,” she said in a beseeching voice. “I promise I will do as you say. I will not get in the way.”

“Let her come, Newquay,” said Daniel quietly. “I have a feeling Georgina will not get in the way.”

“Very well,” said Sebastian, his demeanour grim. “Get your horse quickly. We cannot afford to wait long for you.”

Georgina’s eyes lit up before she raced to the stable for her horse. Within minutes,

she was astride the beast, and they were all heading out over the open green fields towards the mine.

It was utter chaos when they finally got there. Injured miners – some of them very badly injured, howling in pain, clutching limbs – were being carried out of the mine and laid on the grass to be helped.

He noted that Dr Watson and another of the district's physicians, Dr Davies, were already in attendance, barking commands at the volunteers rushing to do their bidding.

Sebastian's eyes slid to the right. A cold shiver went down his spine, followed quickly by a rush of pure grief and furious anger.

A row of miners was laid out on the grass there ... white sheets covering their heads and bodies. The miners who had lost their lives in this explosion. And he had no doubt that more would be added to the row before the mine was finally secured.

"I am so sorry," whispered Georgina, following his gaze, resting a comforting hand on his arm. "So very sorry."

Sebastian's eyes filled with tears of grief and frustration. His throat was so thick with emotion that he couldn't speak at all. But somehow, having Georgina there was soothing him, taking away the intensity of the pain.

He knew it would come again later to claim him, but for the moment, he could handle it.

He nodded abruptly, staring at her intently for a moment, feeling like he was drowning in the sympathy within her eyes before he tore his gaze away.

He dismounted, tethering the horse, rushing towards the fray. One of the mine managers, Oliver Grier, turned to him, curtly nodding his head.

“Your Grace,” said the man, his voice filled with weariness and his face streaked with dirt and blood. “It is a tragedy.”

“What happened?” He noticed that Daniel and Georgina had walked to his side and were listening intently, as well. “What on earth happened, man?”

Grier sighed deeply, a look of pain crossing his face. “I ... I do not know,” he whispered, his pale grey eyes misted with tears. “One moment it was business as usual ... and then, I saw the flare of a match in the darkness ... and the next thing I know, I was thrown to the ground. My ears were ringing so badly I could not hear.”

Sebastian swore beneath his breath, running a hand through his hair. Someone had lit a match in the mine – which was expressly forbidden.

They knew its safety risks. He always ensured the managers drummed all the safety instructions into the miners, under pain of death. If a miner was even caught with a match on him while on duty, he was sent home and severely penalized.

A chill wind tore through him. But it looked like those safety instructions had been ignored today. His hands balled into fists at his side. A wave of ferocious anger swept over him, so powerful that he had difficulty containing it.

The only way he did contain it was by forcing himself to breathe slowly and remind himself that this was no time for anger. That could be expressed afterwards at the inquiry he was going to hold to get to the bottom of how such carelessness had been allowed to occur and how it might be prevented from happening in the future.

For now, they just needed to deal with this crisis – attend the injured and bring the

dead above ground.

“Your Grace?” It was Georgina, pale and wide-eyed, addressing him in a low, solemn voice. “It looks like the physicians need some nursing assistance. May I help them?”

Sebastian suppressed his shock at her question. “Yes, of course, Georgina. I am certain that your assistance would be very welcome.” He hesitated, frowning. “But it is confronting, mucky work. Are you quite certain you want to do it? You will need to have a strong stomach to deal with blood and the like ...”

“I am sure I will be fine,” she said determinedly. “And if I start to feel faint or overwhelmed, I will simply sit down and rest for a while.” A shadow of a smile crossed her face. “It is better to try and fail than never try at all. Do you not agree?”

“I do,” he said softly. “Thank you.”

She nodded, bobbing a small curtsy, before turning and rushing away to where the injured men were lying on the ground. As he and Daniel kept questioning the mine manager, he couldn’t help turning to watch her occasionally.

His heart turned over in his chest as he watched her, realizing that his admiration for her was growing by the second.

She had thrown herself into the fray, helping the physicians, even ripping the skirt of her gown to assemble makeshift bandages. She was dirty and smeared in blood, but she didn’t stop. Not for a minute.

His heart turned over in his chest again. He was almost entirely convinced that she was a gentlewoman now, if not a lady of rank, but she was acting in a way that no gentlewoman he knew acted.

Mostly, in crises like this, ladies helped by organizing refreshments like Lydia and Frances were doing. They rarely got their hands dirty like Georgina. They had been brought up to be very delicate – to swoon and faint at even the slightest sight of blood.

How tenacious she is. How determined and fearless. She truly is just the type of woman I have always yearned for – selfless, compassionate, and capable. She embodies everything I have ever wanted in a wife.

His breath caught in his throat, and he froze, as the thought swept through his mind. At that moment, Georgina looked up, wiping sweat off her brow with the back of her arm.

Their eyes met and locked across the grassy field. He felt a jolt unlike anything he had ever felt before.

If she were a woman of rank, who I could seriously consider, I would not hesitate. I would not hesitate for even a moment to pursue her.

Hastily, he turned away, breaking the connection between them, his heart pounding painfully. He couldn't consider her – he must not even let his mind journey down that train of thought, even for a moment.

His heart filled with profound sorrow. The weight of his lofty title felt as heavy upon his head as a king's crown. Society expected – no, demanded – that he marry someone of near, if not equal, rank.

There was no way on earth that he could seriously court and consider marrying a woman who had no position in this world – a woman who might be the daughter of a tinker or a tailor.

He had never wished to be anyone else in this life – had never felt that the responsibilities and expectations of his high rank were a burden in any way.

But now, he felt it keenly. Fervently he wished that he was just an ordinary man, free to choose who he wanted for a bride. For a moment, he indulged in the fantasy of it.

How happy I would be. How perfectly happy I would be.

“Your Grace?” Oliver Grier’s voice cut through his fantasy. “Are you quite alright?”

Sebastian took a deep breath. “Perfectly, thank you, Grier.” Firmly, he pushed the thought of Georgina aside, focusing on the manager of the mine. “Can we go over again exactly what happened in the lead-up to the explosion? We must get the details exactly right.”

He forced himself to concentrate as Grier went over the lead-up to the explosion and then went over it again. Daniel had the idea of sending for parchment and quill, and when it arrived, they wrote the manager’s account of the events down carefully before moving on to other miners who were shaken but not injured, writing down their accounts, as well.

Eventually, the mine was cleared. Slowly, his heart in his mouth, he strode over to where the dead lay, counting the bodies. Fifteen men had lost their lives in that mine. Fifteen men would never return to their families. And other men were close to death, as well.

It was a tragedy of epic proportions. And he was responsible. It had happened in one of his mines. The weight of it was like a shell on his back, weighing him down unbearably.

Suddenly, he felt a presence at his side. It was Georgina. She reached over, patting

his arm sympathetically, gazing at him with a look of pity on her face.

“I will seek justice for them,” he whispered, his voice thick with tears. “And I vow to look after their families until my dying day.”

“Of course,” she whispered, her green eyes flickering. “I would expect nothing less from you.”

Their eyes met and held again. He wanted to close his eyes and rest his head on her shoulder. He wanted no one but her ... and the tragedy was, he could never have her.

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Christina was silent as they walked into the foyer at Newquay Hall. She was so exhausted she could barely stand up.

Lord Ealing had returned to his home an hour ago – she and the duke were among the last of the helpers.

The injured had been cared for, either sent home or onward to hospital ... and the dead had been transported home, as well, so that their families could mourn and grieve and prepare them for burial.

Her throat felt thick with tears, remembering when the wives had started arriving, wailing and keening, breaking down with grief over the bodies of their husbands.

It had been so heartbreaking – it had been very hard containing her emotions. She had felt like breaking down and keening with grief herself.

She sighed deeply, turning to the duke, her heart flipping. His face was lined with exhaustion and despair – his dark eyes looked haunted.

She had been so busy nursing the injured men, but she had noticed him taking control, leading the inquiry into what had happened, and the men's respect for him.

He deeply cared for them and wanted to get to the bottom of this tragedy. Seeing his response to the disaster and seeing him among the miners had been a revelation ... and it had solidified her opinion of him.

He is a great man. A kind man. A man of integrity and courage.

“Thank you for your assistance,” he said in a low voice, threaded with weariness. “You were truly marvellous.” He hesitated. “I want you to go to your room to rest. I will tell Mrs Sollock to make a hot bath for you and send up a tray of food.”

Christina’s breath caught in her throat. “You are very kind,” she stammered. “You should rest as well, Your Grace.”

His dark eyes flickered over her, and his jaw tightened. A weight of emotion seemed to rush between them, filling the air. Her heart started to beat erratically, feeling like a small bird beating its wings frantically in a cage.

“I do not think I shall be able to rest,” he said in an anguished whisper. “For every time I close my eyes, I will see you ... witnessing your strength amidst that chaos has profoundly affected me ... I have never encountered a woman like you before, Georgina.”

She gasped, her heart beating faster still. His face was filled with such intensity and tenderness, unlike anything she had ever seen. And she had evoked that emotion within him.

She felt a corresponding rush of emotion so powerful that she gasped again.

There had always been a strong connection between them right from the moment they had met, but now, it had grown so strong it felt as if it were pulsating brightly, its glow filling the room and the space between them.

“I ... I do not know what to say,” she whispered, her throat going dry. “Only that I have never encountered a man like you, either, Your Grace.”

Slowly, he reached out, taking her hand. He leaned down, kissing it, his lips pressing fiercely against her skin. This wasn’t a polite peck – she felt the passion in the kiss,

barely restrained, threatening to engulf them both.

A frisson went down her spine, and her knees almost buckled beneath her. Was this swooning? Was this swooning with passion?

She had no idea if this had ever happened to her before with some other man, but it felt entirely new. It felt as if her very soul was opening to him, splitting open like spring's first budding in the sunlight, humming and quivering with new life.

I have fallen hard for this man. I have fallen so hard that I do not know if I can ever get up again.

But quickly following on from the sensation was a profound feeling of sorrow and loss. It didn't matter what they felt for each other – this first blossoming of passion and perhaps love between them was destined to be nipped in the bud. It could never fully blossom.

He is a duke - and I am a nobody without a name or a past. He can never seriously consider me. I know that. I have always known that. So why does it hurt so much?

Abruptly, he straightened, letting go of her hand. She felt the loss of the connection like a sudden amputation.

“Go now,” he whispered, his voice thickened with passion. “Rest. Recupérate.” He hesitated. “I will talk with you later.”

She nodded, curtsying quickly, before turning and walking down the hallway towards the staircase. Tears were burning behind her eyes, and her throat was so thick with emotion that she didn't think she could find her voice at all.

When she reached the top of the staircase, she stopped, gazing back. He was still

standing in the same position as if frozen in space, gazing at her intently. Their eyes connected and locked.

She couldn't breathe. The spark between them was so bright and fierce that it was overwhelming.

Go. Turn and leave. Nothing good can come of this. Nothing good can come of falling in love with this man. You are destined for heartbreak if you succumb to it.

With great difficulty, she tore her eyes away, continuing to her room. When she reached it, she closed the door, collapsing across the bed, not even caring that she was filthy, wearing a ripped, dirty gown smeared with dirt and blood.

She berated herself soundly. He was a duke. She was a nobody ... or at least, she had no idea who she truly was. His sister despised her and wanted her gone. She may as well be a child crying for the moon for all the chance she had with him.

Fiercely, she blinked back the tears. The sooner she recovered her memory and left Newquay Hall, the better for everyone ... including herself.

The next day, Christina sat at the window seat in her room, gazing out the window disconsolately.

Even though she tried to tell herself to stop doing it, she had been waiting for the duke – she had been waiting for him to send for her, or to knock on the door. For something. But the summons, and the knock, never came.

And it will not come. He knows as well as you do that indulging this attraction between us is pointless. He knows there is no future in it.

Suddenly, her heart seized. There was a small, sharp rapping upon the door. She stood up, her heart racing, her mouth dry. She smoothed the creases in her gown with trembling hands before walking to the door and opening it.

She bit her lip. Lady Frances was standing there. Christina tried to ignore the way her heart plummeted and crashed to the ground.

It wasn't him. It wasn't ever going to be him.

"My Lady," she stammered, curtsying quickly.

"Georgina," said Frances, smiling at her warmly. "I wanted to check how you are." She hesitated. "May I come in?"

"Of course, My Lady," said Christina quickly, opening the door wider to let her enter. "I am honoured."

Frances swept into the room. Christina closed the door, indicating that the lady should take the only chair in the room, while she sat down in the window enclosure again. They stared at one another without speaking for a moment.

"You look weary, Georgina," said the lady in a soft voice. "I heard about your bravery after the explosion ... how you nursed the injured miners. You are a wonder. Such a courageous, compassionate soul."

Christina blushed fiercely. "You are too kind, My Lady."

"I am only speaking the truth," said Frances with a kind smile. She hesitated. "I wanted to see how you are and commend you for your work yesterday ... but I have also called on you to give you a warning."

Christina's heart seized. "A warning?"

Frances nodded, looking pained. "Yes. A warning. I am afraid that the argument between you and Lydia is not over, Georgina ... in fact, I believe it is only just beginning."

Christina could barely breathe. "How so, My Lady?"

Frances sighed heavily. "Lydia and I attended a small dinner party last evening," she replied slowly. "His grace was supposed to attend as well, but he begged off after what happened at the mine, saying he was too weary and preoccupied to go to a dinner party."

"He was very upset about it," said Christina softly. "He leads with his heart."

"Indeed," said Frances. "He is a kind man and takes his duty to his workers and tenants very seriously." She hesitated. "Lydia was talking about you to our host and the other guests last night, Georgina ... and she was not being very complimentary about you. In fact, I would say she was deliberately spreading rumours about you."

Christina's heart skipped a beat. She should have realized that Lydia would up the ante and do something like this. She had challenged the duke's sister, and Lydia would not let that go. The lady had wanted to get rid of her anyway. Now, it appeared she was actively trying to do it.

"What was she saying about me?" Christina held her breath, waiting for the response.

Frances hesitated for another moment. "She was saying that she believes you are only pretending to have lost your memory to ensconce yourself at Newquay Hall to seduce and marry the duke."

Christina jumped to her feet. “How can she say such a thing about me?” she cried, her heart filling with anger and frustration. “Why is she so set upon the fact that I am a fraud?”

Frances sighed again, shaking her head sorrowfully. “I am so sorry, Georgina. I do not believe you are making it up to deceive and seduce the duke deliberately.” She hesitated. “But then, I have made the effort to sit with you and talk with you, so I know you are genuine. But Lydia has been suspicious of you from the start and quite determined to think ill of you.”

“Why?” Christina turned to the other lady. “Why is she so determined? Why will she not give me the benefit of the doubt?”

Frances shrugged. “I do not know the answer to that question, either,” she said with another heavy sigh. “Every time I try to steer the conversation in that direction, asking why she is so determined to believe the worst of you, she will not reply.” She paused, gazing steadily at Christina. “I do not know why she is so resolute as to match me with the duke, either, when it is clear that neither of us is interested. But Lydia is a stubborn, determined woman, and when she sets her mind to something, it is very hard to sway her.”

Christina sat down again, her sudden anger dissipating. She just felt weary and sad now. She could do nothing to make Lydia like and approve of her, and even her best friend didn’t understand her motivation.

If Frances was in the dark about what was driving Lydia, then what hope did she have of understanding it?

“All I know is there must be something quite important driving her to do this,” continued Frances in a thoughtful tone. “She would not risk public scandal otherwise. It is not her style to stoop to gossipmongering and spreading rumours – usually she

loathes such behaviour. So, whatever her reasons, they are vital to her. I am so sorry, Georgina.”

Christina sighed, gazing out the window. A sense of hopelessness overwhelmed her. She wasn't welcome here. She was driving a wedge between the duke and his sister.

And the fierce attraction between her and the duke could never blossom into anything. Both of those factors were reasons enough to flee Newquay Hall as soon as possible.

Her heart filled with pain and frustration. If only she could get her memory back and return to her old life.

She knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that if it did not happen soon, she would just have to leave this place anyway ... and start her life anew as a woman named Georgina. Before she was driven out.

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“A letter, Your Grace,” said the butler in a smooth voice, placing a silver tray in front of Sebastian and bowing low. “It arrived just ten minutes ago.”

“Thank you, Owens,” said Sebastian, taking the letter off the tray. “You may leave.”

The butler nodded, withdrawing from the study. Sebastian stood up from his desk, letter in hand, walking towards the fire. He sat down in the upholstered armchair closest to the fire, breaking the red wax seal on the letter and opening it.

His eyes slid to the bottom of the parchment to find out who the sender was. It was an old friend of his father’s, Major Tomkins, who had served with the late duke in the army during one of the Napoleonic wars. Major Tomkins lived nearby and was his godfather, so he tried to keep in regular contact with him. The gentleman was in a wheelchair now and quite hard of hearing, but he still had a sharp mind, nonetheless.

He stared into space for a moment, gripping the letter tightly in his hand. It had been three days since the explosion in the mine, and he had barely slept a wink.

Another miner had died of his injuries, taking the total number of casualties to sixteen. Yesterday, he visited the dead men’s families, offering his condolences and telling them that he would always look after them. But the guilt still hung over him like a dark cloud, and he didn’t know if it would ever leave him.

In addition to his guilt, he still struggled with his feelings towards Georgina. He had managed to resist sending for her or going to her room, but it had been very difficult. Every fibre of his being yearned to be with her.

Seeing how she had sprung into action during the disaster at the mine had strengthened his feelings towards her to such an extent that it was difficult to contain them now. He was growing warm just thinking about her.

She is under the same roof as me. What is she doing at this very moment?

With great difficulty, he forced himself to turn his mind back to the letter in his hand. Major Tomkins had very wavering, spidery handwriting, and reading it took a fair amount of effort.

Dear Sebastian,

I hope you are well and not feeling too bad after the accident in the mine. It is a terrible business, of course, but it does happen from time to time, and you should not take it to heart. You have always done your best for your workers and will continue to do so.

I am writing to you about another matter that has come to my attention. I attended a small garden party yesterday afternoon and was more than a little perturbed to hear your name mentioned ... and the name of the mysterious young woman you are housing. The young woman who fell down a mine a month or more ago and who you took into your home out of the kindness of your heart.

I am sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but there was much speculation about this young woman, and none of it was good.

Apparently, there is a strong rumour circulating that this young woman is a fraud, deceiving you that she has lost her memory and is actually a confidence woman, intent upon seduction and making herself the next duchess.

Obviously, I was shocked and distressed to hear such a claim and thought I should let

you know immediately that there might be a viper in your nest, so to speak.

If you need any clarification about this rumour, or further information about what people were saying, then do not hesitate to let me know, old chap. I am more than happy to help.

I remain, your loyal godfather,

Major Peter Tomkins

Sebastian stared at the letter in shock, not certain that he had read it correctly. Was his godfather actually saying that Georgina was defrauding him ... and had deliberately been doing so right from the very start?

He shook his head incredulously, reading the letter again and then a third time before slowly closing it, staring into space again.

He felt cold sweat trickling down his neck. Lydia had made such claims against Georgina, but he had instantly dismissed them, knowing that his sister had taken an instant strong dislike to the young woman he had rescued and had sensed the attraction between them, which hadn't suited her at all, given that she was hell-bent on matching him with her best friend.

He shook his head again. But now ... now there was a rumour circulating about Georgina's authenticity.

Lydia couldn't possibly be the source of it – she despised gossip and would never start a scandal that would besmirch his reputation or the reputation of the duchy. His sister was far too loyal and had always been fiercely protective of the duchy.

His blood ran cold. If his sister hadn't started this rumour ... then who had? And did

that person have information about Georgina that he wasn't privy to? Or was it simply idle conjecture?

No, it cannot be true. I rescued her from the pit myself. She was terribly injured and unconscious. What manner of person would deliberately hurt themselves in such a way just to deceive me and infiltrate their way into my home ... and my heart?

Sebastian shifted uneasily in the chair. It was impossible. Whoever had started this rumour about Georgina clearly had no idea how injured she had been when he had found her. It wasn't possible to fake those injuries. Dr Watson had attended to her and had never expressed one moment of doubt about her.

But she might have deceived you about her memory loss, even though she had genuinely suffered a head injury. Perhaps she is an opportunist and took advantage of the situation when she regained consciousness. Anything is possible.

Abruptly, Sebastian stood up, pacing the floor, trying to force that small, mean voice of doubt out of his head. He would ignore this rumour – for now.

Any mean-spirited person might have started it through idle gossip and didn't have any particular information about Georgina at all.

He supposed he shouldn't be surprised, given that she had been staying here for over a month now and word had clearly moved around the district about her. He had done that himself – he had been trying to find anyone who knew her, after all.

He rubbed the back of his neck ruefully. Georgina wasn't defrauding him for her own gain.

She was a clever, spirited, and courageous woman unlike any he had ever met before, who had the beauty of a goddess and the heart of a lion. A woman who he was

dangerously close to losing his heart to completely.

Another cold sweat broke out over his entire body. She would never betray his trust in her. Or would she?

Christina strolled along the garden path, trying to ignore the two scullery maids who were standing in the near distance. They were staring at her quite openly, whispering together behind their hands. Their eyes were cold as they gazed at her.

She felt a trickle of uneasiness fall through her. The servants and workers in the duke's household and on his estate had always been kind to her and never treated her badly.

But over the past day, she had felt that changing somehow. A cold, rude glare here and there. People were moving away from her when she entered the kitchen. And now, here were these maids, staring and whispering about her and not trying to hide it at all.

Her heart plummeted. She stopped walking, turning around and facing them. She knew their names were Rosie and Martha, but she had never really spoken with either of them before. Slowly, she started walking towards them. Their chatter died as she approached.

"Good morning," she said, raising her chin in the most pleasant voice she could muster. "I could not help noticing that you seem to be talking about me. Why?"

The maids looked startled and a little sheepish at her directness. But then, the one named Rosie, a plump, hard-faced girl with eyes so small they reminded Christina of blackcurrants, raised her chin as well, looking her directly in the eye.

“They say you are a confidence woman,” declared the maid in her strong local Cornish dialect. “They say that you have not lost your memory at all but are faking it so that you can seduce and marry his grace.”

Christina’s heart hit the ground again. Of course, she should have realized the rumour that Lady Lydia had started in that genteel dining room would have spread to the servants’ halls by now.

The servants at the dinner party Lydia had attended had overheard her, then whispered among themselves ... and then whispered it to the servants at Newquay Hall.

Christina had been foolish to think it could be contained. It was clearly spreading like wildfire through the entire district – in both the drawing rooms of the gentry and the kitchens of their servants, as well as among the local farmers, miners, and tradesfolk.

Her throat went dry with sudden panic. If these maids had heard Lydia’s poison about her, then it stood to reason that the duke had probably heard it, as well.

What must he be thinking? Would he believe it? But how could he, when he had pulled her from that abandoned mine shaft with a large, bleeding gash on her head himself?

The maids were staring at her avidly, clearly wanting her to react to what Rosie had just said so they could whisper about it over dinner in the servants’ quarters. There was no way she was going to give them the satisfaction.

“I see,” she said in a prim voice, raising her chin higher. “Well, only ignorant fools listen to idle gossip. So, you may believe what you want about me. But I know the truth, and that is all that matters. Good day.”

Christina turned on her heel, marching away without looking back at the maids. She crossed her arms in front of her tightly, holding her forearms, digging her nails into them, her face burning.

Abruptly, she stopped. Mrs Sollock, the housekeeper, was walking toward her. How was the housekeeper going to treat her now? Would she greet her pleasantly, as she usually did, or would she ignore her and keep on walking?

She felt panic flare inside of her. She almost turned, veering to the left, to escape the confrontation. But then, Mrs Sollock raised her hand, waving at her. Christina stood still, feeling sweat pouring down the back of her neck as the housekeeper approached.

“Georgina,” said Mrs Sollock, with a small smile. “How are you?”

Christina almost slumped with relief. Tears prickled behind her eyes. Mrs Sollock wasn’t acting any differently towards her. The housekeeper must have heard the rumours circulating about her, but she had clearly decided they weren’t true, or it wasn’t her place to judge Christina.

“I am not so well, Mrs Sollock,” she said, biting her lip. “There is talk about me.”

There was an uneasy silence. The housekeeper nodded slowly.

“Yes, there is,” she replied eventually. “There is a lot of it.” She hesitated. “I think you should talk to the duke about it ... before someone else does.”

Christina gulped. She hadn’t seen or talked with the duke since the day of the explosion. The last time she had seen him he had kissed her hand fervently and told her there was no other woman like her in the world.

Her heart shifted. How was he going to treat her now?

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Christina hesitated for only a moment before she knocked on the study door. It seemed like an eternity before she heard the muffled voice on the other side. “Enter.”

She stepped into the room, gazing around, her heart filling with pain. Only a week ago, she had been coming here to help him with the business ledgers for the mines.

He had trusted her implicitly. Only a few days ago, he had let her accompany him to help after the explosion at one of the mines, praising her efforts.

How was he going to react towards her now?

Lydia. It is entirely Lydia’s fault. She was the one who put doubt into his head about me working on the ledgers ... and now, she has cast doubt to the world about me, telling everyone that I am defrauding the duke entirely.

He was standing near the fireplace, with his back to her, gazing out the window. Slowly, he turned around. Despite the circumstances, her heart started pounding hard and she felt a frisson of delight.

The sight of him – broad-shouldered and commanding in a crisp black jacket and cream britches, his tousled dark hair falling over his face – took her breath away.

He was so devastatingly attractive, but it was more than that now. Much, much more. She knew his mind ... and his heart. He was a clever, courageous, compassionate man. A good man. The very best of men.

She curtsied deeply before rising. “Your Grace.”

But he wasn't smiling at her the way he usually did, and his dark eyes weren't shining the way they normally did when he beheld her, either.

"Georgina," he said in a short, clipped voice. "What can I do for you?"

Her heart plummeted at the coldness in his voice. It was such a stark contrast to how he had last spoken to her that it made her mind whirl and her heart ache.

She took a deep, ragged breath. She had requested this audience with him, and she had done it for a good reason. She must get on with it and not let his demeanour unnerve her.

"I apologize for disturbing you," she stammered, feeling disconcerted. "But I thought we should talk." She exhaled slowly. "I ... I have heard some disturbing rumours circulating about me in the servants' hall. I thought you may have heard them as well."

He nodded curtly but didn't say anything. She felt sweat trickle down the back of her neck again. It seemed he wasn't going to make this easy for her.

And worse than that, the lack of surprise on his face showed her that he knew exactly what she was talking about.

"The rumours are not true," she declared, trying to make her voice sound firm but calm, even though she felt like bursting into noisy tears. "I would never do that to you or anyone." She hesitated. "I am not pretending to have lost my memory to stay here and seduce you, Your Grace. The very idea of it is terribly distressing to me ... as is the thought that I might lose your trust in me ..."

Abruptly, she stopped talking, staring at him pleadingly. He was just looking at her, his head tilted sideways, his mouth drawn in a tight line. There wasn't a flicker of

warmth in his eyes. In fact, he looked quite hostile towards her.

He doesn't believe me. He thinks it is true.

Her heart somersaulted in her chest in distress. She was too late – he had heard the rumours about her and stewed on them.

Probably his sister had fanned the flames, reiterating that 'Georgina' was fraudulent and that she had never trusted her right from the start. She should have asked to see him and confronted him about them as soon as she had heard them circulating.

She felt her mind begin to whirl. She felt sick to her stomach. Clearly, the damage was already done ... and there was nothing she could do to repair it.

"I ... I can see that you have already heard these rumours and believe them," she said faltering, trying to raise her chin and look him straight in the eye without flinching. "I do apologize. You have been so generous and kind to me, but I will no longer impose on you. I will leave your home as soon as I make the necessary arrangements."

She turned to leave. But then she stopped, turning back to him.

"It really is not true," she cried, her mask slipping finally, so that he could see how upset she was. "And it is distressing for me even to hear it. But I will say no more. Good day, Your Grace."

The tears were blurring her vision now. She turned and fled the room before she embarrassed herself entirely and burst into noisy tears.

He didn't need to see her distress. She would only make a complete fool out of herself. He would probably think that she was just pretending – that she was shedding crocodile tears.

Christina fled the house, seeking the garden. She marched briskly, her back ramrod straight and stiff. It was only when she entered the secluded sanctuary at the end of the west wing of the gardens, where she couldn't be easily discerned, that the mask finally fully dropped, and she burst into piercing tears.

She sat down on the ground, leaning against an old statue of the goddess Venus, which was covered in moss, sobbing her heart out.

She vaguely heard the birds chattering merrily in the trees above and the humming of bees as they sought the sweet nectar of the flowers surrounding her, but she didn't comprehend any of it.

All she could think about was the cold look on the duke's face as she had told him that the rumours about her weren't true.

Her heart turned over at the thought that he could believe her capable of such deception. They had grown so close over the past month – she had genuinely believed that he admired her ... as well as desiring her. How could he just dismiss his feelings, turning them on and off like pumping water from a well?

Christina wiped away her tears with the back of her hands. She was so hurt that he could believe the rumours about her, but she supposed she couldn't blame him. He was a duke.

He owned a magnificent estate, owned a mining business, and was very wealthy. There would be many unscrupulous people out there who would take advantage of him, given half the chance.

A lot of confidence women, as well as common fortune hunters, who would try to take him for a ride if given the opportunity. He would be a fool not to be cautious.

But I am not one of them. I do not know who I am, or what my life was like before I came here, but I do know that. I know that I have integrity.

A wave of furious indignation swept over her. She was an honest person – she knew that. She was genuinely suffering from memory loss, and no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't seem to recover it completely. The vivid dreams and fleeting flashbacks she had of random people and things were not enough – it wasn't happening quickly enough. How could she make herself remember her life?

She realized she was gripping her knees so tightly her knuckles were white. Slowly, she exhaled, getting to her feet. Instinctively, she started heading towards the stables. She didn't even realize she was going there until she was upon them.

She slipped inside, making sure that no one saw her, her heart beating hard as she walked to the stable at the end, which contained the handsome black horse she had been riding on the day of her accident. The horse that held the key to who she really was.

The horse was leaning over the stable door as if it realized she was coming. Christina ran to it, crooning to it sweetly, stroking its glossy nose, admiring its beauty.

I love this horse with my whole heart. I know that I do, yet I cannot remember why. I cannot remember when I first got this horse, our first ride together, or anything about my relationship with the animal. Why? Why won't my memory return? What am I trying to forget ... what is my mind trying to shield from me?

She stared into the soft brown eyes of the beast, willing the memories to return, but it was as useless as always. It just wasn't happening. She let out a sob of pure frustration. The horse nickered, pressing its nose against her as if trying to comfort her.

Suddenly, she knew what she needed to do. She needed to ride the horse. She needed to leave the estate entirely, to feel the wind on her face, her hair streaming behind her.

She needed to get away from this pressure just for a little while. And who knew – maybe riding the horse by herself, over these hills, might spark a memory within her mind, leading to the recovery of her entire life's memories. At the very least, it couldn't hurt.

As she led the horse from the stable, saddling it, she tried to ignore the deep hurt within her heart, pushing aside thoughts of the duke entirely. She couldn't make him believe she was an honest person. She couldn't make him love her, either. Now, she just wanted her old life back. Whatever it had been.

Sebastian hurried down the garden path, searching for Georgina. Mrs Sollock had told him that she had seen her entering the gardens but didn't know what direction she had gone.

The housekeeper's eyes had been filled with sympathy as if she knew how hard this was for him. How hard he was battling to figure out the truth of this.

He stopped abruptly, gazing around, as he reached a fork in the paths leading in two directions. The sun was shining brightly on his face. He squinted, contemplating both of them, wishing he could figure out which one she had taken.

I cannot believe it has come to this. I cannot believe that I am seriously considering that she might be a confidence woman. I rescued her from the pit with my own arms. I know how injured she was ... and how dazed and confused when she finally regained consciousness.

He hesitated. The rumours about Georgina had been gaining ground, whipping around the estate with lightning speed.

Mrs Sollock had informed him that the servants were whispering about Georgina in their quarters, and no matter how firmly the housekeeper told them off, they kept doing it.

The scandal was taking on a life of its own ... and no matter how hard he tried to tell himself that he shouldn't listen to gossip, the doubts had entered his mind and his heart, worming their way in like poisonous asps and lodging there.

His heart tensed. He must find her. He could see how distressed she was when she had left the study, and it had broken his heart. He didn't know what he believed anymore ... only that he didn't want to see her so upset.

Suddenly, he saw Hawkins, the stable master, walking towards him. The man's face was grim.

"I thought I should tell you that the young woman has taken the black horse," said the stable master curtly. "She did not tell anyone. She simply slipped into the stable, saddled the beast, and has taken off riding, Your Grace."

"Thank you, Hawkins," said Sebastian, his heart sinking.

The man nodded, leaving him. Sebastian kicked a stone, staring into the distance. His heart was filled with trepidation. She had told him she was leaving Newquay Hall. Had she just done it?

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“Keep going, boy,” whispered Christina into the black horse’s ear, as they sped along the field, the air whizzing around her head. “Faster!”

The horse seemed to understand exactly what she had just commanded. They were already galloping. Now, the horse increased its pace again, flying like the wind. Christina gasped with sheer delight.

The world was rushing by so fast it was a blur – it looked like paint smeared on a canvas. It was so exhilarating that she gasped again.

This is exactly what I needed. I feel as if the ride is blowing cobwebs out of my mind. I feel as if I do not need to think at all.

She leaned forward, hugging the horse tighter, feeling as if her very muscles were an extension of the animal. The connection was so strong between them as if they were communicating via telepathy.

She knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that she and the horse had been close in her real life. They were the very best of friends.

She gritted her teeth. If only the horse could talk and tell her who she was and where she came from. If only.

For five minutes, they raced like the wind. Eventually, she slowed the horse down to a trot. They skirted along the top of a hill before heading towards the ruins of a castle in the near distance.

She would explore it before she headed back to Newquay Hall – it would give her something to do while she thought more about what she would do next.

She tethered the horse to a tree, carefully picking her way through the castle's ruins. There were large grey stones scattered everywhere and brambles interlacing the decaying walls. She had just entered what looked like an old chapel, complete with a tumbling altar, when she stiffened. There were voices on the other side of the wall. Men's voices.

She froze, not knowing what to do. She didn't want to alert them to her presence – she was enjoying being alone. She needed to be alone.

She was just about to creep stealthily out of the ruins when she stopped, listening intently to what they were saying. Her eyes widened – she recognized one of the voices. It was so strident and loud.

“You made sure the wooden slats at that abandoned mine were loose?” The man's voice was withering. “They are fixed now. It was boarded up closely when I walked past it just the other day.”

“Of course, it is boarded up now,” the other man exasperatedly replied. “He found an injured young woman in the shaft. He made sure it was fixed after that.”

Christina froze again. Her heart started to pound uncomfortably. They were clearly talking about the abandoned mine she had fallen into ... and 'he' was the duke.

Abruptly, her blood ran cold as she realized the first voice belonged to Mr Walter Hester, the man who had spoken to the duke in the village inn that day.

The rival mine owner who had been so rude to the duke. The man who the duke didn't like at all. His nemesis if you will.

“You must find a way to sabotage it again, Barstow,” declared Hester in a cold voice. “Along with all his other abandoned mines. The more accidents that happen within them, the more word will get around that Newquay’s mines are unsafe, and confidence in him will plummet ... which will mean he will sell his mines to me for a song.” There was a significant pause. “Remember, I am paying you a very pretty penny for this, my good man. I demand results.”

There was silence for a moment, and Christina’s heart started to race. They were standing on the other side of the crumbling castle wall and might start walking into where she was at any moment.

She really should leave before they realized she was here. But she couldn’t. She needed to hear more of their conversation. It was very important – Hester was clearly paying this man, Barstow, to sabotage the duke’s mines.

“And you are getting results,” retorted Barstow hotly. “There was the accident with the young woman – then the mine explosion.” There was a taut silence. “I don’t feel good about that one, Hester. Good men lost their lives ...”

“You are not being paid to have morals,” snapped Hester. “You are lining your pockets nicely with my coin. You will soon have a nice little nest egg and can leave this district and start over again. You will never have to worry about this community again, will you?”

“I suppose not,” replied the man. But his voice was filled with fear and trepidation. There was another pause, and Christina tensed more, watching a bird fly onto the top of the crumbling wall, staring at her intently. “What do you want me to do next?”

“I want you to sabotage another of his abandoned mines,” declared Hester. “Do not make it look too obvious. I will make sure that people see it ... and the rumour mill starts circulating about it. His reputation will be in tatters soon ... and it will make it

so much easier for me to swoop in and buy his mines.”

The bird on the wall suddenly squawked, and Christina froze. She heard footsteps from behind the wall. The men were approaching, clearly attracted by the sound of the bird.

Quickly, she threaded her way back through the ruins, trying not to make a noise. She didn't want them to catch her – they would know instantly that she had overheard their conversation.

Her heart was in her mouth by the time she made it back to the horse, untethering the reins from the branch and leading the animal away.

She mounted at a safe distance from the ruins, flying like the wind towards Newquay Hall.

She bit her lip, needing to speak to the duke immediately and tell him what Hester was doing ... and what he was still planning to do. But would he believe her? Or would he assume that she was just trying to cause mischief?

The trust between us is broken. He will probably assume that I am making it all up to curry favour with him – that I am being manipulative. But I must try. What else can I do?

“You look like a bee in a bottle,” remarked Sebastian, staring at Daniel as his friend paced the study floor. His friend had dropped by unexpectedly. “Whatever is the matter, old chap?”

Sebastian tried to focus on his friend. But he couldn't help glancing out the window.

It had been over an hour since Georgina had taken the horse and left Newquay Hall, and there was no sign of her return. Had she truly fled the house forever?

No, I cannot believe she would just flee without informing anyone. She did not speak to Mrs Sollock or any of the other servants. And Lady Frances doesn't know anything about her leaving, either.

He had torn through the house like a mad thing when he realized she was gone, questioning everyone. But no one knew where she was heading. She hadn't spoken to any of them. She had simply taken the horse from its stable and ridden away.

Abruptly, Daniel turned, facing him. His face was white. "I have come to confess," he said quickly, the words tumbling out of his mouth. "I ... I am secretly courting Lady Frances Lewis, old chap. Behind your back. I feel dreadful about it."

Sebastian turned his full attention to his friend, stifling a grin. Daniel looked so earnest and scared. For a split second, he contemplated stringing him along, acting offended and angry at the declaration, then decided he couldn't be so cruel.

Daniel had clearly screwed up his courage to tell him this. He looked taut with tension, his manner stiff and rigid.

Sebastian realized, quite suddenly, that his friend was serious about Lady Frances. Daniel wouldn't be acting like this otherwise. He wouldn't have even bothered to call on him to tell him.

"You have my blessing, old chap," he said with a rueful laugh. "Truly."

Daniel's eyes widened. "You ... you understand what I am telling you?" He shook his head incredulously. "But ... I thought you held a flame for Lady Frances. At least, that is the impression your sister likes to give."

Sebastian gave a bark of laughter. “Yes, Lydia enjoys interfering in my life, alright,” he stated, his mouth tightening momentarily. Then his eyes softened. “I am telling you the complete truth, old chap. Lady Frances has always been like another sister to me. I have no romantic feelings towards her at all. You truly have my blessing to pursue her.”

Daniel visibly sagged. “Thank you, Newquay. I feel like a weight has been lifted from my shoulders.”

“You really like her, do you not?” Sebastian gazed at his friend curiously. “I have never seen you this way before.”

“I do,” declared Daniel, his face splitting into a grin. He took a deep breath. “I am sorry. I was so preoccupied with it that I forgot to ask you how the inquiry about the mine tragedy is progressing. How are you, and how is it going?”

Sebastian sighed heavily. “I am still gathering evidence. It will be a long process. I hope the inquiry into the disaster will be ready in about a month or so.”

“Good,” said Daniel, nodding. He hesitated. “I have some news about Hester, my friend.”

Sebastian tensed. “What news?”

“He managed to buy two more mines,” he replied, his eyes flickering with concern. “It means that you and Hester own all the mines in this district now, Newquay.” He hesitated. “And I heard a rumour that he plans to drive down the price of copper to force you to sell your mines to him.”

“Over my dead body, he will,” growled Sebastian, his hands balling into fists. “He will have the fight of his life on his hands.”

There was a tense pause, and Daniel cleared his throat again.

“I should mention, too, that I have heard rumours circulating regarding Georgina, old chap,” said Daniel, looking embarrassed. “They claim that she is faking her amnesia ... so as to deceive and seduce you.” He hesitated. “I want to tell you I do not believe a word of it. I like Georgina and believe she has a good character. The way she swung into action helping the injured miners proved it.”

Sebastian’s heart flipped. “I have heard the rumours,” he admitted. “I confronted her about them ... and she said she will leave the house if I truly doubt her authenticity.”

“Do you?” Daniel stared at him hard. “Do you think she is faking it?”

Sebastian shrugged helplessly. “At this point, I do not know what to believe,” he admitted. “I want to believe her ... very much.” He hesitated. “I am torn, old chap. I am thinking about hosting a grand ball and inviting people from far and wide, outside of the district as well, to see if anyone recognizes her.”

“What a great idea,” enthused Daniel. “We could use the ball to gather more information about Hester’s schemes, as well ...”

Sebastian turned to the window, his friend’s voice fading slightly. A flash of colour and movement had caught his eye. His heart contracted violently.

It was Georgina atop the black horse, cantering across the lawn towards the stables. Abruptly, she stopped, dismounting, leading the horse by the reins. The next moment, she vanished from view.

A wave of relief swept over him. She had returned. She hadn’t fled Newquay Hall. It told him all he needed to know about how he felt about her.

He frowned. But his feelings were not the issue. It was whether she could be trusted. And he still just didn't know. The doubts about her had wriggled into his heart like worms, and he didn't know how to dislodge them. Or even if he should try.

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“Come along, boy,” whispered Christina, leading the horse by the reins towards the stables. The horse’s flank was glistening with sweat. It had been a long, intense ride, and she knew the horse was exhausted from it. “Let us get you to your stable where you can have a long, cool drink and a rest ...”

Her voice drifted away. Lady Lydia was walking quickly along a garden path just ahead of her, her hands clasped firmly in front of her, looking as neat as a pin in a pink and white gingham gown, her hair slicked back into a firm bun. Lydia had a determined look on her face, but she also looked distracted.

Christina hesitated. Indignation started pulsing in her veins. She needed to try to find the duke to tell him quickly what Hester was up to, but she wanted to confront his sister, as well.

This was the first time she had encountered Lydia since she had become aware of the rumours circulating about her – rumours that Lydia had spread.

Before she had time to think about it, she veered to the right, pursuing the lady. Her heart was pounding hard now.

“Lady Lydia!” she called.

The lady stopped, turning around slowly. Her face hardened when she saw it was Christina who had called out to her, but she didn’t flee. She stood her ground, her hands still firmly clasped together, waiting for Christina.

“I need to speak to you,” rapped Christina, without preamble. She knew she sounded

abrupt and rude, but she no longer cared. The gloves were definitely off regarding her relationship with the duke's sister, and she didn't see the point in pretending it was any different now. "Why are you spreading vicious rumours that I am pretending to have lost my memory? It is untrue! I fervently wish that I could remember my life and not have to be in this terrible situation."

"I really do not care," Lydia said coldly, her eyes flickering over her. "I do not care if you are authentic or not." She assessed her carefully, studying her like a strange insect beneath a microscope. "You are in the way, Georgina. You have infiltrated yourself into my brother's affections ... and that will not do at all. You must leave Newquay Hall."

"How am I in the way?" Christina gaped at her. "I do not understand."

Lydia sighed heavily. "I am his grace's only sibling," she said in a pained voice. "I am his older sister. I expected to play a pivotal role in the important decisions of his life – and that includes who he decides to marry." She paused. "Your arrival has jeopardized that position – it has jeopardized it within the household, and my status is threatened. You are an interloper, Georgina. You are a cuckoo in the nest ... and you must be turned out."

Christina's jaw dropped. She didn't know what to say.

"You are commandeering my brother's attention," continued Lydia in a pensive voice. "You are threatening my position as lady of the manor ... and I am determined that the next Duchess of Newquay will be a dear friend of mine – and not an outsider."

Christina frowned. The lady spat the last word as if it were obscene. Clearly, Lydia was closing ranks. She wanted Lady Frances to marry the duke to secure her position in this household.

She thought that if an outsider, as she termed it, became duchess, then her own status would diminish. Lydia would end up as the fading spinster sister of the duke, with little power or influence, spending her days as an annoying burden in her brother's home.

But just as she was about to open her mouth and assure the lady that she was no threat to her, Lydia gave her a frosty smile, turning on her heel and marching quickly away. Christina watched her. Lydia's back was as stiff as a washboard.

Christina sighed. There really was nothing she could do to convince Lydia that she wasn't her enemy and wasn't a threat to her.

The lady had branded her as an interloper and a troublemaker from the start, and there was simply no way to change her mind now.

Her eyes flickered to the house, resting upon the window of the duke's study. Her heart flipped over. She must speak with him about what Hester had said. The problem of Lydia would have to wait until another time entirely.

Her mouth went dry. Would he believe her? Or had his sister completely convinced him she was a troublemaker?

Sebastian turned at the sound of the knock on his study door.

Daniel was still here – they were sharing a brandy now as they discussed how to tackle the problem of Walter Hester and his stubborn intention to create a mining empire monopoly in the district.

“Enter,” he called out.

The door opened, and his heart shifted. It was Georgina. Their eyes locked, and they gazed at each other steadily across the room. He felt a small crackle between them.

Daniel got to his feet. "I will give you some privacy," he said quickly. "I will be waiting for you in the parlour, Newquay."

His friend smiled at Georgina sympathetically as he exited the room. Sebastian turned to her, his heart pounding hard. He wanted to stride across the room and pull her into his arms but resisted the urge with difficulty.

He wanted to say so much to her. He wanted to tell her he trusted her and didn't believe any of the wild rumours about her. But he just couldn't do it.

Not yet anyway until he had investigated her background. He must find out who she truly was. It was imperative. Until then, he must proceed with caution and try to keep her at arm's length.

"Georgina," he said, swallowing a lump in his throat. "What can I do for you?"

She took a deep breath. "It is what I can do for you," she replied, her eyes wide. She hesitated. "I went for a ride near the castle ruins ... and overheard a conversation that was not meant for my ears." She paused again. "The conversation was between Walter Hester and a man called Barstow."

Sebastian's jaw dropped. "Abraham Barstow? My tenant?" He shook his head. "It was Barstow who helped me that day when I found you in the mine shaft. He was the one who sent for the physician."

Georgina's eyes flickered. "I do not remember him," she said in a soft voice. "I did not see either of them at the ruins – I just heard their conversation." She frowned. "What they were saying was troubling, Your Grace. Very troubling indeed."

Sebastian shifted on his feet uncomfortably. His heart was really pounding now. It crossed his mind that perhaps she was lying – that there hadn't been any meeting between Hester and Barstow. But why would she do that?

“Go on,” he said, trying to keep his voice neutral. “I am listening.”

She took another deep breath. “Mr Hester said that this man Barstow sabotaged the abandoned mine that I fell into that day,” she said, turning pale. “Apparently, Barstow also caused the explosion at your mine.” She hesitated. “And he did all this because Hester paid him to do it.”

“What?” Sebastian gaped at her. Ice had entered his bloodstream. “He did what?”

His mind was spinning violently now, trying to grapple with what she was telling him. The enormity of it. It was as if the pieces of a puzzle were slowly slotting into place. It was starting to make a chilling kind of sense.

Hester had always been a thorn in his side, but Sebastian had believed the man was fighting fairly with him.

To hear how he was playing dirty like this – sabotaging his mines to undermine his reputation in the district – was a massive blow. But it was a blow that made sense, and he really should have seen it coming.

“Hester is planning to sabotage more of your mines,” continued Georgina, her voice ragged. “He is paying Barstow to do it. Apparently, Barstow will have quite a nest egg with the money he is making from this enterprise.” She bit her lip. “Hester intends to ruin your business reputation, forcing you to sell ... and he will buy your mines at a reduced price.”

Sebastian swore beneath his breath, running a hand through his hair. In one way, he

simply couldn't believe what she was telling him – but in another way, it made perfect sense.

He recalled how belligerent Hester had been to him at the village inn that day. The man had all but threatened him then.

Additionally, Daniel had just told him that Hester planned to lower the price of copper to force him to sell his mines to him. Hester was attacking him from all sides. And it must be stopped. Now.

He gazed at Georgina, forcing himself to bite down on his anger. “Did Hester say anything else to Barstow? Is that the entire gist of the conversation?”

“That is all,” replied Georgina, swallowing visibly. She gazed at him sympathetically. “I am sorry to be the messenger of ill tidings like this.” She hesitated. “I know that you are unsure about me and whether you can trust me, but I am not making this up, Your Grace. I am telling you this because I want to help you.”

Sebastian's face reddened. He didn't know what to say to her, for she had just expressed the truth of it – he was unsure about her and whether he could trust her. But he knew he wanted to trust her ... with his whole heart.

“Stay close to the house this evening,” he said gently, stepping closer to her. “There will be upheaval in the district after I confront Hester with this. I am uncertain as to how things will progress.”

She blinked rapidly. “Of course.” She hesitated. “Please, do not put yourself in danger. I could not bear it if something happened to you.”

His breath caught in his throat as he gazed at her. She looked so beautiful, her eyes shining. He was beset by the urge to pull her to him once again and hold her close, to

breathe in her sweet scent.

At that moment, with the clarity of a glass shattering, he knew she was telling the truth – about everything.

“I am sorry for listening to the rumours about you,” he whispered, slowly leaning over to tuck a stray curl behind her ear. “I know you are not deceiving me about anything, Georgina. I believe in you.”

The moment stretched on between them. It was so taut with tension that he felt as if he could cut it with a knife. Once again, the longing to pull her into his arms, to finally taste her delectable lips, was starting to overpower him.

“Thank you,” she whispered, her bottom lip trembling. Her eyes shone with tears. “That means the world to me.”

He took a deep, shaky breath, deliberately stepping away from her. Now was not the time.

He must ride to Hester’s house and confront him before any more damage was done. He would get Daniel to accompany him. His friend would be more than willing and be good back-up.

“I promise I will return to you,” he whispered, reaching out and trailing a finger slowly down the side of her face. “Wait for me.”

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:41 am

“Please, Your Grace,” stammered the butler, following Sebastian and Daniel as they strode down the long hallway in the Hester’s manor house. “Mr Hester is indisposed and is not receiving callers.”

“The deuce he is not,” growled Sebastian. “He is going to see me whether he wants to or not.” He took a deep breath, gathering his breath. “Walter Hester! Show your face!”

Servants were gathering now, staring at him with mouths gaping like fish as he marched down the hallway, pushing doors open, looking for Hester. His blood was boiling.

The ride from Newquay Hall to the Hesters’ home hadn’t soothed him – if anything, his indignation and anger, the enormous sense of betrayal over what Hester had done to him, had increased.

“Steady,” said Daniel, his eyes flickering. “You do not want to lose your head completely, Newquay.”

“Someone is going to lose their head,” he snapped. “But it will not be me.”

A door opened. Walter Hester stood there, glaring at him. “What is the meaning of this, Newquay? You cannot just barge into my house like this.”

“I already have,” snarled Sebastian, approaching the man and pushing past him into the room Hester had just emerged from. He gazed around. It was the parlour. “You would be best to hear me out, Hester.”

Hester sighed dramatically, turning and following him into the room. Daniel had entered as well, standing behind Sebastian, flanking him like a soldier flanking a general on the battlefield.

This is a battlefield. I am battling for my business and my reputation. And the man before me is my enemy.

“I know what you are doing, Hester,” he said in a low voice, turning to face the man. “I know about your treachery. I know that you were responsible for making that abandoned mine unsafe. And I know you were also responsible for the explosion in my other mine.”

Hester gave a bark of laughter. “You are being absurd!”

Sebastian shook his head in disgust, trying to control his anger, his hands balling into fists at his sides. He wanted to hit the man square in the face, to feel his fist connect with his nose, to release the anger.

“How could you? Sixteen men died that day!” Sebastian took a step closer to the man, grabbing him by the collar. “Have you no morals at all? How could you do such an evil thing?”

Hester didn’t reply. His piggy eyes were shining with anger, though. The tense silence was broken only by the men’s heavy breathing.

“You have no proof of it,” flung back Hester in a scornful voice. “Where is your evidence, Newquay?”

“I am gathering it,” growled Sebastian. “I know that my tenant, Abraham Barstow, is your henchman. I know that you paid him to sabotage my mines.”

Hester's eyes widened. He looked shocked. Clearly, he didn't like that piece of news.

"I have confronted Barstow," said Sebastian quickly. "He admitted everything to me. Your treachery has been revealed, Hester. You may as well admit it, too."

Sebastian's eyes flickered to Daniel, who didn't react to the lie, retaining a straight face. They hadn't confronted Barstow at all. But Hester didn't know that – and telling him they had secured Barstow's confession might just flush the rat out once and for all.

"Very well," said Hester, in a voice filled with contempt. "I admit it! I paid Barstow to sabotage your mines so that your reputation would be diminished, and you would sell to me." He glared at Sebastian. "Your way of doing business is doomed, Newquay. My way is the way of the future. You are too sentimental about your workers. It is all about profit."

A wave of rage swept over Sebastian. This time, he didn't even try to control it. The man had just admitted his treachery.

He swung his arm back, hitting Hester square on the nose. The man gasped, reeling back and falling onto the floor, clutching his nose, still glaring at Sebastian. Daniel stepped forward as if to restrain Sebastian from attacking the man again, but Sebastian shook his head at his friend.

"Do not worry, I will not hit him again," he growled, his chest heaving. "The worm deserves to be beaten to a pulp, but I will not stoop so low."

He shook his head in disgust, staring at Hester, who was squirming on the floor. Blood was pouring from his nose, and he was trying to catch it with his hands. It was spilling through his fingers, all over the man's pristine white shirt.

“I would rather die than sell to the likes of you,” spat Sebastian. “You have blood all over your hands, Hester, and I vow to you that you will never own my mines. Not in a million years.” He took a deep breath, turning to Daniel. “Come on. We have more work to do.”

He strode out of the parlour and down the hallway, Daniel following in his wake. They mounted their horses, heading to Abraham Barstow’s house.

It was silent when they arrived at Barstow’s small stone cottage. The only sound was washing, flapping in the wind. Sebastian rapped on the door. It seemed an eternity before there was a response. To his relief, Barstow answered the door himself.

The man knew something was wrong immediately. Sebastian saw the fear in his eyes.

“I know what you have done, Barstow,” he snarled, grabbing the man by the neck. “Your paymaster Hester has admitted everything ... so you may as well admit it too.”

The man crumpled immediately, starting to babble.

“I know I did the wrong thing,” he cried. “But I was desperate, Your Grace! My youngest child needs special care in hospital that I could not afford, and I have so many mouths to feed ...!”

“Save your breath, Barstow,” growled Sebastian. “You can tell your story to the constabulary.” He shook his head incredulously. “If it were true about your youngest child, you could have come to me, and I would have assisted you. You know that. But you did not do it. Instead, you accepted a Judas’s coin and killed good men. Your neighbours and friends. How could you do it, man?”

The man’s face crumpled. He slumped, almost falling to the ground. Daniel stepped forward, taking the man away. Sebastian ran a shaking hand through his hair.

So much had happened in the space of the day that he was having a hard time dealing with it all. So much betrayal. Treachery was all around him.

Even though he was shocked by what Hester had done, he had always known he was scum, capable of doing anything for money.

The man had no values whatsoever. But it was different with Abraham Barstow – he had thought his tenant was an ally. He had always treated Barstow with respect and kindness.

He swallowed a painful lump in his throat. He was shaken to the core. He felt as if it was him against the world. For if he couldn't trust a man like Barstow ... who could he trust?

Christina paced the floor in her room at Newquay Hall, wringing her hands together.

The duke looked so furious and hurt when she told him about the conversation she had overheard between Hester and Barstow. He had looked as if someone had pulled a rug from beneath his feet.

Her heart turned over in her chest as she pictured his devastated face.

She had wanted to rush forward and soothe him, tell him that everything would be well, and wrap her arms around his waist and hug him tightly. She had only just managed to restrain herself.

She blinked back tears. He had also told her, in a quiet voice, that he believed her – that he didn't think she was defrauding him.

Her heart had surged with joy when he had uttered those words. She hadn't realized how much she valued his good opinion of her until it was gone.

She took a deep breath. But now, he was confronting Walter Hester about what he had done. Her heart lurched with fear. What was going to happen to him? Was there going to be a fight? Would he get hurt?

Oh, please, God, keep him safe. Make sure he comes home in one piece. Please, let everything be well.

Abruptly, she stopped pacing before turning and walking to the window, sitting in the alcove and gazing out. The duke and Lord Ealing, who had accompanied him, had been gone for hours. A knot of anxiety was resting in the middle of her chest, small and tight. What was happening? Where were they?

She noticed long shadows falling across the lawn. A gardener, pushing a wheelbarrow filled with weeds, slowly walked down a path. There was no sound of birdsong – the birds were heading to their nests. It was late afternoon now. Soon, it would be dusk. The day was almost over.

There was a soft knock on the door. Christina started, jumping up and smoothing her hair with shaking hands. "Come in."

The door opened. It was Mrs Sollock, holding a pile of fresh towels. Christina took a deep breath, forcing a smile onto her face. The housekeeper had always been kind to her and was still kind when everyone else was treating her with suspicion and distrust.

"I thought I would bring the fresh towels to you myself," said the housekeeper with an easy smile. "Just so as I can see how you are." She paused. "I noticed you went for a long ride after your meeting with his grace."

Christina nodded, gulping. “Yes,” she said in a faltering voice. “I needed to clear my mind. It seemed that his grace had heard the rumours about me and no longer trusted me, believing I was defrauding him.” She took a deep breath. “I was hurt. I did not know what to do. I told him that I would leave Newquay Hall if he wanted.”

The housekeeper’s expression didn’t change. She nodded. “And now? Do you still think you will leave the manor?”

Christina bit her lip. She hadn’t discussed the possibility of her leaving with the duke at all.

He had told her he believed that she wasn’t defrauding him, when she had returned from the ride and was informing him about the conversation between the men, but he hadn’t addressed her leaving Newquay Hall.

She had no idea whether he wanted her to go or not ... or, more to the point, whether it would be the best thing all round if she left. The best thing for both of them.

Her eyes filled with helpless tears. Hastily, she turned away so the housekeeper couldn’t see them shimmering in her eyes. She felt shaken to the core as if an earthquake had just shimmied throughout her entire body.

I truly care for the duke. It isn’t just a physical attraction and a strong connection. I think I might actually love him.

Stunned, she tried to catch her breath as the enormity of the revelation swept over her. Quickly, she walked to the window. Her mind was spinning violently and her heart felt so full it was as if it might burst.

She loved him. There was no other reason she was suffering like this, agonizing that he might be hurt, waiting for him to return home safely.

It was as if the knowledge had been hovering at the back of her mind, and now it had rushed to the forefront, overwhelming her completely.

She gazed out the window. At that moment, she saw him riding into the estate. Her heart almost fell to the ground, shattering into a million pieces. Quickly, her eyes raked over him, taking him in.

He was safe. He was well. He wasn't visibly hurt.

At that moment, he raised his eyes to the window. Their gazes connected. Christina felt a jolt all the way down her spine to the soles of her feet. It was as if a bolt of lightning had just zigzagged through the window, hitting her in the chest.

His last words to her before he had left to confront Hester fell into her mind.

I promise I will return to you ... wait for me.

She loved him. So much. But she was destined never to have him, even if he had asked her to wait for him. For how could a woman with no past or position ever hope to win the heart of a duke? Especially when the entire world believed that she was a fraud.

Hastily, she turned away, her heart tightening. She gazed at Mrs Sollock.

"I do not know," she said slowly, feeling as if every word was being pulled from her throat. "I do not know if I will stay at Newquay Hall or whether I must leave."

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That evening, Christina stayed in her room, still on tenterhooks, waiting to see if the duke would send for her to tell her about what had happened with Hester. She sat in the window alcove, agonizing about approaching him instead, when there was a sharp rap on the door.

She stood up, her heart pounding hard, smoothing out the creases in her gown. Was it him?

“Come in,” she called in a tremulous voice.

The door opened. Christina’s jaw dropped, and she felt herself turn pale. For it wasn’t the duke standing in the doorway – it was his sister Lydia.

The lady was dressed in a rose silk dinner gown with delicate lace on the bodice and sleeves, her dark hair swept up into an elegant chignon. Understated diamonds twinkled in her earlobes and around her neck. Clearly, Lydia had been out for the evening at a dinner party or some other event.

The lady took a step into the room, gazing around slowly, in an almost curious way, as if she had never seen the inside of this room before. But then again, perhaps she hadn’t seen it in a very long time – Newquay Hall was very large, after all.

“I am glad to see that you are well looked after,” said the lady with a decisive nod. “This is one of the best guest rooms in the manor.”

Christina’s eyes widened. She tried to keep her expression neutral, to mask her shock. It was an odd thing for Lydia to say, given how hostile she was to her most of the

time and the fact that she wasn't reticent about the fact she wanted her gone.

Christina cleared her throat. "Why are you are here, My Lady?"

Lydia turned to her. There was an awkward silence for a moment. Christina shifted on her feet, staring at the lady, waiting for her to reveal herself. Lydia had never condescended to visit her in her chambers before. What was going on?

"I have news for you," stated the lady abruptly. She paused, taking a step closer, a slight frown creasing her brow. "I have discovered who you are, Georgina."

Christina gasped loudly. One hand flew to her throat. She staggered slightly. Her mind was spinning violently. Desperately, she tried to gather her wits, taking a long, ragged breath.

A feeling of elation was starting to flutter to life in her belly. She was thrilled, feeling as if she were teetering on the edge of a cliff, about to fall or fly.

She knows who I am. She knows who I am!

"Who?" she cried. "Please, tell me now. Who am I? How did you discover my identity?"

"I have just returned from a dinner party," said the lady with a slight smile. "I was sitting next to a gentleman who is a major investor in the family mine business – his name is Lord Powell, the Earl of Cheltenham." She cleared her throat, staring at Christina. "I heard him mention to the person seated next to him that he has been searching for a lady. He has been searching high and low for her ... and will never give up the search."

Christina's heart was racing frantically. Her mouth was dry. She couldn't speak.

“After the meal was ended, I approached him,” continued Lydia. “I asked him to tell me about the lady he is searching for and why he is searching high and low.” She hesitated. “He took a small locket from the pocket of his jacket and opened it, telling me the name of the lady ... and I was suddenly staring at a small portrait of you – Lady Christina Whitford.”

Christina gasped again. “That is my name?”

Lydia nodded slowly. “Yes. You are Lady Christina Whitford, the daughter of Viscount Draycott. Your home is Draycott Manor, which is located near Exmouth, about three hours’ journey from here by carriage.” She paused. “Apparently, you went for a morning ride on your beloved horse and vanished entirely.”

Christina gasped again. Images were flashing into her mind like cards being shuffled quickly, so bright and vivid that she could hardly keep track of them.

Walking into a parlour and sitting at a grand piano. Gripping the post of a tall bed while a maid laced her into a corset, chatting like starlings.

An older lady with a kind smile placing a hand on her forehead as she lay coughing in bed. Sitting at a long mahogany dining table. Riding like the wind down a long driveway on the back of a black horse – the same black horse who was now in the stables at Newquay Hall ...

She blinked rapidly, barely able to breathe, as the images kept falling into her mind, over and over.

The images of a house she knew but still didn’t quite recognize as her home. Desperately, she tried to grasp them, to fully open her mind and realize the truth of what Lady Lydia was saying ... but it wasn’t coming. Not yet, at any rate.

Her heart filled with a pure joy, unlike anything she had ever felt. It didn't matter if she didn't fully remember that life yet or who she was within it.

She was sure it would come in the fullness of time. It was as if Lydia had given her the key to the door. She just had to find the right lock to open it.

"I am Lady Christina Whitford?" she said the name slowly as if she were tasting the words on her tongue. "I am the daughter of a viscount?"

"You are," stated Lydia, her smile widening. She hesitated. "I was not sure if it was entirely appropriate or not but I thought you would be very eager to hear all the details of your life and would not object." She hesitated again. "Lord Powell is here now ... Christina. He is waiting in a carriage outside to talk with you."

"He is waiting for me in a carriage outside?" Christina frowned, her mind racing.

She hesitated. As much as she tried, the gentleman's name wasn't ringing any bells in her mind. Her eyes flickered to the clock on the mantelpiece.

It was getting late – it was after ten in the evening. It was hardly a time to go outside and speak with an unknown gentleman in a carriage. Lydia was right – it wasn't really appropriate.

"Lord Powell is so eager to see you, Christina," continued Lydia. "He just wishes to confirm that it is really you, which is quite natural in the circumstances."

Christina's frown deepened. An uneasy feeling was entering her heart. She couldn't recall this gentleman at all.

And even though Lydia had told her that she was certain she really was Lady Christina Whitford as she had seen a portrait of her, she didn't know if she could trust

the lady. After all, Lydia was hardly her best friend.

She bit her lip. But then again, why would Lydia go to all this trouble to enact a lie? That didn't make any sense at all. Still, she hesitated.

The fact that the gentleman was remaining in his carriage and not entering the house was odd, as well. Why wouldn't this Lord Powell simply wait in the parlour to see her?

"Perhaps I should go and see his grace before I meet the gentleman in the carriage," she said hesitantly. "He should know that this is happening."

Her heart pulsed at the thought of the duke. How would he react when he heard that his sister had discovered who she truly was? Would he rejoice ... or would he feel sad that she would be leaving his home at long last? How did he truly feel about her?

Her heart skipped a beat. She knew he found her attractive. She knew he admired her, even when he was trying to fight it.

It was just there in every small glance. It was there in the way his eyes shone when he looked at her ... and how he had trailed his fingers down the side of her face and softly asked her to wait for him.

But then, her heart fell slightly, and her eyes filled with tears. But admiration and attraction were not love. Would he say he was sorry to see her go but then let her go without a backward glance?

"My brother has not returned home from the dinner party yet," said Lydia, with a small smile, shrugging her shoulders. "I left him to mingle with some gentlemen over brandies. He said that he had serious business matters to attend to, so I was loathe to interrupt and tell him about Lord Powell and the discovery of your true identity. He

has so much on his plate since the mine accident. I am sorry, Christina.”

Christina’s heart crashed to the floor again. She had no idea what had happened when he confronted Hester yet – perhaps the serious business that Lydia was alluding to had something to do with his nemesis. She couldn’t blame him. Still, the news that he wasn’t in the house at all was very disappointing. What should she do?

“Lord Powell simply wishes to confirm your identity, Christina,” continued Lydia, in a pensive voice. “You are not leaving Newquay Hall yet. You will have time to pack ... and to say your farewells to my brother and to thank him for his hospitality.”

Christina’s heart twisted. Of course, she knew that she must leave Newquay Hall now that her true identity had been discovered. She had a home. She had a family. She didn’t belong here. It was what she had yearned for all this time.

And yet ... her heart ached at the thought of leaving. It ached badly at the thought of leaving him. She had only just discovered that she loved him – and the feeling was so new, tender, and raw. It was like a tiny fledgling about to stretch its wings and fly for the very first time.

“The earl is waiting, Christina,” prompted Lydia, gazing at her steadily.

Christina jumped. She must decide whether she would go downstairs and greet this earl – an earl she couldn’t remember, who had apparently been searching high and low for her and just wanted to confirm her identity. What harm could it do?

“Very well,” she said quietly, her heart jumping.

Lydia gave a dazzling smile. They left the room together, going down the back servants’ staircase to the rear of the house.

Christina frowned – she hadn't realized that the gentleman was waiting in his carriage at the rear of the house. That uneasy feeling stole over her again. She glanced at Lydia, and the lady gave her a quick smile.

They reached the carriage. A footman held a lantern aloft. Hesitantly, Christina walked towards the door, noticing a hand on it, wearing a black leather glove.

Suddenly, the carriage door opened. She gasped, rearing back instinctively. A large, middle-aged man was staring at her, with black hair threaded with silver and a rather large bulbous nose. His eyes were as black and hard as currants.

"It is you," he rapped in a hard voice. "I have been searching for you everywhere, Christina." His eyes narrowed. "Come along, then." He held out his gloved hand to her impatiently, imperiously.

Christina's eyes widened in shock and horror. She didn't recognize the man at all – and she didn't like the look of him ... not one little bit.

"No," she stammered. "I-I have only come to speak with you. I am not getting into this carriage. I do not recognize you!"

She turned to Lydia to entreat her, but to her shock, the lady had vanished.

It all happened very quickly after that. Suddenly, the gentleman grabbed her hand, pulling her into the carriage. The footman holding the lantern pushed her from behind, bundling her inside. The carriage was already moving by the time she even realized what was happening.

"At last," said the gentleman, in the same hard voice. "You have led us all on a merry dance indeed, Christina. But I am afraid it is over now ... and we will marry within the week."

Christina opened her mouth and screamed. And screamed. But there was no one to help her. No one at all.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:41 am

Sebastian sighed heavily, walking quickly across the foyer in Newquay Hall and heading towards the staircase. He was bone tired, and his head was reeling – it had been a late evening on top of a long, exhausting day. He felt like nothing was ever going to be the same again.

The betrayal by Hester and Barstow. The dramatic arrest of Barstow. And then, brandy and cigars with Daniel and some other gentlemen in the library after the dinner party, trying to gather support for his business, to keep it secure and afloat amid all the turmoil.

For if I am not careful, all of my investors will sell their shares, leaving me bereft. I will be forced to sell.

He frowned, loosening his cravat, feeling like it was choking him. His frown deepened. He hadn't been able to pin down Lord Powell this evening – the gentleman hadn't gone to the library for brandy like the rest but had instead been whispering with Lydia, of all people, on the balcony. He had seen them together as he had walked past.

I need to wash and then try to sleep. It has been such a long day.

He hesitated on the first step of the staircase, thinking about Georgina. He hadn't had a chance to tell her any of this yet.

He had seen her in the window of her room when he had returned after the arrest of Barstow, but then Lydia had assailed him immediately, reminding him about the dinner party.

His first instinct had been to cancel, but then he realized that a few of his investors would be present and would have heard about the day's dramatic events by now. He needed to speak to them and reassure them that their stock was sound. The business depended upon it.

Where is she? Has she retired for the evening?

He hesitated again, torn. He wanted to speak to Georgina badly, to tell her what had happened, and to thank her profusely for telling him about the conversation she had overheard between Hester and Barstow, which had sparked all this.

But more than that, he just wanted to see her again, run his eyes over her beautiful face, and reassure himself that she was still here ...

"Pardon me, Your Grace. May I speak with you?"

He spun around. It was Mrs Sollock, the housekeeper, standing there with her hands folded in front of her, her eyes large.

She looked ruffled, which was unusual for the usually staid and emotionless housekeeper. Mrs Sollock wasn't known for dramatic outbursts.

"What is it, Mrs Sollock?" he asked, unable to keep the edge of impatience out of his voice. "Can it wait for the morning?"

"I am afraid it cannot, Your Grace," she replied, biting her lip, wringing her hands together. She was looking very distressed now. "It is most urgent." She took a deep, uneven breath. "Someone took Miss Georgina in a carriage, Your Grace. I saw it with my own eyes."

Sebastian gasped. "What?"

“I happened to be looking out a window,” asserted the housekeeper, her voice unsteady, almost breaking. “I stopped because I noticed an unfamiliar carriage at the rear of the house. Her Ladyship, your sister, was there, along with Miss Georgina. A footman was holding a lantern aloft, so I could see quite clearly.”

“And?” demanded Sebastian, his heart lurching with distress. “What happened?”

The housekeeper hesitated, then said, “I watched the carriage door open. It was a gentleman. Her ladyship walked back into the house ... and the gentleman grabbed Miss Georgina, pulling her into the carriage. The footman assisted him, pushing her from behind. And then they sped off into the night.”

Sebastian gasped with shock and horror. He couldn’t believe what the woman was telling him. How could it be true?

“You are telling me that Georgina has been abducted?” He stared at her hard. “And that my sister assisted this?”

Mutely, she nodded. He noticed that she had grown very pale. Mrs Sollock didn’t usually make up stories – she was known for being honest and forthright. If she said that a strange carriage had been here and a gentleman had abducted Georgina, he was inclined to believe her.

His heart skipped a beat. He needed to speak to Lydia. Right this minute.

“It is true,” said a small, calm voice behind him. “Mrs Sollock has not lied.”

He spun around. Lydia was standing there, still dressed in her evening attire, diamonds glittering in her ears. She looked composed and thoughtful. He turned back to the housekeeper.

“Thank you, Mrs Sollock,” he rapped. “You may leave us.”

The housekeeper bobbed a quick curtsy before turning on her heel and scurrying away. He turned back to Lydia, staring at his sister with hard eyes, his anger growing by the minute.

He didn’t know what was happening or had happened, but he knew that Lydia was involved in some way. She had just admitted it herself.

“What is going on?” he demanded, glaring at her. “What is Mrs Sollock talking about?”

Lydia raised her chin, taking a deep breath. “You are a fool who has been played like a harp, Sebastian,” she said in a sharp voice, her eyes glinting like steel. “That woman was pretending to have amnesia the whole time. And you fell for her act like a fish being hooked by a rod.”

Sebastian kept glaring at her. “I do not need to hear your opinion about Georgina,” he snapped, his cheeks flushing. “I am already very well aware of what you think about her. I repeat – what is going on? Did someone abduct her in a carriage or not?”

Lydia sighed heavily. “Her real name is Lady Christina Whitford,” she said in a withering voice. “She is the daughter of Viscount Draycott, who lives near Exmouth.” She took another deep breath. “And she is also the fiancée of Lord Powell – the gentleman who wishes to buy our mining business from beneath us, or at least to ruin it, so he can sweep in and pick up the pieces.”

Sebastian’s heart hit the ground, almost shattering into a million shards, like a broken mirror. His mind was spinning. He felt like he wanted to be sick.

How could she be betrothed to a man like Powell?

He took a deep, shaky breath, forcing himself to think properly. But his thoughts were fragmenting beneath the shock of it all.

His sister had discovered Georgina's true identity ... and her name wasn't Georgina at all, of course. She was a noble lady, just as he had always suspected but could never prove – the daughter of a viscount, no less.

Lady Christina Whitford. The daughter of Viscount Draycott.

He felt beads of sweat trickle down the back of his neck. He had heard about Viscount Draycott, who lived near Exmouth, but he had never met the gentleman.

Exmouth was a long way away from Newquay Hall, although it was still located in Cornwall. Georgina – Lady Christina – had been riding very far out of her district that day. Very far indeed.

“How did you find out?” he said in an anguished whisper, turning to his sister. “How did you find out who she is?”

“I overheard Lord Powell talking about her at dinner,” she replied frostily. “He said he was searching for his missing fiancée. He mentioned the time frame ... and I put two and two together, Sebastian.” She paused. “After dinner, I waylaid him, asking for details about the lady. He showed me a miniature portrait of her. The lady who has been staying in our guest chamber was the lady in the miniature.”

“But why would he be openly looking for her if he had planted her in our home?” He stared at his sister hard. “Why would he be showing a portrait of her to you?”

Lydia sighed, looking pained. “Because he does not need her here any longer, does he? The lady has played her part, supplying him with insider information – information she would have gleaned looking at our ledgers and milking you for

information, as well.”

Sebastian flushed with mortification. He had never felt like a bigger fool in his life.

“Powell was probably in cahoots with Hester and Barstow,” she continued in a crisp voice. “Now that the plot against us has been exposed, Powell swooped down, asking about his missing fiancée, to spread the word he was looking for her and thus ‘find’ her.” She gave her brother a withering look. “Why else would he not have mentioned that she was missing before? He sat in our drawing room and never mentioned a thing about her then, did he?”

“No, he did not mention her,” he whispered, his heart pounding hard. His mouth had gone dry. “But I do not think I mentioned Georgina to him, either, and she was not here the day that he called. He did not see her.”

“He did not mention her,” she repeated, her eyes sparking furiously. “Why would a gentleman whose fiancée was missing not mention that fact to you, even in passing? Wake up, Sebastian. He planted her here to glean information about the mining business – and now that the plot has been exposed, he has taken her away. It is as simple as that, brother.”

There was a tense silence. Abruptly, Sebastian turned away, running a hand over his face. He had never felt more miserable or heart-sore in his life.

The truth about Georgina – no, Christina – was pressing on him like a vice, and no matter which way he turned, he simply couldn’t escape it.

His heart sank. Lydia was right. She had been right all along about the woman. And he had been a foolish, lovestruck imbecile who had stubbornly ignored the truth that his sister had kept insisting to him.

He supposed the ‘abduction’ of Lady Christina had been staged, along with everything else. He frowned. However, why they had gone through so much trouble was beyond him.

Powell could have just knocked on the door, claiming he had heard they were housing a missing woman and wishing to see her. Then, they could have enacted a reunion and be done with it.

“I am sorry, brother,” said Lydia with a sigh. “But you must accept the truth of it.” She stared at him. “She is gone. Forget her. And thank the Lord that the plot to ruin you entirely was foiled before it was too late.”

Sebastian nodded, not saying anything. His heart hit the ground again. What more was there to say?

Still, he felt uneasy. Was the lady a spy? Had she been deliberately planted in his house ... or was there still a mystery of why he had found Lady Christina Whitford at the bottom of that mine shaft?

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:41 am

Christina awoke with a start, her heart pounding. The carriage had stopped. She turned to her abductor – the big, bulky man with the small, cruel eyes and silver threaded black hair that was tousled after the journey.

“Get out,” he barked, grabbing her firmly by the arm. “We will stay here the night. It is too far to get back to Exmouth now.”

She struggled against him as he pushed her through the opened carriage door. She blinked, gazing around. They had stopped at a roadside inn near the top of a hill. The wind picked up, sending her hair flying like ribbons behind her, and she shivered violently.

She turned, colliding with him. His girth was as solid as a rock, and the smell of his cologne hit her in the face with the force of a punch. She whimpered in shock, her eyes opening wide.

Suddenly – sickeningly – it all came rushing into her mind with the force of a bolting, distressed horse. It was like a thousand dinner plates started crashing within her mind, one by one, breaking into shards as they hit the ground.

I remember him. I remember everything. My father was forcing me to marry him. He is a cruel, horrible man. And that is why I was on the horse that day, riding along the cliffs. I was trying to escape my life ... and my fate.

“I know you,” she cried in a distressed voice, fighting him anew. “I never wanted to marry you! That is the reason I ran away in the first place!”

To her horror, he laughed in her face, gripping her arm tighter and twisting it. “What do I care what you want? Your father agreed to the betrothal, and that is all that matters..” His eyes narrowed, and he put his face very close to hers, so close that she could smell the sourness of his breath. “You will marry me. And that is all there is to it.”

“Shall I take the horses to the stables, My Lord?” called the carriage driver. “Are you staying the night?”

“Yes,” barked Lord Powell over his shoulder. “We will take some refreshment first and then retire for the night. Make sure you put the carriage away, so it is not visible from the road ... in case the Duke of Newquay decides to play knight errant and chase you into the night, My Lady.”

Christina’s heart twisted anew at the mention of the duke. He must be home and know that she was gone by now. And his terrible sister would have told him that she had gone willingly with this ogre into the night.

Lydia would have told him that the lady did not even wish to bid him farewell after regaining her memory – that she wanted to go straight home. And why wouldn’t he believe his sister?

Her heart twisted again with the agony of a knife. The duke would think she had abandoned him and never cared for him at all. And there was absolutely nothing she could do about it.

She blinked back helpless tears. She could have told Lord Powell that the duke wouldn’t bother playing knight errant to save her.

The duke had already been harbouring suspicions about her that had been fuelled by his sister, and it wouldn’t take much to convince him that she had simply abandoned

Newquay Hall, fleeing like a thief into the night, even if he had gazed at her tenderly and told her to wait for him the last time they had spoken. Even though she had told him about the plot against him.

Her shoulders slumped as she gazed into the inn's main room. Candles flickered and the fire roared as men laughed and chatted, raising mugs of ale in the air and toasting each other.

The brightness and laughter in the room contrasted sharply with the bitter disappointment in her heart and the sour taste in her mouth as she contemplated her dire fate.

“Do not shed any tears over Newquay, my dear,” laughed Lord Powell in a nasty voice. “His sister told me that he and Lady Frances Lewis are practically engaged. You never stood a chance.”

Christina glared at him, her heart pulsing, almost breaking into two pieces and scattering on the floor.

He twisted her arm again, quite badly, forcing her to move towards the door of the inn. At that moment, it started to rain. Thick, wet drops of rain fell slowly on her head.

Her life was over. What was she going to do now?

Sebastian leaned over his horse, squinting into the bitter wind. It was cold, and it was very dark. He glanced to his left to where Daniel was riding beside him. His friend looked as cold, stiff, and exhausted as he felt. It started to rain, great heavy drops falling on his head.

He gritted his teeth. He still couldn't believe he was doing this – that he had rallied his friend to ride out into the night, searching for Lady Christina Whitford and Lord Powell. Daniel, of course, had agreed to do it with alacrity.

But he hadn't been able to sleep a wink after he had left Lydia. He had tossed and turned in the bed, thinking about her and how she had just vanished like that in the night.

Mrs Sollock had been genuinely distressed about it – and he trusted the housekeeper's memory of the event. Lady Christina hadn't wanted to get into that carriage with Powell. He was sure of it.

And then, other doubts crept into his mind. Why would Powell have gone to such ridiculous lengths to plant her here? She was a lady of noble birth. Would she have agreed to them throwing her down an abandoned mine shaft like that? She might have been killed. It didn't make any sense at all.

Eventually, the doubts were shouting at him so loudly that he got out of bed, his heart pounding hard.

He got dressed again, cursing softly in the weak glare of a single candle. Within half an hour, he was on his horse, fetching Daniel, before riding off into the night on the road that Mrs Sollock had asserted the carriage had taken.

They were climbing a road towards the top of a hill, where a steep cliff face plummeted to the beach and the sea. Sebastian knew there was an old inn at the top, where wayfarers drank, and travellers sometimes stopped to rest.

As soon as he saw it, he indicated to Daniel to pull over. It was worth investigating in case they had stopped there at some point and someone had seen them.

They were almost to the inn door when it suddenly burst open. Sebastian stopped short, his heart pounding heavily. He was staring into Powell's face, and Lady Christina was standing by his side.

His eyes swept over her. She looked pale, tired, and more miserable than he had ever seen her. And then he noticed Powell's tight grip on her arm and knew she hadn't gone with him willingly.

He knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that Mrs Sollock's version of what had happened tonight had been real.

His heart was filled with tenderness, so light and effervescent that it was as if it were floating inside him. He didn't care if her name was Georgina or Christina or who she was. All he knew was that he must save her from this brute of a man.

"Take your hands off her, Powell," he growled, reaching for her and pulling her away from the grip of the man. "I know that you took her against her will."

Christina stumbled, falling against him. Her face had transformed from utter exhaustion and abject misery to hope and joy. She gasped, gazing up at him. He could see the light from the inn reflected in her eyes.

"You came," she breathed, her words ending on a sob. "You came for me."

They stared at each other for a moment, their eyes locking. Sebastian lost all sense of time and place. It was as if he were drowning in those cool, green depths.

But then, Powell lunged, trying to grab her again. His face was mottled red with fury.

"You have no right, Newquay," the man spat, his eyes sparking with rage. "She is my fiancée by law. Just ask her father, the Viscount Draycott. He will tell you the truth of

it. You have no right to take her from me!”

“You are not my fiancée!” cried Christina, suddenly furious, her green eyes glittering. “I refuse to marry you!” She turned to Sebastian. “I will not marry that man! He is the reason I was running away from my home that day. I stopped for a short break and fell into the mine. That is the truth of it. I swear it to you on my life.”

Sebastian turned to her. “You do not need to swear anything,” he said in a soft voice. “I believe you.” He swallowed a painful lump in his throat. “Do you remember everything now? Do you remember who you are?”

She nodded, her eyes glistening with tears. “Yes. I remember and know I was running away from him.”

“You are my fiancée by law!” cried Powell, his face puce with rage. He waved a fist in her face. “Your father agreed to the marriage, and that makes it binding, My Lady. It does not matter what you think or want ...”

“You will take her over my dead body,” growled Sebastian, stepping between Christina and Powell, glaring at the man.

“That can be arranged,” cried Powell, his eyes narrowing. The man swung a fist at him quite blindly. Sebastian ducked, raising his fists in the air to defend himself.

He was suddenly filled with a blinding rage. Powell was the straw that was breaking the camel’s back. His long day, confronting Hester and Barstow and then convincing his other investors not to desert him in his hour of need, rose up to choke him.

He had never experienced such betrayal before, such treachery ... and Powell was a dirty Judas, too, as well as an ogre.

He wasn't good enough for her. No one would ever be good enough for her. She was a jewel among women. He had always known it – almost from the very first moment he had seen her lying at the bottom of that pit, unconscious, with a huge gash on her forehead.

He lunged, his fist connecting with Powell's jaw. There was a sharp crack, and the man fell to the ground, toppling like a felled tree. There was a sudden, deafening silence.

They looked down at the inert figure of the man. Daniel rushed forward, a grim look on his face. "I will deal with Powell," he said in a quiet voice. "I will take him to the carriage and send him on his way." He hesitated, looking from one to the other. "I think the two of you need to talk."

Sebastian turned to Christina. Now that the threat from Powell was gone – at least for the time being – he felt exhausted again. He ran a weary hand over his face, not knowing what to say to her.

He stared at her. She looked so beautiful and forlorn standing there, the rain falling upon her, turning her golden hair to flaxen ringlets.

"I never knew," she whispered, her eyes huge and filled with sincerity. "I really did run away and hit my head that day ... I really did lose my memory ..."

"I know," he whispered, his heart lurching, reaching out to take her hand. He gazed deeply into her eyes. "What do you want to do now ... My Lady?"

His heart twisted again as he waited for her reply. He could barely breathe.

“I ... I suppose I should go home,” she said tentatively, gazing at him. “It is where I belong ... and I need to talk to my parents.” She looked wistful. “I realize now that I cannot run away. That I need to face this.”

There was a small pause, filled with longing, so deep that it felt like a ravine. Sebastian didn't know how to bridge it.

“Of course,” he said quietly. “You need to go home. I will take you there.”

He hesitated, his heart breaking in two again. Was he losing her? Had he already lost her?

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:41 am

“Oh, I am so very glad to see you again, My Lady,” breathed Harriet, her eyes wet with unshed tears. “I thought that perhaps you had fallen into the sea and met your death. I waited and waited for you to send me a letter telling me that you had reached Edinburgh safely, but it never came.”

Christina reached out, taking her maid’s hand within her own and squeezing it tightly. Her heart was filled to overflowing to see Harriet again.

As soon as she had seen her maid, the memory of her smiling face had come rushing back to her, as fresh as a daisy, and with it, the realization of how much she loved the girl and the part Harriet had played in aiding her flight on that momentous day.

It seemed so long ago now. And conversely, it seemed like no time had passed at all.

Her heart twisted, thinking about the reunion with her parents, their utter shock when they had seen her standing on the doorstep, looking bedraggled after standing in the rain for so long.

Her mother had almost fainted. Her father had choked back tears, begging for her forgiveness, saying he had been a shell of a man since she had vanished, seemingly without a trace.

They had both expressed, in the strongest way, their regret about trying to force her into marriage with Lord Powell and assured her they would never arrange a marriage against her will again. It had been a comforting and loving reunion.

And now, she was ensconced in her old chambers at Draycott Manor, with Harriet by

her side, as if she had never been away at all.

She blinked, taking in the familiar furniture, the wallpaper, the paintings that hung on the walls – the little details of her former life that hadn't changed at all in her absence. It was like reentering a dream.

A feeling of unreality stole over her. Had she really been living at Newquay Hall for the past six weeks? Had it ever really been her home? Or had she hit her head and imagined the whole episode entirely?

"I am so sorry, Harriet," she whispered in a quivering voice, squeezing her maid's hand again. "The plan went so terribly wrong." She sighed heavily. "I only stopped to take a short rest that day, to walk along the top of the cliffs after a long ride, and then I fell into an abandoned mine shaft and lost the memory of who I was entirely."

Harriet gasped. "I cannot believe it! You truly could not remember who you were, your life at Draycott Manor, or even why you had been out riding that day?"

Christina shook her head. "I could not remember anything," she confessed, tears filling her eyes, vividly remembering the pain and shock of that day as if it had only just occurred. She paused, biting her lip. "The Duke of Newquay was so very kind to me. He helped me enormously ... calling for a physician ... and then, when it became obvious that I had no idea who I was or where I lived, he offered to look after me in his manor home."

Abruptly, she stopped talking, staring at Harriet, trying not to burst into noisy tears. All she wanted to do was weep now.

Thinking about the duke and how kind he had been to her right from the beginning, how he had offered his home to a complete stranger and cared for her, was enough to bring her to tears.

Her heart shifted in her chest, thinking about how kind he had been tonight. How courageous and heroic, setting out to find her in the darkness of night, with the wind howling and the rain pelting down.

How he had defended her against Lord Powell, punching him to the ground. And then, how he had found a carriage so she could be out of the rain as she journeyed to Draycott Manor.

Her breath caught in her throat. He had followed her here, as well, on his horse, to make sure that she got home safely. The rain had cleared about halfway through the trip. She had eventually dozed in the carriage, waking up to a pink and orange sky as the sun rose on a brand-new day.

Home. She had known she was close as soon as she had gazed out that window. The landscape was different near Exmouth compared to the Cornish countryside and Newquay Hall. Her heart had filled with a strange mixture of joy and sorrow. It was so bittersweet.

He had hung back as she reunited with her parents, but after she had tearfully greeted them, he had stepped forward, telling them everything about what had happened and how he had looked after her.

They had thanked him profusely and then seeing that he was white with exhaustion and likely to fall off his horse if he tried to ride home straight away, they had offered him a room, where he was ensconced now.

Christina realized she had started to shake just thinking about him. He was just down the hallway, so close, yet he seemed so far away. She hoped he was sleeping soundly. He deserved rest and recuperation after all that he had done for her.

“The duke sounds like a very nice gentleman indeed,” said Harriet solemnly. “I will

pray for him this evening before I go to sleep, thanking him for looking after My Lady so well.” She shook her head incredulously. “I am so grateful for your safe return.”

“He is wonderful,” declared Christina, her voice thick with emotion. “I have never met a man like him before.”

Harriet looked at her closely. “You seem different,” she said slowly. “I cannot quite put my finger upon it, but you do not seem to be quite the same as when you left the manor all those weeks ago, milady. Is it something to do with this duke? Do you have finer feelings for him?”

Christina’s cheeks started flaming. “Yes,” she admitted eventually, feeling as if she were choking upon the word. “I do.” She hesitated, biting her lip. “I love him, Harriet. I have fallen head over heels in love with him ... but it can never be. He does not feel the same way about me ... or if he does, it is a woman called Georgina who he admires, and not necessarily the woman who I truly am.”

Harriet looked confused. “I think you need to rest, milady. You have had a long journey and an emotional time. You will feel more yourself afterwards.”

Christina nodded as a wave of exhaustion swamped her. She let Harriet lead her to the bed and tuck her in like a small child.

When the maid closed the curtains and darkness enveloped the room, her eyes fluttered closed. Her last thought was about the duke and how brave he was before she drifted off into sleep.

Sebastian gazed around as he sat opposite Viscount Draycott, taking in the small

details of the gentleman's study. It was a cozy, warm room lined with bookshelves. A fire crackled loudly in the fireplace.

He turned, focusing on the gentleman. Christina's father. The viscount was around fifty years old, with greying sandy-coloured hair and light blue eyes.

He had spoken with the viscountess, Christina's mother, over a light breakfast, marvelling at how alike she was to her daughter. But to his disappointment, Christina was not in attendance. Her mother told him she was still fast asleep, and she did not have the heart to wake her yet.

"So," said Sebastian, looking steadily at the gentleman. "I want to assure you, Lord Draycott, that your daughter has been well looked after at Newquay Hall. She suffered a nasty head wound and complete loss of memory, but otherwise, she has been well."

"I am very glad to hear it," replied the gentleman, his face contorting with emotion. "I am so grateful, Your Grace. Thank you for looking after our daughter so well. You have our eternal gratitude."

Sebastian inclined his head. "You are very welcome." He shifted in his chair, clearing his throat, before focusing on the gentleman again, his eyes sharp. "I would like to enquire as to what you are planning to do regarding Lady Christina's betrothal to Lord Powell, given that the gentleman abducted her from my home and what I have told you about the part he played in plotting the downfall of my business."

The viscount reddened. He looked mortified. "I have assured Christina that the betrothal is broken," he replied, his lips thinning. "I will not force her to marry such a man. I will never force her to marry anyone ever again. We almost lost her. She is far too precious to us." He hesitated. "You must believe me that I did not realize how brutish Lord Powell was, Your Grace. Nor how treacherous."

“Why did you arrange the marriage in the first place?” Sebastian stared at him sharply. “Lord Powell is a lot older than your daughter. He does not seem like an ideal candidate for her hand anyway, regardless of the weaknesses of his character.”

The viscount’s colour deepened. “I ... I am embarrassed to say that I was desperate,” he admitted, looking sheepish. “I invested badly and needed the money that Lord Powell promised upon marrying Christina. I am not proud of any of it.” He hesitated. “I will find another way to pay off the debts owing and save our home. I will figure out a way.”

There was an awkward silence as the viscount stared into the fire. The only sound in the room was the crackle of the flames.

“I will pay off your debts,” said Sebastian abruptly. “As long as you assure me that you will never force your daughter to marry anyone against her will again. I must have that assurance in writing to proceed.”

As the words tumbled from his mouth, he inwardly balked, just a little.

Given the troubles in his mines, he would have to pore over the books and shift funds to do it, but he was determined to find a way. He was going to make sure Christina had a good life – even if that meant he played no part in it.

The viscount looked so shocked it was almost comical. Sebastian leaned back in his chair, waiting for the gentleman to collect his wits and respond to his offer.

His heart flipped in his chest. He knew that if the viscount accepted the offer, he might lose Christina. She would be free to marry anyone she wanted.

But it was important to him that she didn’t feel under duress to marry anyone – including him – just to save her family home. If she were to marry him, it must be

because she chose him freely, not for any other reason.

His breath caught in his throat as he thought about her. As far as he was concerned, there was no impediment to him courting her, with a view to marriage, anymore.

She was a noble lady, the daughter of a viscount, with a fine pedigree. And she had never deceived him, as Lydia had asserted. She had run away from her home to escape a forced marriage to a brute, had an accident, and lost her memory. It was exactly as it had always appeared to be.

Her character and morals were not in question. They had never been. Christina was the woman she had always appeared to be – kind, clever, and utterly enchanting.

He wanted her for his own. He wanted her badly. But she must come to him with a free will, choosing him willingly. He would never force her hand.

“I am stunned at your generosity, Your Grace,” stuttered the viscount, his eyes shining with tears. “I accept with extreme gratitude.”

Sebastian nodded. A vision of Christina sprung into his mind, warming his blood. Would she be interested in him now that she had her old life back? Or had their connection been transitory to her? Would she move on and leave him behind entirely?

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:41 am

Christina's heart pounded hard as she stood on the front steps of Draycott Manor to bid farewell to the duke.

Her parents had already said their goodbyes to him, thanking him profusely for all he had done for their daughter and telling him he was always welcome at their home.

She turned to face him. Now, they were entirely alone. She noted the lines of weariness still evident in his face, but he looked much less tired than he had.

Her heart somersaulted as she studied his strong jawline, those velvet brown eyes as warm as molasses, and his strong, commanding physique.

She loved him. Oh, how she loved him. She wanted to rush to him now, caress his face, and tell him how much she cared for him. But how would he react if she did such a bold thing?

She hesitated, hanging back. She just couldn't do it. While he was attentive to her, there seemed to be a distance between them.

Perhaps it was just because she was returned to herself and her home ... she was no longer a waif called Georgina, who he must protect. She was Lady Christina Whitford, the daughter of the Viscount Draycott. Another woman entirely.

And somehow, she felt unworthy of his affection, as well. She had always been such a burden to him.

"So," she said, taking a deep breath, her heart pounding hard as she gazed at him. "It

is over. I am home.” She hesitated. “I just wanted to thank you again for everything you have done for me ...”

“There is no need to thank me,” he interjected sharply. “It was my pleasure, as well as my duty.”

His breathing held a ragged edge. Their eyes met and locked before his eyes hastily slid away. Christina’s heart fluttered in distress.

It was such a bittersweet moment, filled with longing, that could not be expressed. Or perhaps she was just imagining that he felt the same way as she did, anyway. Perhaps he had never felt anything for her at all. Perhaps it had always been in her imagination.

“Well, I should go,” he said abruptly. He smiled weakly. “I am glad that your memory is returned and you are safely back home, My Lady.” He paused, his dark eyes flickering slightly. “Your father has assured me he will not force you to marry Lord Powell ... or anyone else, for that matter. You do not need to feel the weight of that burden any longer. I wish you all the best in life.”

Christina nodded, gulping, not trusting herself to speak. She knew her voice would break with emotion, and she might burst into tears. She might rush to him, clinging to him, begging him not to leave her. And that would not do at all.

A heavy sorrow, unlike anything she had ever felt before, entered her heart. This might be the last time she ever saw him. In fact, it was likely it was.

They lived a great distance from each other – she wouldn’t encounter him at social events. It would be as if they had never met at all.

I will always love him. I will never love another. But it seems that it was never meant

to be.

“Thank you,” she murmured, dropping into a low curtsy so he couldn’t see the tears in her eyes. “I wish you all the best in life as well, Your Grace.”

She rose slowly. He looked at her for another moment before turning and walking to his horse. She watched him mount, and then he was gone, riding down the long driveway and through the tall gates without a backward glance.

Christina staggered, falling against the door frame, her heart so full of sorrow and loss that she could barely contain it.

Silent tears streamed down her cheeks. She had got her life and her home back, but it seemed she had lost something precious in the process. Something that she could never hope to replace as long as she lived.

Three days later, Sebastian sat in his study, nursing a brandy, as he gazed into the flames of the fire.

He was in a dark mood, beset by a terrible melancholy unlike anything he had ever felt before. He wasn’t usually prone to dark moods at all and he didn’t know how to handle them except to retreat.

He shifted in his chair, thinking about Christina and their parting at Draycott Manor.

He had yearned to tell her how he truly felt about her, how much he longed for her, but fear of rejection had kept him mute. She had looked so self-possessed and contained, returned to herself, the lady she had always been.

She was no longer Georgina, who didn't know anything about her life. He didn't know who this beautiful, poised woman, dressed in a fine muslin white gown with her hair swept into a chignon, was at all.

I have lost her. I have lost her forever. It is over. She will get on with her life now that she no longer has the threat of marrying Powell hanging over her head. She will find her true love. It was never meant to be me.

He jumped at a sudden rapping on the study door. He sighed heavily, pinching the bridge of his nose, before straightening in the chair and placing the brandy on the side table.

"Enter," he barked through gritted teeth. He didn't feel like talking with anyone. He just wanted to be alone, ruminating, wallowing in the pain of his loss.

The door opened, and Lydia entered, dressed in a crisp green gingham gown. He stiffened. He had barely spoken with his sister since he had returned to Newquay Hall after rescuing Christina from Powell.

He was still so angry at how she had interfered and sanctioned the abduction. But he supposed they had to talk sooner or later, and it may as well be now.

"Yes?" he snapped, his eyes glittering with anger. "What is it?"

Lydia bit her lip. His sister looked uncharacteristically uncertain. She was usually so decisive and confident.

"I wanted to tell you how sorry I am, Sebastian," she said mournfully. "I am so terribly, terribly sorry." She took a deep, troubled breath. "I was wrong about Georgina ... I mean, about Lady Christina. I was only trying to protect you and our home and business ... but I got carried away."

Sebastian glared at her. “Yes, you did. You got very carried away indeed, Lydia.”

She looked pained but then nodded. “I deserve censure. I wanted you to marry Frances and was pushing you both towards matrimony against your will. I see that now.” She hesitated. “Frances tells me that she is courting Daniel, and they are both very happy. She told me she loves me dearly, but I must mind my own business.”

Sebastian gave a bark of laughter. “She is telling the truth of it.” He stared at his sister. “Alright, I accept your apology. But you must promise me that you will never, ever interfere in my life like that again, Lydia. I mean it.”

“You have my word. I will never do anything to jeopardize our relationship again.” She blinked rapidly, staring at him, her eyes drifting towards the half-drunk glass of brandy sitting on the side table. “You seem melancholy, brother. You are not your usual, vibrant self. It is because of the lady, is it not?”

Sebastian’s heart shifted in his chest. “Yes,” he admitted. “It does not seem the same without her here at all.” He hesitated. “But I am very glad that she has her old life back, of course, and that she is not being forced to marry Powell. It is the way it should be.”

He tried to shrug nonchalantly, but it felt stiff and unnatural. He sighed deeply, picking up the glass of brandy and draining it. An awkward silence fell between them.

“You should tell her how you feel,” said Lydia slowly. “You should tell her that you rather wish she lived here always ... alongside you, as your wife.”

Sebastian’s jaw dropped. They stared at each other. The only sound in the room was the clock ticking on the mantelpiece.

“I know you are in love with her,” continued Lydia gently. “I think I have always known you were falling in love with her, which was why I became so fixated and stubborn about you choosing Frances. I did not want you to marry a lady I did not choose, you see.” She laughed mirthlessly. “I wanted to retain my position here ... and I thought if you married Frances, it would be assured.”

Sebastian’s heart shifted in his chest. “You are my beloved sister, Lydia, even if you do occasionally drive me to distraction,” he said. “You will always have a home with me. You do not need to feel insecure about it.”

Lydia’s eyes filled with tears. “Thank you, brother. But it is hard for a lady in my position. I was only trying to secure my situation ... in the best way I saw available.” She hesitated, staring at him. “You should go and declare yourself to Lady Christina. I think she will be receptive. I have a feeling she feels exactly the same way about you.”

Sebastian’s eyes widened. His heart started to pound uncomfortably. “Do you really think so? I just do not know.” His face contorted with agony. “She seemed different when I left her at Draycott Manor. So very poised and self-possessed. I hardly know what she truly thinks about me ...”

“Go to her,” insisted Lydia, in an almost impatient voice. “You are mooning and distracted, Sebastian. You must put your heart on the line ... or else, how will you ever live with yourself, knowing that you let her get away? That you had a chance at real happiness ... and let it go for fear of rejection?”

Sebastian stood up. He started pacing the floor. His heart was racing now, and he felt a little sick. He wiped his hands on his britches. They had started to sweat, and his palms were moist.

His mind was spinning violently. He wanted to do what Lydia told him with his

whole heart. He wanted to ride over to Draycott Manor right now and declare himself to Christina. But the fear was stronger, almost strangling him.

She is so beautiful. So exceptional. She can have her pick of anyone now that her betrothal to Powell is broken. Why would she choose me?

He stopped pacing, staring into the flames of the fire. He was suddenly recalling every moment of connection between them, right from the very start, when he had pulled her injured from that pit.

The way her green eyes shone when she looked at him. The way she sought him out. The tone of her voice when she spoke to him ...

His heart seized. He knew that Lydia was right. If he didn't at least declare himself to her and put his heart on the line, he would never know how she truly felt about him. He would lose his chance with her forever. They lived a hundred miles away from one another. He wasn't going to run into her at a ball or a garden party.

If he didn't go to Draycott Manor and declare himself, the chance would be gone. She would move on with her life. She would marry someone else. It was now ... or it was never.

He kept staring into the flames. The agony of enduring this love and not knowing if she felt the same way was unbearable. What was he going to do?

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:41 am

Christina sighed heavily as she walked slowly around the gardens at Draycott Manor. The roses were in spectacular bloom at this time of year, and their perfume was truly magnificent, almost making her swoon.

She stopped, staring at a peach-coloured rose, its petals as soft as silk, burying her nose into the centre of it, breathing deeply. Its scent was so exquisite she felt like bursting into noisy tears.

But then again, she often felt weepy and low these days, unable to settle into anything, drifting around the rooms of the house and the gardens like a lost soul.

She kept walking, blinking back tears. She missed Newquay Hall. Sometimes, at night, it entered her dreams, along with its owner. In the dreams, she would be running down long hallways that seemed never to end – and he would be standing there, so tall and commanding that he took her breath away, beckoning to her.

Come to me. I am waiting for you.

But even though she ran faster still, as fast as her legs could carry her, she could never get any closer to him.

She would reach out her arms, clawing the air with her hands, trying to progress, to no avail. And then, he would dissolve into mist as if he had never been there.

Christina stopped, her heart thumping hard. In the distance, at the very end of the path, he was standing there, dressed in a smart green jacket, white britches, and tall black riding boots, his dark hair ruffled by the wind.

Her heart almost stopped beating. It wasn't him. It couldn't be. The vision was merely a figment of her imagination. She was dreaming of him just like she dreamed of him at night. If she started walking towards him, he would dissolve into the air.

Rooted to the spot, she watched him slowly walk towards her. She could feel the dark burning of his eyes connecting with her own, an invisible cord tightening between them.

He is not real. He is not really here. At any moment, he will be gone.

Her hands were starting to shake now. Desperately, she clasped them tightly together at the front, urging them to stop. But it was no use. And now, she could feel sweat dripping down the back of her neck. Her knees were starting to buckle.

He was almost upon her. He was getting so close she could see the tense set of his jawline, the tightness in his shoulders, the dark circles beneath his eyes. Her heart leapt to life, and she felt the blood zinging through her veins like fire.

He was real. He wasn't a ghost, phantom, or figment of her imagination.

"It really is you," she breathed when he was only inches away from her. She smelt the scent of his cologne, masculine and familiar. "You are actually here."

He nodded, reaching out and taking her hand. "I am," he said slowly, taking a deep, shuddering breath. His eyes raked over her face. "You are just as beautiful as I remember. Maybe more so. You are the most beautiful woman in the world to me."

Her heart leapt, glorying in his words. She could barely breathe. "Why? Why are you here? I thought I would never see you again."

"I tried to stay away, but to no avail," he said, his dark eyes turning even darker so

they were almost black. “I convinced myself that you would never be interested in me ... but then, I could not stay away.” He took a deep, ragged breath, looking tormented. “Please, put me out of my misery. Tell me, do I have a chance with you? Even a small chance?”

Christina’s jaw dropped. Her breath caught in her throat. Her head started to spin. Perhaps she was dreaming after all?

She dug her nails into her forearms. It hurt. No, she was definitely awake. And he was staring at her so ardently, with such hunger in his gaze, that she couldn’t deny any longer that this was real, and he truly was standing in front of her, asking her if he had a chance with her.

“Yes,” she said in an agonized whisper. “Yes. This is what I have dreamed about.”

“Have you?” He took a step closer to her, taking her hand and pulling her close. His eyes were lit up now, luminous with joy. His eyes flickered over her face. “I cannot believe it. I love you, Christina. I love you so much that my heart is aching with it. I cannot sleep, and I cannot eat. I am a man in torment.”

He dropped down onto one knee, gazing up at her beseechingly. “Please, will you be my wife and make me the happiest man in the world?”

Tears were streaming down her face now. Mutely, she nodded her head. He gave a cry of joy, leaping to his feet and pulling her towards him.

His lips, when they finally descended upon her own, were hard, like flint, before turning as soft as silk. He wrapped his arms around her, drawing her closer as if he were going to devour her.

Christina clung to him, feeling as if she were drowning in a pool of joy. She had

never been happier in her life.

They had found each other at long last. And she knew it wasn't a dream any longer. It was the most real thing that had ever happened to her.

A woman called Georgina had been cared for by a duke ... and woken up as a lady in love.

A lady who had found the man of her dreams against all odds. And now that they had finally found each other, at long last, she knew they would never let each other go. Forever.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:41 am

Newquay Hall. Three months later

“I have never told you how happy I am that you are about to become my sister-in-law,” said Lydia in a hesitant voice, flushing slightly as she turned to Christina. “I want to say it now. I am so glad that this day has finally arrived ... and that I did not ruin it completely.”

Christina turned from contemplating her reflection in the full-length mirror to Lydia, trying to stifle the surprise she felt.

This was the very first time Lydia had broached the subject of what had happened between them, even though they had been growing steadily closer over the past months, even planning the wedding together. Lydia had proved a staunch ally.

And now, the day had finally arrived. She was about to become the Duchess of Newquay, a position grander than she could ever have imagined.

But more than that, she was becoming the wife of Sebastian Cavendish. And she was prouder of that than anything in this world.

“I did what I did because I was protecting my brother,” continued Lydia in an anguished voice. “I was scared of my position here being diminished, as well, but it went much deeper than that.” She hesitated, her eyes filling with tears. “I made a vow to our dying mother, Christina, to always look after him. And I took that vow very seriously indeed.”

“I understand,” said Christina softly, reaching out and taking Lydia’s hand. “I would

have done the same thing in your position. I think I always knew you were doing what you did out of a fierce love for him.” She smiled slowly. “And I was a complete stranger to you, after all, living under this roof in odd circumstances. You were right to be wary, even if you did take it to the extreme.” She laughed.

Lydia looked mortified, her colour deepening. But then, they started laughing together.

“You look beautiful,” declared Lydia at last, wiping tears of mirth from the corners of her eyes. “I do not think I have ever seen a more beautiful bride, Christina. Sebastian is going to be thrilled. And I am so happy to be your bridesmaid, along with Frances.”

At that moment, Frances entered the room, clutching her bouquet, her eyes shining. “The coach is here.” She stopped short, staring at Christina. “Oh, you are exquisite! Are you ready?”

Christina turned back to the full-length mirror.

A petite woman with golden hair swept up into an elegant chignon, with pearls in her ears and gleaming around her neck, gazed back at her. She was wearing a cream silk and lace gown with a long train. She barely recognized herself.

“I am ready,” she whispered, swallowing a lump in her throat. She turned, reaching out to take the hands of her bridesmaids, drawing them into a circle. She was starting to feel very nervous now. “Thank you for sharing this day with me. Thank you for supporting me.”

The ladies squeezed her hand. They kissed each other. And then, her mother was there, urging them into the carriage. At the bottom of the steps, her father was waiting. His eyes moistened when he saw her.

“You have found your place, my girl,” he said softly, kissing her on the cheek. “And I could not be prouder. I am sorry for all I did so long ago ... for betrothing you to that dreadful man ...”

“It is alright, Papa,” she whispered, squeezing his hand. “It led me to Newquay Hall ... and Sebastian. It led me to my destiny.”

“He is a good man,” declared her father with a smile. “One of the best. He took you in and cared for you. He rescued you from that brute Powell. And then he paid off my debts, under pain of death that I would never force you into a betrothal again ...”

“He did what?” Christina’s jaw dropped.

“He never told you?” Her father shook his head incredulously. “Although I suppose it shouldn’t surprise me. He is such a humble man, never wanting praise or reward for anything he does. A true prince among men.”

At that moment, Lydia and Frances arrived, bundling them all into the open landau, declaring they would be late if they didn’t leave now.

Christina climbed into the carriage, her heart filled with so much pride and joy that she could barely contain it.

She had thought that she couldn’t love him more than she did. But it seemed that she was wrong. Was there no end to the kind, generous things he had done for her?

She really was the luckiest woman in the world. And when he finally slipped the ring onto her finger, and she became his wife, she would be luckier still. Tears pricked her eyes.

It could have all been so different. But she had told her father the truth – it had been

the luckiest moment of her life when she had inadvertently fallen down that mine shaft. For it had led her to the love of her life.

Sebastian adjusted his cravat, trying not to stare at the church door. His palms were sweating now. Daniel, standing at his side as his groomsman, grinned widely.

“Do not worry, old chap, she will be here soon and your misery over,” he quipped. “You look like you are about to walk to the gallows rather than marry the love of your life!”

Sebastian grinned weakly. He felt sick to his stomach. He had been longing for this day with an intensity that had bordered on obsession, and it had arrived at long last. But now that it was here, he felt like he was about to expire from nerves.

I just want it over and done with. I just want her to be my wife.

He had been journeying back and forth from Newquay Hall to Draycott Manor for months to see her, and it was starting to wear thin.

He just wanted her by his side – to see her face when he first woke up in the morning and to see her before he closed his eyes at night. The longing and the love between them had grown so intense that he could hardly think about anything else any longer.

He gulped as he stared at the congregation. And that day was finally here. He heard a murmur through the crowd. He started to panic. Where was she?

At that moment, the door burst open. He turned, his eyes widening, seeing her for the first time. His heart seized.

He had never seen anything more beautiful in his life.

She held her father's arm, standing with the light behind her. Her golden hair seemed to glow like a halo. She wore a gown of cream silk and lace with a long train that snaked behind her. She looked exquisite, like a fairy princess.

His heart filled with love and pride. He didn't know what he had done to deserve such a woman; he was just glad he had found her.

As she started walking up the aisle towards him, he was beset by the memory of finding her at the bottom of that mine shaft, deathly pale and unconscious, with a large gash on her head.

He had never been more frightened in his life, thinking she was going to die in his arms. But he had also been stunned at finding the most beautiful woman he had ever seen there.

His heart swelled again. It had come full circle. Now, that injured woman, who had lost all memory of her life, was about to become his wife.

Finally, she reached his side. His heart was racing so erratically now that he could barely greet her. His mouth went dry.

They turned to one another ... and he was lost within her eyes. The way he was always lost within her eyes. He knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that he would be lost within them forever.

As the vicar cleared his throat, ready to start the ceremony, he knew that life would never be the same again. And that was truly the most wondrous thing in the world.

Christina looked down at her hand resting in her new husband's hand, feeling a glow unlike anything she had ever felt before.

They had stolen some precious moments alone in the gardens after cutting the wedding cake. Fairy lights twinkled, interlaced around the garden, casting a faint illumination.

"Happy?" whispered Sebastian, pulling her towards him.

"I have never been happier," she whispered, gazing into his eyes, meaning every word from the bottom of her heart. "I still cannot believe it. I cannot believe that I am your wife. It still feels like a dream."

"Believe it," whispered Sebastian, nuzzling her neck. "We are never going to wake up from this dream, Christina. I promise you."

They gazed into each other's eyes, lost in a daze of love, leaning into each other ... when they both jumped, hearing a noise behind them.

"Shhhh," whispered Sebastian, grinning. He gripped her hand tighter. "Come with me."

Giggling, they stole along the path. Suddenly, they stopped in their tracks. Daniel and Frances were there stealing a kiss. Their friends jumped, breaking apart, smiling at them sheepishly.

"We have news," declared Daniel, taking Frances's hand in his own and holding it high. His eyes were shining. "I have just asked Frances to be my wife—and she has accepted!"

Christina gasped before letting out a cry of joy and rushing to them. She enveloped

Frances in a fierce hug. Sebastian took Daniel's hand, shaking it heartily.

"Congratulations, old chap," he said, grinning from ear to ear. "I hope you are as happy together as Christina and me. I think this calls for champagne. Shall we go inside?"

They all shouted their assent, drifting towards the house, their arms around each other, their chatter ringing into the air.

Christina squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. Yes, she was very glad she had fallen down that abandoned mine shaft. In fact, if she were given the choice, she would do it all over again. A thousand times over.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:41 am

Newquay Hall. One year later

“Do not drop the basket,” implored Christina to her husband, who was swinging the wicker basket in his right hand. “Mrs Sollock and Cook prepared it with such care! We will lose all our luncheon if you are not careful, Sebastian.”

“I promise I will pick it all up if that happens,” said Sebastian, grinning at her like a naughty child who had just been caught with his finger in the honey pot. “Or I will go back to the house and fetch more food for our picnic. I promise I will not let you or any of our guests starve to death, wife.”

Christina laughed despite herself. She never could stay mad with him for too long. They always ended up laughing together. The past year had been filled with such laughter and wonder. The very best year of her life.

He pulled her towards him, kissing her softly. “Have I told you lately how much I love you?” he whispered to her, nuzzling her neck. “Have I told you how much I absolutely adore you?”

“Only ten times a day.” Christina laughed breathlessly, her heart overflowing. “Only twenty times.”

They gazed at each other, lost in each other’s eyes. But at that moment, they heard shouts. They turned, grinning, as their picnic guests walked towards them over the lawn.

Christina noticed Lydia wearing a new blue muslin gown that suited her figure to a

tee and beaming widely. Daniel and Frances were hand in hand, as always. Well, they were still newlyweds, after all, having married only two months ago.

Christina's heart flipped over as she watched them all. They were all so close now, as thick as thieves, doing everything together. Like this picnic on the top of the hill overlooking the sea to celebrate the first day of spring.

"Hurry up!" called Sebastian, grinning at them. "My wife is scolding me that we are about to lose the food. We need to eat it before I swing the basket too wide and drop it all."

The others caught up to them, the sound of laughter and chatter filling the air as they walked through the gardens, cutting across in front of the gazebo before they left the estate, climbing the hill.

The sun was shining brightly, and Christina saw the first tight buds of spring starting to blossom on the trees, waiting to burst forth, pink, white, and peach, as well as wild irises and daffodils, their petals waving like flags in the wind.

They were puffing by the time they reached the top of the hill. Sebastian unrolled the picnic rugs, spreading them on the ground beneath a weeping willow tree, with the most uninterrupted view of the sea. They sat down, opened the basket, and were soon feasting upon sandwiches, ginger sponge cake, and iced tea.

After they were replete with food, Sebastian, Daniel, and Frances decided to take a walk. Christina, who was feeling a little tired, decided to stay behind, as did Lydia, who said she would keep her company.

Christina laid back, gazing at the sea, drinking in the view. It always took her breath away, and she imagined it always would.

The district around Newquay Hall was more beautiful than anywhere on this earth. It really was God's own country, as Sebastian always said.

She turned, gazing at her sister-in-law. Lydia really was glowing ... and Christina thought she knew why. She thought it might have something to do with a certain ginger-haired gentleman who had been calling on her sister-in-law quite a lot lately.

"How is Lord Giles these days?" she asked abruptly, clearly taking Lydia by surprise, for her sister-in-law's eyes widened, and her cheeks turned pink.

"Why, he is well enough," replied Lydia, looking embarrassed. There was an awkward pause. "He is a good, kind man. I enjoy his company enormously."

"And he clearly enjoys your company as well," said Christina, smiling at her. "Do I hear the chiming of wedding bells soon?"

Lydia's colour deepened. She waved a dismissive hand in the air, laughing.

But she looked pleased, nonetheless. Christina knew that she had hit a nail on the head. Her sister-in-law really did like Lord Giles. She hoped that the relationship progressed – Lydia deserved love and her own home and family, at long last.

Christina shook her head incredulously. She would never have believed that she and Lydia could be so close, but once her sister-in-law decided to accept her, nothing seemed to stop her.

Frances had once told Christina that Lydia's loyalty was fierce, and it seemed it was true. They were such firm friends that Lydia watched over her like a hawk, as well as Sebastian.

"I have something to tell you," said Lydia suddenly, her face turning solemn. "I

thought I would tell you first ... before telling Sebastian.” She hesitated. “Walter Hester has avoided criminal charges against him for what he did at the mines, on condition he sell his mines in this district and leave it entirely. He and his family are moving to London next week.”

A shadow passed over Christina like a cloud had passed over the sun. The business with Hester had been dragging on for most of the past year and had caused Sebastian much angst.

She wasn’t sure how he was going to take this news, but she suddenly knew she was glad it was over and done with for good. Now, they could move on with their lives, once and for all, and put all the unpleasantness behind them for good.

She took a deep breath. Sebastian must put the saga of Hester behind him, just like she had put Lord Powell behind her.

The disgraced earl had fled the country after a scandal had emerged regarding his conduct with her, and she was fervently glad. He had been unredeemable ... just like Hester. She knew it was hard for her husband to reconcile. But it was getting better, day by day.

At that moment, Sebastian and the others walked back towards them.

Christina’s heart filled with love as it always did when she saw her husband again, even after a short absence. It was as if she were struck by lightning and falling in love over and over again. Every single day.

Her hand strayed to her belly. Soon, it would no longer be just the two of them. She hadn’t told him yet – she had just found out herself. It was still very early days.

But the new life growing within her symbolized change and renewal, just like the

beginning of spring and Hester and Powell leaving their lives once and for all.

Their eyes met and locked. She felt the frisson between them, as always. Slowly, she smiled. She would tell him the happy news tonight.

But for the moment, it was as if they were the only two people in the world ... as it had always been between them. And somehow, she knew it always would.

It had been fate that had brought them together. It had always been meant to be. She knew it from the bottom of her heart.

THE END

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:41 am

Five Years Later

“Henry, no, not the tart!” Christina laughed as her three-year-old son, a mischievous grin plastered across his face, reached for the strawberry tart on the picnic blanket with sticky fingers.

Sebastian chuckled, his deep voice rumbling as he plucked the tart from the boy’s grasp and handed him a less delicate scone instead. “Your mother worked hard on this feast, Henry. Let’s save the tarts for after we’ve eaten our sandwiches, shall we?”

Henry pouted but took the scone, his big brown eyes a mirror of his father’s. Beside him, Amelia, the quieter of the twins, giggled as she tried to arrange her wild curls under the bonnet that refused to stay in place.

“Do you think Amelia might have inherited your stubborn streak, darling?” Sebastian teased, his tone light as he glanced at his wife.

Christina smiled, adjusting Amelia’s bonnet with a patient hand. “It’s far more likely she’s taken after you. Determined and headstrong, just like her papa.”

Sebastian reached over and squeezed Christina’s hand, his touch warm and grounding. “Then she’ll be unstoppable.”

The family was seated on a large, embroidered blanket spread beneath the shade of a sprawling oak tree on the grounds of their estate. The summer sun cast a golden glow across the rolling hills, and the scent of blooming wildflowers filled the air. Nearby, the twins’ nursemaid stood at a respectful distance, ready to assist but allowing the

family their private moment.

“Have you heard from Daniel this week?” Christina asked, passing a plate of sandwiches to Sebastian.

Sebastian nodded, taking a bite before answering. “Yes, he wrote to say they’ve finally completed the new stables on his estate. Frances is thrilled, of course. She’s always had a soft spot for horses.”

“And for Daniel,” Christina added with a soft laugh.

“True enough.” Sebastian’s eyes sparkled as he spoke. “They’ll be visiting tomorrow, by the way. Frances insists on bringing some of her preserves. I hope you’re prepared for an impromptu tasting session.”

Christina’s laugh rang out, clear and bright. “It wouldn’t be Frances if she didn’t arrive with jars of jam and an endless supply of praise for her recipes.”

As they spoke, the twins played on the blanket, their chatter and laughter blending harmoniously with the gentle rustling of leaves above. Christina leaned back against Sebastian’s shoulder, her heart full as she watched their children.

“Look at them,” she said softly. “So full of life. It’s hard to believe how much has changed in just a few years.”

Sebastian kissed the top of her head, his voice steady and reassuring. “It’s been a journey, hasn’t it? But I wouldn’t change a single moment. Not when it’s brought us here.”

“Do you think Lydia will join us tomorrow as well?” Christina asked, her gaze drifting toward the horizon where the sun hung low, painting the sky in soft hues of

gold and lavender.

Sebastian leaned back, propping himself on one elbow, his expression thoughtful. “She mentioned she might. It depends on how she’s feeling. Giles has been fussing over her more than ever with the baby due so soon.”

Christina’s face softened with a smile. “He’s so attentive. Lydia deserves someone like him after everything she’s been through. I’ve never seen her so radiant.”

Sebastian chuckled. “She glows brighter than the candles in Newquay Hall, that’s for certain. And Giles is practically tripping over himself to ensure her comfort.”

“I’m happy for her,” Christina said, plucking a wildflower from the edge of the blanket and twirling it in her fingers. “She’s become such a dear friend. Hard to believe how we started.”

Sebastian raised an eyebrow, teasing. “Hard to believe? She practically declared war on you the day we brought you home.”

Christina laughed, shaking her head. “Yes, but look at her now—an ally in every way. She’s even teaching me embroidery.”

Sebastian feigned a grimace. “A skill you don’t need, if you ask me. You’ve more than proven your worth with the ledgers. Giles told me Lydia’s impressed by how quickly you manage the accounts, even with the children underfoot.”

Christina’s cheeks flushed with pride. “I’ve grown to enjoy it. Working with you on the mining ventures feels like we’re building something together. It’s fulfilling.”

Sebastian reached out and took her hand, his touch grounding. “It is. And you’ve been invaluable, Christina. I don’t say it enough, but I couldn’t have managed

without you.”

Before she could reply, Henry toddled over, clutching a feather he’d found, and waved it triumphantly. “Mama, look! For you!”

Christina beamed, taking the feather as though it were the most precious treasure. “Why, thank you, Henry. It’s beautiful.”

Amelia followed close behind, her small arms wrapped around a bouquet of dandelions. “For Papa,” she announced proudly, thrusting the wildflowers toward Sebastian.

“Thank you, my little flower,” Sebastian said, his voice tender as he took the bouquet. He ruffled Amelia’s curls, earning a delighted giggle.

As the twins settled back on the blanket to play, Christina leaned closer to Sebastian. “Do you ever think about them?” she asked quietly.

Sebastian didn’t need clarification. He sighed, his gaze distant. “Hester? Powell?”

Christina nodded.

“Sometimes,” he admitted. “But not often. Hester’s schemes are behind us. He’s disgraced, far from Cornwall, and under close watch. As for Powell...” Sebastian’s expression darkened briefly before he softened. “He’s gone, and he won’t trouble us again.”

Christina exhaled deeply, her shoulders relaxing. “It’s strange, isn’t it? To think how much they once loomed over us. Now, they’re little more than shadows of the past.”

“And that’s where they’ll stay,” Sebastian said firmly. “We have too much to look

forward to, Christina. Too much to cherish.”

“I’m glad we’ve put those days behind us,” Christina said, her voice steady. “And it’s comforting to know we can look ahead without fear.”

Sebastian nodded, his hand brushing hers. “We’ve built a life filled with love and security. The trials we faced only made us stronger.”

Before Christina could respond, the sound of hoofbeats drew their attention. She turned to see Daniel and Frances approaching, their carriage rolling smoothly along the dirt path toward the hill. Frances leaned out of the window, waving enthusiastically.

“Perfect timing,” Christina said with a smile, standing to greet their friends.

As the carriage halted, Daniel hopped down, helping Frances step onto the grass. “What a view!” Frances exclaimed, looking out toward the sea. “Every time we visit, I’m reminded why you love it here so much.”

“It does have its charm,” Sebastian said with a grin, embracing Daniel in a hearty handshake before turning to Frances. “And you brought preserves, I hope?”

Frances laughed, handing him a small basket tied with a checkered ribbon. “Only the best. Blackberry this time. You’ll love it.”

The twins came bounding toward Frances, their faces lighting up at the sight of her. “Aunt Frances!” they cried in unison, clinging to her skirts.

“Goodness, you two have grown,” Frances said, bending to hug them both. “You’ll be taller than me before long!”

“And just as lively,” Daniel added, winking at Sebastian.

They all settled onto the blanket, the conversation flowing as easily as the gentle sea breeze. Daniel and Frances shared updates on their estate, recounting their progress with the new stables and their plans for expansion.

“Perhaps one day, our children will ride together,” Frances mused, glancing at Henry and Amelia, who were now chasing a butterfly near the tree.

“Perhaps,” Christina said, her smile soft. “I imagine they’ll be the best of friends, just like us.”

Frances reached over to squeeze Christina’s hand. “It’s amazing to think how much has changed in just a few years. We’ve all come so far.”

Sebastian glanced at Daniel, his tone playful. “And you’ve managed to keep pace with Frances, I see.”

Daniel grinned. “Barely. She keeps me on my toes, but I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

The group laughed, the sound mingling with the rustle of leaves. For a moment, Christina allowed herself to simply breathe, taking in the joy and warmth surrounding them.

As the sun dipped lower in the sky, casting long shadows across the hill, Christina looked at Sebastian. “I think we should do this more often,” she said softly.

Sebastian nodded, his gaze warm. “Agreed. These are the moments worth savoring.”

The sun began its slow descent, painting the sky in rich hues of amber and pink. The

golden light bathed the hillside, casting a warm glow over the group as they lingered, reluctant to let the day end.

Lydia and Lord Giles arrived next, walking hand in hand. Lydia's radiant smile was framed by her glowing cheeks, and she held her belly with a protective hand.

"Apologies for the delay," Lydia called, her voice as cheerful as the breeze. "Giles insisted I rest before the walk up the hill, but I couldn't miss the chance to join you all."

"Resting is important," Christina said, rising to greet her sister-in-law. She embraced Lydia warmly. "But I'm glad you came. You look wonderful."

Lydia laughed softly, her eyes sparkling. "Giles dotes on me as if I'm made of glass. It's a bit excessive, but I suppose I can't complain."

"It's no more than you deserve," Sebastian said, shaking Giles's hand. "We're all eagerly awaiting the little one's arrival."

"Especially me," Lydia said, her voice brimming with joy. "I can't wait to meet this baby. Giles swears it's a boy, but I have my doubts."

Christina smiled, exchanging a knowing glance with Frances. "Either way, it will be a blessing."

As they all settled back onto the blanket, the twins climbed onto Giles's lap, giggling as he tried to tell them a story about a brave knight. Lydia leaned against her husband, her eyes closing briefly as she soaked in the moment.

Christina reached for Sebastian's hand, intertwining her fingers with his. "It's hard to believe how much has changed," she murmured.

Sebastian turned to her, his expression tender. “And yet, some things remain constant. Like my love for you.”

Christina felt her cheeks warm, even after years of hearing such declarations. “And mine for you,” she whispered back.

As the first stars appeared in the darkening sky, Christina rested her head on Sebastian’s shoulder, her heart full. She placed a hand on her belly, where the faintest signs of new life were beginning to show.

“Sebastian,” she said softly, drawing his attention.

“Yes, my love?”

“I have something to tell you,” she began, her voice trembling slightly with emotion.

He turned to her, his brows furrowing in concern. “What is it?”

She smiled, her eyes shimmering. “We’re going to have another child.”

Sebastian froze for a moment, his expression unreadable. Then, a brilliant smile broke across his face. “Truly?” he asked, his voice thick with emotion.

Christina nodded, her heart swelling as he pulled her into his arms. “Truly.”

The others noticed the embrace, their curiosity piqued. Frances leaned closer. “What’s the news?”

Sebastian looked around at the gathered group, his joy evident. “We’re having another child.”

A chorus of cheers and congratulations erupted, the joy shared by all.

As the group began packing up to return to the house, Christina and Sebastian lingered, taking one last look at the sea.

“Life has given us so much,” Christina said, her voice soft.

Sebastian kissed her temple, his arms wrapped around her. “And it will give us so much more. Together, we can face anything.”

With the stars twinkling above them, they walked hand in hand toward their future, their hearts full and their love stronger than ever.

THE END

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:41 am

“Delphine, dearest, they are coming.” Benedict Loxley’s voice cut through the darkness of their chateau bedchamber. “We must leave. Now.”

Delphine de Beaumont Loxley clutched their infant daughter close to her breast, her heart thundering against her ribs like a revolutionary’s drum. “Benedict... the letters—”

“Are destroyed.” He pressed a swift kiss to her temple, his familiar scent of sandalwood and ink washing over her. “Everything that could identify our... arrangements... is gone.”

Outside, the February wind howled through the Loire Valley like a banshee’s wail, rattling the windowpanes of Chateau de Beaumont. The ancestral home of Delphine’s family had stood for three centuries, but tonight, it would witness its last de Beaumont departure.

“Madame,” Agathe, the nursemaid, appeared in the doorway, her face pale as fresh linen in the candlelight. “The trap is ready, and Pierre has the carriage waiting at the crossroads with the... special cargo.”

Benedict helped Delphine to her feet, his diplomatic composure cracking only when baby Angélique whimpered in her mother’s arms. “Hush, ma petite,” Delphine whispered, adjusting the infant’s wool blanket against the bitter cold.

The chateau’s familiar corridors felt alien in the darkness, as their footsteps echoed off the very same stone walls that had witnessed generations of French aristocratic splendor, now reduced to shadows and whispers in the dead of night.

Portraits of Delphine's ancestors seemed to watch their descent with painted eyes that held centuries of judgement.

"Your father would be proud," Benedict murmured, helping her navigate the servant's stairs. "You are showing the same courage he did when he helped the British during the Seven Years' War."

Delphine's throat tightened. "Papa believed in loyalty above all else. Even to former enemies."

"As do I," Benedict replied, his English accent contrasting with his wife's French accent, even more so under the stress of their situation. "And my loyalty is to you, and our little Angélique now."

They emerged into the kitchen, where Margot, Delphine's lady's maid since childhood, waited with a bundle of provisions. The faithful servant's eyes were red-brimmed but determined. "The back path is clear, Madame. I have checked twice."

"Margot," Delphine reached for her maid's hand. "The trunks—"

"Are safely with Pierre in the carriage, Madame. All has been done exactly as Monsieur specified."

"God speed," Benedict whispered as he flicked the reins. As they pulled away from the only home she had ever known, Delphine caught a final glimpse of Margot's silhouette in the stable yard.

The maid crossed herself, a gesture Delphine had not seen her make since they were girls sneaking treats from the kitchen.

The trap's wheels crunched over frozen gravel, each rotation carrying them further

from danger—or closer to it. Delphine cradled Angélique, breathing in her sweet, milky scent.

Her daughter would grow up English, safe from the madness consuming France. The thought should have brought comfort, but instead, it felt more like one more piece of herself being stripped away.

“The carriage is a half-hour ahead,” Benedict murmured, his eyes scanning the darkness. “Once we catch up, we will transfer to it and make haste for the coast. By this time tomorrow, we shall be in England.”

Delphine nodded, not trusting her own voice. In her arms, Angélique slept peacefully, unaware that her world was changing forever. The infant’s features, so like her own, held traces of both France and England—a bridge between two warring nations, just as Benedict and she had once hoped to be.

The trap rattled onward through the night, carrying its precious cargo toward an uncertain future. Behind them, the Loire Valley slept under a blanket of stars, while ahead, the road stretched dark and empty—or so they prayed.

The trap jolted over a rut in the road, and Angélique stirred with a tiny mewl of protest. Delphine hummed softly, a lullaby her own mother had sung to her in happier times. The melody drifted away on the wind—lost forever to the rhythm of hoofbeats and creaking wheels.

“There is someone behind us,” Agathe whispered suddenly, her grip tightening on Delphine’s arm.

Benedict’s shoulders tensed as he urged the horse faster. “How many?”

Agathe’s breath hitched. Her fingers dug into Delphine’s arm as she turned sharply.

“At least three riders, my lord. They are moving fast!”

The night air grew thick with tension, broken only by the increasing tempo of their horse’s hooves. Delphine’s heart seemed to beat in time with each stride that struck against the frozen earth underneath them.

“They are gaining,” Benedict’s voice was as taut as a bowstring. “Delphine, listen carefully, should anything happen—”

“Non!” she cut him off. “We stay together.”

“Dearest—”

“We stay together,” she repeated firmly, though her arms trembled around Angélique.

The riders were close enough now that Delphine could hear their horses’ labored breathing. A shot cracked through the night like breaking ice, and their horse reared in panic.

“Get down!” Benedict shouted, fighting for control of the reins.

Another shot rang through the night. Agathe let out a strangled cry, her body jerking as she instinctively curled inward to shield Angélique with her arms. Her weight pressed against Delphine in a desperate attempt to protect them both.

“Your papers!” a rough voice demanded from the darkness. “Present your papers!”

Benedict’s response was lost in the thunder of hooves as more riders emerged from the shadows. The trap swerved sharply, and Delphine caught a glimpse of dark figures in revolutionary cockades.

“These are the ones,” another voice called. “The English spy and his French whore!”

“Non!” Delphine clutched Angélique closer. “We are loyal citizens. Please!”

The trap’s wheel caught on something—a rock, a root, she would never know—and the world suddenly tilted sideways. She felt Benedict’s arms around her, trying to shield her and the baby as they were thrown clear. The impact drove the breath from her lungs.

Through a haze of pain, Delphine heard boots crunching on the frozen ground. A lantern swung into view, its light harsh and accusing.

“Search them,” someone ordered. “Find it.”

“There is nothing here,” came the frustrated reply after several minutes. “Just some clothes and papers.”

“Impossible! The information said—”

“Keep looking!”

Delphine tried to focus on the voices, to understand what they wanted, but darkness was creeping in at the edges of her vision. Beside her, Benedict lay very still, in a puddle of something dark that glistened in the faint lantern light.

“My... my baby,” she whispered. But Angélique was gone, and Agathe with her. Had they fallen? Had they been thrown clear? Delphine could not remember. And now, the cold was seeping into her bones, accompanied by a strange sense of peace.

“Benedict?” She reached for her husband’s hand, finding it already growing cold.

“Je t’aime,” he whispered, his final words carrying the accent of her homeland rather than his own.

The lantern light receded, taking with it the sound of cursing and the shuffle of searching feet. Delphine closed her eyes, tears freezing on her cheeks as she joined her husband in the endless night.

A mile ahead, Pierre brought the carriage to a halt at the sound of distant gunfire. Margot, crouched in the well-sprung interior, pressed a hand to her mouth to stifle a sob.

“We must go back,” she whispered.

“No.” Pierre’s voice was firm. “Monsieur’s orders were clear. If anything happened, we are to protect the child and the cargo.”

As if on cue, Angélique stirred in Agathe’s trembling arms. The nursemaid had thrown herself from the trap at Benedict’s signal, rolling into a ditch.

She had managed to secure the baby firmly in her arms and fled the scene just moments before their enemies arrived. They had run through the darkness until Pierre’s lantern guided them to the carriage.

“The trunks,” Margot suddenly straightened. “Monsieur said they were more important than his own life. We must reach the coast before dawn.”

Pierre nodded grimly and snapped the reins. The carriage lurched forward, its precious cargo secured beneath false panels and hidden compartments. Whatever secret Benedict Loxley had died protecting, was not their responsibility.

The coastal road stretched endlessly before them, each turn bringing them closer to salvation. When they finally reached the hidden cove, the eastern sky was beginning to pale.

“Hurry!” a gruff voice called from the shadows. “The tide will not wait.”

Margot recognized the English accent of their contact, and two sailors emerged from behind wind-twisted trees, moving quickly to help them down from the carriage.

“The trunks,” Margot insisted, even as the men tried to hurry them toward the waiting rowboat. “They must come with us.”

“No room,” one sailor argued. “The boat is for passengers only.”

Margot drew herself up to her full height, channeling every ounce of her mistress’s aristocratic bearing. “These trunks contain the last possessions of an English diplomat and his wife, who died tonight ensuring their delivery. You will make room.”

The sailors exchanged glances, then began unloading the trunks. As they worked, Margot caught movement near the tree line—shadows that might either have been branches in the wind, or something more sinister.

“Quickly now!” she urged, taking Angélique from Agathe’s exhausted arms.

The baby’s eyes opened, revealing irises as blue as her mother’s. For a moment, Delphine’s face swam before Margot’s vision, and she had to blink to fight back tears.

“Your parents died protecting you, petit ange,” she whispered. “And whatever secret they have hidden in these trunks, I swear it will be yours when the time is right.”

As the rowboat pushed off from the shore, a figure stepped out of the shadows, watching their departure.

In the growing light, Margot glimpsed the glint of spectacles and the cut of an expensive coat. The man raised his hand in what might have either been a farewell, or perhaps a promise.

It might have been far more sinister, but all that mattered was the swoosh of the oars, the weight of the baby in her arms, and the mysterious trunks that had cost the lives of two people.

An English ship waited on the horizon like a promise of safety, while behind them, France receded into memory and shadow. Whatever Benedict Loxley had hidden from his pursuers remained secure—but for how long?

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:41 am

“Geoffrey Eddard Warburton, if you steal one more pinch of that dough, you will spoil your appetite entirely!” Angelica Loxley tried to sound stern, but laughter bubbled beneath her words like water over stones.

“I am merely testing the quality, cousin.” The ten-year-old boy grinned, the flour dusting his dark curls like fresh snow. Someone must ensure that these biscuits are fit for the war effort.”

Sunlight streamed through the large kitchen windows of Rosemere Hall, catching the copper pots that hung in neat rows and turning them into burnished gold. The scent of butter and sugar perfumed the air, mingling with the earthier aroma of freshly baked bread.

“The war effort, indeed!” Angelica shook her head, sending a loose tendril of pale blonde hair dancing across her forehead. “Well, I suspect your efforts to be entirely self-serving, young man.”

She turned back to her work, her slender fingers deftly cutting shapes from the rolled dough. In the morning light, her features held an almost ethereal quality—high cheekbones and a straight, narrow nose that spoke of her French heritage, softened by eyes like English bluebells.

It was a face that merged two warring nations into something uniquely lovely, though Angelica herself seemed unconscious of her beauty as she worked.

“I remember you yourself saying that serving others serves ourselves,” Geoffrey countered, attempting to mimic his tutor’s philosophical tone. “Therefore, by eating

these biscuits, I serve both myself, and England.”

“Your logic would impress Aristotle himself,” Angelica laughed, then caught her lower lip between her teeth as she concentrated on arranging the biscuits on the baking sheet. Her movements were precise, and graceful—with the same careful attention she brought to everything she did, as if each small task were a prayer of gratitude.

The kitchen door swung open, admitting Lady Crowley, their nearest neighbor, in a rustle of expensive silks. The woman’s pinched features registered surprise, then barely concealed disdain at finding the niece of the Lady of the house elbow-deep in kitchen work.

“Lady Angelica! What on earth...” she sniffed, her gaze sweeping the domestic scene like a general inspecting a group of particularly disappointing troops.

“Good morning, Lady Sophia,” Angelica straightened, unconsciously assuming the perfect posture that her aunt had drilled into her since childhood. “We are preparing biscuits for the soldiers at the parish hospital.”

“How... charitable of you.” The woman’s tone suggested it was anything but. “Though, one cannot help but wonder whether it is entirely appropriate, given the current situation with those French savages. It might even cause some to question where... certain sympathies lie.”

Lady Sophia’s words struck Angelica with the force of a physical blow, though the only outward reaction she allowed to show was a slight tightening of her fingers on the rolling pin. She opened her mouth to respond, but Geoffrey beat her to it.

“Cousin Angelica is as English as Yorkshire pudding!” he declared hotly. “She has been teaching me to be a proper patriot, and we are making these biscuits for our

brave soldiers.”

Lady Sophia’s expression soured further, as if the boy’s defense only proved her point. “Yes, well. Do give my regards to your aunt. I had hoped to speak with her about the upcoming assembly, but I can see she is otherwise engaged.”

The door closed behind her with more force than strictly necessary, leaving a sudden chill in the sunlit kitchen.

“Do not mind her,” Geoffrey said fiercely, wrapping his small arms around Angelica’s waist. “She is just jealous because you are prettier and nicer and better at everything.”

Angelica hugged him back, grateful for his kind, loyal heart. “Thank you, dearest. Now, shall we get all these into the oven? The soldiers certainly will not be impressed with raw dough, no matter how thoroughly tested.”

They worked in companionable silence for a few minutes, until the sound of another entrance made them both look up. This time, it was Lady Lavinia Loxley Warburton who swept into the kitchen like an elegant ship under full sail.

“Honestly, Angelica,” Lavinia sighed, sinking into a chair with theatrical exhaustion. “Why can you not just have the maid do it? It is hardly seemly for a young lady of your station to be playing a cook.”

Where Angelica was all gentle grace and quiet beauty, Lavinia was all sharp angles and studied artifice. Even at this early hour, every dark curl was perfectly arranged, every ribbon placed just so. She had been a renowned beauty in her youth, and at forty-five she still commanded attention through sheer force of will.

“The maids are busy with preparations for tomorrow’s celebrations, Aunt,” Angelica

replied, wiping her hands on her apron. “And I enjoy the work. It makes me feel useful.”

“Useful!” Lavinia waved away the word like an annoying insect. “You are to be nineteen tomorrow, my dear. It is time you thought about being ornamental rather than useful. Which reminds me...” a smile curved her painted lips. “I have an early birthday surprise for you.”

Something in her aunt’s tone made Angelica’s stomach tighten with apprehension. She recognized that particular smile—it usually preceded some grand scheme that would benefit her aunt far more than anyone else.

“Oh?” she managed, trying to keep her voice light.

“Yes, indeed.” Lavinia leaned forward, her eyes bright with triumph. “I have arranged a most advantageous match for you, my dear. You are to be married!”

The rolling pin slipped from Angelica’s fingers, clattering against the wooden worktable. “Married? To whom?”

“All in good time, my dear.” Lavinia’s smile grew more sphinxlike. “The gentleman in question is of excellent breeding, and, more importantly, considerable means. You will meet him soon enough.”

“But—”

“Now, now.” Lavinia rose, brushing imaginary crumbs from her silk skirts. “A wealthy husband is essential for a young lady’s security in these uncertain times.”

Angelica frowned, her delicate brows drawing together. “But surely I have no need for wealth? Papa left me well provided for, did he not?”

Something flickered in Lavinia's eyes, quick as a minnow darting through clear water, but her smile never wavered. "One can never be too secure, my dear. Now, go and make yourself presentable. We are expected to attend Lady Crowley's ball this evening."

After Lavinia swept out, Geoffrey tugged at Angelica's sleeve. "You are not leaving when you get married, are you? Who else will help me steal biscuits and climb trees and learn French swear words?"

"Geoffrey!" Angelica could not help but laugh, though her heart felt heavy as lead. "I never taught you such things! And no one could ever keep me from being your friend. I shall visit as much as I can—I promise."

The rest of the day passed in a blur of preparation. Angelica's lady's maid, Susannah, helped her into her finest ball gown—a creation of white silk that made her look like a fresh spring flower. The mirror reflected back a young woman caught between two worlds: her mother's French refinement in the graceful arch of her neck and delicate wrists, and her father's English steadfastness in the determined set of her chin.

"You look like an angel, my lady," Susannah said, carefully adjusting a pearl pin in Angelica's upswept hair.

"Angels do not have knocking knees," Angelica replied wryly, "or two left feet."

The Crowley's ballroom blazed with hundreds of candles, their light multiplied by gilt-framed mirrors until the whole room seemed to float in a golden haze. Angelica followed her aunt through the crowd, acutely aware of the whispers that followed in their wake.

Would her mysterious intended be among the attendees? Would she recognize him somehow, like the heroines in romantic novels?

“My Lady,” a deep voice interrupted her thoughts. “Might I have the honor of this dance?”

She turned only to find herself looking up—quite a way up—into a pair of warm, brown eyes that crinkled at the corners with good humor.

Their owner was tall and broad-shouldered, his evening clothes perfectly tailored to his robust, athletic frame with nothing short of military precision.

A slight unevenness in his stance suggested an old injury, but it only added to his distinguished bearing, like a battle scar on a fine sword.

“Lord Christopher Fenwick,” he introduced himself with a bow that managed to be both proper and playful. “I promise to try not to trample on your feet too badly,” he added with a laugh that was rich and genuine, and it warmed her like a good brandy.

“Lady Angelica Loxley,” she returned with a curtsy, charmed despite herself. As he led her onto the dance floor, Angelica caught her aunt watching with a strangely unreadable expression.

From the corner, the orchestra began playing their music, and to Angelica’s surprise, she found herself moving with unexpected grace. Christopher led her with confident ease, his slight limp barely noticeable as he guided her through the figures of the country dance.

“It seems,” he murmured as they turned, “we make quite a pair of invalids, though balancing one another quite well.”

“Hardly invalid, my lord,” she replied, feeling a slight blush warm her cheeks. “Though, I confess, this is the first time I have not had to count my steps in my head like a schoolgirl.”

“Ah, but counting is vastly overrated, do you not think? Dancing should be like conversation—natural and unrehearsed.”

Their eyes met then, pools of sapphire and deep oak colliding, causing something to spark between them, quick as lightning and just as startling. Angelica felt her heart skip a single beat, then race to catch up.

She could not help noticing how the candlelight caught slight bronze highlights in his hair, or the way his shoulders filled out his coat with unconscious elegance.

“You are having dangerous thoughts, my lady.” He said softly, his eyes twinkling.

“Am I?”

“Yes, I can see you calculating how to step on my good foot instead of my bad one.”

Angelica laughed, the sound carrying across the ballroom like a sting of silver bells. Several heads turned, and she caught Lady Crowley’s disapproving frown from across the room.

“You’ve caught me. But then again, it has been said that I am a terrible strategist.”

“On the contrary,” his voice dropped lower, meant for her ears alone. “I think you are exactly what you appear to be.”

“And that is?” Angelica asked, slightly intrigued.

“Kind, genuine, and refreshingly free of artifice.”

The words touched something deep inside her, a longing to be truly known and accepted. But she could not afford such feelings, not when she was promised to

another. Could she?

Their dance ended and left Angelica feeling flushed and slightly breathless. Christopher bowed over her hand, his lips barely brushing the top of her gloved knuckles, but even that slight touch sent sparks racing up her arm.

“Until we meet again, my lady.” He said, and she could not help but notice how his eyes lingered on her face, as if memorizing its details.

“You seem to have made quite the impression, niece.” Lavinia materialized at her elbow, steering her toward the refreshment table. “Though I am not sure that is quite what we are looking for.”

“We?” Angelica accepted a glass of lemonade, using it to cool her warm cheeks. “Aunt Lavinia, please—why all the mystery? Who is my intended? Might I have some say in the matter?”

“Of course you have a say in the matter, dear, but you must also trust that I know what is best.” Lavinia’s eyes darted around the room, as if searching for someone. “Ah! There is Mr. Montague. I must have a quick word with him regarding tomorrow’s meeting.”

She swept away, leaving Angelica alone with her thoughts. From across the room, she could see Christopher in conversation with several other gentleman, among them a few officers.

Even from this distance, he cut an impressive figure, his bearing somehow both militant and graceful despite his disability.

A burst of masculine laughter drew her attention to a nearby alcove, where two gentlemen stood partially concealed by a potted palm.

“—cannot imagine why old Montague is in such a rush,” one voice said, “unless he knows something we don’t about the Loxley girl’s finances.”

“Well, there is the French connection to consider,” his companion replied. “Perhaps it is better to settle these matters quickly, before anyone starts asking uncomfortable questions about her loyalty.”

Angelica’s hands trembled so badly she had to set down her glass. How dare they?

She had spent her entire life proving herself a loyal English subject, supporting the war effort, trying to be more English than the English themselves. She had eradicated and hidden what she could pertaining to her heritage—even adapted her given name to better suit to her life in England.

“Lady Angelica?” Lord Fenwick’s voice made her jump. He must have seen something in her expression, because his own was now bearing signs of concern. “Are you unwell?”

“I—” she forced a smile. “It is just a tad warm in here, is it not? I wonder, would you be so kind as to escort me outside for some fresh air, my lord?”

He offered her his arm immediately, leading her toward the terrace doors. The night air was cool and sweet with the scent of early roses, helping to calm her racing heart.

“Better?” he asked softly.

“Yes, thank you, my lord.” She drew a deep breath.

“Call me Christopher, please. At least out here—away from all that stuffiness.”

“Christopher.” Though she was well aware of the breach of propriety, his name felt

just right on her tongue, like a word she had always known but just discovered the meaning of. “Do you ever feel like you are simply playing a part? As if everyone around you has expectations of who you should be, and you are constantly trying to live up to them?”

He was quiet for a long moment, and she suddenly feared she had overstepped and said too much. But then he spoke, and his voice held understanding rather than judgement.

“Each day,” he admitted. “Though, I suspect your burden is heavier than most, my lady.”

She turned to him, surprised. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that from what I have seen of you all evening, Lady Angelica, is that it is clear how carefully you guard every word, every gesture. It must be simply exhausting, trying so hard to be the perfect English rose.”

The truth of his words struck her deeply. How had he managed to see so plainly what she worked so hard to disguise?

Before she could respond, Lavinia’s voice carried through the open doors. “Angelica? Where are you, dear? Mr. Montague wishes to discuss tomorrow’s arrangements.”

“You should go,” Christopher said softly. “But remember—perfection is highly overrated. Sometimes our flaws are the things that make us far more interesting.”

He stepped back into the shadows just as Lavinia appeared, leaving Angelica to wonder if she had imagined the conversation.

But no, her heart was still racing, and her skin still tingled where his hand had rested

briefly beside hers on the balustrade.

As she followed her aunt back inside, Angelica could not shake the feeling that something momentous was shifting, like ice breaking up on a river. Tomorrow, she would come into her inheritance and finally be able to take control of her own destiny.

And yet... she could not help but wonder why her aunt seemed so intent on securing her future by marrying wealthily. Why did she have the most unsettling feeling that something bigger was afoot?

Through the crowd, she caught one last glimpse of Christopher watching her, his expression unreadable. Then, a pair of lovers stepped between them, and he was gone, leaving Angelica with nothing but questions and the lingering warmth of his touch.

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“I assure you, ladies, every detail is in perfect order,” Mr. Edwin Montague said as he adjusted his spectacles with practiced precision, the morning light catching the silver smudges at his temples. “Though I must confess, the news may not be what you expect.”

Angelica sat perfectly straight in the leather chair, her dove grey, empire waist morning dress arranged with careful elegance.

The solicitor’s office felt unusually cramped that morning, despite the tall windows overlooking Bath’s fashionable Queen Square.

The scent of beeswax and old papers hung heavily in the air, mingling with the lavender water that her aunt wore too liberally.

“Come now, Edwin,” Lavinia’s laugh tinkled like cracked crystal. “You are being positively mysterious. Surely my niece’s inheritance is straightforward enough?”

Montague’s fingers drummed against the edge of his mahogany desk, each tap falling like a hammer blow in the quiet room.

Angelica watched those fingers—long and elegant, yet somehow predatory, like a spider testing its web. She had known this man all her life, yet something in his manner today made her skin prickle with unease.

“The matter of inheritance is never simple, Lady Warburton,” he replied, his voice as smooth as cream hiding sour notes. “Particularly in cases where the estate has been... encumbered.”

“Encumbered?” Angelica’s clear voice cut through the heavy air. Her hands made gestures that were deliberately precise, like the ballet positions she had learned as a child. “I do not quite understand. My father left everything in trust until my nineteenth birthday—which is today.”

Montague cleared his throat, reaching for a thick ledger bound in cracking leather. “Indeed, Lady Angelica. Your father did; however, certain arrangements and adjustments were made over the years. Necessary arrangements, surely you can understand, for the maintenance of Rosemere Hall and your own upbringing.”

Something cold settled in Angelica’s stomach, like a stone dropped in still water. She turned to her aunt, noting how Lavinia’s fingers twisted in her lap, crushing the fine muslin of her handkerchief.

“Aunt Lavinia? What is he talking about?”

“Now, dear, you must understand—” Lavinia began, but Montague cut her off with a raised hand.

“Perhaps I might better explain.” He opened the ledger, each page rustling like autumn leaves caught in a faint breeze. “Your father’s estate, while considerable, required careful management. Lady Warburton, as your guardian, had full authority to make certain... financial decisions.”

The cold in Angelica’s stomach spread outward, numbing her fingers where they gripped the arms of her chair. “What kind of decisions?”

“The mortgaging of Rosemere Hall, for one.” Montague’s voice held no emotion, as if he were discussing the weather rather than the destruction of her world. “Several times over, I am afraid, Lady Angelica. Then, there were the bonds drawn against your trust fund, the sale of various properties, the—”

“Sale?” Angelica’s composure cracked like thin ice. “Which properties?”

“The London house, the cottage in Devon, the hunting lodge in Yorkshire—”

“Is everything gone?” The words emerged as barely more than a whisper.

Montague spread his hands in a gesture of practiced sympathy. “The trust fund is depleted. Rosemere Hall stands on the edge of foreclosure. I am afraid, my lady, that you are, in the plainest of terms, penniless.”

The room seemed to tilt sideways, like a ship caught in a sudden squall. Angelica’s grip tightened on the chair, her knuckles turning white against the dark leather. She felt, rather than saw Lavinia reach for her hand, and jerked away from the touch.

“How?” she forced the word past her numb lips. “How could this have happened?”

“My dear girl,” Lavinia’s voice dripped with honeyed concern. “How did you think we maintained our position in society all these years? Your gowns, your tutors, your music masters, not to mention—”

“Enough.” Angelica raised a single hand, the gesture as sharp as a knife’s edge. She turned to Montague, noting how his eyes glittered behind his spectacles. “You were meant to protect my interest, Mr. Montague. How could you have allowed this to happen?”

“I merely executed your aunt’s perfectly legal instructions.” His smile reminded her of a cat watching a wounded bird before it went in to finish the job. “Though, I did attempt to counsel prudence—”

“Prudence?” Lavinia’s voice rose sharply. “If memory serves, you were the one who suggested the first mortgage! You said it was all perfectly sensible, that all the best families did it—”

“Perhaps,” Montague interrupted smoothly, “we might do better to focus on solutions rather than recriminations?”

Angelica watched the interplay between them, her mind racing like a horse at full gallop. Something was not quite right here—some piece of the puzzle remained hidden, like a shadow glimpsed from the corner of one’s eye.

“Solutions?” Angelica’s voice emerged steadier than she felt. “What possible solution could there be? You have just informed me that I own nothing—not even the roof over my head.”

“Ah, not quite nothing, Lady Angelica,” Montague reached beneath his desk, producing a small wooden box with elaborate marquetry. “Your father did leave this with me for safe keeping, with instructions to deliver it on your nineteenth birthday.”

Angelica’s hands trembled as she accepted the box. It was lighter than she expected, its surface warm from the morning sun. The lid bore an oval miniature, exquisitely painted—a woman’s face that made her heart catch in her throat.

“Maman,” she whispered, forgetting herself enough to let the French word slip out.

The woman in the portrait had her own yes, the same clear blue as an April morning. But where Angelica kept her expressions carefully controlled, her mother’s painted face held a hint of mischief, of secrets waiting to be shared.

“I believe the artist was quite renowned,” Montague remarked, watching her closely. “Jean-Baptiste Isabey if I am not mistaken. He painted many of the French aristocracy before... well.”

Before The Terror. Before everything changed. Before England and France were at war. Before her parents died on a dark road trying to reach safety.

“There is more,” Montague said, producing a sealed letter, the paper yellowed with age. “Written in your father’s own hand, I believe.”

Angelica stared at the unfamiliar writing—bold, decisive strokes that seemed almost familiar, and yet at the same time, not at all. The lines seemed steady, but if she looked closely, Angelica thought of how her father’s hands might have trembled slightly as he wrote them.

“I—” she swallowed hard. Then she looked up and saw the barely concealed intrigue in Montague’s eyes. “I think I shall prefer to read this in private.”

“Of course, my dear,” Lavinia said, reaching for her arm. “We should return to Rosemere—”

“No.” Angelica pulled away, her movements as sharp as glass breaking into shards. “I mean, I need a moment. Alone. Here.”

Montague rose smoothly. “My private office is at your disposal, my lady. Lady Warburton, might I offer you some refreshment in the parlor?”

Lavinia opened her mouth to protest, but something in Angelica’s face seemed to make her thing better of it. With a rustle of silks, she followed Montague from the room, leaving Angelica alone with her father’s last words.

The seal broke with a soft crack, and the paper held the ghost of her father’s cologne—sandalwood and ink and tobacco, scents that felt both familiar and foreign, bringing tears to her eyes.

My dearest Angélique,

The letter began, using her birth name rather than the Anglicized version she had adopted.

If you are reading this, then you have reached your nineteenth year, and I am no longer here to guide you. Know first that you were—are—my greatest treasure, worth more than all the gold in England's vaults.

Angelica's vision blurred, but she forced herself to continue, and she blinked hard to let the tears plunge from her dark lashes.

I fear you may have heard tales that paint me in an unfavorable light. Know that everything I did was for love—love of your mother, love of you, love of both my countries. I am not the man others may claim. Your mother and I died protecting something precious, something that goes far beyond mere fortune.

Her hands shook so badly she had to press the paper flat against the desk.

Trust your instincts, my darling girl. They are your mother's instincts, and she was never wrong about people. Look beneath the surface, question what you are told—no matter who it comes from and remember that true wealth cannot be measured in pounds and shillings.

The last lines were written in a hastier hand, as if time had been running out:

Your mother's jewelry box holds more than memories. Study it well. And remember—you are a daughter of two lands, and that is your strength, not your weakness. This is my plight to you: restore our family's honor, and you will find your own fortune.

Your loving father,

Benedict.

Angelica pressed the letter to her chest, breathing in its fading scents. Her mind raced with questions, each one leading to another like paths in a maze. What had her father

been protecting? What secrets lay hidden in her mother's painted face?

A knock at the door made her jump. "Lady Angelica?" Montague's voice held a note of carefully measured concern.

"Yes," she called back, hastily folding the letter. "Please come in."

He entered with the silent grace of a cat, Lavinia trailing behind him like an anxious shadow. Angelica noticed how his eyes flickered immediately to the box in her hands, and she saw a glimmer of something hungry in his eyes before he masked it with professional concern.

"I trust your father's letter was... illuminating?"

"In a way," Angelica said, trying her best to keep her voice neutral, though her mind was churning like a stormy sea. "He speaks of honor and hidden fortunes."

"Ah." Montague's smile did not quite reach his eyes. "Yes, there have long been rumors about Lord Loxley's... activities during the Revolution. Some say he secreted away a considerable fortune when fleeing France."

"Rumors?" Lavinia leaned forward, her earlier contrition utterly forgotten now. "What kind of fortune, Mr. Montague?"

"No one knows for certain," Montague's fingers drummed against his desk again, in that same rhythm that set Angelica's nerves on edge. "But, if such a treasure indeed exists, it would legally belong to your niece, now."

Angelica studied the painted face of her mother, noting small details she had missed before. The artist had captured something in the eyes—a hint of challenge, of secrets kept safe behind a perfect smile reminiscent of the Mona Lisa.

“It rather sounds like you are talking about a treasure hunt, Mr. Montague,” she said, keeping her tone light even though her heart was racing. “How theatrical of you.”

His answering smile held too many teeth. “Life often is, Lady Angelica. Particularly where family secrets are concerned.”

“And what of my intended?” Angelica turned to Lavinia, whose face flushed bright pink beneath her powder. “I assume he is aware of our... situation?”

“Lord Hugh Tennant has...” Lavinia twisted her handkerchief again. “That is to say... well, I would rather think that given the circumstance he would feel...”

“I suffice it safe to say that this will cause him to withdraw his offer,” Angelica finished flatly. “Because I am penniless? Or perhaps because I am French.”

“Both, I imagine,” Mr. Montague interrupted smoothly. “Young men can be so... particular about such things.”

Something in his tone made Angelica look at him sharply. Had there been a hint of satisfaction in those words? Her father’s advice about trusting her instincts rang loudly in her ears.

“Then it seems I have decisions to make,” she rose, cradling the box against her chest. “About my future, and about my past.”

“Dear Angelica,” Lavinia reached for her arm. “Surely you are not thinking of pursuing this... this wild fancy of hidden fortunes? Think of the scandal it will cause!”

“I think it rather safe to say the mere fact that I am suddenly penniless shall cause more than enough scandal, Aunt.” Angelica’s voice could have frozen boiling water. “And, I am thinking of survival, since you have left me little choice in the matter.”

“Lady Angelica,” Mr. Montague’s voice oozed with concern. “If you would like my advice—”

“Thank you, but no.” She cut him off with a smile as sharp as a razor. “I believe I have had quite enough advice for one day.”

With that, she swept from the office, her back straight as a sword’s blade, though her mind whirled with possibilities.

Her father’s letter, her mother’s portrait, the mysterious fortune—all pieces of a puzzle that did not quite want to fit together—yet.

It was only when she reached the privacy of her carriage that she allowed herself to look at the box again. The portrait seemed to watch her with knowing eyes, holding answers to all of these secrets, just out of her reach.

Something about the painting tugged at her memory—a detail she should recognize, a connection just beyond her understanding.

What had her father been trying to tell her? And why did she have the unsettling feeling that Mr. Montague knew far more than he was saying?

She traced the edge of the portrait with one finger and felt something shift beneath the painted surface—like a whisper of movement, so faint she might have imagined it.