



A Lady's Beastly Duke

(Courtships of Acceptance #1)

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Category: Historical

Description: "Scars and wounds can heal through the power of love and acceptance, or maybe not?"

Lady Anastasia Gray, the daughter of the Earl of Graystone, longs for a love match in a world where status and wealth dictate her fate. With a kind heart and a passion for dance, she dreams of a future filled with joy and a husband who will cherish her. But as societal expectations and familial duty close in around her, Anastasia fears she may have to sacrifice her own happiness for the sake of obligation.

An elusive Duke of Willowick, Sidney Markham, hides behind a life shrouded in secrecy and pain, his heart walled off by the shadows of a past too painful to confront. But when Anastasia, with her quiet strength and unwavering warmth, enters his world, something stirs deep within him. The walls he's so carefully built begin to tremble, and for the first time, Sidney dares to imagine that love might find him, even in the darkest corners of his soul.

In a world where appearances reign supreme and secrets threaten to shatter their bond, Anastasia and Sidney must fight for their chance at happiness. Against all odds, they will discover that true love has the power to create a masterpiece out of even the most broken of canvases.

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November 1815

“I cannot , Papa. Cannot someone take this weight off my shoulders?”

Sidney’s voice rang out in the dull, muffled silence of the graveyard. It was autumn, and dark clouds hung heavily over the space, muting the colors of the lawn and the cypress trees into shades of silvery gray. A slight breeze ruffled Sidney’s dark hair like a cold hand and billowed out the black cloak that he wore. He gazed down at the recently turned earth under his boot-toes. Papa had passed away just six months ago.

Sidney had hoped that it would become easier to bear, but it seemed that the opposite was true. Every day was harder. The numb, dull ache in his chest had softened, over the months, to a mix of sorrow and disbelief that was no easier. A small part of him still refused to believe that Papa was no longer there and that he, himself, was Duke of Willowick.

It was that responsibility that he could not bear. He was not only the duke, but he was also the head of the family. His sister, Amy, was eighteen and had just come out into society, and his mother was deeply sunk in her grief. He had to take care of them. He had to be strong, but yet, for all his nine-and-twenty years, part of him still felt like a confused child, like the little boy who had run to his father with his spinning top or gyroscope and asked him to explain it. Papa had always had answers. If he had not known, he would have consulted people and encyclopedias until he could give Sidney the information. Without Papa there, it seemed there were no longer any answers, and the world was a barren, empty place he could not navigate.

He closed his green eyes solemnly and wished that he could cry. Amy still sobbed

whenever Papa was mentioned, and it seemed dishonoring to his father's memory that he had not yet managed to show the smallest sign of grief. The wound was too deep for tears.

"Papa, I will do what you require of me," Sidney managed to say in a pained, broken voice. "I promise. I will keep Mama and Amy safe. I will do my best for the family."

He had been raised to be able to keep that promise. As the heir to Willowick, it had been expected that he would take over one day. But he had imagined that would happen when he was middle-aged, and Papa was old. Papa had never got to be old.

Papa's face filled his mind, his high, chiseled cheekbones proud above cheeks that had long wrinkles carved down them. His eyes, too, had been marked with lines at the edges and they were hazel, where Sidney's were green. In all other respects, besides Papa's white hair, they were identical—both had long, chiseled faces, square jaws and big, solemn eyes. They both had the same thin-lipped mouth, or so Amy and Mama always teased. Mama always said that Papa had been blonder than Sidney. They were both fine-looking men, Mama always teased. Fine, handsome men.

Sidney sniffed as he gazed down at the grave. In his mind's eye, he could see Papa so clearly, could hear his voice in one of the last discussions they had. You'll be a fine duke, one day, son. You have a clear mind, and you are not afraid to speak up for what you believe is right.

Papa had not guessed how soon those words would come true. He had been out walking around the garden and the butler, who had been working in the drawing room, said that he saw the duke suddenly tense where he stood, and then drop to the ground. The butler had run out to check on him, but by the time he had got there, the duke had seemed dead. The physician confirmed it just hours later. When Sidney returned from a brief consultation with one of the estate gamekeepers, he was told that his dear father had passed away.

Sidney swallowed the stinging pain that rose in his throat with the memory. He turned and walked to his horse, who he had tethered to the fence. He had made his promise, and standing there would do nothing but fill him with despair. His dappled gray hunting stallion neighed when he saw Sidney approach. Sidney felt his heart lift at the sound. He adored his horse, who was named Quicksilver. He was one of the few beings on Earth who could cut through Sidney's grief.

"Easy, old boy," Sidney murmured. He took the reins and threw his leg over into the saddle. His black mourning cloak billowed out as he sat and leaned forward, signaling a trot.

Sidney let Quicksilver go ahead, barely aware of his surroundings. It was a mile back to his London townhouse. It was darker than it had been, and he could almost smell the rain. Quicksilver snorted and stepped sideways as if something had startled him. He was usually a very steady horse, and Sidney frowned in concern.

"Whoa, there, old fellow," Sidney said gently as the stallion skirted sideways again. He gripped the reins, leaning back to slow his horse and frowning more deeply. There did not seem to be any reason for such strange behavior.

A crash of thunder rent the air, and almost simultaneously a blinding flare of lightning lit the hillside before them. Sidney cried out in alarm, gripping the reins, but his horse—who was terrified beyond all else of loud noises—took off.

"Whoa! Whoa!" Sidney shouted, as the thoroughbred raced down the path. It was a simple path of packed dirt, and the rain had begun to fall, turning it into a treacherous, slippery surface.

"Stop!" Sidney yelled, but his horse was panicking and as another clap of thunder tore across the sky above them, the horse screamed and reared.

Sidney gripped with his hands and locked his knees around his horse's flanks. He had practiced for hours in the saddle as a youth, and he sent up an inner prayer of thanks for all those hours.

His horse plunged back down to earth, shivering, and stood still. Sidney, by some miracle was still seated, and he reached down to pat him, to soothe him, but another crash of thunder sounded. The big stallion screamed and started to run. There was nothing Sidney could do except to hang on. He gripped onto his horse's flanks with his knees, clung onto the reins with his slippery, sweat-and-rain-soaked fingers, and bit his lip with his teeth, trying to keep a hold on his growing fear.

They clattered down the street. A clap of thunder made his horse rear just as they rode past the vicar's garden. Sidney screamed, desperate to hang on, but this time as his horse crashed down to earth, he bent down, throwing his head forward as another roar sounded overhead.

Sidney yelled in alarm and tumbled forward, plunging off over his horse's head, skidding and sliding along the rocky ground. It was too fast, too impossibly fast, and then all he knew was pain. Searing, impossible pain in his face, in his hands and in his head.

He lay where he was and breathed in sharply. His face was wet, but it was not from the rain. He reached up to touch his cheek. His hand came back covered in blood. He gazed down at his hands for a moment. They were both covered in blood, and as the stinging, searing pain crowded in on him, stealing his senses, he realized what had happened.

In front of him, one of the vicar's glass-filled frames, under which cucumbers and other vegetables grew, lay shattered. Sidney had been thrown straight into the glass. It had shattered into sharp, cruel shards that had sliced into his face and hands.

Sidney lay where he was. His face throbbed and burned, and his hands were a mass of pain. His cloak was heavy with rain and mud, and he was too tired to move. His last thought as he hovered on the edge of consciousness was that at least he had not been blinded.

A soft, velvety nudge made him look up. Quicksilver was standing over him, nudging him with his soft, sensitive nose. Sidney let out a sigh of pain and weariness.

“I know, old chap. You didn’t mean it. I’m not dead,” he added softly. He squeezed his eyes shut again—the pain was unbearable. But he could not ignore his valiant horse. The poor creature had not meant any harm, and was still waiting there, despite the storm that raged around them. His love for Sidney was even stronger than his fear.

Sidney gazed up. He could not ride his horse in the state in which he found himself. Blood was trickling down his face, running into one eye and he could barely see. His hands were throbbing in agony, too sore and too wounded to contemplate taking the reins.

He gritted his teeth and stood up, trying not to touch anything as he did so. His horse seemed to understand, because Sidney leaned against him and he walked slowly, step by step. Together, they made the slow, agonizing walk through the village.

“Your grace!” a carter yelled. Sidney’s head whipped round. The man on the cart had a blond beard and graying blond hair. He was Mr. Aldrich, a fellow who delivered vegetables to the manor. The man’s eyes widened in horror as he took in Sidney’s appearance.

“Goodness, your grace! Allow me to escort you home at once.”

Sidney whispered his thanks and allowed the fellow to help him into the cart.

Quicksilver was fastened onto the cart too, walking alongside as they rode their way up the winding path towards London.

An hour later, the blood washed partly clean from his face by the torrential rain, his hair plastered to his skull and his body racked with pain and shivering, Sidney stumbled from the cart and into the townhouse.

“Your grace!” the butler exclaimed when he opened the door. Sidney half-fell in over the threshold. He collapsed in the doorway. Amy’s scream rent his ears.

“Sidney! Mama! Fetch the physician! Sidney’s bleeding. He’s hurt! Fetch him at once.”

Sidney lay where he had fallen. Mama and Amy ran to him, exclaiming over him and trying to rub the blood off his face and hands with handkerchiefs.

“He’s bleeding so much...” Amy whispered desperately.

“Summon Mrs. Haddon. She should have some clean cloths,” Mama’s voice instructed. She might have been born to an ancient noble house, but she was practical to an almost ruthless degree. Sidney slumped forward, knowing he was being taken care of.

The housekeeper, Mrs. Haddon, was summoned, and the butler. Sidney felt himself lifted as someone carried him upstairs to his bedroom. He was lying in bed, after Richford, his manservant, helped him to change out of his soaking clothes and into a nightgown, when the physician arrived.

“I can do what I can, your grace,” the physician said gravely. “But I do not know if I can restore everything fully.”

Sidney winced. He had always been conscious of his looks. Not vain, exactly, but he had known he was good-looking like Father, as Mama always said. He was aware that he drew the eye of the ton towards himself when he was at Almack's, and he was not displeased by it.

"Do what you can," he said grimly.

"I shall, your grace."

Six months later, Sidney stared into the mirror in the hallway near the dining room. Hatred surged in his heart. Not hatred for Doctor Penwick, who had done his best in restoring Sidney to health. But for the hideous, scarred visage he saw in the mirror in front of him.

"God," he whispered. "How can I live with this?"

His smooth skin was bisected in two places by a jagged, pink-edged line. One sliced across his right cheek, and the other down his nose, ending on his upper lip. His nose itself had not been distorted, and for that he was grateful. A third scar sliced sideways, towards his chin, but that one was only a hair's breadth in thickness.

"God," Sidney whispered, staring at his own scarred face. "Help me."

He gazed at his hands, which were likewise lined with scars. He could cover those with gloves. But he could not hide the ones on his face. His own green eyes stared, horrified, back at him.

He looked terrible. How was he going to manage to be Duke, to manage all his duties with a face that would make most women run away from him in fear?

He was going to have to try. He had promised it to his father.

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May 1816

“Sister...are you sure about this?” Sidney hissed as he stood on the top step of the mansion on Duchess Street in London. His heart was thudding, and he felt terrified. The scars on his hands were stretched over his clenched fists and he winced at the pain in them. They still hurt in the early morning chill, and the breeze was brisk and cold.

Amy, her hazel eyes widening, shot him an impatient glance.

“Yes. Quite sure. It’s an art gallery, Sidney! You’ll love it.”

Sidney made a sour face. He was sure his younger sister was intentionally ignoring his real concerns. She could not fail to understand how terrified he felt of what people would say or do when they saw him. He had been out of society for a year, allowing his wounds to heal as much as they were going to. Now, for the first time, he’d listened to her entreaties and had agreed to be dragged to this place to view an art collection.

He glanced sideways, trying to avoid spotting his reflection in the window opposite. The image of his face in the looking glass in his bedroom haunted him still. No fancy cravat or gold cufflink was going to draw people’s attention away from that hideous scarring. He knew that. All he could pray was that nobody screamed outright.

He gazed down at his hands, bitterness and sorrow mixing to make a lump in his throat. He had wanted to wear his riding-gloves, but that had felt too eccentric, even to him, and so he had left them off, and he curled his hand into a fist, trying to hide

the worst of the scars.

“Henry?” his sister called, turning around. Sidney glanced sideways, catching sight of Henry, the Earl of Barrydale. He was newly married to Amy, after a courtship that had lasted only a few months before the two of them declared themselves blissfully in love. Sidney felt his lip lifting in a smile at the thought.

“Yes, my sweetling?”

Sidney felt his smile deepen and he looked away. Henry was a dear fellow—chestnut-haired, with a rather fuller face than Sidney had, and dimples that showed when he smiled. Sidney and Henry had met one another at Cambridge, where Sidney had read Classics. They had liked each other a great deal, and Sidney was delighted that Henry and his sister had found such instant warmth.

“I was wondering if we should stand over there?” Amy asked. “You’re sure this is where we go in?” They were standing in front of a door that was resolutely shut.

“It seems to be the only entrance, my dearest,” Henry assured her. He consulted a pocket-watch in an elaborate filigreed case. “It is not quite nine of the clock, my dear. They will open at any moment now.”

“Oh. Grand,” Amy replied. She gazed smilingly at Sidney. He coughed, feeling awkward, as he always did when anyone gazed at him too long.

“Not too long, old chap,” Henry assured him. His lively, russet-brown eyes lit up. He was one of the few people Sidney had agreed to see following his accident, and he was glad he had. Henry, like his family, ignored the scars utterly. In their presence, it was possible to forget, at least sometimes, that they existed.

He took a deep breath, his stomach tying itself in painful knots. He had no idea what

to expect and the tension was making him feel ill.

“It’s nine o’ clock,” Amy murmured, as the church bells began to peal for the hour. Henry looked around.

“I’m certain this is the right place.”

Sidney glanced down, his heart thudding. His hands sweated and his teeth clenched as he made an effort to ignore his pounding heart. He could not do it.

“Ah! Look, my dear. See?” Henry declared, as a man in a liveried uniform came over and unlocked the door. Sidney, who was standing at the front of the group, looked away, trying not to notice the man’s widening gaze.

“Your Grace, my lord? My lady?” the man addressed them, his voice a mixture of surprise and respect. “Do you wish to gain entry?”

“We do,” Amy spoke instantly.

“Well, then. Step inside,” the liveried youth invited them. “The entire gallery is open for viewing.”

They nodded their thanks and Sidney hesitated before stepping in through the door. He swallowed hard, his heart racing. He glanced over at Amy, but she was not even slightly nervous. If anything, her expectant look suggested she was already weary of standing around outside and wished he would hurry up and go indoors.

Sidney stepped in, not letting himself think about it. He felt Amy follow, then Henry, and then it was too late to run, because he was already inside.

His gaze moved around the wide space. The ceiling soared high overhead, many

windows letting light pour in. The floor in the art gallery was laid with polished wooden boards, reflecting a refined elegance befitting the gallery and the room was bare except for a few chairs here and there placed opposite the paintings to allow restful viewing. The only other person in the gallery was a man in the same livery, and Sidney guessed he was a servant of some kind, sent to check on the paintings and straighten them. He could hear voices, though, and he guessed that more people were coming up the stairs to the gallery. He gazed around, feeling the desperate need to escape. His legs burned with the need to run, and his heart thumped, ready for action.

“Ah. Look. Landscapes. That’s your interest, eh, Sidney?” He followed Henry’s gaze and they all seemed to share his interest, because, without speaking about it, they all drifted over to the landscapes section.

Sidney tilted his head back, staring up. He could hear the murmur of voices behind them, and he knew that other people had, indeed, followed them into the exhibition. He tried to ignore them, but his ears strained for information.

They are talking about me, he thought, horrified, as the people glanced at him and then said something he could not hope to overhear. They are staring at me.

He looked at his hands, ignoring them. They had, indeed, turned to look at him and he gazed at the paintings on the walls, heat surged within him, as wrath suffused his countenance with a deep crimson hue.

“Look at that!” his sister murmured, sounding impressed. Henry was gazing up with her at one of the paintings higher up on the wall. Sidney tilted his head, staring up at the landscape.

The subject was a seascape, though the shore looked desolate, like a desert. The picture was painted in oils, and there was a lot of technical skill on display—the highlights on the waves were intelligently placed, the rendering of the sand skillful.

But somehow the whole thing lacked any sense of atmosphere. It was dull and lifeless, a faithful rendering of what the scene looked like, while capturing nothing of what it felt like; or of what the artist felt about it.

I could portray that same scene better, Sidney thought a little crossly. Painting was a hobby of his; one he had always kept largely secret. His mother knew, and Amy and Henry as well, but nobody else. It was not befitting for a duke to paint. Even Sidney himself suspected that creating anything at all might be out-of-keeping with being a gentleman of leisure, and accepting money for the works would be seen as vulgar.

“It seems very deserted, does it not?” Amy murmured.

“It’s a lifeless scene. It could have been used to capture real desolation, a haunted, haunting atmosphere. But it’s just dust and oil-paint,” Sidney said bitterly.

“Oh?” Amy blinked at him in surprise. Shorter than him by a head, her hazel eyes gazed up confusedly.

“Sorry, sister,” Sidney said in a quiet voice. “I’m just not feeling very generous with my comments today.”

“Oh. Oh, of course,” Amy replied. “Look at this one. This is more like it. Lots of grass and plenty of flowers in this one.” She was looking at a scene in what was most likely England or Scotland. Lush greens filled the canvas, and here and there little flowers showed in the thick green grass. Sidney breathed in, feeling relieved. He preferred this one. He could almost feel the grass under his feet and smell the dew. This one evoked something. It might not be as good, technically, as the scene above it, but it was burgeoning with life and emotion.

He coughed, about to share his opinion on this one, since it was much more favorable than the opinion he had given earlier, but at that moment three new visitors arrived.

They all stared at him in unabashed confusion. One of the young women lifted her hand and whispered something to the others in the party.

Sidney shut his eyes, feeling shame swamp him. If he had not been there with his sister, if he had not promised to spend an hour at the exhibition with Henry and her—against his will, more or less—then he would have run away by then. Shame like the biting of a hundred tiny ants, crawled across his skin. He looked down.

“Ah! Behold these delightful still-lives! They possess a charm that is decidedly more jolly.

I like them,” Henry said warmly, seeming to notice his discomfort and trying to distract him.

Sidney glanced over at the still-lives. It was a genre he disliked—something about a scene in which action was implied but failed to take place, worried him. It was dead, like an image of death. Like his father’s desk, filled with the familiar objects that ought to be used and moved and yet were not anymore. It made his stomach knot with pain.

“I think I’ll go over there,” he suggested. “There are portraits and also some studies of animals.” He went over to the other wall, where a few portraits of various people were hung. One of them struck him at once—a young woman looked out, her big dark eyes wide, her lips set in a slightly uplifted line that seemed as though she had been caught in the instant before she grinned. It was a beautiful painting, one that evoked a sense of joy in him. Portraiture was a genre that he found interesting. Capturing the likeness of a person was, in his mind at least, not too different from the likeness of a scene. In both cases, it was what the subject evoked in the artist that was actually painting.

Nothing is truly seen, he thought distantly as he gazed at the beautiful painting of the

woman. It is only perceived. Does anything really, objectively, exist at all?

He was so deep in thought that he did not notice someone standing beside him until he had taken a step and heard a sharp yell. He jumped back, alarmed, realizing that he had bumped right into someone. He let out a small, shocked sound and turned in alarm.

A young woman stood there. She was average height, with blonde hair and big, startled blue eyes that gazed up at him.

“Pray excuse me,” he said with haste. “I did not perceive your presence.”

His heart stopped as she gazed up at him. She was a little taller than Amy and he stared at her for a moment, unsure of what to say. Where Amy’s face was rounded and dimpled, this woman had a slim face, with delicate bones; a long oval in shape. Her brows were pale and arched and her skin was like porcelain. He noticed all that, but what he noticed the most was her eyes. Wide, framed with pale lashes, they were the exact blue of the morning skyline. They were bright and sparkled and they called to his weary, saddened soul.

“It’s all well,” she murmured. She smiled, the corner of her mouth lifting in a brief, amused grin. “I understand being deep in thought at an exhibition.”

“I...” Sidney stammered. Her smile, those pale lips parting just briefly to show white teeth in a gentle grin, was the most mesmerizing thing he’d seen ever. “Yes. It is understandable.”

“Are you fond of portraits?” the young woman asked him.

“Yes,” Sidney managed to say. He blushed red. He felt foolish. He had walked into her, and now he could barely speak without stammering. The heat of the blush spread down into his neck.

“Me, too,” she agreed.

They stood side by side as he gazed up at the paintings. She was wearing a pale cream-colored gown in muslin, the sleeves delicate puffs of gauze, her hair arranged in ringlets about her face and drawn back in a chignon. The low neck of the gown was filled in with a chemisette and she appeared, quite frankly, exquisite.

Sidney stared at the canvases hung high overhead. His pulse raced. He was standing close to her and the strangest thing of all was that she wasn’t frightened of how he looked—or if she was, she had not run away, not yet at any rate.

Sidney gazed around the room. He wished that he could see a mirror somewhere. Her complete lack of response to his scars made him think, just for a second, that they had somehow been rendered invisible.

Mayhap she currently hasn’t noticed, he thought quickly. Mayhap she will notice in a moment and then she’ll run away and call the town Watchmen.

He gazed up at the portraits, holding his breath lest she take fright and run. He did not want to hurry away. He had been afraid to confront the other visitors and preferred to weave his way as swiftly as possible around the exhibition. After all, he was only doing it for Amy, and she could not ask that he do more. With this woman standing close his fear disappeared, and he felt curious instead.

Why is it that she cannot see the scars? Perhaps her eyesight is bad.

He looked up at the portraits, heart thudding as he tried to decide whether or not to

risk saying something to her.

“What think you of this?” he asked, his voice harsh in the silence of the room. The woman turned and looked up at the painting he was staring at.

“That one is very impressive. It seems as though it radiates something; a sense of warmth,” she murmured.

“Yes!” Sidney exclaimed, amazed that she noticed exactly what he did. He lifted his hand to his mouth, a flush creeping into his cheeks. He need not bring any more attention to himself than the cruel stares he was already receiving. “It does. That was my exact thought.”

The young woman smiled. The effect was breathtaking, making his heart leap. Her cheeks flushed prettily with rose pink and those pale lips were drawn up at the corners, transforming her face. She was beautiful before, but even more when she smiled.

“You are evidently in possession of a good eye for art,” she told him.

Sidney blushed. Normally, he would have dismissed a comment like that as being flattery. But what reason did she have to flatter him? He was not known to her. She could have no idea he was a duke, since he was sure he’d never seen her in his life before. And there seemed no other reason she might flatter him.

“Thank you,” he said solemnly. “I am pleased you think so. I have always been fond of the pursuit.”

“As am I. Though I do not paint,” she began to say. He smiled, and for a second, he hesitated, feeling a strong desire to tell her that it was his favorite mode of creation. But just as he decided that he ought to say something else instead, Henry and his

sister appeared.

“Pray tell, would you care for a cup of tea, Sidney?” his sister inquired. “There is a delightful tearoom almost directly across the street from here.”

Sidney drew in a breath. An art gallery was one thing—there the people attending it had endless other things to stare at. A tearoom too—well, that was too much for one morning.

“Thank you, Amy,” he began slowly. “But I think I would prefer not to. I had quite enough for breakfast to keep me on my feet till lunchtime.”

He tried to make his tone sound light. Amy grinned.

“Of course, brother. Well, then, when we have all walked through the room once, perhaps we ought to go to the coach. It looks like rain out there and I wish to be at home so that I can practice the piano while it’s light enough outside to read the music.”

Sidney smiled. “Of course, sister.” He would have added that they could depart whenever she desired to, but the thought of the pale-haired young woman made him stop before he could say that. He turned towards her, planning to introduce his sister to her. He realized that he did not know the young lady’s name, so he could not make an introduction. She had drifted off towards the paintings, a red-haired young lady gripping her arm firmly.

“I have not yet looked at the paintings of those ruins there,” his sister murmured. She glanced over to the door, where one small wall hosted paintings that seemed devoted to landscapes and ruins.

“Yes, quite so,” he murmured. He felt a little saddened by the young lady’s

departure—it had been delightful to talk to her, even so briefly.

Amy turned to Henry, and he said something gentle, making Amy laugh warmly. Then they were already crossing towards the paintings of animals. Sidney looked around, his heart thudding. His mysterious companion had vanished into thin air.

Perhaps it's better that way, he thought harshly to himself as he watched Amy and Henry walking clockwise around the space. Perhaps it was better that her lovely, charming smile could not prey on his mind too much.

He glanced around the room again, but he could not catch sight of her. His heart hurt a little, which surprised him.

You're a fool, he told himself firmly. You said naught more than a few words to her. That does not mean a thing to her, and it should not to you.

He blushed at his own foolishness. The young woman was a visitor just like he was. She was here to see the artefacts and that was all.

Perhaps it is better that you ignore me, he said silently to the image of the young woman he'd just spoken with, which was still seared into his mind. I am not what you seek, not at all.

She was beautiful, but she was also doubtless as concerned with social matters and with acting as the ton dictated she should. Nobody was honest about what they felt in high society. She was doubtless the same—insincere and cold.

He looked around and found a bench in the hallway with a padded cover. He went out and sat down, feeling weary. He had not realized how draining it would be, venturing into society. He was so tense and alert that his energy was being used up too fast.

“You did an excessively good job,” Henry’s voice reminded Sidney warmly. “You deserve a bit of fun now and again.”

Sidney swallowed hard. “I disagree,” he managed to say. The idea of his deserving any manner of pleasant thing almost burned him with fear. He was disfigured and horrible and he did not feel as though he deserved anything.

As they rode back in the coach, the image of the young girl’s face slipped into his mind, as if it was an answer to his question. He pushed it away. He was scarred, he was hideous, and he had no right to do so much as think of her. His lips set into a hard line, and he stared out of the coach, watching the gray buildings and streets roll past below a gray sky.

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“Camilla, dear...what is it?” Anastasia asked in a low voice, turning a wide-eyed blue gaze at her friend. She tucked a strand of pale golden hair out of her eye and frowned at her red-haired friend beside her. Camilla had come to join her the instant two people had joined her and the scarred gentleman; her arm wrapped through Anastasia’s as though she was about to drown.

“My dear friend!” Camilla hissed; her expression concerned. “I had to come and rescue you.”

“From what?” Anastasia asked, blinking her pale blue eyes confusedly. She looked around the gallery where she stood. There was no fire, and no footpads or bandits had leapt out from behind the pillars. Or, if they had, she had not noticed them.

“From that man!” Camilla whispered urgently. “He looks like a terrible sort. I could not bear to see him exchange a word with you.” Her dark eyes widened with urgent fear.

“That man...?” Anastasia blinked again, looking around. There were quite a few men at the gallery, walking about in fashionable velvet coats and long trousers. But nobody seemed dangerous. Just behind them, their chaperone, Martha, walked. Nobody had approached them, and she could not imagine what had made her friend fearful.

“The one with the scar! He was horrible.”

“Him?” Anastasia shook her head confusedly. “No. He was quite affable. He talked about the paintings.” She gazed dreamily up at the portraits they had discussed

together. There were so few people willing to chat at art galleries that she had been glad to stop and talk about the artworks with somebody. Camilla had been talking to a mutual friend in the doorway and she had missed being able to share comments with someone.

“But that scar!” Camilla repeated. Her long oval face was a picture of shock. Her deep russet hair was piled up on her head in a fashionable chignon; her pale pink dress a cheerful clash with the spicy color of it. Her hazel eyes were wide, framed with black lashes and her lovely face was still distorted by her shocked look that she directed towards Anastasia.

“He had some scars, yes,” Anastasia said lightly. “But his insights into the work were interesting. Shall we go over there?” she gestured at the wall where the landscapes were.

“Some scars...Anastasia!” Camilla exclaimed. “That’s the Duke of Willowick. Everyone says he’s monstrous.”

“The Duke of Willowick?” Anastasia frowned. She recalled distantly hearing some gossip. She barely paid attention to gossip. “Well, whoever he was. He knows a lot about art. And he’s friendly. What difference would a few scars make to that?”

“A few scars?” Camilla exclaimed, then grinned. “I wager you a shilling that if Napoleon Bonaparte were to stroll in here, you would scarcely take note of him either. Your attention perpetually resides elsewhere.”

Anastasia chuckled. She linked arms with her friend, and they drifted towards the paintings.

“Are you going to attend Almack’s tomorrow?” Camilla asked as they wandered around. They had taken a turn around the gallery already. “I find myself quite

parched,” she remarked, gliding toward the doors.

“Indeed, I feel the same way,” Anastasia responded. “As for Almack’s... I believe so,” she added, though her voice exhibited a hint of uncertainty.

Camilla grinned. “You must know!” she teased. She often teased her friend about being permanently elsewhere, her head full of thoughts and dreams. Anastasia chuckled.

“Indeed, I shall attend. However, I confess I do not possess a particular inclination to do so.

“Why, I do comprehend your concerns!” Camilla chuckled gently. “However, I assure you, it shall be a diverting engagement! I have a great affection for dancing.”

“Me too,” Anastasia assured her. Dancing was one of her favorite activities; more than playing the pianoforte or painting. The pianoforte ran a close second, however, which was a happy coincidence, since Camilla loved to sing. They performed together whenever they had a moment and were highly praised among their family and friends for their talents.

“Well, then,” Camilla said lightly, “it should be diverting.”

Anastasia nodded slowly. They were walking past a tea-house, and she glanced at Camilla, who nodded, and they went over to the door.

“Why not?” Camilla asked lightly. “The Hatfield is as good a tea-house as any I know.

They went in. Anastasia looked around the bright, white-wallpapered interior, where dozens of long windows let in plenty of light and the wooden floor was meticulously

clean. A woman in a long black dress with modest long sleeves and an apron approached them. The proprietor, Anastasia guessed.

“A pot of tea for us, and...shall we say two slices of cake?” Camilla asked Anastasia, her voice wandering as her gaze moved towards the counter.

Anastasia lifted her shoulder. “I suppose.”

Camilla shot her a look and they both grinned.

“So,” Camilla asked as they went over to the table that the proprietor indicated to them. Martha followed and sat down with them. “You are prepared for the first ball?”

“I have to be,” Anastasia said lightly as the proprietor returned with their tea. “Papa has ordered the gown and everything.” She felt her stomach knot awkwardly. Her father, the Earl of Graystone, was known even more for his love of money than for his noble status, and she often got the impression that he saw her purely as a means to advance himself on both fronts. He always insisted that she attended Almack’s and every other fashionable venue when they were in Town, and he always bought her a new wardrobe, including the showiest gowns. Anastasia loved dancing, but she would much rather have been at home reading or chatting to her sister Lily and Camilla than being at Almack’s and feeling like she was on show.

“Oh.” Camilla made a face. She understood better than anyone how Anastasia felt. Her own parents, the Viscount and Viscountess of Bramley, were nowhere near as interested in advancement and Camilla’s mother frequently assured her that she could marry whomever she chose. Anastasia’s stomach twisted. She wished someone had given her anything like that assurance.

“Yes,” Anastasia murmured in reply. They stood and wandered over to the counter to select their cakes as the proprietor brought the teapot to the table.

“I would rather be at Lady Etherly's ball,” Camilla commented, pouring some tea and stirring in a lump of sugar. “The music is better.”

“Absolutely,” Anastasia agreed firmly. She poured her own cup of tea and sipped it. It was hot and she sipped it slowly from the small porcelain cup with its painted roses. “The quartet at her balls is much better.”

Talking of music with Camilla reminded her of discussing art with the strange man at the gallery. It had been diverting to talk with him. He had seemed as though he knew a great deal about art, and she had been looking forward to talking further with him. She recalled again those haunting green eyes and the way his lips had lifted in a slight smile, though his gaze had not lightened but remained brooding throughout the discussion.

“Ah! Thank you,” Camilla murmured as the proprietor appeared with the slices of cake that they had chosen. Anastasia accepted her plate of fruit gateau with a smile and a nod and took a delicate forkful with the silver cake-fork. She shut her eyes for a moment, savoring the sweet, many-layered taste. She had barely eaten at breakfast time, being lost in thought and a little apprehensive about the upcoming ball.

Her mind wandered back to the gallery, and thence to the man she had talked with there.

“That man,” Anastasia asked, as her friend took a hearty mouthful of cake. “Were you concerned because you know something about him?” It seemed very unusual for Camilla to judge someone by their looks and her friend’s vehement reaction had confused her. Camilla coughed, apparently almost choking on her tea. “The Duke of Willowick?” she asked, her eyes round. “What more can one know about him? He’s a beast. People say he sleeps all day and walks about at night like a nocturnal creature, and that he can curse people.”

“What?” Anastasia blinked. “Camilla, my dear! Surely none could be so foolish as to truly believe such a thing, could they?”

Camilla shot her a look. “Well, I don’t think the last bit can be true,” she admitted. “But he is rather frightening in his appearance, so I understand how people might assume it.”

Anastasia shook her head. She felt a little sad. While she had never felt pushed out by society, she had been raised by her mother to try and accept people in spite of their differences. It seemed confusing and hurtful that other people did not see things that way.

“He just has a scar,” she said slowly.

Camilla raised a brow. “But what if it’s a dueling scar?” she demanded. “How many times do you reckon he’s dueled to get so many of them?”

“Indeed, it could be said that such an occurrence took place but once. Should that indeed be the case, I should imagine he would have little inclination to engage in further hostilities.”

Camilla stared at Anastasia and then burst out laughing.

“Indeed, you speak with complete accuracy!”

Anastasia felt her own lips lift. She was glad she had managed to change the subject and to lighten the atmosphere a little. It was so unlike Camilla to be hurtful or judgmental that she was pleased the mood had lightened somewhat.

“Will you have time to practice tomorrow?” she asked, referring to a song they were preparing for the season’s many soirees. Young ladies were often called upon to play the piano or sing, and she and Camilla always performed together.

Camilla sipped her tea and looked up at Anastasia wide-eyed. “An hour in the morning, at least. I have to go to the modiste’s, in the afternoon.”

“Oh?” Anastasia grinned. “A new gown?”

“Two new gowns,” Camilla answered, making a wry face.

Anastasia chuckled. “A ball gown?” she pressed. The light, happy conversations she had with Camilla always lifted her spirits.

“A ball gown,” Camilla confirmed. “White, as befits a young lady, with plenty of lacy embellishments.”

Anastasia grinned. “I’m sure it will become you very well.” Camilla’s mama had a tendency to design Camilla’s gowns—at least her ball-gowns—without much input from her daughter. Since Camilla’s parents were, in every other respect, some of the most relaxed parents in the ton, neither Camilla nor Anastasia minded that one foible. And Camilla insisted on being the sole designer of her day-dresses.

Camilla made the same sour face. “I’m not so sure. But the other gown is promising. Dark green and long-sleeved. I think it suits me well.”

“I’m sure it does,” Anastasia answered, sipping her tea. Camilla was beautiful, with her long, fine-chiseled features and darker coloring. Anastasia felt quite sure Camilla was more of a society beauty than she herself was, with her pale hair, blue eyes and slightly sharper features. But Camilla always assured her that the opposite was true until Anastasia had to beg her to stop saying it. As always, they ended up laughing a

great deal.

"I ought to return to the residence," Camilla said, casting her gaze up at the timepiece. "I must attend to some matters within the ledgers." Camilla was very quick with numbers and her father often asked her if she could cast her gaze over the household accounts with him. Anastasia nodded.

"I should return too," she agreed a little sadly. She would have to pretend to be excited about the upcoming ball when she went home, and she felt no true excitement. Her father focused on it, and she felt afraid he had some or other expectation of her, since he often commented that she needed to uphold the family honor; something he had never said before.

"I will see you tomorrow, though?" Camilla asked, lifting her cup to sip at her tea.

"Of course. In the morning," Anastasia agreed.

They went into the street where the coach was waiting, and they all alighted into it. As the coach moved down through London, Anastasia stared out of the window, watching the buildings and houses move past under the gray sky. Her thoughts returned to the art gallery, and she found herself thinking, once again, of the man she had met. Her lips lifted at the edges as she recalled how he had talked to her so naturally. Not many people were so ready to discuss art, and he seemed knowledgeable.

You'll not see him again; her mind reminded her. He doesn't seem the sort for balls and parties, or you would already have spotted him somewhere.

She gazed out of the window, watching the buildings rattle past and trying not to think of the Duke of Willowick, nor of the upcoming ball, which she had to endure in a few hours' time.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am

“It’s no trouble if it won’t curl properly, Rachel,” Anastasia assured her maid as Rachel tucked one of Anastasia’s pale ringlets behind her one ear while she sat at the dressing-table. Anastasia gazed at her own face, surrounded by her fine, pale hair that often was hard to curl, since the strands were thin enough that it singed easily at the proper heat.

“It’s curled well, my lady,” Rachel assured her swiftly, and went to the fire to place the metal curling-rods on the hearth. “I just need to place some pearl pins now. Here, do you reckon?” She held up a pearl-ended pin and slid it into the side of Anastasia’s hair, near her ear where the ringlets hung.

“If you think so,” Anastasia said mildly. She gazed at her own reflection nervously. Her own wide blue eyes stared back, troubled and fearful.

She studied her appearance. Her face was long and slim, her features neat, and her skin pale. Her long blond hair was arranged in ringlets about her face and drawn back into a chignon that was decorated with white ribbon. Her gown was white, the tight bodice covered with white gauze, and the sleeves delicate puffs. The skirt hung from the fashionably high waistline and down to her ankles. The dress was beautiful, made of white silk, and Anastasia wished she could have felt excited about the ball. Instead, she just felt nervous.

Her father had said he had high expectations of her at the ball. It was her second Season, and he expected her to make connections.

“There you are, milady,” her maid said softly.

“Thank you,” Anastasia said a little distantly, and stood up from the chair by the dressing-table. She went to her bed, lifting the soft, filmy shawl and her small, drawstring velvet reticule from it, and then she walked out swiftly into the hallway.

“Oh! Anastasia!” Lily, her younger sister gushed. “You look beautiful! I wish I could come.”

“Next year,” Anastasia promised, giving her younger sister a crushing hug. Lily was ten and six and, though she could have come out into society already, her parents preferred to wait until the following year. Anastasia, three years her senior, smiled as Lily gazed up into her face. “You’ll make a tremendous come-out into society next year, I promise. Then all of the Ton will be beating their way to our door.” She smiled into her sister’s bright hazel gaze.

“Oh, Anny,” Lily teased. “If that was going to happen, they’d be here already. But for you.”

Anastasia just smiled. “I’ll tell you about it tomorrow,” she promised Lily, who clapped her hands.

“Good! I shall importune you throughout the breakfast hour for every minute detail until you find yourself utterly weary of recounting another word.”

Anastasia laughed. “Good. Goodnight, Lily. See you soon.”

“Have a tremendous evening, Anastasia!” Lily called to her. Anastasia was still smiling as she went down the stairs, hearing Lily hurry to the drawing-room where she would practice the pianoforte. Lily was a skilled pianist too, and she had a sweet voice.

Anastasia felt her stomach twist as she saw her parents waiting near the front door.

Mama was dressed in a blue gown, her graying honey-brown hair arranged in tight ringlets and covered with a brief cap that looked more like a wide hairband—an indicator of her married status. Her eyes widened as she saw Anastasia, her long, thin face that was something of a mix between Anastasia's and Lily's, lit with a grin.

“Daughter! You look beautiful.”

“Thank you, Mama,” Anastasia murmured, feeling genuine warmth as she gazed at her beloved mother. Her gaze went sideways to Papa and the uncomfortable clenching of her stomach returned again. Her fists, likewise, clenched in a response that was mostly fear.

“You will have to be on your most sparkling behaviour,” her father told her resolutely as Anastasia looked down at her toes. “This is not your first Season, you know.” His words could have been kind, but they were like a wintry wind, chilling her, stealing her warmth.

“Hubert!” Mama hissed with a shocked tone. Papa ignored her words.

“I have great plans for you, daughter,” he told Anastasia firmly. “But you have to try harder.”

“Yes, Papa,” Anastasia muttered. She felt tears in her eyes as she walked to the door. Her father always made her feel worthless, as though she could do nothing right. She felt her mother rest her hand briefly and lovingly on her shoulder and she took a steadying breath.

She turned and smiled at her mother, trying to reassure the older woman that she was all right. Then they all alighted into the coach.

“I will go to the Club tomorrow,” Papa informed Mama as the coach drew off. “I

have business associates to meet with.”

“Of course,” Mama murmured without looking at him. Anastasia glanced caringly at her mother. Over the years, she seemed to have come to a place of neither fearing nor disliking Papa, despite his unpleasantness and rudeness. Mama seemed largely to ignore it, but Anastasia knew that, despite her brave facade, every dismissive word still hurt. She reached out and took Mama’s hand, holding it firmly in her own.

Mama smiled and the coach rolled on down the street, heading for Westminster and for Almack’s Assembly Rooms.

They stopped outside the Assembly Rooms half an hour later—as always, on the night of a ball, the traffic was congested in the area with coaches being forced to stop while others tried to turn in the street after divesting themselves of their noble occupants. Anastasia jumped down from the coach, her skirts rustling as she landed, ankles jarring on the hard stone-dressed surface.

“Pray let us enter,” Mama murmured, gathering her shawl closely about her shoulders. “The air is rather brisk this evening.”

Anastasia nodded and she walked with Mama, hand-in-hand, as they went up the stairs and into the building. The front doors were wide, flanked with pillars and topped with a stone entablature. They went in and Anastasia blinked in surprise at how warm the hall felt compared to the chill outside. A footman stood waiting to take cloaks and coats, but Anastasia had only her thin shawl and she drifted past, heading towards the ballroom.

“It’s filling up already,” Mama murmured as they stood on the threshold. Papa was behind them, with their tickets. Whether one had an invitation, or a voucher, to attend Almack’s or not, one needed also to purchase tickets—neither was enough on its own. Anastasia watched as Papa demonstratively showed the tickets and they all went

into the ballroom together.

The voice of a footman announced their arrival, but Anastasia barely heard him—her head was tilted back, and she was gazing up at the chandeliers. At least six or seven of them hung overhead, the crystals winking in the light of perhaps a hundred candles. She gazed up, mesmerized by the beauty.

“Anastasia!” Camilla called her. Anastasia looked down, beaming.

“Camilla! So good to see you.” She grinned at her friend. Like herself, Camilla wore white, but her dress was decorated with lace, as she had said, a filmy over-skirt of gauze covering the white silk. Her red hair was drawn back in a tight chignon, decorated with some tiny white flowers made of lace.

“And grand to see you, too,” Camilla said with a smile. “Are you losing yourself in staring at the candles?”

“They’re beautiful,” Anastasia retorted.

Camilla chuckled. “You have a keen eye for such details. Come, let us make our way to the refreshment table. The lemonade, though notoriously dreadful, is a welcome respite in this oppressive heat.”

Anastasia laughed. She followed Camilla to the refreshments table. When she reached it, Papa was there already. She blinked, gazing up at him in surprise.

“Daughter,” he said firmly. “There is a person to whom I wish to introduce you.”

Anastasia glanced at Camilla. Her heart thudded with nerves.

“I’ll come with you,” Camilla said instantly.

“Thank you,” Anastasia said firmly. She took a deep breath and followed her father through the room towards the side door.

“Ah! Lord Ridley,” he greeted a man who stood there. The man in question was, Anastasia guessed, close to ten years her senior, with a long oval face and intense blue eyes. His mouth was a small bow and somehow it seemed mean to her, his lips barely lifting into a smile as he saw her. He was wearing a dark blue tailcoat, dark blue knee-breeches and white stock, and an elaborate cravat. He smelled of expensive cologne. His eyes contemplated her inquiringly. They were slate blue, and she saw no expression there except a mild interest as he might pay to a minor diversion.

“Good evening,” he greeted her neutrally.

“Lord Ridley. May I introduce my daughter, Lady Anastasia? Anastasia, this is Thomas Baker. He is Viscount Ridley.”

“Good evening.”

The man bowed low and straightened up. When he cast his gaze over her again, it seemed almost calculating.

“Lord Graystone?” he began, addressing her father respectfully but ignoring Anastasia herself utterly. “If I may, I would like the honour of claiming your daughter’s hand for the waltz.”

Papa blinked. Anastasia stiffened. There was no precedent for him asking Papa that. He had to ask her permission, not her father’s. Her father looked surprised but turned to the viscount.

“Of course. I don’t see why not.”

Anastasia stared at her father, horrified. It would have been appropriate if he had told the viscount that he had to ask her, not him. That it was her permission that was needed, not his own. Her mouth opened and she shut it. There was no point in saying anything to either of them.

Anastasia glanced sideways, seeing her mother approaching them. She felt her stomach twist. If Mama had heard what had just happened, she would doubtless say something. Part of her hoped she had not—it would do Mama no good to be angry, and it would do no good if she tried to intervene.

“Come, my lady,” Lord Ridley murmured. He gestured towards the refreshments table. “May I fetch you a glass of something?”

Anastasia shook her head. She could smell brandy and when she stared into Lord Ridley’s prominent eyes, he barely seemed to notice her.

“No, thank you,” she murmured.

“I will fetch some port,” he announced. “And you will have lemonade.”

Anastasia blinked. She had already said she did not want anything, but he apparently had not heard or had not cared to listen. She watched as he wandered off and came back a minute later with his own glass, and some lemonade. She accepted it wordlessly.

“A fine ball,” Lord Ridley continued, and it was not apparent to her if she was supposed to say something, since he was not looking in her direction. “I think the waltz will be soon.”

“Yes,” Anastasia murmured.

She heard the quartet tuning up in the corner and her heart sank as she noticed that they were playing a waltz. The introductory notes were distinctly in a waltz tempo.

“Come,” Lord Ridley demanded. Anastasia followed him and winced as he took her hand. The correct place for the other hand was over the shoulder-blade on her back, and she prayed he would know that. His touch was cold and forceful, and she recoiled from it. He rested his hand, fortunately, on the region of her upper back. They stepped onto the dance floor.

“Careful,” Anastasia hissed as they whirled round and almost collided with another couple. She tensed, inwardly counting the meter of the dance. He was clumsy, almost stepping on her feet. She shut her eyes, wishing that she could run.

Papa wanted to introduce me to him, she thought confusedly. The implications of that were clear. He had intended her to meet this man, and that spoke volumes. He had a plan in mind. He was naturally good at investing, and he had made a considerable fortune for himself on top of what he had inherited, making Graystone a wealthy estate. And looking at Lord Ridley, he was wealthy too. She felt her heart sink, wondering if her father was seeing yet another opportunity to make money.

She felt Lord Ridley misstep, and she gazed upward, watching the whirling, winking chandeliers. They were so beautiful, mesmerizing in their beauty. She counted the steps but otherwise she barely focused, losing herself in the world of bright silvery light overhead.

The sound of the melody shifting brought her head sharply down from her contemplation of the candle-light. The waltz was rounding off. She slowed and stopped, her gaze moving abruptly from the ceiling to the crowd around them.

Lord Ridley was bowing, and she curtsied automatically as the people around them did likewise, some politely applauding each other’s efforts. Her gaze roamed the

crowd distantly and then she froze in place. Her eyes locked with striking green ones, and she knew she was staring at his grace, the Duke of Willowick, who was just a few paces away from her across the room.

She looked hastily down and then up again, her heart thudding at that striking green stare. She took a step off the dance floor, and her feet led her, almost without her conscious choice, across the floor towards where he was standing, lost in the crowd.

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Sidney stared at the young woman who was gazing at him across the ballroom. Her hair was pale honey in the candlelight, her skin like pearl. Her posture was fine and graceful and the white dress that she wore flowed around her lovely form. Her eyes held his and Sidney blinked in confusion, then he realized who it was. It was her! The woman from the art exhibition.

His heart raced. She was looking at him and she was not hurrying away. Quite the opposite. It seemed, rather, that she was heading in his direction. He rooted to the spot, watching in complete disbelief as she moved through the crowd in his direction. He had dreamed he might see her again, but he had not expected it to happen. He could barely believe it.

“Anastasia!” A young woman’s voice rang out on his left, and Sidney’s heart fell as she moved hurriedly in the direction of the auburn-haired young woman who had spoken. He looked away, feeling ashamed.

She was looking for her friend. That was all, he told himself sorrowfully. His throat tightened, and he was surprised that tears burned in his eyes. He felt a fool.

“I say, old chap!” Henry’s voice was loud in his ears. “It’s crowded in here, eh?”

“Mm.” Sidney nodded. He cleared his throat, trying to respond. He gazed around the room, but he could not see the pale-haired young lady or her companion anywhere. He tried to ignore the pain he felt.

She wouldn’t dance with me anyway, he reminded himself sadly. At least I didn’t have the option of asking.

She was beautiful and clearly sought-after in society. He was none of those things—at least, not anymore.

“Sidney!” Amy appeared at his side. She smiled at him, her dark eyes wide and bright. “It’s so hot. Shall we find some refreshments?”

“I’d be pleased to walk with you to the refreshments table, sister,” Sidney said firmly. He was terrified of being so close to people, but he could not refuse his sister anything. She beamed at him. Her thick dark hair had reddish tones in it in the bright candlelight, and the rich dark red dress she wore made them appear strongly.

He walked with Amy through the thronging people, looking for the refreshments table. As a man somewhat taller than average, he had an advantage—he could see over everyone’s heads. He gazed around, informing Amy of what he could see.

“There’s a table over by the doors at the back,” he told her. “I think it’s the only one without a crowd around it. Mayhap we should go that way.” His pulse raced. The raw terror that he felt whenever he had to face people outweighed anything else.

“Indeed, let us proceed,” his sister agreed brightly.

He pushed through the crowd with her at his side. He could see the table, and there were one or two people standing close to it, but nothing like the crowds around the tables lower down. He headed slowly towards it, wincing every time someone looked at him. He saw people flinch and look away and his heart thumped painfully every time it happened.

I look horrible, he reminded himself savagely. Like some evil creature.

He glanced at Amy. She didn’t ever notice his scars. He felt reassured by the fact that at least she could tolerate them—her, Mama and Henry. And Cousin Giles and Aunt

Harriet, he reminded himself a little sourly. They didn't cringe away from him either. Five people in the whole of London who could look at him unflinchingly.

"Ah! Grand." Amy exclaimed, interrupting his thoughts.

He noticed Amy seemed contented and he turned away, letting her go to the table on her own. She could not really expect him to mingle so closely with people who were looking away, practically turning their backs on him. He gazed out over the crowd.

There, in the corner, he could see a head of blonde hair, beside a head of red hair. It was her; the woman from the gallery. He was sure of it. He watched them, longing to go over there. He was far enough away that all he could see was their heads, and a smudge here and there of white dresses in between the thick crowd in which they stood. They were right up at the front of the hall, where the group of people was most densely packed.

"Son?" His mother's voice made him whip around in surprise. His mother was standing just behind him, her pale gray gown shimmering in the candles. With her stood two ladies. One was white-haired and seemed to be around Mama's age. Beside her stood a young lady with dark tresses artfully arranged in delicate ringlets framing her countenance. She had a heart-shaped face and red lips, and she should have been beautiful, but the look of frozen disdain she leveled at him made him shudder.

"Son? This is the baroness of Kepford and her daughter, Miss Highbury." Mama said lightly.

"Good evening," Sidney said mechanically, and he bowed.

"Good evening, your grace!" Lady Kepford gushed. "Why! We have heard so much about you." Her hazel eyes sparkled, but it was more of a glitter than a sparkle, like someone sighting a prize.

“Truly?” Sidney could not help asking. He knew what was whispered around society, and he was just about to ask her if, having heard so much, she still dared come near, when she spoke again.

“Yes! We are delighted to make your acquaintance.”

“Thank you,” Sidney murmured. He looked into her eyes. He could see no real warmth, though she was smiling brightly at him. Instead, her expression seemed hard, and more than a little forced. He studied her more closely. She was wearing an ocher gown, her neck encircled with a thick gold necklace, her white hair pulled back into a tight chignon. Her posture was firm, almost aggressive. Somehow, altogether, she gave off a predatory air.

She’s interested in my fortune, Sidney thought sadly. He looked down at his feet.

“It is so hot in here, is it not?” Mama asked, clearly trying to interject a few words into the gaping quiet.

“It is!” Lady Kepford declared stridently. “So hot. Would you not care for a turn about the terrace, Priscilla? Perhaps the Duke of Willowick and the dowager duchess might accompany us?” She gazed at Mama hopefully.

His mother’s eyes met his and Sidney looked away. He knew that she was fully aware of how uncomfortable he was. He cleared his throat.

“I don’t...” he began, trying to think of some excuse—any excuse—not to have to join them. At that moment, Lady Kepford cleared her throat.

“It’s quite remarkable that my daughter still has space on her dance-card. With Almack’s so well-attended, I’m surprised she has a dance left to spare!” She giggled in what was clearly intended to be an appealing way. Sidney swallowed.

He knew that Lady Kepford was asking him to ask Miss Highbury to dance. He looked at her daughter and he was met with a cold glare. If Lady Kepford could see some benefits to her daughter that could be gained via him, evidently her daughter could see none of them, and that lanced painfully into his heart.

“I...well...” he stammered. He looked up and saw his mother watching him, her green eyes filled with hope, and he hastily stammered an affirmative answer. His mother smiled in relief as he did so. “I would be pleased to ask Miss Highbury if she would accompany me in a dance.”

“Of course! Priscilla, dear? You must save the quadrille for the duke.” Her mother’s gaze did not allow room for argument.

Priscilla leveled that icy stare at him. Sidney looked away.

“I will dance the quadrille with you,” she managed to say. Sidney’s heart twisted. It would have been kinder to refuse than to accept with such evident distaste.

“Well, then!” His mother smiled uncomfortably from Priscilla to Sidney and back. “Perhaps we should fetch a glass of lemonade, and then the young people will likely go to the dance floor.” She beamed at Lady Kepford. The smile did nothing to alleviate her worried look.

“Of course, Your Grace. It would be a pleasure.”

Sidney gazed at Miss Highbury. She shot him an angry glance and then stared around the ballroom. He bowed low and took her hand.

“Shall we dance, miss Highbury?” he asked politely.

Miss Highbury tensed visibly. She was wearing long white gloves that reached to her

elbow like the rest of the young ladies at the ball, but nonetheless his touch seemed to burn.

“Yes,” she managed. She nodded her head, the merest inclination as she might acknowledge a servant or a troublesome shop-assistant.

Sidney walked with her to the dance floor.

The music of the quadrille started as they arrived there, for which he was grateful. They had only a few seconds to look around and find someone with whom to dance—the quadrille was danced in groups of four: two men and two ladies. He spotted Amy and he shot her a desperate look. She was standing with Henry, and she understood at once what he wanted as the music began.

“We’ll join you, Sidney!” she declared cheerily.

Sidney let out a sigh of relief and he stood with Henry, Amy and Miss Highbury.

Sidney took Miss Highbury’s hand and took two steps forward, then two back. Then Miss Highbury and Amy joined hands and all four of them stepped forward, then back. Then he and Henry stood still while Amy and Priscilla stepped sedately around them. The quadrille was extremely formal and stately. It was a dance Sidney usually enjoyed, since it required memory work but not much innovation. Once he had learned the steps he didn’t need to think.

“I do like a quadrille,” Amy sighed contentedly as they walked past each other. Sidney inclined his head. He glanced over at Miss Highbury, but she was making no attempt to converse with him or with anyone else. She held her head aloft, a stony expression upon her countenance, as though someone had requested her to traverse the foul refuse of all London.

That's what she thinks of me, Sidney thought miserably. I am truly that repellent, that awful to her.

He looked over at the quartet. The music seemed to have changed key, which was good, since that meant they were at least halfway through. His mind did not need to focus on the steps—he was a good enough dancer that he could let his thoughts drift a little while his body did the steps.

His gaze roved the ballroom, but he could not see the mysterious lady from the gallery. He pushed away the thought angrily. If this young lady was finding it almost impossible even to glance upward at him occasionally, then that young lady would doubtless be repelled as well.

The music slowed and he glanced at Amy, who still looked happy. He felt his spirits lift.

The quadrille came to a close and he bowed low to Miss Highbury, who dropped the briefest curtsy.

“I must find my mother,” she said in a clipped, cold voice.

“As you will,” Sidney murmured. He gazed out over the ballroom. Having been praised for his handsomeness as much as for his dancing, the pain of her attitude was more than he could bear. He inclined his head to Amy, trying to hide the pain in his face.

“I will go out for a moment to get some fresh air,” he told her as evenly as he could. “It is very hot.”

“Of course, Sidney.” She glanced at Henry. “I would come with you, but it looks like Henry is involved in a discussion here.” She gestured to where he stood talking to

some men in army dress uniform. Sidney nodded.

“I’ll be but a minute. Thank you, sister,” he said briefly. In some ways, it would be easier should Amy stay indoors. He was terribly afraid he might cry, and he did not wish for her to see him.

He shouldered his way through the crowd, gazing out over the majority—who were shorter than him—to spot the doors.

Low, murmuring talk surrounded him as he walked out into the cold night air. There were already a few people standing outside on the big stone terrace that overlooked the street. Sidney made his way to the railing, drawing in gulps of cool air. The night was dark, punctuated here and there by light to help the guests to see. He leaned on the cold stone of the railing, feeling the cool, scratchy surface under his palm.

Noises from the rest of the town drifted to him as he shut his eyes—a coach somewhere, people whooping as they stumbled out of a public house. A dog, barking. He could hear music closer, and the low murmur of chatter. He opened his eyes. He wanted to cry, but even here there was not enough space to do so privately. He stared out over the city, blinking at the flickering candle lights and wishing that he could run away somewhere far, where he would never have to face London and its cruel populace again.

He stood silently, gazing out over the city and then he turned as he felt a slight breeze. Someone else had come over to the railings. He widened his eyes, staring in surprise.

It was the lady he had met at the art gallery.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am

Anastasia gasped in surprise. She had not noticed there was a man standing at the railing until she was almost there, and then when she turned to look at him, she could barely believe who it was. It was the man she had met in the gallery; the one with the striking eyes and the unusual scarring. The Duke of Willowick.

“Sorry your grace,” she murmured, as his eyes widened in apparent alarm. “I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

“Not at all.” He shook his head. She frowned. He seemed to be smiling, but perhaps that was just her imagination. His green eyes were hard to read in the half-light of the terrace, and they were mesmerizing enough to make them hard to read anyway. She felt a little like a rabbit, staring at an eagle. His gaze stunned her, held her in place.

“I didn’t see there was someone at the railing,” she explained, remembering how to speak.

“I was standing still,” he said, a tilt at the edges of his lips making her sure he was grinning. “It’s hard to spot me when I stand still. I’m rather good at it.”

She giggled. “It’s a good talent to have. Remaining motionless, I mean.” She smiled at him. “I am rather unskilled at it, I fear. Should I hear a melody, my foot begins to tap before I can suppress it, and then there is no hope of achieving stillness thereafter.”

He laughed. The sound was so bright, so unexpected in light of his somber expression, that she felt a shiver of joy.

“I am pleased to hear that you have an appreciation for music,” he remarked warmly. “It appears that but few individuals attend soirees with the intent to dance, or to truly savor the delight of dancing.” A touch of melancholy clouded his gaze.

Anastasia grinned. “I have come to just the same observation as you. I do believe that all present are gathered here to display their ostentation before one another.”

His smile lit his green eyes. In high contrast to his hair, they seemed like emeralds in his pale face. She felt her heart thump hard in her chest.

“I think that you have deciphered the key to London society. It is a display of vanity.”

She giggled. “I’m afraid so,” she agreed, her happiness wearing off a little at that thought. It was, sadly, absolutely true. The ton were forever parading in front of one another, trying to outdo each other in their performance of Perfect London Elite.

She looked up from her contemplation of the town to find his gaze on her. His green eyes held hers with an intensity that made her shiver. She did not feel afraid, though, as she did when Lord Ridley looked at her. She felt, instead, a tightness in her heart that had nothing to do with fear. It was closer to the anticipation she felt before an event she loved than it was to fearfulness.

“You are wise,” he murmured.

Anastasia’s cheeks flared and she giggled. “No. Truly no.” She laughed at the thought. “My friends all tease me for getting distracted even by butterflies or the candles in the candelabras. No. I am not wise.”

“It is wisdom to observe the small things,” the duke countered. “Or that is what I have always believed. To value the small, simple things in life is the road to contentment. That is what my father always said.”

Anastasia felt her blush deepen. Her body was heating up, a mix of embarrassment and delight making her want to twist her skirt in her fingers, a habit she had when she was just a little girl. His words made her soul sing, since she agreed with them absolutely.

“Your father seems like a wise man.”

“He was.” The duke swallowed hard.

“You must miss him a great deal,” Anastasia said gently.

He nodded, his eyes glistening with tears. “Every day,” he murmured. “I think of him often.”

Anastasia felt her heart twist. Though she was not close to her father, she could not begin to imagine what it might be like to lose him, or her mother, to whom she was extremely close.

“I am sorry,” she said softly. “To lose someone so close to you...it must be terrible.”

The duke nodded. His eyes were damp, and he looked upwards so that the tears did not fall. “It is...confusing,” he said slowly. “It is almost too confusing to feel pain—at least for the first year.” He sniffed. “I almost wished I could have felt more.”

Anastasia nodded. “I think I understand,” she said slowly. “It is too huge, too unbelievable.”

“Yes. Yes, exactly.” He nodded, a tear running down his cheek. “This is the first time I have cried for him.”

Anastasia swallowed hard. “I am sorry,” she murmured again.

He smiled gently. “Do not be. I am glad. I am relieved that now, I can cry.”

His green eyes held hers. Anastasia gazed up at him and he held her gaze. It felt as though she was drowning, floating in the depths of those eyes. She stared up and he leaned just a little forward and her heart thudded with a sudden longing she had never felt before—a longing to feel those thin lips pressed to her own.

“I say!” a voice interrupted them. Anastasia’s gaze shot up to see a man with rust-colored hair and wide brown eyes approaching them. He had a softer face than the green-eyed duke, who was gaunt and angular. The brown-eyed man grinned at her.

“Good evening, my lady!” He bowed low. “Who do I have the pleasure of addressing?”

“I am Lady Anastasia,” Anastasia managed to say. “Daughter of the Earl of Graystone.”

“Oh!” The brown-eyed man smiled. “I am Lord Barrydale. And if I know anything, this fellow here has not introduced himself?” He gestured with a fond expression to the tall man who stood beside him.

He must be a friend of his, Anastasia thought. The Duke of Willowick shot him an angry glance, but the brown-eyed man smiled.

“Lady Anastasia, may I have the pleasure of introducing His Grace, the Duke of Willowick?”

“Your Grace,” Anastasia murmured, dropping a low curtsy. She was pleased to have a formal introduction to him—the first one she had received.

“Lady Anastasia,” he said softly.

Heat flooded through her at the sound of his saying her name. He made it sound beautiful, a treasure on his tongue. Her heart thudded in her chest. She gazed up at him and he gazed at her, his green eyes holding her own.

“I’m going back indoors, old chap,” Lord Barrydale murmured to the Duke of Willowick. If you will pardon me, I wish to claim the next dance with my beloved wife.”

“Of course,” the duke said with the faintest trace of a grin. “I will join you shortly.”

Anastasia stared up at him, her heart thumping at the fact that he had not gone back inside with his friend. He had chosen to remain outdoors, and she suspected it was so that he could talk to her. She looked around swiftly. Camilla had come outdoors with her—the only reason it was proper for her to be out here. She checked that she could spot her friend, and her eye rested on some striking reddish hair where Camilla leaned on the railing. She was talking to a mutual friend of theirs, Lady Emily, and with them were two tall men, one of whom appeared to be wearing a dress uniform. She grinned. Camilla had always fancied men in uniform.

“It’s cold,” she murmured, trying to think of something to say.

He smiled. “It is quite cold, indeed. However, I find the atmosphere in the ballroom to be oppressively warm. I would gladly endure the chill than succumb to the heat.”

“What say you?”

She tilted her head, considering the question. “While it may be more prudent to avoid the heat, I must confess my inclination leans towards warmer climes. I have a great fondness for the delights of hot weather.” She looked around the terrace. While there was a cool breeze, it was still perfectly possible to be outside in her thin dress and shawl. Summer and spring were cheerful, happy seasons where it was possible to

linger the entire day outdoors and the sun set later and later. It always made her happier when the weather was warmer—it felt freeing.

He laughed. “I regret having to maintain the opposing view. While one can wear a greatcoat and avoid the worst of the winter’s chill, one cannot do much to avoid the heat.”

“Perhaps,” Anastasia replied. She smiled at him. He was an amusing person to talk to. He was ready to speak about anything, and he was knowledgeable on most things—or at least, having discussed art even briefly with him, it certainly seemed that he was very knowledgeable about art.

He gazed at her and her heart thumped. His stare was so arresting, and she had to admit, as she looked up at him, that, though the scar was the first thing one noticed, the features beyond the scar were not repellent. He had a slim, almost gaunt face and thin lips and his neck and posture were upright and proud. With that thick brown hair and striking green eyes, one could have said he was quite good-looking, or at least unusual.

““Do you find pleasure in balls and soirees?” he inquired, causing her to raise an eyebrow in surprise.

“I’ve never given it much thought,” she murmured. “I do attend such events, but...” She tilted her head, contemplating. “I adore dancing,” she declared suddenly. “And music, in general.”

“Indeed?” He seemed genuinely intrigued. “Do you play any instruments?”

“The pianoforte,” she replied promptly. “I take great delight in it. My friend Camilla sings, so we often perform together.” She glanced over at Camilla, who was standing with Emily and laughing and talking with the officers.

“My sister plays the pianoforte,” the duke replied.

“You have a sister?” Anastasia asked with a note of excitement in her voice. “So do I.”

“A younger sister?” he guessed. She nodded.

“Yes. She is ten and six. She is not yet out in society. I think she envies me for the balls and parties.” Anastasia smiled fondly, thinking of Lily, who was filled with excitement at the prospect of her own come-out the following year.

“I, too, have a younger sister,” the duke said with a smile. “She is wed to Lord Barrydale there.”

“Oh!” Anastasia felt her brow lift. “I thought that you and he are surely friends.”

The duke inclined his head. “Yes, we are,” he agreed. “I am glad that Amy wed Henry. He is a level-headed, kindly man.”

Anastasia nodded. “That is important,” she agreed. She knew how he felt. She shuddered involuntarily at the thought of Lord Ridley. If Lily were even to have to dance with such a man, she would feel angry.

“You are cold,” the duke murmured, seeing her shiver. Anastasia shook her head.

“No...it’s not too cold out here,” she contradicted. He chuckled.

“I know now that you prefer the heat to the cold. So, I must insist that you go indoors. I will join you. It is surprisingly chilly out here,” he added a little more softly.

“Oh.” Anastasia grinned, her spirit soaring. She had hoped to be able to continue

talking with him. He was diverting and interesting. She glanced over at Camilla, hoping that her friend would see and come inside with them. Camilla happened to turn and see her and her eyes grew large and round as she stared at Anastasia.

“I must tell my friend I am going indoors,” Anastasia murmured to the duke. He nodded.

“Of course, my lady. I shall wait at the door.”

Anastasia hurried over to Camilla, who was staring at her as if she had just walked in wearing a funny, weird outfit.

“I’m going inside,” Anastasia said swiftly. Camilla frowned.

“That is the Duke of Willowick you are talking to, is it not?”

“Yes,” Anastasia said lightly. “Yes, it is.”

“Do be careful, dear,” Camilla said swiftly. “I am coming with you.”

Anastasia felt dismayed—she did not really want Camilla to come with her, since she was enjoying talking to the duke and Camilla was so fearful of him that it would not be comfortable with her listening to them.

“We shall all go inside,” Emily said swiftly, and the two tall officers grinned and nodded.

“At once, Lady Emily,” the one said, as if she was a senior officer.

They all laughed, and Anastasia walked back into the ballroom with her spirits lifted. As he had said earlier, the Duke of Willowick was standing by the door. He stepped

aside and followed them all in, coming to stand with Anastasia.

“It sounds like a waltz is playing,” he said after a moment of awkward silence. Anastasia nodded.

His voice sounded strained, and she stared up at him, a small frown on her brow.

“Yes, it does,” she agreed. He looked tense, his brow furrowed. She wondered what had troubled him.

A second later, he cleared his throat. “My lady, might I have the honour of requesting a dance with you?” he asked.

Anastasia felt her heart flood with warmth. She inclined her head, reaching for his hand.

“I would be delighted to,” she agreed.

They proceeded gracefully side by side toward the dance floor. The music commenced, and she performed a delicate curtsy, while he executed a low bow. Then, placing his hand gently upon her shoulder, they were swept into the waltz, her feet feeling as light as air as they glided effortlessly and elegantly across the dance floor together.

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Sidney stepped forward in time to the stately tune of the waltz. He could feel the warmth of Lady Anastasia's hand on his, even through the opera gloves she wore, and the firm muscle of her back where his hand rested just on her shoulder-blade. He could smell the soft floral scent of her perfume, and her skirt whispered against him as they twirled across the dance floor. He blinked, barely able to believe it was really happening.

He drew in another breath as they stepped neatly around the corner, waltzing gracefully past two couples who turned the corner with them. She was truly an expert—dancing with her was a pleasure. She felt light on her feet and her timing was excellent. Waltzing with her was effortless. It felt as though he had waltzed with her from the day he was born.

He grinned at the wild thought. But it did not seem crazy as they stepped neatly around the ballroom. She was so companionable, so easy to talk to, that it seemed like they had known one another forever.

No , he corrected himself. It seems as though we have missed each other forever and just found one another.

He grinned again. That thought sounded like Amy when she met Henry. To him it had appeared as foolish nonsense then, the wild talk of someone in love. Now he understood that, even though it sounded wild, it actually happened.

His smile widened as they waltzed neatly around the floor.

The cadence of the music was shifting, and he guessed that the waltz was ending, but

he was not even thinking about the music; his body moving to it almost unconsciously as the rest of his mind focused on the lady who danced so beautifully with him.

Her soft hair glowed in the candlelight, her skin as fine as pearl. Her soft pink lips seemed like petals, and he blushed as he noticed her fine, pretty figure with its gentle curves concealed beneath the soft white silk of her gown. She looked up and his breath caught in his throat as her sky-blue eyes fastened on his. It was those eyes that captivated him, lovely as the rest of her might be. Her soul. She had a sense of freedom about her; as though she did not care a jot for the ton and their cruel judgments. She floated through the ballroom like a lark, barely touching the critical, hateful crowd. He loved watching her and listening to her talk. She was funny and wise and inspiring. And her laugh was a treasure.

“I suppose that’s the rounding-off part,” she murmured, and he frowned, guessing she meant the music, which was two or three triumphant chords. He nodded and his heart twisted.

“I suppose.” He bowed low and she dropped into a sweet, gracious curtsy. His heart ached as she straightened up, lifting those gentle eyes to his face.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

“Thank you,” he said swiftly. His breath caught in his throat. She was looking at him with an expression of tenderness and his heart ached. He searched that gaze for pity and found none. It was sincere and honest—perhaps a little curious, but there was no condescension to be seen. Relief washed through him at the realization. He did not want pity from anyone, but especially not from her.

“Would you...shall I fetch you some lemonade?” he asked swiftly. He had to think of something, to find some way of extending the conversation just a little. She inclined

her head.

“Lemonade would be very pleasant, thank you.”

He gazed around the ballroom, searching for somewhere where he could fetch a glass of lemonade. He spotted a table close to them. As he did, he saw his mother, who was looking straight at him.

“I shall go and procure some lemonade,” Sidney said swiftly. Lady Anastasia inclined her head.

“I shall join you.”

He grinned. He had hoped she would. He bent down a little so that he could hear her talking over the din of laughing, chattering guests. She was not short—she was at least average height, if not slightly taller—but he was very tall and that made it slightly harder to hear her talk over the noise.

“It’s noisy in here,” she commented. He laughed.

“Indeed, it is,” he agreed. “Perchance at the rear of the hall it might be more tranquil.”

They made their way through the crowd and reached the refreshments table. As they did, Mama appeared. Sidney tensed, then inclined his head.

“Mama, this is Lady Anastasia. My lady, this is my mother, the dowager Duchess of Willowick.”

“An honour to meet you, Your Grace,” Lady Anastasia murmured, dropping a low curtsy.

“A delight to meet you, Lady Anastasia,” Mama said swiftly. She curtsied and then as she straightened up, Sidney noticed the lines of worry on her brow. He turned to her as she gestured to him.

“A moment, son. If I may...?”

Sidney inclined his head politely, though he felt dismay at the interruption. “Of course, Mama,” he said instantly. “Excuse me, my lady.”

Mama beckoned him towards the doors and then stopped as soon as they were at the edge of the hall where it was quieter.

“It’s Cousin Giles,” she whispered as Sidney leaned in. “He’s...um...not quite well this evening.”

Sidney took a breath. He knew what Mama meant. Giles was here, and he had drunk too much. Giles seemed to be struggling with drink just lately. He felt his heart twist in sympathy. Giles was his dear friend.

“I see. Where is he?” he asked swiftly.

“Outside,” Mama answered briefly. “Henry is with him. If you could go outside? Amy is distressed.”

“Of course,” Sidney said at once. He had to help his family. He glanced over at the table. Lady Anastasia had retrieved some lemonade and was standing there sipping it. He inclined his head to his mother. “A moment, Mama,” he promised.

His mother nodded and he hurried towards Lady Anastasia. She looked up as he approached, and he bowed low.

“My lady, you must excuse me. My mother has asked my help with something, and I must attend to it.” He felt his heart twist.

“Of course.”

He inclined his head. “Thank you,” he murmured. She smiled and his heart lit up.

“Of course,” she repeated softly.

He gazed at her, filling his eyes with her gentle beauty. Then he hurried off to Mama, who waited by one of the doors.

“He’s out there,” Mama indicated. Her face was a picture of worry. Sidney stared out and thought he saw two tall men near the railing. One was Henry—the taller one. The other, he guessed, was Giles. He hurried towards them.

“And...in China...” Giles was slurring. “They drink a beverage made from rice. Fascinating, eh? Rice.” He nodded slowly as if he was divulging a great secret.

Henry was leaning on the fence, nodding slowly as if Giles was imparting some fascinating information.

“Ah! Sidney,” he greeted him as Sidney approached the two. Sidney glanced at Giles and nodded.

“Cousin. I did not know Almack’s held your interest,” he greeted Giles in a friendly manner.

“Almacks!” Giles declared loudly, throwing out a hand as if declaring it on stage. “A hotbed of gossip and dissolute ways!”

Sidney tensed. Enough people had turned to look at them to attract some attention. A woman giggled. Anger flashed through Sidney; a protective anger that would defend his cousin against all censure. He glared at the group, and they fell silent, looking elsewhere.

He glanced up at Henry.

“We were thinking of going elsewhere,” Henry explained to Sidney swiftly. “A club, mayhap. I need to escort Amy home, though.” He shot a worried look at Sidney.

Sidney nodded, understanding instantly. “I’ll go to the club with Giles. You stay here and look after my sister.”

“I’ll come part of the way,” Henry promised. He gave Sidney a grateful look.

“Grand,” Sidney agreed. His heart sank. He desperately wanted to stay at the ball, but Giles needed help—he could not stay at the ball and shame himself, but nor could he get home in his current state. The club would look after him. If he passed out, they would make sure he was safe until morning. Poor Giles, he thought sadly. Poor Willowick, too, should he have to inherit. The thought was like ice.

Henry turned to Giles.

“Now that Sidney has joined us, perhaps we ought to make our way to the Bradford Club, eh?” he asked Giles.

“Bradford...” Giles stammered. “There the beer is terrible. Watering it down, they are.” His slightly unfocused blue eyes focused again angrily. “Vagabonds, the lot of them! Vagabonds,” he repeated.

Sidney glanced at Henry.

“Let’s go to the Grantham instead,” he said quickly. “It’s just as close.”

“Grantham...” Giles repeated.

“Yes. The Grantham!” Henry sounded bright and cheerful. “Let’s go there instead. What say you, old fellow?” He grinned at Giles.

“Grantham...” Giles said uncertainly.

Sidney nodded, aware that if they did not get Giles there fast, he was going to pass out. He put his arm around his cousin, supporting his weight.

“Let’s go, old chap,” he said quickly.

“Yes! Off we go!” Henry declared cheerfully. He grinned at Giles, though Sidney could see the worry on his face. Henry took Giles’ other hand and together they led him carefully through the crowd and out of the ballroom.

On the steps, they stood still, letting Giles breathe the cool night air. It seemed to help a little, because he stood straighter and could walk down the stairs relatively easily. They walked down the street and turned left, then left again and then right. The Grantham was ahead of them. Sidney felt a sigh of relief as they reached the door, the front of the building lit by a pine torch bracketed to the wall. He tapped on the door and a man answered it.

“The Duke of Willowick,” Sidney introduced himself swiftly. “My cousin, Viscount Camberwell, and the Earl of Barrydale.”

“Please enter, Your Grace,” the man said instantly.

Sidney stepped inside, supporting Giles, who seemed to have become suddenly more

afflicted with whatever he had drunk. He leaned heavily on Sidney, swaying as Henry stepped forward to take his other arm. They supported him as they stepped into the room.

The scent of tobacco hit Sidney first, mingled with coffee, strong brandy, and the leather of the chairs. The club always smelled like that. He was hardly ever there. It was not pleasant because people tended to avoid him, afraid, no doubt, of the fearsome scars on his face. He was nonetheless glad to be a member, as nobody questioned him as he led Giles and Henry through the tables towards a corner table. He sat down on the leather-padded seat and Giles and Henry slid in across from him.

“Drink...” Giles stammered as the proprietor of the club appeared.

“Water,” Henry said swiftly. Giles glared at him.

“What a lot of damnable nonsense,” he slurred. “A drink!” He addressed the proprietor with a grin. “A proper drink. Brandy.”

Sidney shut his eyes. He did not say anything, though, and the proprietor bowed and hurried off to get the drink. Sidney and Henry looked at one another. Neither of them said anything. Giles had never drunk like this before. This was something new.

“Sidney will keep you company a while,” Henry said, stretching his legs out under the table.

“I must return to the ball. It would be unseemly to leave Amy unattended, would it not?” He beamed at Giles.

“Look after Amy,” Giles told him, his gaze barely focused as he stared at him. “And get me a drink.”

“Your drink is coming,” Henry assured him gently. He stood up. He cast a sorrowful look at Sidney. “Keep him safe, eh?”

“Of course,” Sidney said at once. He glanced at Giles. The man was barely able to sit upright, and he looked away. Giles had always been so full of life. Seeing him like this made him sad. He had always felt safe, knowing that Giles, who was older than him by two years, was Papa’s second heir. If he himself had no sons, Giles would take over. But that thought was no longer reassuring, and he felt as though Father was there, urging him to have sons soon.

“Brandy, my lord,” the proprietor said, appearing at the table a few seconds later. He cast a worried look at Sidney even as he placed the drink on the table.

“If he should faint, will you ensure his safety?” Sidney said to the proprietor as the fellow straightened.

“We have a room set aside for that purpose,” the proprietor promised.

Sidney nodded his thanks and leaned back. It was going to be a long evening. Giles sipped his brandy and made a face.

“Hateful stuff,” he murmured. Sidney shut his eyes.

Giles leaned back in the chair, looking around.

“Not very lively, is it?” he declared. Sidney shrugged.

“Not really, no,” he agreed. The club was mostly empty, though he noticed two men come in and sit down at the table just beside them. One was older, with gray hair and a hard, squarish face. His eyes were hazel, Sidney thought, but they had a hard, unkind expression in them and he instinctively shrank away. The other man was

young, with prominent eyes of a pale blue and a soft oval face. He also had an unpleasant air to him, though, and Sidney kept an eye on them, listening to their talk even as he focused on Giles and his one-sided conversation about the customs in China. Giles' father had been an envoy with the East India Company, and the Far East was a constant source of interest to him.

"...and that is all I can say right now," the graying man said to the plumper, pale-eyed man at the other table.

"Ten thousand?" The pale-eyed man asked.

"Mm." The gray-haired man inclined his head. "Not more than a trifle for you, I expect, my lord. But a fortune, nonetheless. A fortune," he repeated, as though the word was a word that bore repetition.

"Mm." The pale-eyed man had sounded eager, but now he leaned back, as if ten thousand pounds was indeed a trifling amount. "I suppose."

Sidney tensed. They were discussing some sort of transaction—he just couldn't guess what. He nodded to Giles, giving his cousin a friendly smile, then turned to listen to the two men.

"Well, it's all I can spare for Anastasia. I have another daughter, you know. They both need dowries." He grinned, but the smile did not lighten the hardness of his gaze.

Sidney tensed. He could not—did not—mean Lady Anastasia, did he? His stomach tied itself in a knot. He felt sick.

"I understand, Lord Graystone," the younger man agreed.

Sidney pushed back his chair. His stomach roiled. He felt as though he was going to be sick. This man, this hard-eyed creature with all the apparent honesty of a corrupt merchant in the marketplace—this was Anastasia’s father! And the man sitting across from him, he recognized now. He was the man he had seen Anastasia dance with!

They are selling her, he thought, horrified. They were discussing her dowry as though she was a sack of potatoes in the market; worth a certain amount and to be sold to the highest bidder. It was not possible.

“I say, old chap!” Giles slurred. “What’s that about?”

Sidney lifted his hand, which he had made into a fist and had thumped on the table without noticing. The two men at the other table looked up, glanced at him, then dismissed him by glancing away. A drunk patron, they must have thought. Sidney shut his eyes.

“Giles,” he said gently. “Can you manage here by yourself? I am afraid I have to return to the ballroom.”

“Ballroom!” Giles declared loudly. Here, nobody turned to stare. The other patrons were, many of them, at least as drunk. “Why should you go back to the ballroom?” he demanded, giving Sidney an angry gaze.

“No particular reason,” Sidney began. “Mama needs me,” he added. He had to hurry.

“Go, then,” Giles slurred. “Mothers know best. Eh?” He laughed. Sidney inclined his head.

“Yes, Giles,” he agreed. “They usually do.”

He stood and hurried to the door, promising the proprietor that he would cover

whatever expenses Giles incurred during his evening at the club. Then he hurried out into the night.

The ballroom was a good walk away and he was sweating as he walked swiftly down the darkened streets. He breathed deeply, his head clearing in the cold night air. As he reached the ballroom, his resolve had altered. He could not very well march up to a lady he barely knew and accuse her father of trying to sell her to a strange man. At best, she would not believe him. At worst, she would think he had lost his wits entirely.

He hesitated in the doorway.

“Can I take your coat?” the footman asked. Sidney nodded. He shrugged out of his greatcoat, which he had hastily shrugged on when he and Henry had walked with Giles to the club. Then he hurried into the ballroom.

He looked around, but he could not see Lady Anastasia. His gaze drifted around the room, but he spotted neither Anastasia nor her friend, the red-haired young lady he had seen her talk to. He felt his stomach twist with disappointment. The candles were burning low, and he guessed that the two young ladies had gone home.

“Sidney, dear,” Mama greeted him as he crossed the floor, heading towards her. “Henry and Amy have departed. Might we as well? I feel tired.” She stifled a yawn.

Sidney nodded. He had danced all he ever wished, he was weary of stares, and he had much to think about as they hastily excused themselves and walked out to the coach.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am

“Sidney? Sidney!” Mama’s voice echoed through the door of the drawing room. It was muffled by the thickness of the wood, and Sidney could, in all fairness, have claimed he did not hear her. He turned his back and continued focusing on the canvas that stood before him.

A storm-tossed gray sky reflected in a leaden sea was painted in thick lines of oil-paint on the canvas. In the foreground, a lone figure stood on the shore, his black mourning-clothes the only truly black shape in a world of shifting, silvered gray. Sidney reached for his brush and dipped it in the deep blue, adding some highlights to the shadowy figure.

His mind had been in turmoil since the ball at Almack’s the previous evening, tormented with thoughts of Lady Anastasia and confused by the horrid conversation he had overheard. He had told nobody about either thing, and the only outlet for his bewildered and painful thoughts was his canvas.

“Sidney!” His mother called, and this time she was bursting through the door and into the room. Sidney blinked, fixing her with a distant gaze.

“You know what I asked about being disturbed when I paint,” he said reproachfully.

“Sorry, son,” his mother said gently. “But I had to warn you. Aunt Harriet is on her way up and I thought you’d like a moment to get ready before she arrives.”

“Oh.” Sidney blinked again, this time in surprise. He could not be angry with his mother for his aunt’s visit—it was hardly her fault. “Thank you,” he added. He reached for the canvas, carrying it on its easel to a place around the corner of the

dressing-table, out of the way. Nobody would see it there, which was how he wished it to be. He struggled to show his art to anyone when it was completed—there was not even the thought in his head of allowing someone to see it uncompleted.

“I told the butler to delay her in the entrance-way,” Mama said swiftly. “He can only hold her at bay for so long, though, before she starts to wonder what is happening up here.” His mother looked up at him with wide eyes.

“What should be happening?” Sidney asked mildly. “Is the wicked Duke of Willowick harming people up here?”

“Oh, Sidney,” his mother said sadly. “Nobody thinks you’re evil. You know that. You just...”

“Look evil?” Sidney demanded, still light as though he was teasing.

“No! No. You look a little different. That’s all. Still handsome. But different,” his mother said insistently.

Sidney grinned. While he hated the fact that society now whispered tales about his distorted, terrible features the way they had once whispered about his beauty, he also took a sort of perverse pleasure in it. He had to find it funny, because he would go mad if he didn’t.

“Is she on her way up?” Sidney asked, checking that the easel could not be seen from the low table by the fire where they would take their tea.

“I think so,” Mama murmured. “I didn’t add that Giles is with her.”

“Oh. Cousin Giles.” Sidney raised a brow. “How does he fare?” He had been vaguely worried about Giles all day, ever since the ball the previous evening. At least, it

seemed, he had returned home without mishap.

“I don’t know,” Mama answered.

Footsteps sounded in the hallway, followed by the appearance of Mr. Moreton, the butler, and by Aunt Harriet, Papa’s sister, and Cousin Giles.

“Your Graces,” the butler greeted them formally; almost apologetically. “Lady Camberwell is here, and her son, Lord Giles.” He inclined his head politely.

Sidney gazed at the new guests.

His gaze hastily took in Giles, who was still drunk, swaying a little on his feet, his stare focused as if walking was difficult. Sidney’s eyes moved to Aunt Harriet, who stood beside him.

Aunt Harriet was Papa’s sister, and the resemblance was certainly there—like Papa, she had a strong bone-structure. Her hair, however, was black, streaked here and there with gray, and curling. Her eyes were likewise very dark. Her small chin had dimples and her big dark eyes were fringed with thick, dark lashes. She was pretty, and tense, like a dormouse blinking in the uncertain light of day. She smiled up at Sidney nervously.

“Nephew! I’m glad to see you.” She, like Sidney, was still dressed in black, despite it having been a year since Father’s passing. Beside Sidney, his own mother was dressed in the dark gray of half-mourning, which she had donned just yesterday following her black clothing. Sidney and his aunt were likewise free to change out of their mourning clothes, but clearly neither of them wished to. Not yet.

“I am pleased to see you, Aunt,” Sidney greeted her. It was not entirely untrue—he had always been fond of Aunt Harriet. She and Mama were good friends.

He glanced sideways at Mama. In her gray gown, her long, fine-boned face looked even more delicate. Her eyes were blue-green and catlike, her brows dark. Her hair was chocolate brown, streaked with gray, and her skin was like porcelain despite her age. She had been a famous society beauty in her youth; but then, Harriet had also been considered a beauty by the ton, despite how different they both looked.

We're a good-looking family, Sidney thought distractedly as he went to sit down at the tea-table with the guests. His younger sister Amy was also beautiful, with Mama's chocolate-brown hair and their father's grayish-blue eyes. She was not with the family, of course, residing now outside the town at Barrydale. He smiled at the thought—it was one of the few things that could bring a smile to his face in spite of his sadness, but he was not yet accustomed to it.

"I say, old chap!" Giles greeted him, a grin lifting one side of his mouth. "You look weary. Have you been in your study, poring over your books again?"

Sidney raised a brow. Giles Markham was Papa's only living relative and the second heir to Willowick. He was also funny, loud, intransigent and vibrant and he had at one time been Sidney's best friend. Now, with the slightly glazed look in his hazel eyes that had become perpetual, Giles was much changed. It was because of the brandy.

He glanced at Aunt Harriet, who was gazing at Giles. She was worried.

"No, I haven't, as it happens," Sidney said mildly. "I have been otherwise involved."

"What, eh? A woman?" Giles grinned.

"Giles, please," Aunt Harriet hissed. Mama, sitting next to Giles, looked at him with a mix of concern and compassion.

“Have you been into Bond Street today?” she asked Aunt Harriet, changing the subject.

“No. No, I will go in tomorrow, Viola,” Aunt Harriet informed Mama. Sidney tried to think of something to say.

“Your tea, Your Graces. My lady, my Lord.” The butler announced, saving him the need to think anymore, and everyone was silent as the butler unloaded the tea-things and poured their tea. Sidney accepted a cup of tea with a nod of thanks and added sugar, stirring absently. He sipped it, barely aware of how it tasted. His attention was elsewhere.

“Nephew, may I speak to you in confidence?” Aunt Harriet whispered from Sidney’s left.

“Of course, Aunt,” Sidney agreed at once, seeing the frown of consternation on her brow.

“Very well. I shall only be a moment, my dear Viola,” Aunt Harriet said, addressing Mama.

“Of course,” Mama agreed.

Sidney followed Aunt Harriet to the door, standing back to hold it open for her. She hurried with him into the hallway and then to the small antechamber next to the drawing room.

“Sidney, I fear for Giles,” Aunt Harriet confided at once.

“You fear for him?” Sidney asked carefully.

“His drinking. It is...not good,” Aunt Harriet said, staring at the wall as she spoke. Her expression was tense and drawn. “It’s his health I fear for. But I worry for us all,” she added, those dark eyes pools of concern and care.

“For all of us?” Sidney asked.

“Yes. He is rather scandalous in his behaviour,” his aunt said softly. “And I worry about the way he spends, too. Not just on brandy, but at the card-table. He will ruin Camberwell if he is not careful. And Willowick too. I am afraid for what will happen if...when...” she wet her lips and gazed up at him, her eyes fearful.

“You mean you are scared that Giles will inherit?” Sidney asked carefully.

“Yes. I worry that...well...”

“Have no fear,” Sidney said firmly. “I will make sure that does not happen.”

“You will?” His aunt sounded genuinely relieved. Sidney felt compassion and gratitude—many women would have been so intent on having a duke for a son that they wouldn’t have cared if he would ruin himself and the duchy that he inherited. But his aunt was not like that. He could see she cared both for Giles and for Willowick too.

“Yes. Thank you, Aunt,” he murmured. “I will do what I can.”

Aunt Harriet smiled at him. “You’re good, Sidney. You’re a good man.”

“So is my cousin,” Sidney said firmly. “We just need to lead him back to himself.”

“If only that were easy,” Aunt Harriet murmured.

“We shall try,” Sidney promised.

His aunt gazed up at him and his heart twisted. She trusted him to keep his promises. He had to.

He inclined his head respectfully and they went back out to the drawing room.

“In Town, eh?” Giles was slurring as they arrived. He was evidently more in his cups than anyone realized. “Town’s good. Come into Town, Sidney. We can go to the Westford Club. We’ll find some ladies of ill repute, and...”

“How was the weather in Warrenbridge?” Sidney interrupted swiftly, addressing Harriet, whose home was in Warrenbridge, four miles from London.

“Good. It was good, thank you,” Aunt Harriet replied swiftly. She had gone pale.

“Would you like some sugar?” Mama asked.

“Town’s not boring,” Giles informed Sidney loudly, clearly unaware of how uncomfortable the rest of the tea-gathering was by now. “Full of things to do. You have to get out and about. Out and about,” he repeated, nodding solemnly.

“I need to go into town for a modiste’s appointment,” Aunt Harriet announced, perhaps trying to distract from Giles.

“Town is where everything happens!” Giles informed them all authoritatively. “It’s the epicenter of the world. The epicenter,” he reiterated, nodding as though he approved of how it sounded.

“You must have a look at the new roses,” Mama informed Aunt Harriet, evidently trying to steer her onto another subject. “They are flowering exceptionally well since

our gardener chose to plant them in a new place.”

Sidney listened distractedly to the conversation. Giles had stopped declaiming and was eating instead. That was good, for several reasons. One of the reasons was that Giles looked as though he hadn’t been eating very much. His face was weary, and his body seemed to have shrunk, his white linen shirt hanging on his form. He carried around an air of neglect. Perhaps he never went home, just went from club to inn to public house in London.

“We should take our leave,” Aunt Harriet said after an hour. Sidney glanced at Giles. His dark-haired head was bent over his plate of pound cake, and he was tucking into the third slice he had eaten since arriving. He looked up, his hazel eyes—identical to Uncle’s and Father’s--gazing directly into Sidney’s.

“You need to enjoy yourself.”

Sidney inclined his head. “Perhaps,” he said lightly.

“Enjoyment is...is the key to long life,” Giles stammered. He drew a breath and Aunt Harriet turned to him.

“We should get going, dear,” she said tightly.

“ ‘ Need to hold my tongue, do I?’” Giles inquired. He did not sound irate, yet his mother tensed. “Holding my tongue.”

Sidney winced. Giles was miserable—he knew that much. His vibrant, funny cousin had never drunk like this before.

After Giles and Harriet went to the coach, Mama remained behind in the drawing room.

“Harriet is so worried,” she murmured to Sidney.

“I know,” Sidney agreed. “She’s worried for us, too,” he added. “The duchy and all. Should I not...not...” he could barely say the words. A year ago, before the accident, he would have had no worries in the world. Finding a duchess would not have been hard—all he would need to do was go to Almack’s and the ladies would vie to get him on their dance-card.

He swallowed hard. He was in London and Almack’s Assembly would be opening soon for another ball, as it did with a regular tempo during the Season. He had to go. If he did not—if he did not quickly produce an heir for Willowick—Giles would be the next to inherit the title. And love his cousin as well as he might, he could not bear to see that rakish dissolute sit in the seat his father had sat in. He had to do something. He had to do it fast. His promise to Papa made his heart twist painfully. He had to keep it—that was the least he could do.

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“I can’t! I won’t!” Lilly shouted, her feet echoing on the stone steps as she ran. Anastasia, standing on the stairs just above the entrance-way, felt a frown wrinkle her forehead.

“Lilly?” she called. She hurried down the cold stone steps, her feet feeling the hard edges through the thin indoor shoes she wore. She still felt tired and a little dazed following the ball the previous night. Lily’s shout had shaken her out of a daydream, and she ran to find her. “What grieves you?”

“Anny!” Lilly sobbed, running to her.

“Shh...what is it?” Anastasia murmured, holding her sister tight. Her shoulders were shaking with sobs, her long honey-brown hair falling loose over her shoulder from her run.

“It’s...it’s Mr. Holloway.” Lily was sobbing, now.

“What happened?” Anastasia asked, her back tensing at the name. “Whatever did he do?” Mr. Holloway was the dance instructor. Anastasia had learned mostly from Miss Prestwick, their former governess, and then a little from Mr. Holloway, after Miss Prestwick retired into the country. She had not liked him. He was cold and disinterested. His criticism had always seemed arbitrary, as though he enjoyed being critical rather than because there was truly a reason for his censure.

“He...he said I’m clumsy. That I’m not ever going to be a good dancer. He said he would give up right now if Papa wasn’t paying him as much as he is.” Lily sobbed and Anastasia held her tight, anger rushing through her like a wave of heat.

“I am going to give him a piece of my mind,” Anastasia said grimly. She stepped back from Lily, who stared up at her, hazel eyes round.

“You are?” There was a look that was part delight, part fear in her eyes, as though she wished Anastasia to do it, but was scared of what would happen were she to do so.

“I am,” she replied. “I suppose he is in the ballroom?” She walked steadily, Lily following her.

“He is. Oh, Anny...don’t do it. He’ll be so angry that I told you, and...”

“Ah. Mr. Holloway.” Anastasia’s voice was cold as the dancing instructor walked briskly out of the ballroom. His prominent blue eyes were cold. He reminded her just a little of Lord Ridley, except that he was lean where Lord Ridley was not.

“Lady Anastasia.” He sketched a slight bow. He was an expert in all matters of dance and movement, and he could have bowed as low as he liked, but the brief inclination of his torso was meant to insult; she was sure of it.

“I understand you had words with my sister?” Anastasia said, barely able to hide her rage.

“Now, my lady, do not take such matters to heart overly much. I...”

“Why not?” Anastasia countered coldly, interrupting him. “My sister informed me that you told her she was clumsy and would never be a good dancer.”

“Well, I didn’t say exactly that. I was...”

“My sister does not lie,” Anastasia said in a tight, hard voice. “I am sure that is exactly what you said. I do not take kindly to insults to my family. And how is she

meant to learn, when you have already informed her that it is impossible? That is no way to teach.” Her eyes held his. She saw rage flare in their flint-blue depths.

“Do you presume to tell me how to conduct my trade?” the man hissed.

Anastasia looked at him in disbelief. She allowed all the coldness and anger she felt to infuse her stare. She saw his eyes widen and his posture change from aggressive to fearful. She paused.

“I presume to tell you that your manner of conducting your trade is not welcome here. If your means of conducting it is to insult and belittle, then there is not much merit in it.”

“But...but...” the man stammered.

“I will see to it that other employment is found for you,” Anastasia soothed. She was stunned by his rudeness, but she could not bear the thought of throwing the man onto the street empty-handed. “But your services are not needed here.”

“But...but how is she to learn dancing?” the man demanded angrily.

Anastasia just looked at him. “I will instruct Lady Lily.”

“You?” He sounded outraged.

“I am well-versed in dancing, and also in etiquette. It seems you do not know much of that.”

“I have never been spoken to like this!” he raged.

“Nor have I.”

It seemed that he finally realized he had taken matters too far, but he shot her a hate-filled blue glance and walked to the door. Anastasia waited, watching him exit. Lily gasped.

“You threw him out!” She was ecstatic, her small, soft face transformed into a picture of relief and joy. “You really did! I really won’t have to have him insult me anymore?” Lily asked, gazing up at her sister longingly.

“You most certainly will not.”

“Thank you!” Lily clapped her hands and then ran to Anastasia. “Thank you, Anny! I’m so happy. And you will teach me! That’s grand. I can’t wait to start.”

Anastasia hugged her and smiled. “We could start now,” she suggested, looking down towards the ballroom. “I have no plans this afternoon except playing the pianoforte.” She grinned at her sister. She was tired, if she was honest—probably too tired to dance. The ball had wearied her since they had returned home just after midnight. But she could not resist Lily’s smile.

They went inside the ballroom.

“All right. Now, let us begin with a waltz,” Anastasia suggested. It was easy in terms of steps to remember, but difficult in that the beauty of the dance came from how one performed it, rather than the sequence of steps itself.

“I don’t think I can do it,” Lily stammered. Her hazel eyes were filled with doubt, and she looked almost scared as Anastasia held out her hands.

“Of course you can. If I can, you can,” Anastasia assured her. “Now, allow me to place my hand upon your shoulder, and take your other hand, in this manner. Let us merely step forward. It matters not whether it is executed perfectly; we shall simply

embrace the experience of it.”

“I can’t...” Lily said, sounding frightened. Anastasia started counting.

“One, two, three. One, two, three. One, two, three...” She sang the notes to the tune of her favorite waltz as they stepped. Lily giggled as they stepped into a turn, her fear starting to dissipate.

“Whoops!” she called out, missing a step and narrowly avoiding Anastasia’s toe. Anastasia just chuckled.

“There! You’re doing it. Now, let’s go down the length of the ballroom. One, two, three! One, two, three!”

Lily was clearly frightened, her steps stiff and uncertain. After two or three whirls, though, she was laughing, her steps wider and more relaxed.

“There! I did it!” she shouted, triumphant and amazed, as they whirled the length of the ballroom and came back again.

“See?” Anastasia said with a smile. “It’s not so bad, is it?”

“No! It was quite diverting! I like dancing.”

“As you should,” Anastasia assured her. “You’ll have a grand time with it, I am sure. You’re good at it.” She felt sure that, with support and the right sort of teaching, her sister’s natural gift would blossom.

“Oh! Anastasia! I’m so happy. I can’t wait to try it in a proper ballgown.” She looked down at the pink muslin day-dress she was wearing.

“You’ll be doing that very soon,” Anastasia said with a grin.

“I can’t wait!”

Anastasia smiled and watched as Lily ran to the door. She let her go. It had been a long afternoon for her—first she’d had the instructions from Mr. Halloway, and then after all that turmoil, more instructions. She needed to rest. She walked to the door herself and tensed as she almost bumped into Papa. Mama was behind him and her gaze was wide and seemed troubled.

“Hubert don’t...” she began.

“I need to address this!” her father said self-importantly. He lifted a newspaper in his right hand and glared at Anastasia. She had been about to ask him what the matter was, but the anger in his gaze made her fall silent. “You, daughter, must not be the subject of scandal again.” He shook the newspaper and glared at her; his chest puffed out. Anastasia felt her brow crease, a deep frown there.

“I did nothing,” she began confusedly.

“You danced with that odious, miserable creature!”

“I beg your pardon?” Anastasia said with a frown. She glanced at Mama, who shook her head as if to advise Anastasia to remain quiet.

“You did! They all saw you. Even I saw you. It’s a disgrace! It must not happen again. The Duke of Willowick might be a duke, but that is all. He is badly thought of, and his reputation will disgrace us. You must be careful,” he concluded, gazing at her as though trying to convince her with his stare alone.

“The Duke of Willowick?” Anastasia gaped at him. The man was kind and friendly.

He was not miserable, nor any of the things that her father suggested. And scandalous she could barely imagine him to be. He had scars, that was for certain, but if society was shunning people simply because of a few marks on their faces, then she was sure she would rather have no part in it. “He is...”

“I don’t wish to know!” her father interrupted. “You will not dance with him. The scandal sheets are full of it. It’s hard for our family.”

Anastasia felt her heart twist. She gazed up at him and her mother gazed back.

“You did not mean it,” she said gently. “Just be careful, dear. This man is not someone safe for us.”

“But Mama...” Anastasia began. Her mother was not like that. Her mother never judged any person by their outer features, and she cared not a jot, usually, for what she called the wanton cruelty of society’s scandal-spreaders.

“I have spoken!” her father said pompously. “And that should be sufficient. Now, you need to prepare for this afternoon,” he added, his tone softening somewhat.

“Why?” Anastasia asked.

“Why! Because the viscount, Lord Ridley, has expressed a wish to call on you. He will escort you to Hyde Park to take a stroll at four o’ clock.”

“At four?” Anastasia blinked. She was sure it must be past three already. She had likely just half an hour to prepare. And besides, at four o’ clock, the park would be full of people, those going to the tea-shops or those coming from their meetings or appointments. Everyone would see them. The whole of London would be gossiping about that.

“Yes. I am sure you wish to dress appropriately.”

Anastasia looked at her mother, who looked back at her, her expression sad. Anastasia gaped at her father. He had not mentioned a word of the invitation, which she was sure was issued the previous evening at the ball. He had kept it from her, perhaps knowing that, had she known, she would have found a way to get out of it. Lord Ridley repelled her.

“I will come with you, dear,” Mama said gently. Beside her, Papa was standing; a slight indulgent look on his wide face as though he was proud of what he had accomplished. He had clearly been involved in encouraging Lord Ridley to call and she shot him a look of pure disbelief before her mother came and led her upstairs.

“Your father has high hopes in Lord Ridley. He sees him as an asset,” Mama murmured as they reached her bedchamber. “Not only is he involved in plenty of investments with your father, but he is also very wealthy, if rumour is to be believed. Your father sees him as an advantageous match,” Mama explained.

“Him?” Anastasia said in a small, high-pitched voice. “But he’s horrid. He can’t dance and he has no manners—he either gawps at me or ignores me. And, as far as advantages go, he’s a viscount, Mama.” She gazed at her mother and wished she could somehow make her understand. The Duke of Willowick might be scarred, but Papa could not complain about his social standing—he was a duke. He was much higher in the ranks of the peerage than Lord Ridley, so why did Papa not see the advantages there?

“Lord Ridley is wealthy,” her mother explained, as though that was the most important thing about him. “And your father has invested with him in several important enterprises.”

Anastasia just looked at her mother. This was not like her at all. Her mother looked at

the floor, her own soft brown eyes sad.

“I want you to have a comfortable life, my dear,” her mother commented as Anastasia drew breath to protest. “One filled with good things.”

“But Lord Ridley...” Anastasia began. She let out a sigh. “I will accompany him to the park,” she assured her mother, who seemed instantly relieved, her chin lifting and her eyes shining. “But I cannot do more. I cannot even speak to him.”

“I know,” her mother assured her. “I do not know if I can tell your father, though. He is...much taken with him. He is a major investor in the ventures your father supports.”

Anastasia drew a breath. She knew her father well enough to know that such a recommendation was all somebody needed. Money was very important in his world.

“He may well be,” Anastasia agreed. “But he is...not pleasant.” She swallowed hard. She did not want to share her real opinion—which was that he was repellent and horrid.

Her mother nodded. “I know, my dear,” she agreed gently. “I will try, but...”

“I know, Mama,” Anastasia said gently. “And I will try to do as Papa wishes, but...”

“You shall exert your utmost, dear heart, and I shall do the same; however, I cannot pledge that success shall be our reward.”

Anastasia sighed and went to summon her maid, Rachel. She glanced over at her wardrobe before her maid arrived.

“The green dress, please.”

“As you wish, my lady,” Rachel answered.

Anastasia went behind the screen to change into the dress, standing for Rachel to fasten up the buttons behind her. The high collar of the dress reached her neck, the long skirt falling from a fashionably high waist to her ankles. The sleeves were long, despite the heat and the fabric heavy. The dress was the most formal, least revealing one she owned. It was the only thing that would let her feel comfortable in proximity with Lord Ridley in the coach.

I don’t know what is worse, she mused as she combed her long hair. His stare or his indifference.

She watched as Rachel styled her hair, and then they headed out to the coach.

“Ah! Lady Anastasia!” Lord Ridley called as he alighted from his coach with its coat of arms emblazoned on the door. His booted feet crunched the gravel.

“Lord Ridley,” she murmured, dropping him a slight curtsy.

“I will return at six o’ clock,” Lord Ridley assured her parents, who were standing on the step. Anastasia glared at him. He barely even spoke to her.

Her father waved and her mother waved too, and then Anastasia let Lord Ridley help her into the coach. His touch was warm and peremptory, and she tensed. Rachel got in next, as they decided she should chaperone instead of her mother and then Lord Ridley swung up and sat down opposite them.

“To Hyde Park,” he called out of the window, sounding pleased with himself.

Anastasia gazed out of the window, trying to ignore the fellow. She would usually try to make conversation, but he had proved himself so rude the previous evening that

she did not wish to attempt to talk. She stared at the bushes and realized that he was staring at her as she did so.

“Do you like flowers?” he asked her as the coach rattled and bumped down the street towards the park.

“I do,” Anastasia replied. It was an odd question, and she felt her frown return.

“Good,” he said, sounding pleased. The coach had stopped at Hyde Park, and he jumped down and reached to help her. “Because Ridley Hall has extensive gardens, and I believe you will like them well enough.”

“Your home has extensive gardens?” She stared at him. He was speaking as though she was going to accept his hand. He had not even exchanged ten sentences with her in her life, and yet he seemed to think it was a foregone conclusion that she would, sooner or later, reside at his house.

“Yes. Yes. Of course, some of the grounds are woodland, but that’s to be expected,” he said lightly.

“Do you have stables?” Anastasia asked as Rachel walked with them down the path. She tried not to catch Rachel’s gaze, as she was sure her maid looked as shocked as she felt. She had hardly talked to this man, and yet he was already talking as though they had permission to court from her father.

“Oh, we do. You have no need to miss your little lady’s pony, should you have one.” He smiled condescendingly at her.

Anastasia blinked in shock. Again, his tone was as though he expected them to be living there in a matter of days. She could not believe it. His patronizing manner was a stinging affront, yet she resolved to disregard it.

“Do you ride?” she asked, desperate to change the subject.

“Not often. I assure you, I am often at home,” he replied, giving her that same smile.

“I imagine you do not conduct much business when at the estate,” she murmured. She did not want him to think she imagined, as he did, that she would live there.

“Oh, now and then,” he replied lightly. “But I try to stay at home—especially if I am expected to.” He grinned.

Anastasia looked at the path and wished that her father would explain to her exactly what was going on.

When she returned home, after the walk that must have lasted barely an hour, but which had felt as though it lasted for the rest of the century, she walked briskly to her chamber.

“Sister?” Lily called. “Pray, might you assist me with a passage from my French tome? I have perused it no fewer than twenty times and find myself utterly confounded by its meaning. Would you be so kind as to lend your aid?”

Anastasia smiled. “In a moment, dear,” she managed. “I just wish to rest for a moment. It’s so hot out in the park,” she added, fanning herself and trying to make Lily smile.

Lily grinned. “I’m sure! “I shall await you in my chamber. I am most grateful for your kind offer of assistance!”

“Of course,” Anastasia said wearily. She went into her bedroom, shut the door and sat down heavily on her chair by her desk.

Her father's plans for her were frightening, and his insistence on Lord Ridley nauseated and scared her as much as his unfair judgements of the Duke of Willowick hurt her and she prayed silently for guidance, for help out of the intolerable situation in which she found herself.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am

Anastasia hurried to keep up with Camilla. They were shopping on Bond Street, with Rachel to chaperone them. The window displaying the exquisitely lovely gown that she had paused to admire quickly receded from view as Anastasia traversed the thoroughfare with all due haste.

She was trying not to draw attention to herself while at the same time hurrying to catch Camilla and Rachel, who had not even noticed that she had fallen behind.

“Anastasia! Oh!” Camilla gasped in surprise as Anastasia stepped neatly up beside her. “You scared me. You’re breathless. I’m so sorry. Did you have to hurry?”

Anastasia drew in a breath and grinned, nodding. “I did. The fault was mine...I stopped to look at that pretty dress back there. I wanted to see the fabric it was made from.”

Camilla grinned. “I should have guessed.”

They shared a smile. Anastasia’s tendency to be caught up by things that other people barely noticed—and not to notice things that were obvious—was a constant source of delight and teasing.

“There is the mercer’s shop. We must make haste.”

Anastasia nodded. “It’s almost three o’ clock,” she agreed. They had arranged with Camilla’s mother that the coach would return for them at five o’ clock, and that gave them two hours to choose and purchase fabric for Camilla’s new gown, to find a pair of gloves and a bonnet for both of them, and then, perhaps, to stop for tea. They

would have to be quick.

They walked briskly down the pavement. The draper's shop that Camilla liked best was just fifty yards or so away from where they were, and they strode hurriedly down towards it.

"Oh! Observe, a shoemaker's establishment," Camilla remarked as they hastened by a window. "Was that in existence previously?"

"I don't recall," Anastasia said, feeling a little out-of-breath.

She tensed, thinking that Camilla might stop to look through the window, even though they had no intention of buying shoes.

"Let's hurry!" Camilla exclaimed. "That's the bell."

The church bells rang, revealing the time. It was exactly three o' clock.

Anastasia let out a louder laugh than she would usually give as they strode down the pavement, trying to be as quick as possible without actually running. Running would be unseemly for young ladies, but the peculiar stride they had adopted to move fast was probably even funnier and more ungainly than running would have been. The thought amused her as she raced ahead.

"We must seem remarkably foolish!" she exclaimed, striding along as fast as she could beside Camilla, who was stepping briskly forward, both of them doing the closest they could safely do to a run.

"Yes! I suppose so!" Camilla agreed, panting with exertion. They were getting closer to the shop and as they walked briskly, a gentleman stepped into the street from an office. Anastasia shrieked and Camilla did likewise.

“Oh!”

Anastasia gaped up at the gentleman, and then her eyes widened in astonishment.

It was the Duke of Willowick.

“Your Grace,” she murmured, swiftly dropping into a curtsy. Beside her, Camilla did likewise. Camilla stared up at the duke, her eyes wide, clearly frightened by his many scars.

“Ladies.” The duke bowed low. He was wearing a black tailcoat, a high-collared white shirt and a simple cravat. His black trousers were spotless, and he wore black riding boots with them, and a black top-hat. He lifted his hat, his expression reserved.

“We were hurrying to the shop. I apologise,” Anastasia said swiftly. He looked upset and she wished that she had avoided almost walking into him.

“We only have two hours,” Camilla agreed. “And we need to buy fabric and hats and gloves. We’re on our way to the draper’s.”

Anastasia glanced at Camilla, surprised by how flustered she was.

“We didn’t see you,” Anastasia added.

To her surprise, his lips lifted in a smile.

“That was fairly self-evident,” he replied, but his grin took the sarcasm from his words.

Anastasia chuckled. “I suppose so. Unless you assume that we go around running full tilt into fellow shoppers for the fun of it, that is.”

His grin broadened. “Or that. Yes.” He chuckled.

Anastasia glanced sideways at Camilla, who was staring first at her and then at the duke as though they had begun to speak a foreign language.

“May I introduce my friend, Lady Camilla?” Anastasia asked politely. “She is the daughter of Viscount Bramley.”

“Charmed,” the duke said, surprisingly politely. He bowed low.

“Camilla, may I introduce the Duke of Willowick?” Anastasia asked. Camilla dropped a low curtsy.

“Good afternoon, Your Grace,” she murmured.

Anastasia smiled at Camilla, seeing that she was decidedly awkward, her glance moving to the door of the shop and back again as though she wanted to run inside.

“Can you see aught you like?” she asked Camilla, gesturing to the window. She wanted to put her friend at ease, and yet she could not—quite—bring herself to suggest that they go into the shop. The duke’s smile lit her mood, his green eyes sending a spark down her spine in a way that she did not understand. She felt happy having seen him.

“Um...that one,” Camilla replied. She was gesturing towards a roll at the back. “I think I will go inside and ask the draper about it.” She was practically begging to go inside.

Anastasia cleared her throat. “I..”

“Shall we all go in?” the duke asked.

Anastasia gaped at him in amazement. He was smiling at her, a little shyly, but in all other respects he was acting as though it was perfectly ordinary to visit the draper's shop with people with whom one was barely acquainted.

"I need to purchase some fabric for the tailor," he said a little awkwardly. "I need some new clothes that are not...well, that are not black." He gestured to his outfit. Anastasia inclined her head.

"Of course," she replied at once. "Then, do join us, I implore you."

He was changing out of his mourning clothes. That could only be good, she thought happily—perhaps he had recovered a little from his grief.

He grinned, his posture shifting as if he was relieved. "Thank you."

Her heart thudded as he stood back for Camilla and herself to enter the shop. Camilla went first, hurrying into the shop. Anastasia went next. Her heart thudded as she walked past the duke. He was just an inch away from the door frame and her skirt rustled against him as she went in. Her cheeks reddened, though she could not say why.

The duke followed them in, and then Rachel came in immediately after him. They all stood together in the center of the room. Anastasia tried to focus on the rolls of fabric, ignoring the man who stood beside her, not six inches away, but it was hard. She was aware of his presence as though he was a beacon of warmth and light, each part of her skin sensing he was there without her looking.

"Good afternoon, Your Grace. My ladies." The proprietor, a woman at least ten years Anastasia's senior, greeted them as she emerged from a workroom. "What may I do for you?"

Anastasia glanced up at the duke, but he was silent, waiting for Camilla and herself.

“I need fabric for an evening gown,” Camilla said after glancing awkwardly at Anastasia and the duke.

“Of course, my lady. Anything in particular?” The proprietor asked, smiling warmly at Camilla. Camilla was a regular customer, and Anastasia often came with her. “Silk, or velvet? Something light for summer?”

Camilla nodded. “I would like a thin silk. Have you any brocaded silks?”

“I have! I happen to have some new stock. A beautiful white brocade, just arrived this morning.”

Anastasia followed Camilla as she and the proprietor walked across the shop. Rachel went with them. She glanced sideways over her shoulder at the duke, who was standing in the center of the shop, looking around awkwardly.

“And here are some patterned muslins...so modish,” the proprietor was saying as she led them past the rolls upon rolls of fabric that lined the shop. Camilla stopped briefly to look at a muslin patterned with leaves, and then they went on to where the silks were. Anastasia glanced around, her eyes widening at the beautiful fabrics she saw there. Rolls of silk of all sorts of shades stood around—pale ones, bright ones and dark ones. The proprietor was looking at a roll of white silk with a pattern of white roses. Camilla lifted a piece of it admiringly.

“...and I would need enough for a dress with a fuller skirt,” Camilla was saying. Anastasia allowed her glance to move from her friend to the man who was standing in the center of the shop. He was gazing across at the rolls of fabric with a faraway stare. As she glanced over, his gaze moved to her. His green eyes held hers.

Anastasia felt her heart thudding. His stare was so striking. She barely noticed the scars when his eyes locked with hers. They were there, undoubtedly, thick lines across his face that made her long to know their origin. But when she stared into that green gaze, all she thought of was how handsome he was.

Her cheeks reddened.

“Perhaps you can assist me?” the duke asked, making Anastasia stiffen in surprise. She had not expected him to speak. He looked so awkward in the shop that she had expected he would ignore them all, but his voice was level and confident, a small smile lifting the corner of his lips.

“Of course. If it is possible for me to do so,” Anastasia added. He grinned.

“I think it is possible. You certainly are more well-schooled in the matters of fabric than me.” His brow lifted. “I require some advice. Should I need to purchase fabrics for an evening coat, what fabric would I require?”

Anastasia blinked in surprise. “Well...” she paused, thinking. “Velvet is always a fine choice. And brocade, too, perhaps, for a less restrained look? Mayhap a fine wool blend, though that would be better for the daytime...” she paused. His eyes widened.

“Velvet,” he said decidedly. He raised a brow. “That was quite comprehensive.”

She giggled. “Thank you. Growing up mostly in London, I suppose one learns a lot.” The family had spent almost as much time in London as out of it for as long as she could recall. Papa did not just go to Town for the parliamentary season, but also for business ventures.

“You must have paid a great deal of attention,” the duke said, his eyes holding her own.

“Not really.” She giggled. “In truth, I am often the subject of jest for my lack of attentiveness. I find myself continually diverted by one thing or another.” She looked down, a little self-consciously.

“That is the opposite of not paying attention.” His voice was firm, surprising her. “Noticing small details shows a keen eye. It is a trait of great value. Especially in artists.”

Anastasia swallowed hard. His words were not flippant, but deadly serious. He sounded far more sincere than he had throughout their lighthearted talk.

“Thank you,” she murmured. Camilla and her other friends teased her often about her tendency to get distracted. The duke was the first person she had met who thought it was more than just amusing.

“It is no less than the truth,” he said softly.

Anastasia gazed up at him. His voice was gentle and the sound of it stroked across her skin. She stared into his eyes, and he stared back. His gaze held hers. Anastasia’s heart thumped rapidly in her chest.

“Anastasia?” Camilla’s voice called. “Would you be so kind as to assist me in making a choice?”

Anastasia blinked and turned around slowly. She felt dazed. The look that the duke leveled at her was compelling and it drew her in, making it impossible to look away or to think of anything else. Her cheeks blushing furiously, she looked away.

“Yes, Camilla?” She called. “What are you deciding about?”

“These two.” Camilla strode around the side of the shelf. She barely glanced at the duke, who was five or six yards behind Anastasia. Anastasia did not turn around to see if he looked at them or not. “The brocaded silk, or the pink one?” She held up two pieces of fabric, which were attached to rolls that the proprietor had moved to lean against the nearby worktable.

“Um...” Anastasia tilted her head, considering. Her heart was thudding and all she could think about was the duke, who was still there in the shop behind her. “Um...mayhap the brocade? You don’t have any in brocaded silk, as I seem to remember?” It was hard to concentrate. Every part of her was aware of the duke, her skin seeming to sense his gaze on her from across the room.

“Grand!” Camilla grinned, seeming pleased. “I thought the same. Well, then. I will take the brocaded silk. If you could measure the correct amount for an evening dress?” Camilla asked, turning to the proprietor.

“Of course, my lady. If you should require gauze or ribbon, we have a counter of ribbon over there...” she gestured.

Camilla wandered over and Anastasia followed her slowly. As she did, she was aware of the duke moving over to speak to the proprietor. He was speaking too softly for her to hear, and she tried to focus on Camilla and the ribbons she was looking at. Her mind kept on wandering to the duke, trying to listen.

“I think this might do for the waistband and for the sleeves, to edge them?” Camilla was asking, lifting up a thin satin ribbon in white.

“I think so,” Anastasia replied, touching the soft, silky fabric that Camilla indicated.

Camilla carried the ribbon over to the proprietor so that she could measure out and cut a piece of it for her. Anastasia stood where she was, gazing at the ribbon. She was

aware of the duke coming over to join her.

“Thank you,” he said softly. “Your advice was helpful.”

“Thank you,” Anastasia murmured. “I am pleased that I could help.” She felt a flush move into her cheeks, which were already hot with blushing. She looked down at her feet, a lump in her throat from the strange, shy tension she felt whenever he stood nearby.

“I was pleased to discover you here.” He bowed low.

Anastasia swallowed hard. The words were not particularly romantic or unusual, and yet they sent tingles down her spine—sweet, pleasurable tingles.

“It was pleasant,” she managed. Her throat felt impossibly tight, as though it was suddenly too narrow for speaking and breathing at once.

“Good day,” he murmured. He lifted his hat. Anastasia noticed that Camilla was walking briskly over, a bundle of fabric in her arms. Rachel was walking with her, holding another bundle.

“Do you need to purchase something?” Camilla asked Anastasia, her gaze a little confused as it wandered to the duke.

“No,” Anastasia said softly. She had not planned to purchase anything. Part of her wanted to stay, just so that she could stay with the duke, while the rest of her felt too confused to wish to be longer in his presence, since it caused her such floods of feelings that she felt quite baffled.

“Well, then!” Camilla smiled. “We shall go. We bid you a pleasant day shopping.” She added to the duke. He bowed low.

“Thank you, Lady Camilla. Thank you, Lady Anastasia,” he added. Anastasia felt her cheeks flood with heat when he said her name, though, again, she could not imagine why it should have such a strange effect. His voice was low and resonant, certainly pleasant to listen to, but that did not account for why it seemed to resonate in every part of her, nor why her heart thudded wildly in her chest.

“I say!” Camilla exclaimed when they were perhaps fifty yards from the shop. “He was...quite taken with you.”

“Camilla!” Anastasia flapped a hand at her, grinning widely. “No, he wasn’t. He just wanted some advice about fabric for a jacket.”

“Yes. Yes, certainly.” Camilla beamed. “And it couldn’t just be an excuse to talk.”

“No!” Anastasia laughed, but her heart soared with delight at the thought. “No. He really wanted to buy some fabric.”

“Yes. I believe you.” Camilla grinned.

Anastasia flushed and looked away.

They went to the milliners for bonnets and stopped to look at a shop that sold gloves. By the time they had completed their purchases, they had to hurry to the park, where the coach was waiting to collect them.

As the coach rattled down the street, taking Rachel and herself back to her family’s townhouse, Anastasia found her thoughts wandering to the duke. Camilla could not be right—he was a quiet, respectable man and there was no reason for her to think he was taken with her, as Camilla had said.

But then, she thought, wonderingly, he had sought her out to speak to and come into

the shop with them when he could easily have waited.

Her lips lifted in a grin at the thought. Perhaps he really had enjoyed talking as much as she had.

Nonsense, she told herself silently. He just wants to buy new clothes now that he is out of mourning again.

She frowned, wondering how long he had been in mourning. There was so much she did not know. And, oddly, she longed to know, to ask him the answers.

You're being silly, she told herself crossly. You have no reason for any interest besides a polite, friendly sort of curiosity.

She tried to put the conversation out of her mind and focus on the time with Camilla, but the chat with the duke circled around her mind again and again and she could not stop herself from smiling to herself all the way back to the house.

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Sidney stared at the canvas in front of him, feeling a mixture of annoyance and sorrow. He gazed at the face that was emerging under his brush and oil paint. Blue eyes looked back at him, the exact shade of summer morning sky. Hair fell across a pale forehead in soft waves of pure pale blond.

“But the nose is horridly wrong,” Sidney said angrily.

He had been trying for at least twenty minutes to recall, and then to depict, the shape of Lady Anastasia’s face and nose. Her eyes he had set down immediately—nothing about them eluded his memory. They gazed at him now, twin pools of mysterious, shimmering blue and he felt his heart leap. He had managed to render them so that, at least in part, that part of the painting resembled her beauty.

“But this chin! And this nose, too.”

He sighed and stood back. He was getting tired, and the longer he stared at the canvas, the less sense it would make to him. He knew that from experience. He put his brush into the turpentine and turned away. He needed a few minutes to regain perspective.

“Sidney? Sidney!”

He shut his eyes. It was his mother at the door. He did not like being interrupted, but this time he had an additional fear. He did not want anyone to see what he painted. He never painted portraits, though he had some talent. He did not want her to ask him who the person was and why he was painting her. He turned the easel swiftly to face the window.

“Coming, Mama. Just a moment.”

He pushed the easel back so that it almost touched the windowsill. That way, nobody could walk around to the front and see what he painted. His mother was curious, on the rare occasions that he hid a painting, but she never pushed.

He opened the door. His mother looked up at him, a slight surprised smile lighting her face when she saw him, though he could see lines etched on her brow.

“Son! There you are.”

“Mama, come in,” he said at once, standing back so that his mother could enter. She wore black, though her shawl was white, and she had not worn the usual jet beads. She was in half-mourning now, as was he. His heart lifted to see it. “May I send the butler to fetch some tea for you?” he asked. He felt genuinely pleased to see her despite her having interrupted. He had been working all morning and part of the afternoon uninterrupted while she went into town to call on a friend. He was glad to have some company, especially that of his mother, who was as close to him as Amy, if in a motherly way.

“Thank you, son, but no,” his mother murmured. “I had something to mention to you. If I may?” She frowned.

“Of course,” Sidney said awkwardly. His mother never looked so tense, and he wondered what on Earth might be bothering her. “I would be glad to hear of it, whatever it is.”

“I was in Grantley’s Tea Shop,” his mother said awkwardly. “When I happened to see these. I never normally look, but I was with Lady Renning and Lady Aldersley, and they always look.” She blushed, as though she felt uncomfortable. “I happened to see your name in it. I’m sorry, son,” she said carefully. “But I had to read further. I hope

you can forgive me.”

Sidney took a breath. He could see what she was holding. It was the scandal sheets—one of the least appealing parts of London high society. Scandalous news was printed there, and he took a breath, knowing it had to be about him or Mama would never have deigned to read anything. He took it from her, eyes widening as he read.

“...that this scarred oddity dares to show his face at public balls is a disgrace by itself,” he read aloud. He blinked, his eyes filling with hot, angry tears. He bit his lip and turned away so that his mother could not see them. Being called unattractive was bad enough, especially given that he was handsome—or he had been, before the riding accident. Being spoken of like a creature, a beast not even granted human dignity—it was painful.

“Oh, son,” his mother whispered. She was crying, tears running freely from her pale green eyes. He reached for her, resting a hand on her shoulder. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“It’s not your fault,” he said stiffly. “You didn’t write the article.” He tried to laugh. Even he could hear the tightness in his voice.

His mother looked down. “I know. I should never have shown you, son. I just had to understand what it meant,” she added softly.

Sidney frowned. What it meant was evident, unless there was more. He read on. His eyes skimmed over the raw insults. He knew they would be there, and he did not want to know the details. He read on.

“...but that he chose to dance with Lady Anastasia, a young lady who made her debut in society just last year, is surprising. That a young lady so new among the ton should

risk the dent to her reputation of taking the hand of this creature is surprising. Perhaps she likewise has a scandal up concealed.”

Sidney felt his hand close so forcefully that the paper tore.

“Sidney?” his mother asked, frowning. She looked worried. He took a breath.

“Sorry, Mama. I just...I suppose the tension of it all is too much.” He tried to hide his rage. Somehow, he did not want his mother to know of Lady Anastasia. She was beautiful, she was fresh in society. He knew his hopes were foolish. Mama would try to spare him, but she would try and dissuade him from pursuing her and push him towards someone he could reasonably aspire to wedding as they needed an heir.

“What happened?” his mother asked. “Who is this young woman? Have I at any time met her?” She sounded interested, not angry.

He took a breath. “I am sure neither of us have met her before,” he began. “Mama...please, do not worry. I assure you I will do my best. I know I must wed. Somehow, even if it means braving Almack’s again, I will achieve our objective.”

His mother frowned. “Son. I just wondered,” she said gently.

“I...” Sidney began, trying to assure her that he knew she was worried, and he would try to take the matter in hand, but then the door burst open.

“Your Grace!” The butler exclaimed, but before he could get a word out, a voice boomed.

“Where’s my cousin? You wretch! Show him to me.”

Sidney took a breath. “Giles!” he called out. He glanced at Mama, who was pale. He

went swiftly to the door and found Giles there. The mix of unwashed clothes and brandy suggested to Sidney that Giles had likely not gone home, or that, if he had, he had slept in his clothes. He tried to smile and was enveloped in a hug.

“Cousin! There you are. I thought...I thought you were at the Grantham...” he swayed on his feet. His expression showed that he was in pain and Sidney felt a twist of compassion. The poor man had spent the night, and probably the day, drinking and not eating and there was a fair chance he had done himself some damage with that.

“Mr. Moreton?” he addressed the butler. “Please, send for Dr. Benfield.”

“At once, Your Grace.” The butler bowed.

Sidney turned back to Giles as his cousin let out a guffaw. “You sly thing! Sneaking off home. I thought you were at the Grantham...”

He turned around and Sidney winced, knowing the poor fellow was going to be ill. He quickly gestured to a passing footman.

“Please, Mr. Hensley—take my cousin to the guest suite. Make sure he goes to bed at once.”

The footman gave Giles a compassionate glance and inclined his head.

“At once, Your Grace.”

Sidney watched as Giles followed the footman down the hallway. He let out a sigh.

“Poor man.”

Sidney nodded. His mother was watching with a compassionate stare.

“Harriet is so worried. It’s on account of Lady Amery’s daughter.”

“I know,” Sidney replied sadly. Giles had been wildly enamored of the girl, but she had eloped with a sea-captain and gone to France with him on his ship. He felt his heart twist painfully. Giles had lost interest in everything after that, and that was why he drank.

“Poor fellow. He needs someone to help him.”

“I am sure,” Sidney said sadly. He did not know what to do. He could not restore Giles’ faith in the world or his trust in his own heart. He knew that those things had been taken from Giles and he would have given them back, if he could, but Giles was interested in only one thing. All he wanted was to forget, and if that took a bottle of brandy a day, he was apparently unconcerned by the unpleasant results.

Or Sidney thought sadly, forgetting was more important.

“Poor man,” his mother repeated. “But, if this continues, he cannot be the heir.” She gazed up at Sidney worriedly.

“I am aware of that,” he said carefully. “Mama, I will do my best. I promise.”

“I am sure of that,” his mother said and smiled up at him. “You are the best son, Sidney. Truly, you are.”

Sidney kissed his mother on the brow, hugging her close. She had never even noticed his scars, or so it seemed. She loved him and he loved her. He wanted to do what made her happy.

“But it’s impossible,” he told himself sadly as he entered his chamber.

“Your Grace? What is impossible?” His manservant, Mr. Richford, demanded. He was tidying the room and Sidney let out a sigh.

“Nothing, Richford,” he said gently. “If I might have a moment?”

“At once, Your Grace,” Mr. Richford agreed, and hurried to the door.

Sidney sat down on the bed heavily. He stretched out his long legs and leaned back, one hand going to his cravat and tugging at the knot to loosen its itchy, hot band.

It was impossible—the entire situation was impossible. He could not fail to do his best for his mother. Yet, how was he supposed to find someone? He was hideous, and the scandal sheets delighted in ridiculing that. He blinked, the tears returning. He took a deep breath, trying not to cry. If he let himself feel sorrow, he would not be able to move forward.

He blinked again, trying to think about the promise he’d made. Miss Highbury, as much as she hated him, was at least being practically forced on him. He had to consider it. His mother would be delighted. It was wrong, though—she would be miserable. So would he. He could not do it.

He shut his eyes. Papa was not there to guide him, and he wished beyond all things that he was.

“I don’t know what to do,” he said to the empty room. “Papa? Help me.”

He leaned back on the bed, his eyes open, wishing that his father was still there, ready with an explanation to clear up the mystery of everything from the gyroscope to some complicated question about navigating the globe. He longed for that reassuring voice, those gentle hazel eyes as he gazed at Sidney with understanding.

As he shifted on the bed, he was surprised that, instead of an answer coming to him, Lady Anastasia's face was suddenly clear in his mind. He could see all her features clearly, even the ones he had struggled to draw. He focused on the image in his mind, recalling the way they had talked. He smiled, recalling her witty banter.

At least you have reminded me of how her nose looks, he thought silently to his father, with some amusement. It wasn't possible that Anastasia was the answer to his questions.

He could not allow himself to hope that. Hope would be too painful.

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“And I thought perhaps a plume or two for my hair. I...Anastasia? Can you hear me?”

Anastasia blinked. She was in the drawing room, she realized suddenly, sitting and taking tea with Camilla. Her mind had been with the Duke of Willowick. Ever since she last saw him in the street when she and Camilla had been shopping, just two days ago, she had been daydreaming about him.

“Sorry, Camilla,” she murmured. “My mind was elsewhere.”

“Oh?” Camilla’s red lips moved into a grin. “With a gentleman, were they?”

“Camilla...” Anastasia made a shooping gesture with her hand, but a grin stretched across her face.

“You see! I’m right!” Camilla said delightedly. “Who was it? It wasn’t Willowick, was it?”

Anastasia blushed. “And if it was?” she asked defensively.

“Anastasia!” Camilla shrieked. She was smiling, but her eyes looked worried. “He’s...he’s odd. That’s what all of society says. And usually I wouldn’t believe them, but...”

“He has a scar, Camilla,” Anastasia interrupted gently when her friend paused. “He’s not evil or anything. He’s actually very pleasant,” she added defensively.

“He is very odd to look at,” Camilla countered.

“He isn’t,” Anastasia said a little crossly. “He bears scars, as I have mentioned. Yet, he is not unpleasing to the eye. His countenance is...rather captivating. Moreover, he is engaging, amusing, and possesses a delightful conversation.”

“Oh?” Camilla blinked at her.

“He is. He can talk about all sorts of things. Music, art, plants and gardens...” she trailed off, thinking of all the topics they had discussed in what must have been a fairly brief conversation. Talking to him was like opening a box of assorted chocolates—there were so many delights that one did not know where to start.

“Oh, Anastasia!” Camilla exclaimed with a radiant smile. “You are such a fanciful creature. If only we all indulged in our reveries as much as you do.”

Anastasia smiled. “I’m not sure that would be helpful.”

Camilla chuckled.

“Had you described your outfit for the ball?” Anastasia asked, returning to their previous conversation. Before she became distracted, Camilla had been doing so.

“I did!” Camilla laughed. “I described the whole thing. But I would be happy to do so again, should you wish to hear of it?” her gaze sparkled with the teasing note in her tone.

“I do,” Anastasia replied. Her cheeks felt warm. She had not meant to defend the Duke of Willowick so hotly—anyone listening would think she was falling for him. She frowned.

Am I?

The thought cannoned into her, distracting her from Camilla. She had to focus hard to bring her attention back to the description of the ball-gown so that she would not miss it a second time.

As she focused on Camilla's description of a gauze overskirt and white silk, she heard a commotion in the hallway and her gaze moved instantly to the door.

"My lord! I..." The butler, Mr. Shipley, was shouting.

"I will go where I please!" a pompous voice interrupted him. Anastasia stiffened.

She recognized the voice seconds before the man who owned it appeared, so she had a moment to tense nervously before Lord Ridley strode into the room. His pale blue gaze moved across the furnishings and focused on her.

"Lady Anastasia," he said formally. He inclined the merest bow. He did not look at Camilla, nor greet her, and Anastasia bristled at the rudeness. "I came to invite you to Gunter's Tea Shop with me."

"You did?" Anastasia stammered. She had danced with him once and endured his presence in Hyde Park. And now he felt he could walk unannounced into the drawing room and demand that she went to tea?

"When?" she asked.

"Now, if you please," Lord Ridley said tightly. He sounded as though she should have known that.

"Now!" Anastasia blinked at him. "But my lord! I have a guest. I cannot simply stride off."

“Yes, you can,” he said lightly. “I have your father’s permission to ask you,” he added, sounding self-important. “And you must remember that he and I have conversed privately about this matter.”

“This matter?” Anastasia gaped at him. She assumed he meant the matter of her attending tea at Gunter’s, but were that the case, he could have said it directly.

“The matter I discussed with him,” the viscount replied.

Anastasia gripped Camilla’s hand where she sat across the low table. Camilla gazed at her.

“You do not have to...” Camilla began, but before she could speak, Anastasia’s father appeared in the doorway.

“Daughter!” He beamed at her. “If you wish to change your clothing before attending tea, I will entertain the viscount while he waits.”

“Papa?” Anastasia stared at him. He knew perfectly well that Camilla was there—he had spoken to her not half an hour ago, when she had arrived. And yet he expected her to depart posthaste, without so much as a word of farewell.

“If you wish to change into a different gown,” her father said patiently. “I will wait here with the viscount.”

“I know,” Anastasia replied. “But Papa! I cannot just hurry off. What of my friend?”

“Lady Camilla will not mind. Not so, Lady Camilla?” Papa’s gaze on Camilla’s seemed to warn her to agree.

“I...” Camilla began. Her voice was wobbling but Anastasia knew her well enough to

know she was about to argue with Papa. She stood up quickly, not wishing Camilla to have to face her father, who had a cruel temper.

“I shall attend,” she reassured Camilla swiftly. “Pray grant me ten minutes to change my gown, Papa.”

“Of course, daughter,” her father replied, sounding friendly again.

Anastasia felt her stomach knot up. There was something very peculiar going on. She did not understand it, but it seemed that her father and the viscount were on the same side. She could not imagine what Lord Ridley had discussed with her father, but she likewise did not wish to think about it.

“If you could fetch my green dress,” she asked Rachel as her maid appeared in answer to the bell, “and tuck these stray curls back into the chignon?” She gestured to her hair, which had come slightly loose during the afternoon. She had been dressed informally for tea with Camilla; wearing a pretty but worn blue muslin gown. The green dress was the only dress she felt comfortable in when Lord Ridley was there. His gaze on her was uncomfortable enough as it was without there actually being any visible skin for him to stare at.

“You might have hurried,” Lord Ridley complained as she clambered into the coach. Rachel followed her, and then Lord Ridley swung up behind her and sat down. Anastasia stared out of the window.

“I hurried as much as I could,” she said, not quite looking at him. “I also needed to be polite to my earlier guest.”

“I was waiting,” Lord Ridley said angrily. His blue eyes flashed as though nobody should dare to inconvenience him.

Anastasia inclined her head in agreement but said nothing. She did not wish to argue but she also did not wish to agree.

Rachel, beside her, looked concerned.

Anastasia looked at her with what she hoped was a reassuring look. She herself was sweating, her palms damp with perspiration that had little to do with the fact that she wore long sleeves. It was not cold, but nor was it particularly hot.

She gazed out of the window and watched the streets roll past. Soon, before she had expected it, the tall, gabled building with its stone facing appeared on the left of the coach. She felt her stomach knot with discomfort as they rolled up outside the tea shop.

“We would have been earlier,” Lord Ridley complained as he helped her down. “Then we might have had a better seat.”

Anastasia said nothing, just bit her lip and followed him up the stairs. There was no use arguing with the fellow—she understood that already. His pomposity required him always to be right and he would achieve that by bending the truth or accusing everyone around him.

“Now,” Lord Ridley declared as they made their way to a table that was in full sun by the window. “I suppose you will take cake with the tea?” His expression was expectant.

Anastasia tilted her head. She had not wanted to eat anything—she had no appetite in his company. “I would prefer just tea,” she began.

“Oh! Do you have to be so difficult?” Lord Ridley pouted. “I had planned to try the new gâteau, and since you won’t have any, then nor shall I.”

Anastasia drew a breath. She felt a twist of guilt, and then she frowned. She had not told him not to eat cake—that was his own choice. Everything sane and safe seemed to slip away when she was in the company of Lord Ridley, who seemed to bend the truth to suit himself.

She sat down and Rachel sat wordlessly beside her at the round table. Lord Ridley sat opposite, and the proprietor came over.

“A pot of tea,” Lord Ridley demanded, shooting Anastasia a sour glance as though she had spoiled everything.

Anastasia glanced at the tablecloth, which was fine linen. She tried to recall how it had felt to dance with the duke. It had been beautiful, a moment of pure bliss. Her cheeks flushed at the thought.

“Lady Anastasia?” Lord Ridley interrupted her thoughts. “What is your opinion on attending Almack’s tomorrow...?”

“Almack’s?” Anastasia blinked. He must have mentioned it earlier, but she had hardly heard him. She frowned. She had an invitation to a private ball at the Earl of Barrydale’s home the following evening. At that moment, the proprietor appeared, bringing their tea. A tall man in a white apron who poured them each a cup and then walked across the room to address another table of guests.

“It’s hot in here,” Lord Ridley complained, forgetting his earlier statement.

“We could move to another table?”

“There you are again! Being difficult!” Lord Ridley said in an accusatory tone. “Can you not be content for two minutes? We are sitting here now.”

Anastasia gaped at him. She was wearing long sleeves, the collar of her dress reaching to her neck. She was sweating and she was seated even closer to the window than he was. Besides, she was not the one who had complained. He had.

“Could you please pass me the sugar?” she asked.

He shot her a resentful look as though she had interrupted some deep musing. He lifted the sugar bowl and set it down in front of her.

They sat silently as she stirred her tea.

“At my estate we take tea at half an hour past ten, and then at half-past three,” he told her pompously. “Exactly on time.” His gaze moved to her as though it was her fault that it was later than usual.

“I see,” Anastasia murmured. He acted as though she was a terrible burden, so why was he speaking again of the estate as though she might one day live there? It made no sense at all.

She sipped her tea while he talked about Ridley Hall and how pleasant it was in the summer. Anastasia tried hard to focus, lest he spring a question on her, but she could not keep her attention on him. She glanced at the clock, wishing she could run.

The peal of church bells made Lord Ridley look up. They were chiming the hour.

“Is that the time?” he asked, interrupting his own long one-sided conversation. “I must make haste. I have an engagement at the bank.”

“Of course,” Anastasia murmured, her heart thudding with relief. She pushed back her chair and, beside her, Rachel stood up in a hurry as if she, too, was desperate to escape.

They went down the front steps and out to the coach.

Lord Ridley was silent on the way through town. Anastasia sighed with relief as the coach drew up outside the townhouse.

“Good day,” she murmured in a small, polite voice as Lord Ridley helped her down from the coach.

“I will call on you again soon,” Lord Ridley said as though he was genuinely sure she wanted to see him. He smiled at her. “Until we talk again.” He lifted his top hat.

“Until then,” Anastasia agreed coolly.

She hurried up the stairs with Rachel following her and she felt relief flood her as the butler opened the door.

“Daughter! I trust you had a pleasant afternoon?” her father greeted her on her way past the drawing room. Her eyes widened and her heart fluttered, feeling nervous. He looked pleased, as though he approved heartily of Lord Ridley.

“I had a...strange afternoon,” Anastasia began. She was not particularly close to her father, and she was unsure of how to confide in him about how unsettling the afternoon had been.

“Of course.” Her father beamed. “Courting is always strange at first, Daughter. I trust you will become accustomed to it.”

“Courting? Father? What?” Anastasia gaped at him.

“I must hurry,” he said, walking past to the stairs. “I am late for a meeting at the club with investors.”

Anastasia stared after him, horrified. Mama and Lily had gone to tea, so there was nobody to talk to. She stood where she was, rooted to the spot.

Her father had given Lord Ridley permission to court her.

Her heart sank. He was pompous, rude, and confusing as well as unpleasant. She could not court him. She could not!

She ran to her chamber, desperate to think of a plan. Nothing sprang to mind—her father was not one who would listen to her opinion, no matter how firmly she tried to deliver it. Nor would he listen to Mama—if Mama was not already half-convinced that Lord Ridley was good for her.

Anastasia ran a hand distractedly through her hair, heart pounding. She had no idea what to do. But she had to do something, and hopefully before the ball where she would doubtless see Lord Ridley. And where her papa would doubtless do anything that he could to stop her from seeing the duke himself, were he to be there.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am

“Ah! Your Grace. A delight to see you again,” Lady Kepford gushed. “My dear Priscilla was quite hopeful that you might be here.”

Sidney stood in the corner of his sister’s ballroom at Barrydale House. The chandeliers poured bright golden light down on the polished marble floor of the ballroom. The sound of delicate conversation filled his ears, and a soft breeze wafted through the door that led to the terrace. He gazed across at her daughter, Priscilla, who was known—as she was the daughter of a baron—as The Honorable Miss Highbury.

Her lovely dark-colored hair was arranged in a mass of curls decorated with small, white flowers. She wore a white gown with a low square neckline showing pale skin. The overskirt was lace and she would have looked beautiful, except that her mouth was set in a curl of distaste, her hazel eyes flint-hard and aloof.

“I expect that Priscilla’s card will fill up fast,” Lady Kepford continued, her own hazel eyes piercing and expectant.

Sidney drew a breath. He did not wish to dance with Miss Highbury, but her mother was clearly, and not indirectly, trying to make him ask her. He cleared his throat.

“May I dance the quadrille with you, Miss Highbury?” He managed to ask. His throat was tight and he cleared it. He did not wish to dance with her, but when he thought to refuse, he imagined Willowick in ruins, his father’s legacy a barren wasteland and their tenants evicted because the cottages were falling down.

Miss Highbury shot her mother a hard look, then inclined her head to him in a gesture

that was the limit of politeness. "I will reserve you the quadrille," she said, her tone so frosty that Sidney was amazed he had not caught a chill from it.

"There! You may rest assured," Lady Kepford said with a delight that sounded feigned even to his ears. "My daughter will save you the quadrille."

Sidney looked away. The mix of desperation and distaste in Lady Kepford's tone hurt him. She was clearly desperate to find a duke for her daughter, or she would not have cast an eye on him. She found him repellent, he could tell, and he felt a sting of pain and anger.

If you think I am so unbearably ugly, then let me have my peace, he wanted to shout.

He gazed out across the ballroom.

Guests stood about, drinking from delicate wineglasses. Across the room, Amy was talking to Henry and some of her guests, her lovely dark hair arranged in an elaborate bun. She caught his eye and beamed. She had not discussed the guest-list with him despite his protestation that she did so. His stomach clenched with excitement at the thought that, just perhaps, Lady Anastasia might be included.

He heard the quartet begin to tune up and he tensed. He had no idea when the quadrille would be on the list, but he suspected it would be soon. His stomach twisted nervously and when the introduction played, he groaned. It was a quadrille.

He went to find Miss Highbury.

She was standing with another lady and a gentleman he did not know. He guessed they would partner them for the quadrille, and he bowed low. The gentleman looked

frostily at him, and Sidney bridled at the judgmental stare. He was spared having to say anything, as the dance was beginning, and he took Miss Highbury's hand and stepped onto the dance floor.

"Ouch," he murmured as, after two or three steps, she stood on his toe. She had seemed a graceful dancer before, if a little stilted, so he raised his brow in surprise at the unexpected misstep.

When it happened again, and then a third time, and she seemed reluctant to apologize, his back stiffened and he knew she was doing it on purpose. She clearly disliked him immensely, her gloved hand stiff in his. He would almost have been amused at her attempts to put him off if her attitude had not been so hurtful.

You don't know me, he thought, miserably. How can you judge me so cruelly?

The music stopped playing and he bowed low. Miss Highbury gave the barest curtsy. He stared out across the ballroom, his gaze searching for Amy.

She was standing by the wall with Henry, and she spotted him. She wove her way through the crowd so that, by the time he was standing in the midst of a group of people, she was beside him.

"Are you having a pleasant evening?" she asked him, her blue eyes sparkling as she gazed up at him.

"Um...somewhat," Sidney replied unsteadily. "You have organised a splendid ball, dear sister," he added hastily, not wishing to upset her.

She beamed. "I am glad to hear it. Perhaps even more splendid now that a certain person has arrived?"

“A person?” Sidney felt his brow furrow. He gazed around the room, confusedly. “What person would that be?” he asked.

Amy grinned. “She is there, over by the window, brother. The one by the garden door.”

Sidney gazed across to where the breeze wafted in, and he gaped. The tall young lady in a pale blue gown, her lovely hair in ringlets about her face, her elbow-length gloves shimmering satin, was clearly nobody other than Lady Anastasia.

“You...you...” Sidney stammered. He had told nobody of his affection for Lady Anastasia—in fact, he had tried to conceal it from Mama, thinking it a hopeless dream. He had not known that Amy knew; nor did he know how.

“Go and dance with her, brother,” Amy said, looking up at him with a fond stare. “She doesn’t want to have to wait around either, I expect.”

Sidney just stared at his sister. He swallowed hard. “I...I couldn’t,” he murmured. “The scandal...” He tried to explain to his sister that he did not want to cause any harm to Lady Anastasia’s good name. His sister laughed.

“This is a private ball,” she said swiftly. “I would not permit any of those horrors who pen those scandals to enter this room. We are safe here.”

Sidney stared at her. She was right. They were mostly among friends—Henry and Amy’s friends, not necessarily his own—but there would almost certainly be nobody witnessing this ball who wished them, or their family, harm.

He inclined his head.

“Mayhap I shall.”

His sister beamed. “As you should, brother. I had best hurry. Henry’s talking to a footman and perhaps there’s some matter of organization that needs discussion.” She beamed at her brother and hurried off before he could get a word out.

He swallowed hard. He gazed over at Lady Anastasia. She was standing talking to someone—he could not see whom, but it was another woman. He cleared his throat, heart thumping in terror. It was foolishness, he knew, to feel so afraid—the worst thing that could happen was that she refused. But that would have wounded him terribly. He approached cautiously. A thousand different words flew round his head as he tried to decide what to say.

“My lady.” He bowed low.

“Your Grace.” Lady Anastasia curtsied. Her eyes were shining. “Good evening.”

“I would be greatly honoured if you would grant me the pleasure of this dance,” he stammered. He was too shy to exchange pleasantries. The soft floral scent of her was wafting into his nose and making his heartbeat race wildly, blotting out all thoughts. “The next dance?” he added swiftly, lest he find his courage deserting him.

“Of course.” She smiled at him.

“Of course ?” he repeated, staring at her. He had been so sure that she would refuse, or that she would come up with some excuse or other, that her affirmative reply rooted him to the ground. She grinned.

“We’d best hurry,” she said, gesturing to the dance floor. “I believe the quartet is already playing the introduction. It’s a waltz.”

“Good,” Sidney murmured. He blushed, feeling foolish. He followed her to the dance floor and took her hand in his. His other hand moved to her shoulder-blade, and he

felt hot, crimson blood flush his cheeks as she stepped close.

The music began and he stepped lightly, her steps gliding and smooth as they whirled around the dance floor. It was lively, rather than stately, and they whirled and stepped and whirled.

He shut his eyes for a moment. She was extremely graceful and dancing with her felt like flying, like gliding; as swift and smooth as skating on ice and yet as lively as a song.

She is so beautiful , he thought, his heart twisting. So beautiful and lovely and graceful. I am a beast, a clumsy oaf.

His heart ached as he opened his eyes again. She had her head tipped back; eyes shut.

Perhaps she is dreaming that she is elsewhere, he thought painfully.

He gazed at her longingly and wished that he knew what she was thinking.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am

Anastasia shut her eyes for a moment, a small smile of rapture lifting the corners of her lips. She was waltzing, floating, flying. It felt for a moment as though they were whirling across the empty air, like two eagles in a dance so beautiful that it brought tears to her eyes.

“My lady?” A small, earnest whisper made her open her eyes again.

“Yes?” She gazed up at the duke, staring into that striking green stare.

“Is all well?” he whispered. His brow furrowed with a frown; his eyes filled with concern.

Anastasia felt her own brow crease and she almost missed a step. She recovered quickly and they whirled along the edge of the ballroom.

“Yes,” she replied, feeling confused. “Yes. I am quite well.”

She could hear the music shifting, moving into the last third of the dance and she looked up into his eyes, wishing to forget that the waltz would last at most a few minutes. She wanted to dance with him all night.

He had seemed as though he was about to speak as she stared up at him, but he stopped before he had said a word. His gaze met hers and held it, and she felt her heart thumping louder than the quartet, louder than the burr of conversation around them. All that existed was his face, his eyes, and the beating of her heart.

Heat flooded up into her face and through her body and she became aware of his

closeness, of the warmth of his hand on hers. She drew a breath as the strangest longing flooded her. She ached to feel the warmth of his lips on hers. The scent of him drifted to her—a mix of leather and pomade and something else that she couldn't identify. Altogether, the mix of smells made her heart thud and somehow made that strange, urgent longing grow. She saw him lean fractionally forward and she drew a breath and held it, thinking for a second that he had felt the same and that he was going to kiss her.

Something flared in his gaze—if she had not known better, she would have thought it was fear. He straightened up and then they were slowing as the cadence changed and the waltz resolved into its closing section.

She slowed her steps, and her eyes remained locked on his, that strange longing still there. She drew a deep breath, but the sound of applause distracted her, and she realized that the other couples were politely congratulating each other on the dance and that the quartet was not playing anymore.

“Your Grace,” she stammered, dropping a low curtsy.

“My lady.” He bowed low and her heart raced as he looked up at her.

Her thoughts were blank, or they seemed to be coagulating in the strange feeling that was possessing her, the sweet, honeyed feeling that flooded her somehow slowing them on their way through her mind.

He cleared his throat. His eyes were shining, and Anastasia wondered, for a moment, if the same odd magic that was happening in her mind was happening in his as well.

“Might I offer you a glass of lemonade?” he said. His eyes were bright, but his voice sounded strange, as though his throat was half-blocked. He coughed again to clear it.

“Yes. Yes, please,” she managed to say. Her heart leapt. He did not want simply to bow and curtsy and depart. He wished to go to the refreshments table together, at least.

“Well, then,” he replied. “I shall escort you.”

Anastasia frowned. His voice sounded formal—despite that strange, thickened quality as if his throat was part-blocked. He had been so friendly earlier, but there was a reservation in his speech that she found confusing. His gaze on her had been so bright, but now she detected a tinge of fear in the tightening at the corners of his eyes, the set of his mouth.

Perhaps he is tired, she told herself. The press of people and the blazing brightness did sometimes tire one out, particularly if one had already done something strenuous. And it was a particularly bright, well-lit ballroom.

He gestured towards one side of the hall, and she followed him as they wove their way across to it. The ballroom was not large, and the guest-list was slightly more generous than the space would allow, so the room was rather tightly packed.

They made their way towards a table and Anastasia looked around, blinking at the bright light of the chandeliers. She could see her parents conversing in one corner of the room and she felt her stomach twist a little guiltily. Her father would be angry if he saw her with the duke—but then he had not explicitly forbidden her from dancing with him, so she was not really doing anything wrong.

“Lemonade, my lady?” The duke sounded, again, a little formal as he spoke.

“Yes. Thank you,” she replied.

He passed her a long glass filled with whitish, cloudy liquid that, when she sipped it,

was a delicious mix of sourness and sweetness. She let out a sigh, the taste reviving her instantly.

The duke smiled.

“It’s good, is it not?” His green eyes danced. Anastasia took a deep breath. He was so handsome when he smiled. The scars were just as noticeable as ever, but the strange thing was that she had stopped noticing them. She was aware of them—she could not deny that, as they were part of his face, part of the things that made him himself. And yet they were not disfiguring anymore. They were arresting, unusual, even interesting. They were one of his features and, as such, they were dear to her.

She froze in amazement. He was dear to her. More than dear. He was handsome and funny and kind and intelligent and simply seeing him made her heart soar.

I am falling in love, she realized dizzily.

She beamed up at him, the joy of that realization like wings that lifted her off the floor, that set her soul dancing a waltz. He gazed at her in absolute astonishment, and then a grin blossomed on his face.

“A fine evening, is it not?” he asked. His voice was light and joyful, and it made her grin wider.

“Yes. A wonderful evening,” she sighed.

He gazed out over the ballroom, and she stared out too, watching the people talking, hearing the happy, joyful chatter and the sound of the quartet tuning in a discordant and yet beautiful shimmer of notes. The candles shone bright golden light down on the scene, and it felt as though her happiness was expanding, filtering through the room, as though her laughter and joy and that of the others was all melting together

into a cacophony of happiness that mingled with the tuning violins.

His smile was as broad as her own and she grinned up at him, her gaze fixed on that lovely green stare.

He leaned forward again, and Anastasia held her breath. Unseemly and impossible it would be to steal a kiss, yet part of her wanted to—part of her ached so to feel his lips on hers that the rest of the ballroom melted away.

He tensed again and she frowned as he straightened up. It was the second time she could almost have sworn that he would kiss her, and yet at the last moment he drew away.

It's because it would be unseemly, she reminded herself. It would be a bad enough scandal, since we are unpromised and unwed, but so much worse given his reputation.

She swallowed hard. That was true, and yet part of her was confused, wondering if that really was the reason, or if there was any reason at all. Perhaps she had just imagined he was going to kiss her.

She stared up into his eyes and caught a look that made her heart race with longing. It was a smoldering gaze, one that called up those strange warm feelings in her because it was pure longing in itself.

He does feel it! Her heart soared with delight. It was not her wayward imagination. It was true.

Just as she thought it, the quartet started playing and the duke blinked in surprise.

“That's the dance my sister said would conclude the program for the evening.” He

sounded wistful. Anastasia felt her own heart twist with disappointment.

“There will be tea and coffee in the drawing room,” she remembered, but then she laughed. “I suppose you’ll be in the billiard room with the rest of the gentlemen.”

He grinned. “I suppose I have to be,” he reminded her. “Or the rest of the gentlemen will envy me so fully that they might come and toss me from the window.”

“No!” Anastasia laughed. “That’s horrid.”

“But true,” he said, his eyes twinkling.

Anastasia giggled, and her cheeks flushed with the thought that he meant that the rest of the men would not simply envy him the company of all the ladies, but her company in particular. He made her feel beautiful. That was not the reason that her heart leapt when she saw him—that was because of him alone—though it was perhaps the reason why a playful smile lifted the corner of her mouth when they talked.

“My sister always chooses a Polonaise as the concluding dance,” he noted as the music, lively and fast, filled the room. “I don’t know if it’s as a challenge to the guests—anyone still sufficiently awake to perform such a lively dance ought to win a prize.”

Anastasia laughed aloud. “What a terrific idea!”

He beamed. “It’s rather unfortunate that the Polonaise is usually a short dance,” he murmured, and his gaze was wistful again.

Anastasia nodded, but it was only as he bowed, to proceed with the other gentlemen to the billiards room, that she realized that he meant that, if the dance had been

longer, they might have had longer to talk.

She gazed over her shoulder longingly as she saw him wander off in the direction of the door. A small smile lifted the corner of her lips, and the warmth of their discussion burned inside her like a candle, making her grin as she drifted towards the big door. Her mother's voice, from just beside her, made her turn abruptly, startled.

"Daughter! There you are. Shall we go up for a cup of tea? I long for one."

Anastasia smiled. Her mother's eyes were sparkling. Usually, her mother looked either weary or tense—especially when Father was nearby. It was unusual to see such joy on her face and her own heart soared with delight. She glanced around and was surprised to see two women who she did not immediately recognize with Mama. She frowned, then smiled in happy amazement.

It was the Dowager Duchess of Willowick, and the lady she had been accompanying when they met in London.

"Anastasia, dear," Mama murmured as they stepped into the entrance-way. "I am pleased to introduce you to the Duchess of Willowick."

"I have met your dear daughter before," her Grace murmured, making Mama frown.

"You have?" She looked at Anastasia, who smiled and nodded.

"Yes. We have already met briefly."

"You did?" Mama gazed at Anastasia and then turned to the duchess, whose green eyes lit with warmth.

"Indeed. I was very pleased to meet Lady Anastasia." She smiled with genuine

happiness. Anastasia drew a breath. While she would have sworn that her own mother was the most beautiful older woman in London, the duchess—with her strong features and stunning eyes—was breathtaking. Her green eyes were lined at the edges, her brown hair graying at the temples, but the vitality and warmth that poured from her were engaging and combined with her striking looks made her a real beauty. “This is my sister-in-law, the dowager Viscountess of Camberwell,” she added, indicating the woman on her left with the dark hair and the slightly tense, pretty face.

“Good evening,” Anastasia murmured, dropping a curtsy to the lady who the duke had introduced as his aunt.

“Good evening, Lady Anastasia.”

Anastasia’s mother smiled at her, as if sensing that she was utterly bewildered.

“Come and join us for a cup of tea, dear,” she said gently. “And then I think I would like to go home and rest.”

“Yes,” Anastasia murmured. “Yes. That sounds pleasant.” She gazed with a mixture of astonishment and perplexity at the three elder ladies. Her father had already given Lord Ridley permission to court her. Why was her mother being so friendly to the duchess and her sister-in-law, when they had explicitly been told to avoid all contact with the duke? It made her happy to see her mother so accepting of the duke’s family, but it bewildered her too.

With her head swimming in confusion, she followed the three older ladies up the stairs to the drawing room.

“Would you like some sugar?” Lady Camberwell asked, passing Anastasia the sugar-bowl and tongs. Anastasia smiled.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

“What a lovely ball,” Mama said contentedly as she stirred her tea. “Your daughter has arranged a most delightful evening for us.”

“She is a most proficient organizer,” the duchess replied, a faint smile playing at the corners of her mouth. “I took great pleasure in having her oversee my own household.”

Anastasia chuckled. Despite the duchess’ regal appearance, she could actually imagine her delegating much of the organizing to her industrious young daughter.

“May I say that you danced very beautifully?” the duchess said to Anastasia. She felt her cheeks redden.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” she murmured, looking at the table with shyness.

“Anastasia is a fine dancer,” Mama said warmly. “She has always enjoyed it greatly.”

“How grand,” Lady Camberwell said with a smile.

“I was never as fond of a dance,” the duchess said, grinning. “I much preferred soirees.”

“But Viola! You danced so much,” Lady Camberwell objected, her eyes round and wide.

“I didn’t have much choice,” the duchess said with a laugh.

“Quite so!” Lady Camberwell agreed, chuckling. “At least five men would be queuing before each dance.”

The duchess just smiled. "That was long ago," she murmured.

"Youth is not beauty," Mama noted, and the duchess beamed.

"No. Beauty is a quality unto itself. Yet, at times, they do coincide. Like your daughter, yonder." She glanced over at Anastasia, who felt a warm flush rise to her cheeks once more.

"Thank you, Your Grace," she whispered.

Mama smiled at the duchess. "I heard of you. You had your debut three years before me. Everyone was gossiping about the lovely Lady Viola, daughter of the Earl of Blackford."

The duchess smiled. "That is kind," she murmured. "I was merely fortunate to withdraw from society once more with such expedience."

"Only because you wed Alexander the same year."

"Yes." The duchess smiled. "That is true. I was very lucky. My dear, dear, Alexander." She sounded sad and Anastasia felt her heart tighten in sympathy. She glanced over at her mother, who laid a protective hand over the duchess' own.

"You must miss him terribly," she murmured.

The duchess swallowed and Anastasia blinked, seeing tears in the older woman's eyes.

"Yes. Yes, I do miss him," she said softly. "I miss him every day. But I see him in my dear boy. My dear, dear boy." She stopped and Anastasia wanted to cry, too, seeing the mix of love and sorrow in her gaze.

“Is he very like?” her mother wanted to know.

“He is the image of Alexander. It is my greatest comfort,” the duke’s mother murmured. “He is the dearest thing in the world to me. His happiness matters the most to me of all things.”

“I understand,” Mama said gently.

Anastasia blinked in surprise. She knew her mother loved her—she had never doubted it. But seeing the duchess speak of her son, she realized just how deep that love was. She gazed at her mother in renewed appreciation.

“I love my son,” the duchess said with emotion. “He and Alexander were my whole world.”

“I’m so sorry for your grief,” Mama said sincerely.

Anastasia nodded in silent agreement. She gazed at the duchess. This was something else that was new to her—the undeniable love that she could see in the duchess’ eyes when she spoke of the former duke. Her own mother looked mostly fearful when she spoke of Papa. And Papa seemed to have no affection for any of his own family.

I can have a love like the one I feel for the Duke of Willowick, she thought with surprise. It is possible. It is real and permissible and safe.

When she looked at the duchess’ face, at those lines that were from grief but were also from pride and joy; she knew that a life like that was the one she wanted to live. She wanted to throw herself headlong into the love that she felt, to let it carry her like a river and wash her onto the banks of wherever it led. That beautiful feeling like warm honey, like fire, like the stars turning—it was real, and true, and allowed.

She smiled at the duchess, wishing she could tell her how much freedom she had given her just by showing the love that burned within her.

The duchess smiled back.

They sat and talked—lively, amusing conversation about London and the more bizarre aspects of high fashion—and then the clock chimed. Mama gazed around the room.

“I suppose we ought to take our leave,” she murmured to the duchess and her sister-in-law, who were also both readying to stand up.

“I suppose,” the duchess murmured, stifling a yawn with an elegant hand. “It is long past midnight.”

Anastasia stood and greeted the women and walked with her mother to the door. It had been a beautiful evening and images of the dance, and of the duke and those beautiful eyes, ran through her mind as she clambered sleepily into the coach. Her father shot her a look and Anastasia shuddered, knowing that he had seen her dance with the duke.

He must have been tired, because he said nothing, only nodded briefly as they clambered in. Nobody talked much and she slipped into a drowsy slumber as the coach rattled and jolted along, her lips lifting in a smile at thoughts of the duke. Love like that was allowed and welcome and wonderful and she knew that now. She could not wait to see him again soon—if only her father might allow it.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am

Sidney stood in the hallway. He could hear the loud talk of men in the billiard room, their laughter drifting out to him where he stood beside a potted fern. He gazed around wearily. Though it was Amy's ball, and he felt obliged to go and join Henry and the rest, he was reluctant to enter. The room's occupants would be evenly mixed between those who stared at him and whispered, and those who were too intoxicated to notice.

Either way, I do not care to mingle with them, he thought icily.

The sound of voices made him stiffen. Someone was coming up the hallway and he felt pushed to a decision. Either he had to enter the room, or he had to go downstairs and excuse himself.

He walked towards the room uncertainly, but just as he got there, the two talking people arrived. One of them was tall and gray-haired and the other was shorter, with a squarish face and hard, sharp eyes. The sharp-eyed man spotted Sidney and he tensed, frowning.

I know that face from somewhere.

The man gestured to his tall companion. "You go in, Edward. I have some business to attend to over here." He nodded in Sidney's direction. "I'll be a moment or two."

"Of course, Hubert." The tall man inclined his head.

Hubert? Sidney frowned. He did not know anyone called Hubert, but the man seemed insistent that he knew Sidney, because he believed he had business with him.

“Good evening?” Sidney said cautiously. The smaller, sharp-eyed man was squinting up at him in a way that seemed threatening. He was certain he did recognize the man, but the memory eluded him.

“Don’t pretend to exchange pleasantries with me,” the small man growled.

Sidney blinked in astonishment, then drew himself up to his full height. “I beg your pardon,” he began angrily. “I think you are confused. You do not know me, and I have never been introduced to you.” He spoke coldly to the shorter man. He had always been tall and imposing, and he relished that the man momentarily flinched.

“You are to leave my daughter in peace. I don’t need you making scandals with her.”

“Scandals?” Sidney frowned. “Excuse me, sir, but who might you be?” He had a horrid sensation that he knew, but he wanted to confirm it before he knew what he was going to say.

“Don’t fool about,” the man grunted. “I’m the Earl of Graystone.”

“You are Lady Anastasia’s...” He trailed off.

“Yes. She is my daughter. And I will have you know that if I see you near her again, you will be sorry.”

Sidney stiffened his posture and looked down his nose at the small man. “Do not presume to threaten me,” he said in a flint-cold tone. “I respect Lady Anastasia, and I would do whatever it took to preserve her honour. I have no need of threats from you.”

The little man glared at him. Sidney held his glare, and he had the satisfaction of seeing his posture shift, his shoulder slumping just a little. Sidney, being tall and

long-limbed, had a natural advantage in a duel of swords or pistols, and the heavy muscle of his shoulders added to the impression. He had never had anyone dare challenge him in the past and it did him good to see the small, angry man look uncertain.

“Just leave her alone,” the man muttered and stalked off.

Sidney turned away.

His heart thudded, racing. He had not realized until the threat passed that he had been so tense. He went into the billiards room and looked around. Henry was by the window, talking to a group of gentlemen, laughing and smiling. There was nobody to talk to and the laughter and loud banter hurt his ears and made his heart race—both still recovering from the confrontation just seconds ago in the hallway. Sidney wished, suddenly, to go home. He went to the door.

“Please inform my mother that I am in the coach,” he told a footman who he spotted walking down the hall.

“At once, Your Grace,” the footman replied. Amy’s staff all knew him, since he called on her and Henry often. The man went to the drawing room to find Mama. Sidney went downstairs. The coach was waiting outside, and he ached to be at home.

“Sidney!” Mama exclaimed as she came downstairs. Aunt Harriet was with her. “Should we depart? I must confess I am tired.”

“Yes, Mama,” Sidney said with a sigh. “Let us depart. I am weary also and wish to sleep.”

“I will also be glad to be back at home,” Aunt Harriet said softly. “What a lovely evening!” She beamed at Mama and Sidney.

“Yes. Amy organised a grand ball,” Mama agreed. “I told her so before we exited the drawing room.”

“Good,” Sidney said softly. He felt guilty—it was Amy’s ball, and he hoped she wasn’t upset that they were departing early.

At home, he wished his mother goodnight, then went upstairs to his chamber. He shrugged off his coat, but his mind was racing despite his weariness. He could not rest, and he walked to the drawing room. The portrait he had painted was still on the easel, pulled close against the wall lest anyone see it. He pulled it back and turned it around, fetching a lamp from the mantelpiece.

Anastasia’s soft, gentle face gazed at him, her lips lifting at one corner as though she was about to smile. Her blue eyes had a tender expression. Her pale hair touched her cheek, ringleted as it always was, over her ears.

He stared at it. As he did, he recalled the dance, and how she had laughed and smiled and talked. She seemed to enjoy his company. She was always diverting and interesting and he loved to talk with her.

“My dear,” he whispered to her, as he never could in life. “I am sorry.”

He shut his eyes, a tear running down his cheek. Here, with the household in their beds and nobody to see, he could let the racking grief show. He sobbed and did not try to hide his tears. Her father was right. He could not do this. He could not be seen with her in public. He was flawed and unworthy and she was all that was lovely and good.

“I cannot do it,” he whispered as he turned to face the dark window. “I cannot turn my back on her.”

He stared out at the starry sky, the stars winking overhead like pearls scattered on velvet by a careless hand. They glowed and shone, twinkling more like candle flames than pearls did. He went to the door that led to the balcony.

“Father,” he whispered, tipping his head back to stare up at the night sky. “Guide me. Please? I am in need of your answers.”

He stared up at the yawning blackness, straining his ears, gazing up hopefully. Perhaps there would be a sign. Perhaps Father was up there somewhere and could hear his pain.

Nothing moved. Nothing shifted. The sky was as black, and the stars were as bright and there was nothing that he could see that he thought might be a sign. He blinked and turned away. He had no right to ask for guidance, to think that his father would be there to help him. He was too flawed, too unimportant.

He walked towards the door.

He had left the lamp on the windowsill, and a big, white moth flapped lazily against the windowpane. He frowned. The moth made bumbling circles, thumping at the window. Sidney felt his lip lift at the corner, amused despite the agony of indecision within him.

“I’m like that moth,” he murmured. “Drawn to a flame.”

He reached over and cupped the small, furry creature in his hand. It had pure white wings, its small feet seeming sticky on his palm.

“Off you go, poor creature,” he murmured to it softly. It sat in his hand, gazing up at him bewildered. He went to the edge of the balcony and shook his hand gently, trying to dislodge the moth. It walked to the edge of his palm, then stayed there, reluctant to

leave the warmth and the inviting candlelight.

“Off you go,” he repeated, and shook his hand more firmly. The moth launched itself off his palm and flew off into the darkness, its big furry body still visible as it headed off towards the garden.

“I also don’t want to fly away,” Sidney said softly.

He swallowed hard, through a throat tight with emotion. He had to. He had to do it—not just for himself, but for Lady Anastasia. Like the moth and the flame, only pain was going to result from their interaction. He had to obey her father. But should he? Or, like the moth, was he doomed anyway—either to die in the candlelit drawing room or perish in the unseasonable cold outside?

“If this is your advice, I do not understand it, Father,” he murmured.

He turned his back on the balcony and went into the house to find a book to read in the hope of distracting himself.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am

Anastasia gazed out of the window. It was a week since the ball, and she had been nowhere except to Gunter's with Lord Ridley once and to tea with one of Mama's friends. She had hoped that they might spot the duke somewhere, but so far, she had not seen him.

"I wish that Papa gave him permission instead," she said in the silent drawing room. Papa was out at the club and Mama and Lily had gone to a shop in town to buy fabric for new gowns. The house was quiet, and the duke filled her thoughts. She recalled his smile when they waltzed at the ball, the way his green eyes gazed into hers. She remembered the joy of dancing with him. He was a fine dancer. She wondered what had happened—how he had been so terribly scarred. She wished she had thought about asking, but when she was with him the scars never even entered her thoughts. She so enjoyed his quick wit and ready comments that the scars were the last thing that drew her notice.

"My lady?" the butler murmured, interrupting her restless mind.

"Yes? What is it, Mr. Shipley?" she asked politely.

"Lady Camilla is here, my lady. Shall I show her in?"

"Oh! Please do!" Anastasia grinned happily. She had almost completely forgotten that Camilla was to call on her. They were practicing a piece for Mama's musicale that was to take place the day after tomorrow. They had almost perfected it, but they both wished to rehearse several more times before the night, and so Camilla had arranged to call on her to practice.

“At once, my lady.” He bowed low.

“Anastasia!” Camilla greeted her delightedly. She was wearing a blue dress, her rose-scented perfume a familiar smell as she ran lightly across the room to embrace her friend.

“Camilla.” Anastasia wrapped her arms around her friend in a firm hug. “I am so glad you are here.”

“Me, too!” Camilla grinned. “I’m excited about our piece, too. I want to try something new.”

“Of course,” Anastasia agreed at once. She stood, flexing her fingers. She had rested them that morning, since they had practiced wildly the previous day, so much so that she had worried that Camilla would hurt her throat or that she herself might strain something. They had to be careful, Mama had teased, or they would not be able to perform at all at the musical evening.

“Let’s begin!” Camilla said excitedly as Anastasia sat down at the pianoforte. She reached for the music book; the pages of their song well marked. She rested her hands for a moment on her skirts, which were white muslin decorated with a pattern of tiny flowers. Then she began.

Camilla’s voice soared as she began to sing after the short introduction that Anastasia played. Anastasia was dimly aware that her finger hurt a little from having practiced too hard the previous morning, but as the piece progressed, she forgot about it, enjoying the sound of Camilla’s voice and the way the soaring harmonies blended with the notes that she played. She loved music whether she was dancing or whether she was listening or playing it.

They reached the concluding section and Anastasia grinned up at Camilla, who was

definitely performing it a little differently. She was holding the low notes for longer and the effect was beautiful. Camilla grinned back.

“Whew!” she let out a sigh, then giggled. “I thought I might break something.”

“You did beautifully,” Anastasia told her. “I don’t know how you managed to sustain those notes so long!”

“I think I’ll hurt my stomach if I do that much longer,” Camilla said with a laugh. “The muscles are already sore from all our singing.”

“Don’t strain yourself,” Anastasia told her, also giggling.

“I won’t,” Camilla assured her. “Let’s open that window.” She went over and pushed the window open. It was the one that looked down to the street, and the noise of coaches and of people talking drifted in from the road below.

“Is there a piece you’d like to practice again?” Anastasia asked. “I would like to go to bar forty-two. The phrasing there is tricky, and I’d like to practice it again. If you want?”

Camilla nodded. “Of course. It’s easier for me...you’re doing all the trills in that bit.”

“Yes. I am,” Anastasia teased. “My fingers know too.”

They both laughed.

They returned to the bar that Anastasia wanted to try again, and then Camilla suggested they went to the middle section, where there was a passage that she still wanted to work on. A moth flapped in through the window and Camilla shrieked as it fluttered past her face.

“I’ll let it out,” Anastasia said. She had never had a horror of insects—the only crawling things that scared her were spiders. She went to the window where the poor thing was flapping helplessly and pushed it out over the sill. Camilla came and joined her.

“Off it goes,” she murmured.

Anastasia nodded and smiled. She watched the insect flutter down and gazed down to the gardens below. The front of their house had no garden to speak of, resting directly on the pavement.

“Oh! Look!” Camilla said, interrupting her thoughts. She was pointing. “There is a little market down there. I can see a ribbon stall. Shall we go?”

Anastasia frowned. Since her father had seen her dancing with the duke, he had been particularly hard on her about doing anything that might put her good name in question. The town market was far from a scandalous place to be seen, but perhaps he would disapprove. “I am not sure,” she began.

“Oh, come, dear friend!” Camilla chided gently. “There’s no harm in a market! We can take Rachel to chaperone us—of course we shall. Then there is nothing untoward about us being seen there.”

“You are right,” Anastasia agreed. Her heart lifted at the thought of being out of doors. She had been in the house too long. Being outside and doing something diverting like visiting the market felt good.

They hurried downstairs to fetch their bonnets and shawls and to find Rachel to accompany them.

“I shall race you!” Camilla challenged, laughing, as she tied on her bonnet.

“Whosoever is first prepared shall be the victor...though I know not what the prize may be.”

“A Chelsea bun!”

“Yes!”

They giggled and laughed, and Anastasia’s spirits soared as she tied on her bonnet. Camilla was fractionally faster, and they were still laughing as they rushed outside, Rachel hurrying behind them.

“I won!” Camilla grinned as Anastasia caught up with her at the bottom of the stairs that led down from the front door. “I can’t wait to have that delicious bun.”

“I’m having one too,” Anastasia insisted. Chelsea buns were delicious—thick, doughy buns well-stocked with raisins and iced with thick sugary icing.

They both laughed as they hurried down the street towards the market. Rachel hurried to keep up and they were, all of them, laughing and giggling breathlessly as they walked briskly towards the stalls.

“Here we are!” Camilla said with a grin as they reached the ribbon-seller's stall.

“Ooh! How beautiful,” Anastasia exclaimed, reaching up for a ribbon of pure blue silk, the color of the intense evening sky. It was beautiful and her heart thudded as she touched it. It was satiny-soft, and she longed to have it.

“How about this one!” Camilla exclaimed, reaching for a pink silk ribbon. It was a strong pink, and Camilla gestured to it, asking the stallholder to lift it down for her.

“It’s the same color as your gown—your pink ballgown,” Anastasia commented as

Camilla held it up.

“How does it look?” Camilla asked, holding it against her hair.

“Maybe a little bright?” Anastasia replied, gazing at the ribbon. It was somewhere between strawberry pink and rose pink, and it showed less against Camilla’s red curls.

“I declare! I’d like to see it for myself,” Camilla replied, and the man behind the counter grinned.

“My lady, wait no longer. I have a looking glass for you to study it in.”

Camilla nodded. “Thank you,” she said briskly, and the man, still grinning at the two young ladies, brought out a silver looking glass with a rather ornate bronze frame. He held it for Camilla, who frowned at the effect, then grinned.

“I like it. And you?” she asked Anastasia. “What will you take?”

Anastasia gazed up at the blue ribbon. She longed for it—so much so that it hadn’t even occurred to her to buy it. She automatically assumed it would be beyond her pin-money. Not that her father was not generous, and more than generous, with both Lily and herself—but she had thought to save the money to purchase something more practical than silk ribbons.

“I...” she hesitated.

“I need a white one, actually,” Camilla commented, reaching up for a white satin one. “I have too many white gowns, and I need something new to put in my hair. I’m too tall for ostrich feathers.” She giggled.

“I think they could be quite becoming,” Anastasia commented, but Camilla was already reaching over to pay for her ribbons. Anastasia stepped back, studying the stall more closely. Perhaps there was something cheaper. She took another step back to see more.

“My lady...”

Anastasia frowned, hearing how Rachel hesitated. She turned around and shrieked as she bumped straight into someone.

“Oh! So sorry,” she exclaimed, holding up a hand. As she did so, she stared.

The Duke of Willowick stared back.

For a second, they said nothing to one another. Anastasia gazed up at him, joy rushing through each part of her as she beheld his green eyes. He stared at her and she stared back, and she could think of nothing to say, other than how delighted she was to see him and how sorely horrid the last week was, not having spotted him once.

He gazed back at her, his lips moving into a small silent exclamation of surprise for a second. Then he recovered and lifted his hat, bowing low to the three women.

“Good afternoon,” he greeted them. His gaze never moved from Anastasia’s own.

“Your Grace,” Anastasia murmured, dropping a low curtsy. She straightened up, and Camilla straightened up too.

“You are visiting the market?” Camilla asked. Her voice was filled with genuine surprise and the duke smiled.

“I suppose it is not strictly in my duties?” he asked. “I was, as it happens, on my way

from my solicitor's office when I spotted the market. I thought to stop at the silversmith's there, since I wished to purchase a gift for my sister."

"Your solicitor?" Camilla asked boldly. She always was bold. "I trust nothing bad?"

The duke grinned. "No. As it happens, just a matter I wish him to discuss with the accountant. A slight matter."

Anastasia smiled. His gaze caught hers and she felt as though she was drowning in those wide green eyes. She gazed up at him, her heart racing. No thought was in her mind, other than her joy.

"Are you ladies finding purchases to make?" he asked, clearing his throat and still holding her stare. She smiled.

"I bought these," Camilla commented, interrupting. "Anastasia there hasn't chosen yet. Mayhap you could help her?" She grinned at him.

Anastasia stared at Camilla. She felt confused. Was Camilla trying to make the duke and herself talk? She saw her friend turn pointedly away, focusing on the ribbons and discussing prices with the stallholder as though she wanted to give them time together.

"Are you enjoying the shopping?" the duke asked.

Anastasia smiled. "I haven't bought anything yet," she admitted.

"You must have seen something appealing. Look at these colours!" the duke declared. He waved a hand at the ribbons. "Like a paintbox."

"I suppose," Anastasia giggled.

“That one. Cobalt blue,” the duke murmured, reaching for the ribbon that she had been gazing at. “Do you like it?”

Anastasia felt her eyes widen. “I do like it,” she admitted.

The duke smiled. “Your eyes are a fine match for it.”

“They are?”

“Yes.”

Anastasia felt heat flood her and she resisted the urge to fan herself. The compliment made her entire body catch fire. She tried to look away, but a happy smile lifted her lips, and she found she did not want to hide her delight.

She gazed over at Camilla, who was talking to the stallholder as he wrapped her purchases. They were commenting about the weather. She saw the duke grin.

“Anastasia?” Camilla called. “Shall we go somewhere else?” She had a small parcel wrapped in paper in her hand, the ribbons carefully covered so that they would not stain.

“I...” Anastasia hesitated. She still had not decided if she should buy the ribbon.

“Will you not take it?” the duke asked.

“I shouldn’t...” Anastasia began.

Camilla rolled her eyes and the duke laughed.

“Oh, very well!” Anastasia was laughing as she reached into her drawstring reticule.

“How much is that?” she asked the stallholder.

“Sixpence, my lady.”

Anastasia winced at the price, but she reached into her reticule and took out the money. The duke reached out to touch her hand. She froze at the contact, her eyes meeting his.

“Allow me,” he murmured before she passed over the coinage.

“Your Grace...”

Anastasia ceased to object as the duke leveled a harsh gaze at the stallholder, who had been about to take Anastasia’s coin. A minute later, the fellow was passing Anastasia the paper-wrapped parcel while she replaced the coin in her purse.

“Thank you.”

“No need,” he murmured.

They held eyes.

Camilla was chuckling with somebody at the other stall. Anastasia held his gaze for a few moments and then she had to turn as their chaperone, and then Camilla, wandered off.

“I declare!” Camilla said as they walked across the market to a stall selling jewelry. The Duke exhibits a marked tendency to smile when in your presence.”

“No!” Anastasia chuckled, flapping a hand at her. She knew her cheeks were red, and she did not care. Seeing the duke again, even just for a few minutes, made her spirit

soar and her heart sing.

She could feel the ribbon in her purse, and she felt her heart lift as though it was flying. She might not be able to wear it, lest someone—her father, that was—saw it. But she would put it in her drawer and keep it forever, always recalling the moment when he had talked and laughed with her at the market.

She would always remember his gentle, sweet words and how his eyes had held hers. She could not stop smiling.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am

“You’re quiet, Anny,” Lily murmured as they stepped neatly around the empty ballroom. The high windows let late afternoon sunshine filter down and dust danced in the columns of light as they whirled. There was no music, and Anastasia had set the rhythm by humming a few bars of their favorite waltz. It was the sixth time they had practiced together since Mr. Halloway and Anastasia had argued and Lily was starting to relax and enjoy herself again.

“Mm,” Anastasia replied, a little distracted.

“I can’t wait for this evening,” Lily commented as they stepped neatly around the corner.

“Mm,” Anastasia answered again. She was lost in a haze of daydreams, the meeting with the duke recurring in her mind again and again. She had stowed the ribbon away in her dressing table, waiting to wear it at a ball or some special occasion. His sweet words whirled through her thoughts and her lips lifted in a smile.

“Anny!” Lily giggled as they reached the top end of the ballroom and stopped dancing.

“What?” Anastasia asked, blinking. They had danced for two or three minutes, and her mind had barely left the duke.

“You’re so distracted. What are you thinking about?” Lily asked. A grin tugged at the edges of her full lips. “I daresay! You must have encountered your gallant suitor. Am I correct in my assumption?”

Anastasia went bright red. “I...” she stammered. She could not deny Lily’s comment, though she hesitated to confirm it either, lest her sister press her on who the man was. She still had to be careful and keep the entire matter as secret as she could.

“You have!” Lily yelled delightedly. “Oh, how wonderful.” She whirled in place, one hand holding the corner of her white muslin skirt so that it billowed as she moved, the little pattern of pink roses on it flaring out as she danced.

Anastasia chuckled. “I...” she began.

“I would love to find my own gallant suitor,” Lily told her, a rapt smile on her face. “I would dance from dawn to dusk, and we would walk in the midnight gardens. I can’t wait to be in society soon!”

Anastasia grinned to herself. She had been worried that Lily would want more details, but her imaginative younger sister was clearly wrapped up in her own wonderful imagination.

“You will be at the musical evening this evening,” Anastasia reminded her gently. Their mother hosted the event annually, so that meant that Lily would be there too—it wasn’t a ball, and so exceptions could be made. Lily grinned.

“And there won’t just be ladies there?”

“No.”

As if summoned by Anastasia’s remark, Rachel appeared, their mother just behind.

“Lady Anastasia! Lady Lily!” Rachel called urgently. “It’s time to prepare for the musical evening.”

“Oh!” Lily exclaimed. “Is it already so late? Come on, Anny!”

Anastasia just smiled. She gazed at Mama, who looked a little flustered.

“We must begin the preparations for the assembly room,” Mama commented, a frown between her brows. Anastasia smiled. She knew her mother well, and knew that, though Mama looked troubled, she was always delighted to be organizing the musicale. It was a popular annual event in London, and they would host at least fifty people, mayhap more. Her stomach fluttered at the thought. Performing was something she both loved and dreaded. She glanced around the room. The footmen were already bringing in chairs and she smiled at her mother.

“I must prepare myself,” she said softly, to explain why she would not stay to help supervise the setting up of the room, as she usually would if were to be a ball or soiree.

“I know, dear,” Mama said gently. “I will hurry to do so too as soon as I have told Mr. Simons where the chairs must go.” She gazed around the room. “There’s a lot to do.”

“It will be capital,” Anastasia told her mother warmly.

Lily beckoned to her. “Come along, Anny. We must make haste. I shall don my new white gown. How delightful! I can scarcely contain my excitement.”

Anastasia smiled warmly as she walked briskly up the hallway behind Lily. They reached their rooms almost at once. Rachel would assist Anastasia and Lily’s new maid, Debbie, would help her. Since it was almost the beginning of her first social season, Lily needed a maid of her own now to help her prepare.

Anastasia reached for her gown, which had been hung on the wardrobe to air. It was a

pale blue, the satin fine and shimmering, and she was tempted to wear the new ribbon in her hair. She hurried behind the screen to get dressed. Rachel would help her with the buttons and style her hair.

“Very fine, milady,” Rachel murmured as Anastasia stood in front of the looking-glass twenty minutes later. She turned, watching her skirt flare slightly, gazing at the outfit more than usual. At a ball, it was not as though all fifty pairs of eyes would be trained on her, after all. But when she performed, they would all be looking at her.

“Thank you,” Anastasia replied softly. Her long blond hair was arranged in ringlets and the chignon was bound in place by a blue silk ribbon. The thick ribbon showed across the crown of her head, her curls tucked into it. She had chosen to wear no other adornments in her hair.

“As pretty as a picture. Enjoy the evening, milady,” Rachel said in a warm, quiet tone. A smile blossomed in her eyes.

“Thank you,” Anastasia said softly. She fetched her shawl from the chair—a white silk one—and then she went slowly downstairs.

“Anastasia!” her sister called out. She was running downstairs, her white muslin gown streaming out around her. Her face was lit with a smile that was brighter than the little beads that were sewn onto her gown and which glittered as she moved. It was more of a ballgown than a gown for a soiree, but she was only sixteen and nobody would mind if it was a trifle elaborate. Lily’s honey-colored curls were framing her face, decorated with a white band and little white beads.

“You look beautiful,” Anastasia told her, reaching out her hands to take Lily’s. They did not wear white gloves, as for a ball, since they would both be performing later.

“You, too, Anny! I’m so excited I fear I will explode!”

Anastasia giggled. “I do hope not.”

“Me, too!”

They were both smiling as they walked down the stairs to the entrance. Mama was already there, her long gown a rich dark blue. Her graying honey-brown hair was arranged in ringlets and partially covered with a lace cap.

“Daughters!” she exclaimed. “You look grand.”

Anastasia smiled and took her mother’s hand fondly. Papa was already in the ballroom, no doubt—he did not enjoy the musical evening, yet he had never disagreed to host it, mostly because of the prestige of hosting it.

“Shall we go in?” Mama asked, sounding worried. “The guests will soon start arriving. I believe it is all in order.”

“It is going to be grand, Mama,” Anastasia insisted gently. “It always is.”

Mama smiled and they went into the ballroom together.

“Lord and Lady Ashford, and their son, Lord Matthew.”

Anastasia grinned. The first guests included a young man, which she thought was bound to please Lily. She glanced sideways at her sister, who stood at the door with them to welcome the guests, smiling as she saw her round eyes focus on the young lord.

“So glad you could attend,” Mama murmured as the guests entered the room.

“We would never miss the musicale. Would we?” Lady Ashford asked her son.

“No, Mama,” he murmured, his gaze moving shyly to the floor. He could not have been much older than Lily. She grinned as she watched the two gaze at each other and then looked shyly away, both reddening intensely.

The newly arrived guests went to stand in the ballroom, where some refreshments were laid out. Professional musicians played soft music while the guests stood about chatting politely or sampling the lemonade or small delicacies on offer.

More guests began to arrive, some of whom were ladies Anastasia knew and were part of her circle of acquaintances. Many attended yearly. She gazed through the door but could not yet see Camilla.

She arrived a few minutes later, and Anastasia grinned, delight at seeing her lifting her mood, which had been a little quiet.

“My dear friend!” Camilla exclaimed. “Why! How lovely you look. The perfect colour for you.” She gazed at the ribbon and Anastasia flushed. Camilla grinned.

“It’s grand to see you,” she told her friend. Camilla wore a white gown with blue lavender sprigs patterning the muslin. They had already decided that they would both wear something blue, that they might match a little better for the performance. A sweet smile brightened Camilla’s face.

“And you. I hope you will join me soon,” she added, tilting her head in the direction of the ballroom as she and her party moved towards the steps.

“Me, too,” she agreed.

The rush of guests eventually became a trickle, and then the butler was closing the big doors, indicating that there were no more guests to arrive. Anastasia’s stomach lurched. Soon they would perform.

She found herself standing nervously on the floor of the ballroom, the chandeliers brightly lit above them, conversing with Camilla. She could hear Lily giggling and knew that her sister had found some friends. She smiled to herself, trying to focus on what Camilla said. She could feel her stomach clenching with nerves, and she attempted to distract herself from the impending appearance. She could not make herself ignore it for long, and sweat pricked down her spine, her fingers knotting through each other nervously if she did not make her hands stay at the sides.

“Should we go to perform near the beginning?” Camilla asked. Ladies would elect for themselves when they went up, and Camilla always said it was best to be one of the first five. People tended to stop listening after that, waking up again somewhere near the end. She also agreed that going first was not comfortable at all. Anastasia giggled.

“If you like,” she agreed, her stomach twisting queasily at the thought.

“First five,” Camilla replied, repeating her rule. “Ideally number three.”

Anastasia nodded, knowing they would be performing third, as her friend elected.

Her mother, standing nearby with her friends, cleared her throat.

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome,” she announced. No trace of her earlier nervousness showed—she sounded relaxed and calm. “The performances will be beginning in a few minutes. Please make your way to the chairs provided.”

Anastasia smiled proudly. Mama always shone at social events, in no small part because she loved them. She shuddered, thinking of Lord Ridley—he was in many respects even worse than their own father, and he would crush the life out of Anastasia much the way their father attempted to do with Mama.

“My lady.”

A voice at her elbow made her turn. She felt her stomach knot up as she saw Lord Ridley standing there. He looked less than usually sober. If she breathed in, she could smell alcohol.

“Good evening,” she greeted him.

“Might I...be seated beside you?” he asked a little unsteadily. Anastasia spotted her father, watching her intensely. She cleared her throat and nodded.

“Of course, my lord,” she answered.

“Grand. Grand,” he repeated, nodding as though the answer pleased him. Camilla cleared her own throat.

“I will sit beside you, Anastasia,” she said firmly.

“Thank you,” Anastasia replied. She did not like Lord Ridley’s company at the best of times. When he was likely to lose his inhibition, she liked it less.

She made her way to the seats.

A young lady went up and Anastasia felt her stomach knot up with nerves, more intensely because of the solid, reeking presence beside her.

If only Mama had included one more name, she thought wistfully. Papa would never have allowed the duke to be on the guest list. If he even looks at the guest list, she reminded herself.

“Capital!” Lord Ridley murmured, as the young lady sat down. Anastasia winced. It was not exactly polite to speak during a performance, but she watched stiffly, ignoring the man and his antics. How he behaved was not her fault, after all.

“I will perform a sonata by Scarlatti,” the young lady announced. She was around Lily’s age and Anastasia glanced over, seeing Lily smile reassuringly for her.

The piece began and Anastasia listened intently. She enjoyed all manner of music and she fought to sit still as the stirring, bright music poured across the crowd. She wished the duke was there. He would understand if she tapped her foot sometimes.

They applauded the young lady politely, whose performance had been good. A harp had been brought in alongside the pianoforte. The evening was not excluded to piano or voice, though many young ladies were highly accomplished at both.

“I will perform a piece by Vivaldi,” another young lady announced.

Anastasia sat nervously. She knew Camilla wanted to go next. They would be the first duo to perform together. Her stomach was already knotted up and she gazed at the candles on the pianoforte’s top, willing herself to calm.

“Capital,” Lord Ridley murmured. He was barely watching or listening, and Anastasia tried to focus on the performer. She applauded as the young lady concluded her piece, her stomach twisting queasily, and her fingers laced together as Camilla stood up. They would go next.

“We will perform a vocal piece set to music by Haydn,” Camilla announced. The words were beautiful, a poem by one of Camilla’s favourite poets. Anastasia felt her fingers settle on the keys, so automatic after a month of practice that she did not need to think about it.

She inclined her head, counting internally as she waited to begin. They would start on the count of three, so that neither of them was taken by surprise by the other.

One, two, three, she counted silently. Then her fingers began to weave the melody. A

short introduction led into Camilla's vocal performance. Camilla had warmed up beforehand—or she had promised that she would—and the first notes were resonant and beautiful. Anastasia shut her eyes for a moment, losing herself in the beauty of the music that poured from them both.

She felt a slight breeze, stirring the flames that flickered before her eyes. She opened them and gasped.

A gentleman was seated opposite her, one she had not noticed. She wondered if the breath of wind had been the door opening to admit a late guest, but all thought was secondary to the astonishment flooding her.

The duke is here.

His green eyes were focused on her and his face was lit with a tranquil half smile. He looked as though he was enjoying the music as she was, but the look in his eyes was more intense. It was more than admiring, more than interested, and Anastasia felt her heart thunder, sweat tingling on her fingers at the sight of his stare.

A slight fumble on the notes brought her attention back to her performance and she tensed, but skipped ahead to the next phrase, keeping pace with Camilla. She sent up a silent prayer of thanks for how many hours they had spent preparing. If she had been even a little less well-schooled in the piece, she would have lost her place entirely.

The duke's smile broadened as the music continued. Anastasia stared at him, forgetting everything. Her fingers played of their own volition, the weeks of rehearsing informing them in ways that her mind could not. Her gaze was locked on the green eyes before her. The piece shifted and she was conscious with some part of her mind that they were about to conclude, but the rest of her was aware only of the man who was in the middle of the audience, who watched her with love in his eyes.

Camilla's voice was resonant as she sang the highest notes of the piece, and then Anastasia pressed her hands down in the chords that tied it together. The applause rang out, loud and warm, and Anastasia stood up, dropping a curtsy. Her skin tingled, aware that the duke was applauding her, a smile on his slim features, warming them.

She could sense Camilla's skirt rustling behind her as they walked across the floor back to their seats. She sank into her chair, her thoughts drifting, the rest of the room blurred around her for a moment. A young lady was performing, and she could barely hear her thoughts elsewhere.

She could not think of anything except his smile and that green-eyed gaze and warmth flooded her as she recalled it. She could barely believe that he was there, and she longed to discuss the music and the evening and all that they could talk of as soon as she could.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am

Sidney gazed across the room. The young ladies had all performed—and one or two young gentlemen had likewise been coaxed to sing. The guests stood about, discussing music or current events, or simply talking of mutual acquaintances. The sound of conversation mixed with the clink of glasses. Sidney's heart was racing, and he gazed about the room, looking for Lady Anastasia. He could not stop thinking of her.

The piece that she had played was exquisite. The young lady who had sung had also performed beautifully, but Sidney's eyes had never once left Lady Anastasia. He longed to see her, to speak with her. He ached to tell her how beautifully she played, how stunning she appeared.

His gaze moved around the room again.

In the back corner, he spotted someone staring straight at him. He looked away. He was used to stares—women stared at him in horror, and men stared at him in suspicion. He had become accustomed to ignoring them and so he simply ignored it. His eyes roved the room and then stopped when he spotted the same gentleman, staring straight at him again.

Sidney straightened up. He felt the hostile nature of that gaze and it made him tense instantly. Whoever that was—they were too far away for him to see the face properly—their posture was stiff and tensed as if for a fight, aggression radiating from them even across the gap of twenty yards that was between the man and himself.

Sidney squared his shoulders. He was used to hostile stares, and he was not afraid. He

had lived through a horrible accident, and he was a skilled dueler. He had no fear for his life—not at the hands of the man who stared at him, at any rate.

He took eight paces forwards.

At the closer vantage, he stared and stopped. He recognized the man. It was Hubert, Lord Graystone. Lady Anastasia's father. He was looking at Sidney with an expression of anger. Sidney looked around. He had not directly received an invitation. Lady Graystone had mentioned the musicale to his mother, that was all. His mother had then mentioned it to him, suggesting that he would be welcome to attend. The look on Lord Graystone's face did not suggest he was welcome.

Lord Graystone saw him approach and held his gaze. There was an astonished look on the man's face; it was evident even from twelve paces away across the crowded room.

He is scared of me, Sidney realized. But then, being scared never made anyone less deadly.

The more afraid someone was, the more likely they were to strike out or do some desperate act.

Sidney stared hard at the earl, then turned away. The fellow hadn't come to throw him out yet, and that was perhaps a good sign. Not that he would necessarily interrupt his wife's musicale to do such a thing—perhaps even the earl, who seemed to have limits on his concept of manners, would not sink that low.

He gazed around the room. He knew nobody there—the circles in which he moved did not include anybody who was known to the earl and countess, apparently, despite the similarity of their status. He drew a breath, his heart thudding. He was not there to stand about talking—he was there to talk to Lady Anastasia. Staring around the room,

he tried to locate her.

His gaze narrowed as he spotted a red-haired young lady wearing a blue-and-white dress. It was Lady Camilla. He gazed at her, hoping that Lady Anastasia was standing near her. He spotted a young lady in white, whose honey-brown hair was in an elaborate style. She was giggling and seemed happy and something about her reminded him of Lady Anastasia, though he could not have said exactly what. He saw pale blonde hair close by and realized that Lady Anastasia was indeed there, talking to both the young ladies. The young lady in white must be Lady Anastasia's sister, he guessed. His heart warmed to see the joyful interchange between the two. He drew a breath, hurrying forward to talk to them. Lord Graystone was doubtless watching, but he felt bold. He would just exchange a sentence or two with her and then he would make his way home. He did not think that Lady Anastasia could get into trouble—after all, she had not invited him, and nor had her mother. Not directly, anyway.

“Excuse me. Sorry,” he murmured, ducking through the crowd, attempting to cross the room to reach Lady Anastasia.

His movement through the ballroom was slow and he stopped, a large group blocking his way. It was five young men, all of them smelling no better than Giles on an evening —the scent of brandy mixing sourly with strong pomade. Giles, at least, never wore pomade. Sidney breathed in and tried to navigate his way past them. As he did, he heard someone in the group talking loudly.

“And he agreed! I am most blessed.”

“He did?” One of the younger men was impressed. “Fortunate chap!”

“I suppose I am.” The man speaking was tall—though not as tall as Sidney was—with blue eyes and blond hair. “She is a respectable young lady.”

Sidney felt his frown deepen. He recognized that man from somewhere. He lingered beside the group, listening as another man spoke. He needed to know who the man was, why his face tugged unpleasantly at his memory.

“Certainly. Well done, old chap.”

“Lord Graystone is lucky, too,” someone else commented.

“Not really,” the blonde man said lightly. “Someone was bound to offer. Lady Anastasia’s charm is equaled only by her breeding.”

“Hear, hear!” A man yelled.

Sidney shut his eyes. He felt sick. He knew that the man was the one who he had seen dancing with Lady Anastasia. He was boasting that her father had agreed to marry her to him.

Sidney backed away. He stumbled through the room and to the doors.

“Your Grace?” A footman addressed him. “May I help you?”

“My coat,” he muttered.

“At once, Your Grace.”

The man hurried to fetch Sidney’s greatcoat, and he tugged it on. He had walked across town to Lady Anastasia’s parents’ townhouse. It was a long walk back home and the night was cold. He buttoned his coat without having to think about it and walked briskly down the stairs. He could not bear to stay there.

The walk across town was cold and it took over an hour. By the time he arrived home

it was almost midnight. He hurried up the stairs to the drawing room and stopped. There was a lamp burning there. He approached cautiously.

“Mama?” he murmured.

His mother was there, sitting at the table. Candles burned to light the book she read. She saw him and turned, a radiant smile on her lips.

“What is it, Sidney?” she asked gently.

“Nothing,” he said firmly.

His mother frowned. “I will choose to believe you,” she said gently. “Come and sit down, son. Should I send for some tea? You look chilled through.”

Sidney shook his head. He had removed his greatcoat at the door, but he did, indeed, feel chilled, as though the cold London springtime had seeped inside him, and he could not get warm.

“No, thank you, Mama. I should retire to bed.”

“Son, are you certain there is nothing troubling you?” Her green eyes—the image of his own—scanned his face.

Sidney tensed. He had become used to flinching at such direct stares. But it was his mother—one of the only people who never judged. He relaxed and drew a breath.

“Mama...there is something.” He drew a breath. He could almost not find the words to talk about it. The pain seared through him like a knife wound.

“What is it?” she asked gently. “If I can be of any help...” she began. He shook his

head.

“Nobody can.” He could not speak for a moment. “Mama...there is a woman. She means—she means the world to me.”

“Lady Anastasia.”

“You know?” Sidney gazed at her in utter astonishment. She smiled softly.

“I have seen the way you look at her, and she at you. It is rare to see two people look like that.” Sidney drew a breath. His mother’s words both delighted and wounded him. “Truly?”

“Yes.” His mother nodded. Her green eyes searched his face. She frowned. “What is it, son?”

“She...she is engaged to be married.”

“What?” Mama looked shocked.

“Yes. I only just found out this evening. To that...that man she danced with.” He did not know the fellow and even speaking of him filled him with a spasm of rage. The fellow barely looked at her and he had arranged to court Lady Anastasia purely for the money that would be bestowed on her at her wedding. He sought to locate the gentleman and deliver him a most vigorous blow.

“But...” His mother looked confused, but then her face tensed, confusion clearing. “I do not believe it. Her mother did not tell me. She seemed not to know either.”

“Maybe it is recent,” Sidney suggested.

“No.” His mother shook her head. “No. Such things cannot happen overnight. You know that. I do not believe she would not have known.”

“But then...” Sidney gaped. The whole thing must have been arranged over months. And yet, he could not believe that. Lady Anastasia would not have looked at him like that if she had known about it.

“Her mother certainly did not know. She would have told me. She would not have agreed to have you there this evening was that not the case.”

“She agreed...?” Sidney stared at her, round-eyed.

“Yes.” His mother smiled. “Did you not know? She wished you to be there.”

“No!” Sidney raised a brow in disbelief.

“Yes,” his mother replied, grinning.

“But why would she...when...when...” Sidney trailed off.

“I do not know, son. Perhaps you heard a rumour only.”

Sidney shook his head. “But people do not lie about themselves.”

“He told you?” His mother gaped in shock.

“Not directly,” Sidney demurred. He felt exhausted, and it was not because of the lateness of the hour. The hurt and shock drained his vitality.

“Good. I cannot imagine that creature approaching you directly.” His mother was stiff with anger.

He smiled. “I am glad to say he did not. If he had, I might be in a duel right now.” He shrugged.

“Sidney!” his mother looked upset. He let out a sigh.

“Sorry, Mama.”

His mother gazed at him sorrowfully. “I wish there was aught that I could do to help you,” she said gently. Her green eyes matched the sorrow that he felt. Sidney held her hand.

“You cannot, Mama. Nobody can.”

“But it’s so sudden,” Mama replied, a frown creasing her brow. “I am certain Lady Graystone knew nothing.”

Sidney tensed. “Her father hates me—perhaps rightly, perhaps not—and he would do anything to keep me away. Even marry Lady Anastasia to that...that...” he let out his breath sharply.

“I do not believe that he hates you,” his mother said carefully.

“He certainly acts like he does.”

His mother shook her head, a sad expression on her face. Sidney did not know what to say. He did not want to upset her. He went to her and took her hands, and she squeezed his fingers tightly. Her gaze was gentle as she looked into his eyes.

“I am sorry, my son,” she said softly. “I am most upset.”

“Please don’t be,” Sidney said gently. He did not want to cause her pain. He took a deep breath. “It is bad enough that I am.”

She nodded.

“Yes,” she said gently. “That is so.”

He squeezed her fingers again and then turned to the door, ready to go to his room to rest.

He undressed hastily and rinsed his face and mouth at the bowl on the nightstand, then slipped into bed. He lay down, but all that played through his mind was images of Lady Anastasia. He rolled over, trying to push them away, but he could not manage to do so. He drew the covers close, feeling tormented and desperate for the morning so he might do something—whatever he could think of—to relieve the situation in which he found himself. He could not do less.

“It is not true.”

Anastasia said the words aloud, the silence around her echoing, seeming to defy the very notion. She gazed around the empty drawing room. The fire crackled in the grate, banishing the slight chill of the spring morning. The chintz-covered chairs were lit by the cloudy light that came through the windows. The long velvet curtains were open on the balcony, but she barely noticed the scene. Her mind was numbed by horror.

“He can’t have,” she whispered.

Her father had granted Lord Ridley permission to wed her. If Lord Ridley obtained the special license...then she would be married next week.

She gazed out of the window, unable to think.

Her mind filled with horror. Lord Ridley, riding with her in the coach, without Rachel there to protect her. Lord Ridley sitting across from her at tea, feeling free to say the most preposterous things, and pout and sulk at nothing. Lord Ridley being alone with her in any room of the house, with nobody to protect her.

“God,” she whispered. “Please. Help me. I cannot do this.”

Shock and fear twisted her stomach, making a tight knot that made it hard to breathe. She was usually able to think of a way to resolve almost anything—she was brave and resourceful. But now her mind was empty. All she could do was stare out of the window, trying to convince herself that it was all a horrid dream.

Except that it wasn't.

She had just spoken with her father, who had summoned her to his office. Mama and Lily had gone to town, so there was nobody to talk to, nobody to confide in. She wanted to run to somebody, to beg for help. She had pleaded with her father, but he had told her that she should be pleased, that it was honorable to be marrying a viscount and that Lord Ridley was sufficiently wealthy to provide amply for her.

"I cannot only live on silk handkerchiefs and roast pheasant, Papa," she protested. "What of my soul?"

Her father had shrugged. "Silk handkerchiefs and roast pheasant are good," was all he had said.

At the memory of that, Anastasia could not hold back. She began to sob. She had not known what love was when she met Lord Ridley—the beauty and joy of romantic love. She had only dreamed of it.

"Now I know what it is," she sobbed. She had met the Duke of Willowick, and he cherished and cared for her. He talked to her and listened. He held her hand and danced with her and gazed at her with love. He laughed and joked with her. He cared.

All she had ever got from Lord Ridley was accusations, fear, and belittling. He did not love her. He did not even seem to like her.

"God, please," Anastasia whispered.

She could not do this.

"Daughter?" a voice called from the hallway. Anastasia gasped, standing. Her eyes were wet with tears and her mother, who was in the drawing room doorway, ran to

her, arms outstretched.

“My dear!” she exclaimed, hugging Anastasia tightly. “My sweet daughter. Whatever is troubling you?”

Anastasia held onto her mother, drawing strength from her calm, soft presence.

“Mama,” she managed to say between sobs. “Please. Please talk to Papa?”

Her mother gazed at her, confusion knotting her brow. Then, slowly, it seemed as though she guessed what had happened, because her confusion cleared, replaced with care.

“Come, dear,” she murmured. “Come and sit down.”

Anastasia tensed. She allowed her mother to lead her to the chair, but she looked up at her before sitting down.

“Did you know?” she demanded.

“No,” her mother answered. Anastasia gazed into her hazel eyes, and she knew that she was not lying.

“How can he?” Anastasia whispered. “How can he do this? I do not even like the man.”

Her mother took a deep breath. “I did not know, but I thought it might happen,” she said carefully. “Your father was clearly most taken with the man. His extreme wealth has been impressive to him, I think...and that is what has done this.”

“I don’t care if he’s wealthy,” Anastasia sobbed. “I can’t live on gold alone. What

will I do without anyone to care for me? Without anyone to talk to?"

Her mother shook her head. "I don't know, daughter," she said gently. "I will still be here. I will visit as often as I can. And Ridley Estate is not far away from London. We will, at least, see each other often."

"Mama..." Anastasia started to sob even harder. She had hoped her mother could do something, could help her in some way. But she seemed to have accepted the idea that Anastasia would wed the viscount without question.

"Sweetheart," her mother said gently. "I know it's not easy. But society is full of such arrangements. You will be well taken care of. That is something, is it not?"

Anastasia swallowed hard. She gazed at her mother's face. She could see care there, and concern, but her mother did not sound as though she really understood. How could she think that being well-moneyed would even matter? Whatever her material circumstances, being loved would always be more important.

"Mama...it's not just about Lord Ridley. You know I am in love," she tried to explain.

"With the duke," her mother said softly.

Anastasia nodded. "Yes. With the duke." She gazed into her mother's eyes. Her mother looked sad, but it still seemed as though she would do nothing to help.

"My dear, perhaps this is for the best," her mother began. "We all have hardships, and..."

"I would rather face material hardship. I would rather be on the street, and I mean it!" Anastasia said firmly. "Anything would be better than that...that..."

“Shh,” her mother said gently, taking her hands in hers. “Mayhap it won’t be that bad. After all, the viscount must have to be in London often. A man of such wealth is often busy in the town. Mayhap you will not see him often.”

Anastasia cleared her throat, a lump blocking it. “Mayhap,” she said softly. “But what of when he is at home? How can I bear it?”

Her mother shook her head. “I don’t know, daughter,” she said gently. “Your father and I were never close. I wed him because my own father arranged the marriage. I had wanted better for you, but perhaps there is nothing better. I cannot presume to tell you anything because I don’t know more myself.”

Anastasia gripped her mother’s hands. Horror filled her. She was truly going to have to spend the rest of her life with that monstrous, oafish man. She longed to escape. She gazed out of the window.

“I am sorry, daughter,” mama said slowly. Her own voice was full of pain. “I cannot compel him to alter his opinion. All I can do is assure you that I shall visit frequently. Lily shall do the same,” she added.

“No,” Anastasia sobbed. She wished she could accept what Mama was saying. But she could not lose them. She could not lose everything that mattered.

“My lady? Lady Anastasia?” The butler appeared in the doorway.

“Yes?” Mama asked.

“Lady Camilla is here. Should I show her...” he began. Anastasia shot to her feet with alarm. She had forgotten Camilla had said she would drop in. She was about to ask the butler to tell Camilla that she was in town, but then Camilla appeared in the doorway. She saw Anastasia’s tears—as she had feared she would—and her hand

rose to her lips.

“Anastasia! What is amiss?”

Anastasia sat down heavily. She could not hold back the convulsive sobs that had threatened to burst forth all morning. She had been crying, but in the presence of her friend, she did not feel the need to maintain the frosty exterior that she had held to. She sobbed so that her shoulders shook. Tears ran down her face and soaked her hair.

“What is it?” Camilla asked when Anastasia managed to sit up. Both of them were wet with her tears, a big stain on Camilla’s white-and-green dress showing where she had leaned while she sobbed. She gestured to it.

“Sorry,” she whispered.

Camilla shook her head. “It is of no mportance,” she insisted gently. “What is amiss?”

Anastasia drew a deep breath. Her mother had slipped discreetly out while they talked, and she was grateful to her. She needed to be able to talk frankly to Camilla and she could only do that while Mama was not there listening to them.

“Papa just told me that he has accepted Ridley’s offer,” she told Camilla, the news no longer so shocking that she could not even say it. “He gave him permission to...”

“You have to marry Ridley?” Camilla exclaimed.

“Yes,” Anastasia whispered. She felt strengthened by Camilla’s horrified tone.

“No,” Camilla said at once, as shocked as Anastasia herself was. “No. That is too much. I have heard of convenience, but that is...that is preposterous! The man is

horrid.” Her eyes were wide and round.

“I know,” Anastasia whispered. “But I don’t know what to do. Mama cannot help,” she added sadly. She understood that.

If she were to have a child with Ridley, she would be unable to help them, too, in such a situation. She would have to do as he said.

“What about the duke?” Camilla asked instantly.

“Mama...mama said that perhaps this is better.”

“No!” Camilla clasped her hand to her lips. “No. I cannot believe it!” She shook her head in outrage. “But...but what if he knew?” she asked slowly.

“The duke?” Anastasia gaped. “No. No...He cannot know.”

Camilla frowned. “Why? He should know. He would do something, I think. You are the daughter of an earl. You don’t need to wed a viscount.”

Anastasia shook her head. “I don’t want him to know.”

“But why?” Camilla asked.

“He will believe that I always knew. He will think I was fooling him.”

“He wouldn’t think that,” she answered instantly.

“Ridley is obtaining a license,” Anastasia told her. “He wants to be able to wed by next week.”

“What?” Camilla clapped her hand to her mouth. “No. I cannot believe it! So soon?”

Anastasia nodded. “I cannot do this,” she said softly.

Camilla gazed back, a direct, firm gaze. “Nobody should make you,” she said defiantly.

Anastasia shrugged. She knew that her family would not share that view. Her father saw wealth only. Her mother was too afraid to help. And Lily...she could do nothing. She was not even in society herself.

Anastasia took a deep breath.

She and Camilla talked for an hour, but neither of them could think of anything she could do. Anastasia felt assured by her presence, the kindness and compassion healing her.

She walked with Camilla to the door.

“Do not lose heart,” Camilla whispered.

Anastasia nodded and squeezed her friend’s fingers.

When Camilla had returned home, she went up to the drawing room. She sat silently, watching the fire. She had to come up with a plan, and soon.

She could not stay in London. If she escaped, it would have to be far away, right away. But that was impossible. She knew nobody outside London and the estate where she had grown up in the countryside. There was nobody she could run to.

There had to be something she could do. There had to be somewhere she could go,

somewhere she could run to. There was some solution and the fact that it did not come to her immediately was frustrating—she was so good at thinking of solutions usually.

She sat gazing into the fire, but no plans would come. The horror swamped everything, outweighing all else. The answer was far from easy to spot. But she would find it.

And she had to think of it soon, before Ridley was an inescapable fact.

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“Anny. Are you sure?” Lily’s voice was a hushed whisper in the bedchamber. Anastasia nodded. After a day of thinking, she had come to the only conclusion that she could. She had to run away. Camilla had an aunt on the border with Scotland, and if she escaped up there, she might stay with Aunt Gertrude as a companion. It was not the life that she might choose for herself, but it was safety. It was not Ridley.

It was the best she could do.

“Yes.” Her voice was firm. “Yes, I am sure.”

“But, Anny,” Lily whispered. “It is so dangerous. You cannot travel on your own.”

“I can,” Anastasia assured her. “I will wear Rachel’s dress and travel by day.” It was the best she could do. Women did travel on the mail-coaches sometimes—mostly women from less well-to-do backgrounds, and even then, they did not travel for a week at a time, as she had to. It was dangerous—that was a fact—but she could not let herself fear.

“I’m going to come with you.” Lily gazed at Anastasia, her hazel gaze unwavering, allowing no argument.

“Lily, you can’t.” Anastasia wanted to cry. She had told Lily only because she did not want her sister to be afraid or worried. She should have guessed that Lily would be both regardless. “It is dangerous and it is no life for a young lady. You have nothing to run away from.”

“But, if it is your life, I want to share it.” Lily said forcefully.

Anastasia took a deep breath. "I am doing this because I have no other choice, Lily," she said softly.

"You do. Your gallant suitor." Lily's gentle young face was filled with trust and hope.

"No." Anastasia's voice choked. "No." She struggled not to cry. She could not do that. Even if the duke were to help, what could he do? Ridley would challenge him and then he might die. She did not want to be responsible for anyone's death. Her father had already made up his mind and there was no defying him. It was Ridley or escape. Those were the only options. If she thought of the duke now, she would not be able to do as she must.

"Yes. He would help you," Lily insisted.

Anastasia shook her head. Camilla had said the same, only a few hours ago. She could not let herself think of the duke.

"I have made my decision," she said gently. "Lily, you cannot come with me. I cannot let my pain be yours."

"It is anyway," Lily insisted.

Anastasia let out a deep breath. She reached for her sister, clinging tightly to her. "I love you, sweet Lily."

Tears coursed down her cheeks as she held her sister's soft, gentle form against her. Lily was clinging to her, and she knew that if she stayed here, safe in the circle of her sister's familiar embrace, she could not leave. She tensed and stepped back.

"I must dress," she told Lily gently. "Please, sister. I have to do this. I will be safe."

Mr. Jackson will drive me to the mail-coach. He has promised to help me.” She had asked Rachel to lend her a gown, and she had asked Mr. Jackson, the coach-driver, to take her as far as the coach. The two staff members were loyal, and she knew they would help her.

“I know, Anny,” Lily said softly. “But...but...it’s still so dangerous.” She blinked and Anastasia could see tears in her eyes.

“I will be safe,” Anastasia insisted.

Lily gazed at her and then ran to her, hugging her again. Anastasia clung to her, and she had to fight the urge to stay, to remain with her loved ones even if it was only for a little longer.

“I will write,” Anastasia promised. She would have to. She would remain in contact with Lily and perhaps in time her family would forgive her. Papa might never forgive the disgrace, but that was something she was prepared to face. Her life and liberty had immeasurable worth to her, and her father’s opinion did not have enough worth for her to risk either of those things.

“Write often,” Lily demanded. She was crying noisily now, and she hiccupped, trying to hold back her tears. “I will miss you, sister.” Anastasia nodded. “I will see you again,” she promised.

She turned around as Lily rushed through the door of the room. Anastasia sobbed, then stiffened. She had only a few minutes to make an escape.

She reached for the rough-woven gown. It was made of wool, and she shrugged it on over her shift, surprised by the weight of it. Her own gowns were much lighter fabric.

She hastily tugged on her walking shoes—thin leather boots that came to just above

her ankles and were tied with laces—and lifted her valise. She had packed just two gowns and two shifts, a nightgown, and a pair of indoor shoes. Anything else would be too cumbersome.

Blinking to clear her eyes of tears, she hurried from the room.

The hallway was silent, and dark, as she expected. The butler had retired to his rooms an hour before, and the lamps and candles were all unlit. She found her way to the staircase by memory. Her eyes gradually accustomed, so that when she found the entrance door and pushed at it, she could see the sapphire glow that came from the windows.

The cold in the street hit her like a blow. She drew in a breath. The breeze was chilly, but she had a shawl with her, and she clutched it tight around her shoulders. Her heart thudded. Even in this quiet area of London, the streets were not safe at night. She glanced down the street, the sound of her own blood thundering in her ears. She could see nobody. A pine torch flickered brightly against a wall somewhere—one of the houses in the street must have held a party or ball and had lit the way for guests. She drew a breath, half-expecting someone to spot her, then ran.

The coach house was around the back of the townhouse, and she hurried there, heart thudding in her chest.

“All is in order, my lady.”

Mr. Jackson made her freeze to the spot in fright as he spoke. Anastasia gasped, then shook her head at herself.

“Good. Thank you.”

“We must hurry. The mail coach will depart from Gerrard Street at one o’ clock.”

“We must hurry,” Anastasia agreed. She stepped into the coach as he opened the door, the black coach-horses snorting as she walked past. They must have wondered as to why they were being brought out to work so late. She swung into the coach and shut the door behind her. She was on her way.

Mr. Jackson swung into his seat on the top, and then they rattled out of the coach house and into the street. He jumped down to shut the gate, and then they were off. The coach moved slowly, so as not to attract unnecessary attention from any watchmen—though nobody could say anything about a noble using their own coach, whatever the hour. They rattled down the street towards Bond Street. There, they would cross town until they reached Gerrard Street. It was a distance of only a mile, just a few minutes in the coach. Anastasia gripped her valise, her heart twisting as they moved slowly past the familiar things around her. There was the building on the end of their street, with its curious crenelations. There was the big tree near where she and Camilla often met to walk together. The coachman stopped, wrenching the horses back in such a swift motion that Anastasia screamed as she plunged forward off the seat. Her valise tumbled to the floor, and she dragged herself upright into the seat again, tucking her hair back from her face.

“What in Perdition...?” she began in shock. But she had only just managed to get back onto the seat when the door flew open.

“I’m coming with you!”

Lily hauled herself into the coach, a cloth bag on her back. She blinked up at Anastasia, grinning through tears.

“I could not stay without you,” Lily insisted, pulling herself into the seat and shutting the door. “I felt it incumbent upon me to attend, for I cannot bear to be apart from you, dear sister. Wherever you venture, I wish to accompany you.”

Anastasia felt her heart twist. Lily was smiling at her, full of trust. The coachman had started to drive the coach forward again. Lily looked happy. Anastasia was delighted to see her, despite her shock that her sister had run out alone.

“You impossible...” She shook her head, grinning at her sister’s gentle face that was lit with joy. “How on Earth did you manage to sneak out?”

“I heard the door. I could not endure the thought of your departure. As soon as you slipped away, I hastened to the end of the street and took my stand, knowing the carriage must inevitably arrive here. I awaited your return with bated breath, for I could not imagine my existence without you. The very notion was insufferable.”

Anastasia shook her head. “You’re remarkable,” she said gently.

Lily leaned back in the coach, her eyes round. “Is it very far to Scotland?” she asked.

Anastasia took a breath. The mail-coach would go all the way to Edinburgh, but they would disembark before then. Camilla’s aunt lived on her estate near Berwick-upon-Tweed. The town was three-hundred-and-fifty miles from London.

“A long way,” she murmured. “We will be a week in the coach.”

Lily gulped. “That’s...good.”

Anastasia stared at her sister’s pale, frightened face. She was dressed in a white gown and pelisse. Her soft hair was in ringlets, and she looked so sweet and gentle that Anastasia’s heart melted. She was young—just sixteen. She was full of life, and she loved balls and parties. If she went to the border, there would be no hope of that. She would be disgraced, barred from reentering London society, even if she chose to return. And what if she went to stay there? What life was there for her? She would have to live with Camilla’s aunt as well, and that would mean a life without balls and

parties, without dancing and shops and museums and galleries and music. There would be none of the things that Lily loved. She would have turned her back on all of that, simply because she loved her sister and could not bear to be parted from her. It was unfair. It was wrong.

“I cannot do this,” Anastasia whispered.

“We can,” Lily insisted.

“No.” Anastasia shook her head. Staring into that youthful, joyful face, she knew that she could not condemn her sister to a life that would deprive her of everything she loved. “We are not going. We are going home.”

“But Anny?” Lily frowned. “What about Lord Ridley? What of you, and being free, and everything...”

“This is not freedom either,” Anastasia said firmly. “It would be another kind of prison. And it is one I will not share with you. We are returning home.”

“Anny...”

“No,” she said softly. “Stop the coach!” Anastasia shouted, banging on the roof to get the coachman to hear. She had to do it fast, before she lost her nerve. They did not have far to go—they were moving past Hyde Park. She could see the railing in the light from pine torches on a house nearby. The coach slowed and stopped.

“My lady?” Mr. Jackson jumped down from the box, opening the door. Anastasia let out a breath.

“We are going home. Please turn the coach around. Thank you,” she added numbly. She was giving up the one wild escape she had left. It had been bold, but it had taken

the notion of sharing it with Lily to make her see she was not running towards freedom. She was simply running away from one horrible situation into, quite possibly, another one.

She felt the coach start, and she leaned back, gazing at Lily. Her sister looked calmer, though she held onto Anastasia's hand firmly, as if daring anything to come between them.

Anastasia swallowed hard; her heart flooded with love. If it were not for Lily, she would be racing to the mail-coach by now, on her way towards Scotland and a journey which would change her life. Becoming a companion to a remote, eccentric noblewoman was a decision she could not reverse—once she was there, she would have to remain there because she could never go back to society after that.

I am doing the right thing, she told herself firmly. Love had made her decision—love of Lily and, ultimately, love for herself as well. It would be no life for her on the border with Camilla's aunt, either.

All she could do was pray that she had made the right choice and that something—some remarkable thing—would happen to help her.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am

“Giles...I don’t know what to do.” Sidney rested his head in his hands. It was one o’ clock in the morning, and Giles had walked into the billiard room where Sidney had been sitting by the fire, unable to sleep. The firelight flickered over the expensive mahogany tabletop, painting a pattern of light and shade that Sidney focused on. He gazed briefly at Giles, whose squarish face was flushed with the firelight.

“Not so easy, old chap,” Giles agreed. “Could you duel the fellow?”

Sidney tilted his head. “I could,” he agreed. He had long considered dueling with Lord Ridley—ever since he found out the news about Anastasia. “But if I challenge him, he’ll choose the weapons. And I don’t trust him not to cheat.”

“Pistols?” Giles asked. His voice slurred the word, but only slightly. His hazel eyes seemed alert, as though he was taking in all that Sidney said.

“Mm.” Sidney nodded. “And we all know that it’s not so hard to cheat. I don’t know if I want to die.” He shook his head. He felt as though his life was not worth living without Anastasia, but there was a small part of him that did not want to end it. He had seen death all too recently—that cut-off silence, the horror of a life ceased before its time. He did not want that—not for himself, and not for his family.

“That’s not even a question,” Giles said with a snort. “Of course, you want to live. Even an earthworm will fight for its life.”

Sidney frowned. “But you...” When Amelia, Lady Amery’s daughter, had run away, Giles had hovered in a drunken stupor for weeks. He had come close to death then. It was perhaps only luck that saved him.

Giles nodded. “Mm. And that’s precisely why I tell you that you want to live. You know what’s the best thing about life?” he asked. He leaned on the table, reaching for a bottle and pouring it.

“No,” Sidney murmured.

“Hope.”

Sidney frowned. That was one thing he lacked.

“If you’re dead,” Giles continued patiently, sipping at whatever it was he had poured, “then everything stays as it is. Nothing can change. All your problems stay the same, the future stops. Your mistakes stay and you can change not one piece of it.”

“Mm.” Sidney nodded. The image of his father’s desk returned to him, the pieces of paper, the unwritten correspondence, the pen still dipped in the ink, waiting for him.

“If you’re dead, nothing can change,” Giles continued. “Not even your mind. But if you live...now...that is something different. In life, everything can change in an instant. What you have lost can be found. What you have wronged, you can right. What you did not know, you can learn. In life, all that can happen.”

“Mm.” Sidney grunted. In that moment, the words—while appealing—did not make much sense to him.

“When your father died,” Giles said, just a little callously, “what was it that hurt the most.”

“That he wasn’t here anymore,” Sidney replied at once.

“Quite so. He wasn’t here anymore. His story here—his song—was silent. It

stopped.”

“Yes,” Sidney answered, just a little impatiently. Giles had lost his father, too—he had no right to be callous. He was just about to say that, when Giles continued.

“You don’t want your song to stop, Sidney. The best bits haven’t played yet.” His voice was gentle.

Sidney shook his head. “I don’t know that.”

“I do,” Giles said. His gaze held Sidney’s. Sidney stared into his cousin’s eyes, watching the firelight flicker there, and wondered why he had never noticed they were so intense. Giles had once been his best friend. He gazed at him, listening to his words. “Want to know how I know?” his cousin asked casually. “How I know that you haven’t lived the best bits yet?”

“Yes,” Sidney grunted. “I do want to know.”

“Because you’re not dead. That’s how.” Giles fixed him with his gaze. “If you were meant to be, you would be. But you’re not. Makes sense?”

Sidney let out his breath in a sigh. “Yes,” he admitted.

It did make sense. It made about the only sense that anything had made that evening. He had tried to take dinner, but he had no appetite. He had excused himself from the table early and retired to his room, thinking that he could read until he fell asleep. Sleep had not come. All he could think of was Anastasia. Her smile, her pale blue eyes alight with joy and hope and humor. He had come to the billiard room, thinking that he could distract himself with the newspaper or even play a round or two of billiards, but it had already been past midnight, and his brain would not settle.

“So,” Giles continued, bringing his thoughts back to the moment. “Since you’re alive, stands to reason there’s more in store. Am I making sense?” He poured something from the bottle again. Sidney braced himself for the stench of spirits, but oddly, it didn’t hit him.

“Yes,” Sidney answered. “Yes. You make sense.”

“Good,” Giles replied, sounding pleased.

Sidney gazed at him. Giles was the only person who had been so candid, who had discussed so openly the pain that he was feeling. It felt good to talk to someone, and especially it felt good to talk to someone who did not judge, who seemed to understand.

“It’s just...” Sidney sighed. “She’s the only woman who has ever looked at me like that.” He looked down at the table. He had never admitted to anyone—not Mama, not Amy, not Henry or anyone else—how he felt. The scarring had not just scarred his face. It had touched his soul. He had always been proud of how he looked. Not vain, just proud. He had enjoyed being handsome, like Papa. He had enjoyed coming from a beautiful family. Now, whenever he went into public situations, people stared and gawped. He hated it. Sometimes he was angry with them, but mostly he wanted to hide. Hide somewhere in the hills and never come out.

“That’s not true,” Giles countered, sipping his water. “You remain quite fair in appearance. Behold the charm of your eyes; they possess a captivating allure. You are most certainly a dashed heart-breaker.”

Sidney bit his lip. “No.” The word was hard. “No, I’m not. I’m scarred and hideous. People look away, Giles. Miss Highbury, she...” His throat tightened, not letting him express the pain and hurt he felt when she gazed away as though he was a fearful, hideous sight.

“One person looked away.” Giles fixed him with a hard stare. “Not everybody does.”

“Mostly the people who don’t look away are family,” Sidney retorted.

Giles let out a sigh. “Yes. But they like you for who you are. They won’t be the only ones, you know. We’re family but we’re not saints. If we didn’t like you, we wouldn’t.” He laughed. “You’re a pleasant person. It counts for something.”

Sidney shot him an angry glance. “Maybe.”

Giles just smiled. Sidney looked at him closely. He had become used to his cousin having unfocused eyes, his clothes rumpled and his hair a mess. This evening, he did not look like that. If Sidney breathed in, he could smell a little brandy, but nothing like the usual torrent.

“Just don’t forget about tomorrow, cousin.” Giles gazed at him. “It’s the most magical thing we have. We are aware of the events that transpired on the morrow past. The happenings of the day before us remain uncertain—we may hold our assumptions, yet we cannot be certain. As for the morrow to come, well... it is a realm of infinite possibilities.”

Sidney swallowed hard. “I know what will happen,” he whispered. He knew too well. He would never be happy; he would retire somewhere to a monastery and Giles would take over Willowick. Mama would die of a broken heart and the dukedom would wither away.

Giles raised a brow. “No, you don’t. You don’t even know what’s going to happen in an hour’s time.”

Sidney shook his head. “Yes, I do. Absolutely nothing. It’s almost three o’ clock, Giles. Nothing happens at three o’ clock in the morning.” He felt frustrated. His

cousin had made some sense, but now he did not want to hear what he had to say. It was difficult to think about tomorrow. He wanted to sit in the dark and not think.

“The collier’s going to come soon,” Giles said, stifling a yawn. “And I’m going to go to bed. And the cook is going to get up and start baking the morning bread and pastries. So, you don’t even know what’s going to happen in an hour. Don’t imagine that you can say what will happen tomorrow. Tomorrow, it could all be different.”

Sidney just shot him a cross look.

Giles grinned. “You may be as vexed as you desire, my good fellow, yet do not direct your ire towards me. I assure you, I am well informed. Indeed, you shall come to understand as well.”

Sidney grunted. Giles walked to the door.

“Goodnight, cousin,” Sidney called as Giles stepped into the hallway. He felt a little guilty. Giles had sat with him and talked with him, listening to his sorrow as nobody else had. He had spent time with him when nobody else had and tried to talk to him about his deepest sadness.

Giles grinned. “Goodnight, cousin. The lamps are still burning in the hallway.”

“Thank you,” Sidney murmured. It was good to know that he could safely walk down the corridor without risking his neck on the stairs. He heard the door shut and he leaned back and closed his eyes.

The blur of conversation drifted through his thoughts like smoke. He tried to sift it for sense. Oddly, after Giles’ words, he felt something that he had not felt before. While he did not exactly feel happy, he felt as though fresh vitality had been poured into him. He opened his eyes.

“Maybe Giles is right,” he said to himself in the darkened billiard-room. “Maybe I should see what happens.”

He shut his eyes briefly again. His head was pounding, a feeling as though he had whirled around very fast making his temples ache.

“I should go to bed,” he told himself aloud.

He stretched and yawned, standing up and limping to the door. The fire was burning, and he raked ash over the coals, then went out into the hallway, where, as Giles had said, the lamps were still lit.

He followed the lighted trail to his bedroom, and there he collapsed on the bed, his thoughts whirling, his head aching.

He shut his eyes, images of Anastasia pressing close. He was not going to lose hope. As Giles had said, there was always tomorrow, and he did not know what was going to happen.

He had to hope. He had to hold on just a little longer to see what would happen next.

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“I cannot,” Sidney whispered. He barely looked up at his mother, who stood in the doorway to the billiard room. He stared into the fireplace, watching the flames flicker and twist, folding together in a dance so complex that he could watch it for hours, losing himself in it and trying to imagine how to paint it, as though it was the only thing on his mind

“But Sidney...you ate no dinner last night. You must be starving. Please, I beg you, come and have breakfast.” his mother said.

Sidney swallowed hard. He could not eat. He was aware, distantly, that he felt shaky and exhausted, and that not eating was probably not helping him, but he could not make himself sit in the breakfast room. His mother would expect him to talk—worse, Aunt Harriet and Giles, who were visiting, would expect him to talk. He had nothing to say to either of them. Since hearing the news about Lord Ridley, he had not left the billiard room. He had shut himself in—though it was a room he hardly used, it was upstairs and away from everything and he disturbed nobody. He could seclude himself there and forget everything. For six days he had stayed there, leaving only to sleep and sometimes not even then.

“Mama, I cannot,” he murmured.

“Sidney. You’re going to make yourself ill,” his mother began, but when he held her gaze, she stopped. Sidney never insisted on anything, but when he had to, his stubborn streak outdid what his father’s had been—or so his mother always said.

“Mama, please. Let me have my peace.”

“Very well,” his mother said with a sigh.

“Thank you,” he said softly. He could see the pain in her eyes, and he knew he was causing her suffering. He could not do anything else, however. He could not sit in the breakfast room and converse with Aunt Harriet and pretend that he had a heart, as though his soul was not in torment.

My heart is not my own any longer and my soul...I do not know where it resides, save that it is not with me.

He could not live like this.

“I will be in the breakfast room,” his mother said gently. “Should you come down to join us, we would be delighted to see you.”

“Thank you, Mama,” Sidney replied.

He saw her hesitate in the doorway, and he knew she was struggling to let him sit there without eating, but he could not help it. He heard the door close quietly and he slumped.

“Please, God,” he whispered to the empty room. “I cannot do this.”

He leaned back on the leather-covered chair and closed his eyes. He had sat and thought for days. Part of his thoughts had been wild plans—retiring to a monastery, fleeing to pursue a career as a painter. But he knew those were not possible. Mama needed him. Amy and Henry needed him. The entire estate and the dukedom needed him. He had no choice but to stay.

He opened his eyes, looking around the room. The pale green wallpaper with its leaf design and the dark green velvet curtains were like a prison. Yet, staying imprisoned

in this room was better than having to venture out. Here, it was possible to forget everything—to watch the flames and act as though there was no world besides the four walls and the fire.

A knock at the door made him jump. Mama did not knock like that, so abruptly and harshly. He bit back a curse and remained silent. If it was the butler, he would know better than to disturb. Nobody else would be there.

Before he could say or do anything, the door burst open.

“Cousin!”

“Giles!” Sidney yelled. He shot to his feet. Rage flooded through him, and he might have walked briskly over, but his head pounded, and his legs felt weak. Not eating for two days was catching up with him. He swayed on his feet. Giles smiled.

“Cousin. Grand to see you. Are you going to come out?”

“Giles, get out of here,” Sidney grunted. He bit back a curse and stared at Giles. He expected that his cousin would be swaying with the effects of the previous evening. But his cousin was clear eyed when he looked at him, and only the mildest smell drifted from him to suggest he had drunk anything at all.

“I had some news,” Giles began. He was, Sidney thought, dressed in his smart evening jacket, as though he had come back from drinking and spent the night sleeping in the drawing room. Sidney bit his lip.

“What news?”

“I was in the Grantham,” Giles said slowly. “And a certain gentleman was there, too, boasting about his recent betrothal to a certain lady.” Giles’ eyes sparkled. Sidney

groaned.

“I know, Giles,” he said angrily. He had spoken to Giles about it just two evenings ago, when Giles happened to stumble into the room, reeking of brandy and barely able to stand up. It seemed as though Giles did not recall a single word of that conversation, though he had spoken at length. “I don’t need to hear about it.”

“Well, I heard more than just that,” Giles confided. “And I had to come in to tell you as soon as you awoke.”

“I’ve been awake for four hours,” Sidney countered. He had woken when the collier came, at four o’ clock in the morning, and he had not slept since the sound of the coal being delivered to the kitchen downstairs. “What did you hear? Tell me,” he added, seeing Giles’ eyes sparkle.

“The gentleman we are discussing mentioned that he was glad of the money that her father would give him after the wedding. It would pay off his debts. His friends seemed gladdened by the news—I take it they are owed the money.”

“What difference does that...” Sidney began, then blinked as a fact dropped into his head. “Wait...”

He did not know Lord Ridley well—he’d only seen the fellow once or twice. But no rumor had ever suggested that the man was deeply in debt. Most rumors he had heard suggested he was rich, in fact. And that was doubtless what her family believed.

“It does seem that Lord Graystone believes otherwise, too,” Giles said with a grin. “And I reckon that, were this to be known, it would be another matter. The earl is a good friend of all those who are good investors, you know.”

“What?” Sidney blinked again, confused. “Giles...how do you know all this?”

Giles just smiled. "I know more," he said swiftly. "If you rush to Graystone House, you might just make it in time to change things. Wedding's at nine o' clock."

"What?" Sidney gaped. "Giles. What? When?" He was on his feet already, hurrying to the door. "How? How do you know that?"

"A friend visited me," Giles said, and this time the grin was evident, as if he could not hide the warmth he felt. "She confided in me a great deal. Lady Anastasia is very dear to her, it seems."

"A friend? Giles, what?" Sidney's brow was lowered in a tight frown that made his head hurt. His entire body hurt, if he thought about it. Hunger made his temples throb, and his feet felt like they were carved from stone.

"Hurry, Sidney," Giles said swiftly. "You ought to change first."

"Giles?" Sidney frowned at him. "Why are you helping me?" He hadn't thought Giles had heard a word he said that night when they had sat in the billiard room and talked to one another. He had clapped him on the back when he was sobbing, and he had asked if he could help. Sidney had thought he had forgotten all that—Giles had seemed too drunk to remember any of it.

"I might be many things, cousin," Giles said, and his hazel eyes were level and clear and the eyes of his best friend. "But I am your steadfast friend. I hold you in the highest regard, akin to a brother. You must take your leave at once, before the vicar arrives."

Sidney nodded and ran to his room. He had an hour to change his clothing and get across town, and he was tired and hungry, and his head throbbed so much he could barely see. But hope was lending wings to him, and he ran to his room, rushing before it was too late.

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“You look so beautiful, sister.” Lily’s voice was quiet with awe. “Just like a princess.”

Anastasia felt her heart twist. She gazed into Lily’s hazel eyes, her heart so full of love that it ached in her chest. Soon, she would be at Ridley Estate and she would likely not see Lily often. Ridley was not far from London, just a few hours by coach, but something in her told her that Lord Ridley would not take kindly to visitors.

“Thank you, sweet Lily,” she murmured. “You are the dearest, dearest sister.” Her eyes were wet with tears. She looked at the ceiling. Her face was white with fear, and she knew that the tracks of tears down it would spoil her appearance. At the very least, she wanted to be proud of how she looked. She gazed at the looking glass critically. Lily’s words lifted her heart, making her see herself, for a moment, as she did.

The long white dress was silk, the sleeves translucent puffs of fabric. The neckline was oval and low, and the dress fell from the fashionably high waist to below her ankles. Her hair was arranged in a low chignon, the ringlets she usually wore at the front tighter than usual, hanging in formal rows. The silky fabric of the dress, gauze-covered, shimmered as she moved. It was a beautiful dress, and her face, above, was a solemn, long oval, her high cheekbones and slight features not as obvious as her wide, sorrowful eyes.

“I must fetch something,” Lily said, running to the door.

“You look beautiful,” Anastasia called to her as she paused in the doorway. Lily wore a white dress of finest muslin, decorated with a pattern of roses in pink. Her long hair

was ringleted. She looked gentle and pretty. Anastasia's heart ached so much that she was sure she could feel no more sadness. She would miss Lily.

"Thank you, sister!" Lily called back. She did not look as sad as Anastasia had thought she would. She was grateful. She did not want Lily to be sad for any reason at all. Lily understood to some extent the horror of what Anastasia faced, and Anastasia was glad she did not understand it entirely.

She gazed at the looking glass. Rachel had done her hair silently, knowing how desperately Anastasia longed to run. She had said nothing, other than to compliment how she looked, and then she had gone out of the room. Anastasia felt her heart twist. She would miss her too—terribly much.

"Here we are." Lily returned, carrying a bouquet of pink and white roses. "They're from the garden, mostly. I had to pick them." Lily passed the bouquet to her, which was tied with a pink hair ribbon. Anastasia blinked, knowing she would cry and not caring if it showed. The gesture moved her more than anything else could ever have done. She lifted the bouquet, the beauty of the roses matching the sisterly love that they symbolized.

"I will keep it always."

"It will dry out," Lily protested.

Anastasia chuckled. Only her sister could bring a smile to her face in such a situation. "Then I will put it in a big, big book and press it, so that I have it always. It means the world to me."

"You have such a big book?" Lily looked unsure.

Anastasia laughed. "I will find one," she promised. She clutched the roses, knowing

that she truly would keep them forever, even if she had to find some other way to press them. They were precious.

Lily just gazed at her and Anastasia cleared her throat. She would cry more if she remained in the room with Lily and so she tried to sound happier. “Shall we find out where Mama is hiding?” she asked.

“No need,” Lily said. “She’s in the room next door. Shall I call her?”

Anastasia was about to say that Lily need not trouble herself, that she would go out and down the stairs to wait for the vicar, but Mama appeared in the doorway. Her face was red, and she wore a blue dress. She walked to Anastasia and hugged her, crushing her to her chest.

“Daughter. I am going to miss you so much.”

Anastasia shut her eyes, knowing that she was going to cry and cry. She tensed, trying to fight the tears as she smelled the familiar scent of her mother—floral perfume. She clung to her and fought her tears and wished that she could stay in the bedchamber with those two forever.

“The vicar is here, sweetling,” her mother told her. “His cart just rolled up now.”

Anastasia took a deep breath. She looked at Lily, whose big hazel eyes were confused rather than sad.

“Let us go,” she said, trying to sound lighthearted. “It shall be interesting—I’ve never seen a wedding.”

“Me, too.” Lily sounded interested. Anastasia’s heart lifted. She wanted Lily not to suffer. She did not want her to think marriage was tragic and about sorrow and pain.

Lily deserved better. And if she already believed the worst, she would not look for anything more.

She walked forward, going into the hallway and down the stairs. Lily hurried after her. Mama walked at a steady pace. Anastasia drew a breath, her heart thudding.

“Daughter. There you are. The vicar is here. We must hurry. Lord Ridley arrived ten minutes ago.” her father sounded worried.

“Men are supposed to wait,” Mama said lightly.

Papa shot her a look, but he did not argue. He seemed in a good mood, if a little agitated, and was wearing a gray velvet jacket and pale trousers. He was a good-looking man, if a little angry seeming. Anastasia gazed at him and wished that she could feel something besides a vague sense of pity. He was so lost. He would throw away everything that mattered in exchange for a good investment, a prize to be won. And what was worse, he would not even be aware that he had already lost. All that mattered to Papa was what other people thought—and that made him the slave of everyone he met.

Anastasia gazed at Lily. She wished she could tell Lily those insights—she had just noticed them. But then, she thought with a smile, Lily might already be aware of all of that. She noticed more than people thought she did.

They hurried towards the drawing room.

Anastasia tensed as they went inside. Camilla was already there, and Camilla’s parents. They were to be the only guests, besides Mama and Papa and Lily. Anastasia took a breath, but then her gaze focused on the man at the small altar that the vicar had set up, and she could not make herself go over.

Lord Ridley stood facing the vicar, his back straight, his posture almost defiant. He wore a dark blue coat and navy-blue trousers, and the high-necked shirt was embellished with an elaborate cravat.

She felt her legs tense and she forced herself to take another step, and then another. Her father walked by her side. She had to keep up.

Lord Ridley did not turn around until she got to the front of the room. He turned and gazed at her briefly, his eyes widening as he took in her appearance.

Anastasia's stomach roiled.

The appraising look that he leveled at her nauseated her. He never looked pleased or caring or even interested—not really. His eyes always calculated, always measured.

I do not want him to like what he sees. I would rather he ignored me for the rest of my existence than admire me in the way that he does.

She turned away.

The vicar, a young man with a thin face and big, serious brown eyes, smiled bemusedly. He looked a little unsure of why everyone was so tense, and why Anastasia and Lord Ridley seemed indifferent...to say nothing of why she had tears down her cheeks.

He gazed at them, gave an uncertain smile and then began the ceremony.

Anastasia felt her legs turn into stone. She was standing stiffly, unable to move even if she wanted. It was true. She could not run away. She was in the room and the vicar was there and he was speaking, and it was about to happen. Within less than an hour, she would walk out of the drawing room and her entire life would have changed.

God, she prayed silently. Help me. Strengthen me.

She gazed up at Lord Ridley, but he was watching the vicar with the same disinterested boredom with which he watched everyone—disinterested boredom or cold amusement or that unwelcome, discomforting interest he had shown in her as she stood beside him. Those three emotions were all the man seemed to feel.

She shuddered. Her gaze moved to the vicar.

He was speaking, and with horror, she realized that every word was one word closer to her walking out of the door with Lord Ridley. With each word he uttered, her time of freedom ran out.

“And does anyone know of any lawful impediment...” he began, clearing his throat.

Anastasia prayed. Please, she said silently in her heart. Please. Let something happen.

The vicar left the traditional pause, inviting anyone in the congregation who knew of some reason why she could not wed to speak out. It was tradition, only. There was no reason why they should not, and nobody was going to speak out. The vicar cleared his throat, and readied to begin.

Just as he began the next phrase, there was an almighty crack and, as Anastasia whirled around in shock, the door of the drawing room burst open, and a breeze drifted through.

“I do!” a voice shouted. “I know an impediment, Vicar.”

Anastasia’s legs wobbled. It was the Duke of Willowick. And he was walking towards her.

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As he strode into the room, Sidney's gaze focused on Lady Anastasia, and he could look at nothing else. She was wearing a long white gown, a veil of gossamer-thin fabric over her hair, covering her face. She was holding a bouquet of pink and white roses. The fabric of the veil was so thin that he could see her face quite clearly through it—or, clearly enough to see her wide eyes and the surprised expression she wore.

His heart thudded. He had run up the stairs—indeed, he had run around the house from the stable at the back, but it was not for that reason that his heart was racing fit to burst. He was here. He had managed to arrive in time.

“You!” A shout from the chairs on his right made his head whip around to face it. He saw Lord Graystone rising out of his seat. His expression was full of rage. Beside Anastasia, Lord Ridley stood still. His mouth opened and then shut, as if he was going to say something and then thought through it and decided not to.

“I have an impediment to relay.” Sidney faced Lord Graystone, who strode towards him, his face white with rage.

“You can get out of my home!” Lord Graystone shouted. “You have no right! This is not a public building.”

Sidney did not move. He did not care what Lord Graystone said. His gaze moved to Lady Anastasia.

“My lord?” The vicar was looking at Lord Graystone. His dark eyes were wide. “Please, sit down. This man here is permitted to speak. The wedding rite requires it.”

“Oh...” Lord Graystone had been about to swear, but he seemed to recall in time that the fellow was a vicar and decided against it. “Let him speak, then.” He turned to Sidney. “But if you lie, or if this is some wild foolery, I swear that you will regret it.”

“I will never regret speaking the truth,” Sidney said firmly. He stared down at Lord Graystone. The fellow might be bulkier than Sidney, but he was much shorter.

Lord Graystone glared.

“Please, son,” the vicar said softly. “Speak. We all wish to hear what you have to say.”

Sidney cleared his throat. Lord Ridley was glaring, but Lady Anastasia was gazing at him, her blue eyes fixed on him. His heart soared. She wanted him here. She wanted him to speak. She wanted his help. He took a deep breath and began.

“This man, Lord Ridley, has approached Lord Graystone under false pretenses,” Sidney began. “He professed to have extreme wealth. Is that not so?” He let his gaze rove to Lord Graystone.

Beside Lady Anastasia, Lord Ridley took a step forward. If he could have killed Sidney just with a glare, Sidney would be dead.

“Get out,” he growled.

“My lord.” The vicar took a step forward. “Let the man speak.”

“Answer the question,” Sidney growled.

Lord Graystone’s face flushed with anger. “Of course. But this is preposterous. I know for a fact that he is extremely well-off. It can’t be true.”

Sidney raised a brow. "Strange, then, that he was proclaiming to his acquaintances of having come into a fortune the other evening. Curious, too, that he is reputed to owe them a considerable sum."

"What?" Lord Ridley's blue eyes glittered. "This is nonsensical."

Sidney glared at him. "Do you deny it?" he demanded.

Lord Ridley said nothing.

Sidney glanced at Lord Graystone, who had been full of rage, practically ready to attack. He had rooted to the spot. He studied Lord Ridley intently, hanging on his words.

Sidney just looked at him, waiting for him to answer the question.

Lord Ridley tried to say something, but then he swore.

"Bah!" he shouted. "You cannot prove it. This is ridiculous," he added, turning to the vicar. The vicar looked at Sidney.

"You have proof of this?" he demanded. He looked worried.

Sidney nodded. "It is common knowledge in the Grantham club. Is it not, Lord Ridley? Your friends there are all your creditors. Is that not so?"

"Bah!" He said again. He glared at Sidney. "May ill fortune attend you."

Sidney just blinked. He knew he had won. Silently, he thanked Giles and whoever it was who had brought him the information about the wedding. He stood unspeaking.

Lord Ridley turned to Lord Graystone.

Sidney tensed, knowing that Lord Graystone was furious. He looked away. His gaze moved to Lady Anastasia.

Beside the viscount, she moved. She did not step forward, but her hand lifted to her lips and a small cry escaped her. Sidney saw her eyes widen and he grinned.

She knew, as he did, that there was no reason, anymore, for them not to be together. She took a step forward and he stepped towards her.

“This is all lies, is it not?” Lord Graystone demanded of the viscount.

Lord Ridley was rooted to the spot. He had gone pale.

“Is this man’s testimony untrue? Or did you lie?” Lord Graystone challenged.

Lord Ridley said nothing.

Sidney looked away. The vicar stepped forward, ready to intervene, and an older gentleman, the father of Lady Camilla, came and joined them, putting a hand on the earl’s shoulder as if to caution him against violence.

What happened to Lord Ridley was not his business. There was only one thing in the room that was his business, and that was the reason he was there. He turned to Lady Anastasia.

“My lady,” he said, addressing her. A huge smile spread across his face. He could not hide it. He bowed low. “May I escort you to a chair?”

Lady Anastasia grinned. “Please do, Your Grace. Please do.”

Sidney smiled and held out his hand. She took it and he led her to a chair. It was only when she was sitting that he really took in how strange it was to see her in a gown and veil. She looked so beautiful that he withdrew his hand from her arm shyly. She lifted her hand, hesitantly folding the veil back from her own face.

“Anastasia! Anny!” A gentle voice rang out and Sidney looked over to see a young lady of perhaps sixteen, hurrying from the chairs across the room towards them. She was wearing a pink-and-white gown, and she wrapped her arms around Lady Anastasia and gave her a crushing hug. “Anny! You’re free. Isn’t it wonderful?”

Sidney beamed at the young lady, who must have been Anastasia’s little sister. He was sure he had seen her somewhere before. She smiled back.

“Is this him? Anastasia?” she demanded of her sister.

Lady Anastasia grinned. “Yes, Lily. This is him.”

“Oh! How wonderful!” Lady Lily beamed first at Lady Anastasia, and then at him. “I’m Anastasia’s sister. My name is Lily,” she added, her hazel eyes sparkling warmly.

Sidney grinned. “Honoured to meet you, my lady. I am Sidney Markham, Duke of Willowick.”

Lady Lily looked at him and then at Lady Anastasia.

“He has green eyes. I like him.”

Sidney felt his heart soar. He had not expected such an overwhelmingly pleasant assessment from Lady Anastasia’s little sister. His scars horrified most people, and a young lady not yet out in society would almost certainly be even more terrified than

others.

“He is a wonderful man.” Lady Anastasia’s voice was low and resonant, and Sidney’s heart almost stopped as she gazed into his eyes. He could see such tenderness there that his heart stopped for a moment. He took a deep breath.

“And you are a wonderful woman,” he said softly.

She blushed. Her pale, petal-soft skin flushed a pretty bright pink that moved from her chin to the roots of her hair. He grinned, delightedly.

“How lovely!” Lady Lily exclaimed.

Sidney smiled.

He looked up to see two people hurrying across to them. One was Lady Graystone, Lady Anastasia’s mother. He could see the resemblance to Lady Anastasia at once, and to Lady Lily too. The other was Lord Graystone. The vicar followed, frowning worriedly.

“Get out,” Lord Graystone began.

“Hubert...it is not his fault. He was doing us a favour,” Lady Graystone was murmuring. Her husband shot her a look.

“This man was serving a higher purpose,” the vicar began. Lord Graystone spun around as though he was going to hit him. Lady Graystone stood next to the vicar.

Sidney shot him a grateful look.

“I don’t have to put up with him in my home,” the earl shouted. “He is trespassing.

He can get out of my house if all he can do is defy me and my plans.”

“Hubert. He saved our daughter,” Lady Graystone began.

Lord Graystone glared at her.

“The Lord uses all manner of things and people to manifest His will,” the vicar said quietly. “Unmasking a liar is never a bad thing. Lies are an instrument of darkness.”

Lord Graystone shot the vicar a warning look, but even though he opened his mouth as if to say something, he shut it again, fighting to hold his rage from crossing his lips.

“I have never been so rudely treated in my life,” Lord Graystone blustered, but he said nothing more, simply went to the door and pushed his way through. Sidney watched him withdraw. Lady Graystone followed him.

Sidney turned to Lady Anastasia. The remaining wedding guests, including Lady Camilla, stood silently, and he was distantly aware that they were all staring at Lady Anastasia and himself. Lady Lily stood beside them silently, a happy smile still sparkling on her sweet, youthful face.

“I wonder if we might go somewhere else?” Sidney managed to ask Lady Anastasia. “It is a little disconcerting in here.”

She laughed, a bright sound that washed through his soul like sunshine. She nodded. Her gossamer-light veil billowed out around her face, framing it beautifully as she tipped back her head, clearly amused.

“Yes. Perhaps we might retire to the anteroom next door? From there we can access the balcony.” She gestured to the balcony that ran the length of the drawing room.

Sidney nodded.

“Yes. Let us go there.”

Lady Lily grinned. “I’ll stay outside in the hallway,” she suggested. “That way, if Papa or Mama or that horrid man come back, then I can tell you.”

Sidney smiled at her bright young face. “I thank you, Lady Lily. But I assure you that we will be quite all right.”

“Oh. Well, then.” Lady Lily beamed. “Then I’ll stay here. Camilla can show me that new piece I’m learning. Is that all right?” She looked at Lady Anastasia frowningly.

“Of course, dearest sister.”

Sidney smiled as Lady Anastasia turned to him. Her blue eyes were full of joy and delight. His heart started to thump wildly, more uncontrollably than it had when he ran up the stairs. That had been from fear. This was because that look was something new entirely and he had no idea where to begin.

“Come,” she said gently.

Sidney nodded and followed her into the hallway. They went next door to the anteroom, and she shut the door behind him and went to sit down.

Sidney followed her to the chairs by the window, his throat tight and his heart racing and he stared into her eyes, not knowing what came next or what to do. All he knew was this was uncharted water, this new closeness, and he had never been keener to dive into anything else in his life.

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“Thank you,” Lady Anastasia began. She sounded shy.

Sidney swallowed hard. His gaze moved around the room, which contained two chairs, a fireplace and a low table, some paintings decorating the walls. She had taken a seat in one of the chairs and he stood opposite her, the clouds filtering pale sunshine in through the lace curtains behind them.

“I did nothing,” he said, his heart pounding so loud that he could feel the beat of it rushing in his ears. “I did only what I wished to do.”

Lady Anastasia smiled. “You came here. You rushed in without warning to save me from an untenable situation. I cannot thank you enough.”

“I did not do it just for you,” Sidney blurted, and then he felt his cheeks go bright red. “I mean, I did it for me.” He looked down at his toes. He had assumed, always, that she knew how he felt, that her feelings were the same as his. Now, his throat tightened shyly. “I had to try. I could not give you up.”

It was the hardest sentence he had ever said, and yet it shot out of him, unchecked and unguarded, because he could not lie anymore. He could not hide anymore. He gazed into her eyes, terrified. What if she laughed at him? What if she cried?

He held his breath as something miraculous happened. A slow, sweet smile began to spread over her face. It started at the corners of her mouth and tugged upwards, growing and moving to her eyes so that they sparkled brightly, and it was like watching the sunshine spill slowly over the mountains in the early morning.

“I could not give you up, either,” she said softly. Her smile had shifted, and her face was solemn again, her big blue eyes huge as they held his gaze. He blinked.

“You...you...” he stammered. He grinned, a smile blossoming on his own face as he laughed, relief flooding through him like the clear water of a stream. “You felt like I did?” He had always assumed so, but having her say it, having her look into his eyes with that solemn gaze, was like sunshine flooding his heart.

She laughed, that tinkling giggle that set his heart alight with joy. “Of course I did. I could not wait to see you! I counted the days before every event, hoping that I might chance upon you there. I was miserable when I did not see you for a week. I longed to talk to you. I enjoyed every one of the many conversations we had so much. I spent days awaiting them.”

“You did?” Sidney gaped. “I felt precisely the same! I greatly enjoyed our discourse. I often found myself reflecting upon our conversations days hence, recalling something you did utter or the manner of your smile. I revisited them time and again in my mind, and I smiled anew each time I thought of them.”

“Me, too.” Lady Anastasia giggled.

Sidney stared. She was smiling at him, her blue eyes bright, and he could barely believe that he was standing opposite her, telling her the deep feelings he had hidden for so long. She stared up at him.

He stared back.

Her eyes held his and he felt his throat tighten, as it so often had before, when they danced or when they talked on the terrace at the ball. He had longed to press his lips

to hers, to kiss her. He had wondered if she thought the same, and now she stared up at him with a look in her eyes that seemed to mirror his own feelings almost exactly.

“I suppose,” he managed to say, his throat tight with feelings, “that I have always been a little awkward in the past, my lady.”

“Yes,” she said with that delightful tinkling laughter filling the room. “We have rather, Your Grace.” She giggled.

“I just...” his throat was tight. He knew he had to say what he longed to, but he could not quite find the courage yet. “I just always worried that, well, the way I look, was...” he reddened, looking down at his toes. He did not want to bring her attention to his scars, and yet, how could he think of kissing her unless he knew for certain that she did not find him repellent? He drew his breath, too afraid to ask lest he hear the answer that he wanted least.

“I like the way you look,” she said, before he had a chance to ask her. “Yes, I know that it is unusual,” she began as he drew a breath to speak. “But I find your scars lend you a sort of exotic look. You are handsome, and the scars just add to you. They are part of a story that makes you interesting, that makes you strong because you survived it. I do not know what the story is, but I would like to hear it.”

Sidney gaped at her. Tears sprang to his eyes, unbidden and unexpected. His throat tightened and he found that he could not talk, only gasped for a moment as he tried to draw air into his lungs.

“You think that?” he managed after sucking a breath into his lungs. He blinked, aware that tears were running down his cheeks. Strange though it seemed, he did not feel ashamed to let her see that he cried. “You want to know the story?”

“Yes,” she said firmly. She looked up at him. She was standing up, and her head was

just a little tipped back so that she could look into his eyes. “I want to know all about you. You are interesting, Duke of Willowick,” she said with a chuckle. “And I wish to know all about you.”

Sidney blinked. He gazed at her, his mind too full of words and his heart empty of all words except love.

“I...” he stammered, then grinned weakly. “I would like to tell you,” he managed. “But I would also like to know about you. If I may,” he added hesitantly. He felt terribly shy. In spite of her assurance that she liked how he looked, he still found it hard not to think of his company as an imposition, as if he was undeserving of her.

“Of course,” Lady Anastasia began. She giggled. “One thing I can tell you straight away is that this veil is horridly uncomfortable.” She reached up her hand, touching the veil, where it rested on a satin hairband that looked a little tight.

Sidney grinned. “I suppose this is, well...unusual attire.” His heart thudded.

She laughed. “It is somewhat disconcerting.”

He laughed too. “I am so happy,” he confided, “I barely noticed. Besides to notice that white becomes you well. You look exceptional, my lady.”

She laughed, her cheeks crimson. “Thank you, Your Grace.” She tilted her head, studying him teasingly. “I suppose we are a little formal.”

He inclined his head. “Please,” he said, clearing his throat. “Please, call me Sidney.”

She beamed. “And you must call me Anastasia.”

“Anastasia.” He reached for her hand and held it in his own. Her gaze held his, her

blue eyes wide and round. He drew in a breath. “I cannot tell you how I never even dreamed I might say that.” His heart pounded so hard he could hear it thudding steadily in his chest, hot blood flooding into his cheeks and all the way to the roots of his hair.

“I never dreamed I might hear it.” She smiled at him. “Sidney.”

He stopped breathing for a second or two, the word slamming into him like a rock falling from a height.

“I have longed to speak thus to you; to speak the words that are in my heart.” He cleared his throat, his cheeks hot with blushing, his heart racing and his palms wet. “But I cannot hold them silent a moment more. From the moment I saw you, Anastasia, you touched something deep in my heart. I was drawn to you, to your smile, to your wisdom and your brightness. I longed to talk to you, to know you. Yes, you are beautiful—most beautiful. But it was your insights and your intellect that delighted me. I looked forward to every conversation, and each one gave me endless joy. I wanted so much to know you. And now...now I may tell you, at last, what is in my heart. My dearest Anastasia, I must confess that I have long been aware of the depths of my affection for you. The boundless joy and exquisite wonder I experience when I converse with you, or gaze upon your countenance—this profound delight that you exist in this world, and that I am privileged to share it with you—this is true love, of that I am certain. I count myself exceedingly fortunate to have made your acquaintance, dear Anastasia.”

He stopped talking, his heart thumping wildly. He gazed into her eyes. He had worried, as he spoke, that he was making her feel afraid, perhaps obliged. He did not want to do that. He wished only to tell her how he felt. She did not need to do or say anything—he merely wished for her to know.

She gazed up at him and for a moment his heart almost stopped, afraid that she was

offended. She wet her lips and gazed into his eyes.

“I liked you the moment I saw you,” she said, her gaze darting away shyly for a moment. “I felt drawn to you, to your humour and your wit. I was interested in you. I know many people, but none who spoke like you, who had insights like you.” She paused. “I confess, too, that I was aware of your looks.” She grinned. “You have most striking eyes, Sidney Markham. I thought about them for days afterwards. And your words.” She giggled.

Sidney gaped at her. He grinned, a huge grin spreading across his face.

“I have harboured sentiments for you unlike any other,” she confided, her cerulean eyes steadfast in their regard. ‘It has bestowed upon me a joy unparalleled in my experience. It is love, dear Sidney Markham. I am thoroughly entwined in my affections for you; I love you with all my heart.”

Sidney’s heart thudded, filled with so much joy and love that he could barely breathe. He gazed into her eyes and took a step forward, taking her hand in his own. He lifted it to his lips and kissed the back of it, the soft rosewater scent filling his nostrils, flooding his senses until he thought he might drown in it. He released her hand, gazing into her eyes. She rested her hand on his cheek. He drew a breath, knowing that he wanted to kiss her more than he had ever wished for anything. He leaned a little forward, and she leaned forward too and then he bent his head and pressed his lips to her own.

Her lips were soft under his, and sweet and warm, like petals. He shut his eyes, and when she leaned against him, not tensing or flinching, he pressed closer, his hand moving to touch her hair and his other arm drawing her against him. She wrapped her arms around him and held him tight and Sidney’s soul soared, bliss that he had never even imagined flooding into him and through him.

“I love you,” he breathed as he stepped back, his heart thudding and his breath ragged in his chest. “I love you with all my heart, now and always.”

“I love you too, Sidney Markham,” she said softly, her smile bright and warm and like sunshine in his heart. “I love you too.”

He took her hand, and they walked onto the balcony together, into the sunshine.

His lips lifted at the corners, and he longed to share his happiness with everyone he knew, but for the moment, it was enough to hold her and be held, to love and be loved, to revel in the joy of a time he would cherish forever—because love is eternal.

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“I say, old chap!” Giles’ voice was raised slightly above normal pitch. “You are a most cunning rogue, I must admit.”

Sidney grinned. Giles was sitting in the drawing room, clear-eyed and very much himself. They had been sitting together at tea while Mama and Aunt Harriet went shopping.

“I’m not so cunning,” Sidney countered, though his grin stretched from one ear to the other. “A walk in Hyde Park is hardly a scandal in the making.”

“Yes. Quite,” Giles chuckled. “I wouldn’t trust you to set about making a proper scandal, cousin. You’re so strait-laced you’d mismanage it horridly. But, not as strait-laced as I thought, eh.” His voice was warm and fond.

Sidney chuckled too. “I am just glad I told you.” He was, if he was honest, a little tense. He had invited Anastasia for a walk in the park—alone, but chaperoned, as was proper. She had agreed, and it was just half an hour before he ought to depart by coach for the park. He twisted his shirt cuffs in his fingertips, a habit from when he was little more than a boy.

“Well, it’s grand news, old chap. Grand news.” Giles nodded his head in agreement.

Sidney gazed down at the floor, lost in thought. He kept on recalling Anastasia’s face from the previous day. He could not stop thinking of the way her eyes gazed into his, the surprised smile on her face and the warmth that flooded his heart. He thought of the conversation at every spare moment, repeating it to himself in his mind until his cheeks ached from smiling.

“I thought to take a walk later, myself,” Giles mused, as he sipped a cup of tea. Sidney raised a brow.

“Oh?” He was interested. “I did not know you were fond of the park, cousin.”

“I’m not,” Giles replied, raising a brow. “But I will walk nonetheless.”

“Oh?” Sidney repeated, a smile growing on his face. “Any reason for going there, cousin?”

Giles leveled his gaze at him. “Not any that I wish to disclose.”

Sidney just grinned.

“I heard they have a new section where exotic plants are displayed,” Sidney said, tilting his head.

“Interesting,” Giles replied.

The talk turned to the park, and plants in general—neither of them were particular enthusiasts, but both had read some articles which discussed new species of plants, and the topic held their interest for a while. Sidney looked up from the tea as the butler appeared in the doorway.

“Your Grace? Your mother and aunt have returned briefly to deliver some parcels and to convey that they shall be at Gunter’s until five o’clock.”

“Thank you,” Sidney replied mildly. Giles poured some tea.

“Are you off walking?” Giles inquired, stirring his tea as if he had no other interest in the world.

“In a moment,” Sidney replied. He had changed into the clothing he thought suited him best, but he still wished to check his hair in the looking glass before he departed for the park.

“Oh. Grand,” Giles replied, setting down his teacup. “I will depart on my own jaunt shortly, too. Lady Camilla returns from her tea-party at four, and I do not wish to be too late to meet her at the gate.”

“What ?” Sidney gaped. He stared up at his cousin, who was making his way to the door. His dark hair was well brushed, and he wore a dark brown velvet jacket that Sidney had not seen him wear before. Giles grinned.

“Lady Camilla. Who do you think told me about Lady Anastasia and when Lord Ridley would be there?”

“Giles!” Sidney exploded, his grin stretching his face so that his cheeks ached. “You didn’t tell me. How did you meet Lady Camilla?” He got to his feet, but Giles had already departed briskly, and he did not wish to delay him. He sank back onto the chair with a bemused grin.

At fifteen minutes before five, Sidney stood and hurried to his room. He glanced at his hair in the looking glass, smoothing it carefully with a steady hand. Then he hurried down the stairs and to the coach, which was waiting to take him to the park.

“I shall return at seven, Your Grace,” the coachman called out as he hurried away.

“Thank you,” Sidney replied under his breath as he shifted his shoulders in the jacket and hurried to the park.

Anastasia stood at the gate to Hyde Park. It was exactly five o' clock, and a cool wind blew across the park, making the leaves on the trees shiver and rustling in the grass. She drew her cloak tighter around her.

"I suppose he might be delayed," she murmured to Rachel, who stood waiting in her black uniform. Rachel tilted her head.

"It's only just five, milady," she said lightly.

Anastasia swallowed and nodded. "You're right."

She looked around, wishing she did not feel so nervous. The park was slowly filling up, ladies taking an evening stroll after tea and gentlemen in top-hats and tailcoats trying to ignore admiring stares, all the while seeming also to look for them. She smiled to herself. Thoughts of Sidney were never far. Ever since they had spoken yesterday, he had slipped into her mind whenever she was still even for a second. She smiled often, a grin lifting her lips without her even knowing it.

She gazed around, feeling a little tense. She looked down at her gown. She had chosen one she did not wear often, but which Lily assured her suited her well. It was a white muslin with a tiny pattern of flowers in pale blue. The sleeves were translucent puffs, the waist defined with a pale blue ribbon. She tucked a curl of hair back from her eyes. It was fashionably styled in ringlets in the front, but loosely, the way she preferred, not the tight, formal ringlets of balls and soirees.

She did not ever want to dress that way again. Lord Ridley would have been shocked by anything else, and she wanted more than anything simply to forget him and all about him.

The sound of coach wheels made her look up. A coach was rolling past, sufficiently slowly that it seemed it might stop, and as it did so, delight surged through her.

It was Sidney.

“Anastasia.”

He stepped out of the coach, a broad grin on his face. His green eyes were bright, burning with an emerald fire that made her heart race. His fine-chiseled face was pale but seemed lit from within. His dark hair was brushed neatly, and he wore black trousers and a dark blue jacket she did not think she had ever seen him wear before. His shirt collar was high, as was the fashion, tied with a simple but tasteful cravat.

“Sidney!”

She felt a grin lift her lips in the corners as he walked over.

“My lady.” He bowed low and took her hand, pressing it to his lips. Her heart soared and she giggled, unashamed of the girlish joy that glowed like warm candle light in her veins.

“Sidney,” she said, grinning. “We did say we would not be so formal.”

“Yes. But you are, now, my lady. And I want to say it often, for I will never tire of it.”

Anastasia beamed. “And may I say also that you are my gentleman?” Her cheeks were burning with heat, and she looked away, amazed at her own audacity.

He grinned. His eyes were bright with warmth and joy.

“Most assuredly, you may. You may call me your gentleman as often as you wish. I am glad to hear that too.”

Anastasia giggled.

“Shall we walk this way?” Sidney asked, gesturing to a leafy avenue. Anastasia nodded.

“I think that way would be delightful. But then, so would the other, or any other, in your company.” She smiled, her soul soaring with delight. Walking with him, speaking thus to him—it was bliss, something that she would, indeed, never tire of.

He laughed. It was a lovely sound. Warm, rich, and gentle. His eyes crinkled at the edges when he smiled. She glowed, seeing it and hearing his rich chuckle.

“I agree.”

They walked down the path together.

Rachel followed them, hanging back a little to give them the sense that they were not being overheard. Anastasia smiled at her. She would not have worried, however, if everyone in the park was gawping and staring. Some heads did turn as they passed, but she barely noticed. Her world was full of sunshine, and their stares were like paper arrows fired at a stone—insignificant and not able to do harm at all.

“What think you of the rose garden?” Sidney asked as they approached an area of the park that was planted mostly with roses.

“I am fond of it.” Anastasia beamed.

“Good.” Sidney chuckled. “Because we are headed that way.”

Anastasia laughed warmly.

“I am glad you like this place,” Sidney told her as they settled on a bench that was situated close to a lovely flowerbed of roses. Rachel sat on another bench across from them. “Because I would prefer to linger here.”

“You would rather be here than further along the path?” Anastasia asked, feeling curious. He was sitting beside her on the bench, a distance of perhaps five inches between them. It was close enough for her to feel, almost, the warmth of his arm through his sleeve. Her heart was thudding fit to burst and it was hard to concentrate on what he said.

“Yes,” Sidney answered with a smile. “Because I believe my cousin, Giles, is over there, showing a lady the exotic plant collection.” He gestured towards where a hothouse stood across from a fountain.

“He is?” Anastasia frowned. She barely recalled having met Sidney’s cousin, though she was sure that she had seen him once before, at a ball or party where she had spoken with Sidney himself.

“Yes.” Sidney grinned.

“How strange,” Anastasia replied. “My friend Camilla likewise had to meet someone in the gardens.” She felt a frown crease her brow. “It seems we each know somebody here.”

“Yes. Stranger still is that they are here to meet each other.” Sidney grinned.

“What?” Anastasia giggled, lifting her hand to her lips. “No! Truly?”

“Yes.” Sidney smiled; his expression warm. “Giles mentioned to me that he was coming here to escort Lady Camilla on a walk about the gardens.”

“No!” Anastasia giggled, heart soaring with delight. “How remarkable.”

Sidney smiled. “It is.”

They sat silently, and Anastasia breathed in the fragrance of the roses and shut her eyes for a moment. She felt blissfully happy, sitting beside Sidney. She had always longed to be free to talk with him, to spend time with him. And all her prayers had been answered.

“I am happy here, with you,” Sidney murmured.

“As am I, with you,” Anastasia told him, turning to face him with a big grin on her face.

Sidney smiled. He reached up and tenderly tucked a ringlet behind her ear.

“I want to do this forever,” he told her slowly. “I want you to marry me.”

Anastasia gaped at him. She had known that she loved him, that she wanted that more than anything on Earth, but she had, somehow, not expected him to say it. At least not so soon.

“Sidney.” She gaped at him, her eyes wide, her jaw falling open. Tears filled her eyes, and she blinked, a grin tugging her lips. “I think I would like that more than anything on earth.”

She swallowed hard; her throat too filled with emotion to say anything else.

His eyes widened, a look of utter astonishment crossing his face. Then, slowly, a grin moved across his countenance, beginning at his lips and then spreading to his eyes so that he gazed at her, joy and delight shining from him.

“I...you...you said yes.”

Anastasia giggled. “Indeed, I did. You are most dear, delightful, and wonderfully foolish! I hold a profound affection for you. My love for you surpasses all else upon this earth. I love you for all eternity.”

Sidney blinked, and she realized that he, like herself, was close to tears, though a grin bloomed on his face for all to see.

“Dearest Anastasia,” he murmured, his voice laden with emotion. “I too hold you in my affection. My love for you is boundless, enduring through all time. With every beat of my heart, I am yours, now and always.”

He leaned towards her, and she shut her eyes as his lips pressed to her own.

In the soft, damp, scented silence of the garden, they shared a sweet kiss.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am

Anastasia felt the whisper of her veil around her face, and she focused on the vicar, who stood before her, his face lit from within, his eyes smiling though he had stopped grinning when he began reading the ceremony.

Her gaze moved sideways to where Sidney stood. His arm pressed against her side, his dark blue velvet jacket soft and warm. She leaned closer to him, allowing their two forms to touch, drawing courage from his closeness. Not that she needed any. She had been smiling all morning.

The vicar's voice had slowed, and she drew her attention swiftly back to it, focusing on what he was saying.

"...and do thee, Anastasia Marcia Gray, take thee Sidney Alexander Markham to be thy lawful wedded husband?"

"I do." Anastasia spoke the words with more certainty than she had ever said anything in her life.

"And do thee, Sidney Alexander Markham, take thee Anastasia Marcia Gray..." he continued, repeating the vows for Sidney to say.

"I do." His voice was resonant and low, shivering through her and making her grin. She would never forget how his voice sounded, how her heart soared as he said the word. She felt more joy than she had ever felt.

The vicar continued, and Anastasia lost focus on what he said, the words finding their way to her blurrily through the bubble of joy that filled her mind and heart.

She was aware that the ceremony must have concluded, because she sensed Sidney turn, and then, so gently, he was lifting the veil from her face. She gazed up at him through the gauze fabric and her heart thudded wildly in her chest. She shut her eyes as he bent forward and his lips, warm and tender, pressed to hers in a gentle kiss.

It was a brief touching of lips, and then she opened her eyes and gazed smilingly into his, but it was the sweetest kiss because of what it meant.

She stared into his eyes and knew that she loved him with all her heart. He smiled and her heart soared.

Sidney took her hand, shyly, and they turned to face the assembled guests. They were in the chapel at Sidney's country home, and Sidney's family sat mixed with her own. She could see Camilla at the back, with her parents, and Lily, beaming from the front row with her own parents. Sidney's sister Amy and her husband, Henry, sat beside them, and his Aunt Harriet and Cousin Giles sat in the next pew back. Giles was smiling quietly at Sidney the way an older brother might.

Anastasia gazed up at Sidney, her heart full of love. They walked silently down the aisle towards the door through which they had come, the small chapel filled with sunshine as they walked. Their friends and family called out their congratulations as they walked to the door, but Anastasia could barely make out any voices from the mass, besides that of Lily, which was loud and enthused. She smiled to herself.

I will see you often, she promised Lily and herself silently in her heart. Sidney's estate was sufficiently close to London that it was easily possible for herself or Lily to travel the two hours' distance for a cup of tea. Her own family spent almost the entire year in the London townhouse, due to Papa's business interests.

She smiled and waved at Lily, her heart full of love, and then she walked down the short path with Sidney towards the house. Since the wedding had taken place at his

estate, there was no need for the customary coach-ride to his home. All the same, the tenants and the staff of his estate had assembled to see them, and Sidney waved and smiled and tossed the customary coins for the children to grab. A flock of village children ran to squabble over the bright coins and Sidney beamed, his happiness the same as her own.

“Well, my dear,” Sidney said lightly, the term of endearment still making her cheeks heat up brightly. “I trust you are prepared for a large luncheon?”

Anastasia grinned. “I believe I should be,” she replied, one brow rising. The cook at Sidney’s home proved rather flamboyant, providing more food at one dinner than she had ever seen for one meal before. She fully expected an army of courses for luncheon, unusual though that might be.

“As usual, you are right,” Sidney said with a grin.

Anastasia laughed. Her arm was linked through his and they walked, slowly and tenderly, side by side, into the manor house.

The butler was there to greet them—he had not joined the rest of the staff outside, and nor had some footmen, who had stayed within to prepare the dining room. Anastasia followed Sidney into the room, gazing around at the simple beauty of the place. Amy had insisted on having bunches of late summer roses on every table, and the subtle fragrance of the flowers drifted to her where she stood.

“How beautiful,” she murmured.

Sidney beamed. “I didn’t notice. You are so beautiful that you’re all I am seeing.”

Anastasia blushed. “Now, that was flattery, my dear.”

He laughed. “I reserve the right to flatter just a little.”

Anastasia giggled; her joy too bright to hide. “It is a desire I grant gladly, my dearest Sidney.”

He beamed and she could see he was just a little pink in the cheeks too. She felt her heart race with joy. She loved to see him smiling, which he did often.

They waited to greet their guests, who drifted in from the garden.

The meal was, indeed, sumptuous, and Anastasia felt almost too full to stand by the time someone at one of the tables—she thought it was Henry, though she was not sure—suggested that there ought to be some dancing.

Sidney beamed. “A waltz. That would be grand.”

Anastasia went pink. “If you wish,” she said, a little flustered. She loved dancing with Sidney more than anything, but it would feel strange to dance in front of all their guests.

“Grand! Grand,” Henry beamed as Amy joined him and Anastasia felt a little relieved. The other guests would almost certainly join in.

She stood with Sidney, and soon she forgot all else as she stared into his eyes. A group of village musicians had been brought up to play for the servants and the townsfolk who celebrated with them on the lawn outside. The musicians were summoned, and they tuned up hastily. Anastasia gazed at Sidney, the soaring sound of the violins like the joy that lifted her heart.

The musicians played the introductory bars and then they stepped seamlessly together, their dancing as effortless and smooth as ever, feeling—as it always did—as

though they were made to dance together, as though they were thinking with one mind, moving with one body. She breathed in, shutting her eyes as she often did when they danced. Then beauty of it, the poetry and rhythm, was something that moved her to tears sometimes, it was so intense.

“Look,” Sidney whispered as she opened her eyes again.

Anastasia glanced sideways. The music was slowing, moving to the concluding section, and she was just in time to notice Giles, dancing with a lady in a pink dress. It was Camilla.

She beamed up at Sidney. Her heart glowed with warmth and joy. The two of them were smiling at one another, the rest of the room clearly empty to them, as it was for Sidney and herself.

“They look happy.”

“They do,” Sidney agreed.

The dance concluded and they bowed and curtsied, then moved their way silently to the table. The older guests were still seated there, and Anastasia could hear her father discussing what had happened to Lord Ridley. He had fled London following the scandal and she shut her eyes, wishing she could shut her ears too. She did not want to hear about it. All that mattered to her was that she would never see the fellow again; that she had no tie to him and that he could cease to matter altogether. That was all she wished.

“Shall we go outdoors?” Sidney asked, sensing her unease.

She nodded. “Yes, let’s go outside.”

Sidney stood and went over to the doors that led out onto the terrace. He opened them and cleared his throat. She watched him, enjoying the lithe, easy way he moved. They had gone riding a few times in the forest, with Amy and Henry to accompany them, and she appreciated his skill and strength. He was as fine a rider as he was a dancer, and she looked forward to escaping on horseback with him up to the woods around the estate in the future.

“Should anyone feel overly warm, you are invited to the gardens to partake of the cool shade there.” Sidney smiled at the guests as he announced his suggestion.

Several people laughed and smiled, agreeing that it was too hot. Anastasia waited for Sidney to join her, and then, along with some of their other guests, they went out into the garden.

“It’s lovely out here,” Sidney murmured as they made their way down a shaded path towards the bench that they had come to love. It was near the rose-arbor and screened from view of the house by hedges and trees. Anastasia walked with him, their steps keeping pace and headed in the same direction though neither had discussed where they wished to go. They clearly both wanted to go there, and they headed that way, the cool afternoon breeze that blew over the pond ruffling Anastasia’s hair and cooling her.

“It is beautiful,” she agreed, joining him as he paused. She settled on the bench, and he sat down beside her, gallantly waiting until she had arranged her white silk skirt before he settled down beside her.

“I always wanted to show you this part of the garden,” Sidney murmured as they sat side by side, staring out over the brightly colored blooms and smelling the sweet, intense smell of the roses.

“You did?” Anastasia beamed. “That makes me very happy, since it is so beautiful.”

She squeezed his hand gently.

“I have something else I would like to show you. In the drawing room. Later, if we can sneak off after our guests have departed.” He grinned, a shy grin.

Anastasia nodded, her heartbeat a little hastened with her curiosity. She could not imagine what it might be that he wanted to show her.

They sat in the garden, the other guests wandering peacefully about the flowerbeds, and Anastasia smiled to herself as a snatch of conversation drifted across to them now and again. It seemed that their guests were as happy as they themselves, though they were content to sit and enjoy one another’s company in companionable quietude.

“Lord and Lady Anselm are departing,” Henry told them, appearing on the pathway unexpectedly. “I think most of the guests will likewise do so.”

“We will come directly.” Sidney stood and Anastasia followed him. They made their way to the entrance, where, as Henry said, most of the guests were getting ready to depart. Anastasia hugged Lily tight against her chest.

“I will see you tomorrow,” she said with a grin as Lily stepped back.

“See you tomorrow!” Lily said, her smile bright and joyful. “I will bring that book I mentioned. The fifth passage in the song is so hard—I need help with the phrasing.”

“We can sing it tomorrow,” Anastasia promised.

She gazed lovingly at her sister as she went down to the coach. It was wonderful that they could see one another as often as they wished to, and she could not wait to see her and practice the song together.

“Shall we go up...?” Sidney asked hesitantly. The entrance-way was silent, the guests departed to their homes. It was late afternoon, the shadows long and the sunshine that fell through the windows was the color of clover honey.

“Yes,” Anastasia murmured, her heart lifting with excitement. “Yes, let us go upstairs.”

Sidney walked hesitantly up the stairs ahead of her, almost as though he was hesitant to show her whatever it was. She followed him, waiting as he crossed the hallway and went into the drawing room ahead of her. The curtains were partly drawn so that the glare of the sunset was less blinding, the room painted with orange sunshine and dark, greenish shadow.

“Could you wait a moment?” Sidney asked, from where he stood near the windows.

“Of course,” Anastasia agreed softly.

He moved something forward—a piece of furniture that she recognized as an easel only when it was fully in the slanting sunshine.

“Come in now, if you will,” Sidney offered hesitantly.

“Of course,” Anastasia agreed instantly. She hurried over to the easel, where it was turned away from the door to catch the bright sunlight falling in from the window behind her. Sidney stood on her right. She stopped, rooted in place.

“Sidney!” she shrieked. “It’s...it’s beautiful.”

“It is. It’s you,” Sidney said, his shy smile slowly lifting the corner of his mouth.

“I know!” Anastasia replied, her eyes wide and with tears blinding them so much so

that she had to blink to focus. “I know. It looks...it looks just like me.” She could barely speak, her throat blocked with feeling.

“It does,” Sidney agreed, smiling warmly. “That’s why it’s beautiful. I painted it in secret, and I must beg your pardon. I hope it does not displease you.”

“What?” Anastasia giggled. “Of course, it does not! It’s beautiful, Sidney. I love it.” She blinked, her eyes filling with tears afresh. The brushstrokes were tender and loving, the lucency of her eyes and the slightly surprised expression on her face capturing tenderness, a beauty that she had never thought that she herself possessed. The love was obvious. There was such love in every line of the work that she could not look at it without tears springing to her eyes.

“I painted it—or I started it—the day after our first dance. I added to it since then. I must say, I completed it just a month ago.”

“It’s beautiful,” Anastasia murmured. She turned to face him. “I love it. I love you, Sidney Alexander.”

Sidney chuckled. “And I love you, Anastasia Marcia. I love you so very much.”

Anastasia gazed up at Sidney, at that beautiful, scarred, magical face that belonged to the man she loved more than anything in the world.

“My dearest Sidney, I hold you in the deepest affection. My love for you shall endure eternally.”

“And I adore you, Anastasia. For all eternity.

She felt his arms move tenderly around her and she hugged him tight, pressing him to her in an embrace so firm that she could feel the warmth of him through the thin silk

dress she wore. She held him tight, and he bent close, and his lips pressed onto hers in a kiss so warm and tender that she thought her heart might melt.

She drew him closer, hugging him tight, stroking his hair, and they stood silently, their love as bright as the light that flooded the silent drawing room.

The End

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am

Hilltop House, hunting lodge to the Earl of Glenfield, November 1816

The sound of laughter—shrill, brandy-fueled—echoed around the terrace. Sebastian breathed in, smelling the heady smell of liquor, dew, and perfume in the cold air. It was familiar; the smell of every party he had held at this hunting lodge. He breathed out and reached for his drink, gazing contemplatively into the depths of the brandy-glass.

“Dash it,” he murmured to Matthew, his friend who stood beside him on the terrace. “I think I’m losing my touch.”

“What’s that, old fellow?” Matthew asked, a pained expression on his face. “It’s so awfully loud out here.”

“I said,” Sebastian replied, feeling sour, “that I think I’m getting old. I don’t seem to feel alive like I used to.” He sighed, still staring at the amber liquid. It held no appeal for him—it was, well, just brandy. The party was just a party. The noise was too loud and the company, while certainly colorful, didn’t excite him as it would have done just a year earlier, when he was thirty. He ran a hand through his thick, dark hair, feeling confused.

His friend stepped closer. “What was that, old fellow? You feel old?” Matthew grinned; his brown eyes sparkling. That crooked grin of his had lit up the most tiresome days at university. He and Sebastian had attended Cambridge together, where Matthew read law, while Sebastian read history. Sebastian had thought that he would die of boredom—not because studying challenged his brain overmuch, but because he found everything tiresome after a while. With Matthew, at least there was

always some crazy exploit they could indulge in, like running in the woods in winter or daring one another to jump naked into the frozen river. Sebastian smiled fondly, recalling those times.

He stared around the party, his dark eyes narrowing as he did so. People of all sorts were there. Mostly, they were his noble friends—as the Earl of Glenfield, most of his friends were part of the Ton . But mixed in with the company were actors, dancers and people from other, even more questionable professions, pouring in from the nearby town of Chatham. They were all welcome—the more the merrier, and actors and dancers were much livelier than the average nobleman.

“Yes,” he murmured. “I feel old.” His eye roved across the colorful company, the women in low-cut gowns, bright velvet clashing with brighter silks. People laughed and joked, and one group surrounded a man who tried to climb a tree amidst drunken yells of encouragement. That sort of foolery would have delighted Sebastian once. Now, he thought it merely a little silly. “I’m too old for this sort of thing,” he continued quietly.

“Nonsense,” Matthew chuckled.

“What? Nonsense?” Sebastian shook his head. He considered sipping his brandy, but the smell repelled him. He put it down on the table nearby. “It’s not nonsense, old chap. I’m one-and-thirty years old.”

“And I’m only two years younger than that, so mind your tongue when it comes to calling yourself old.” Matthew grinned. His auburn hair was bright in the light from the window.

Sebastian sighed. “I don’t really mean I am old; old fellow.” He looked out over the lawns, searching for an explanation. “I mean I feel old.”

Matthew snorted. “It’s one o’ clock in the morning, Glenfield. I would be surprised if you were bursting with vitality.”

The familiar nickname from his title, the Earl of Glenfield, warmed him as much as his comment did. Matthew always lightened matters. Sebastian inclined his head. “I suppose you’re right.”

He didn’t know how to explain it—even in his own mind, it made limited sense.

“Come on!” Matthew called briskly. “Let’s go and see what those fellows under that tree are doing. Looks like old Ackroyd has got himself stuck in that tree. That’s a lark, eh?” He was laughing, clearly amused by the foolery of the group on the lawn. Sebastian sighed again. Maybe a few days before, he would have laughed and joined in the fun, but after a week of parties at the hunting lodge, it had lost its appeal.

“Hey! Hey!”

Sebastian’s gaze whipped round at the sound of a yell. He tensed, the shout sobering him instantly. He had drunk sparingly, and the sound of the shouting was like ice down his spine.

Something was very wrong.

A woman screamed, and then other screams followed, and Sebastian ran. He headed straight for the direction where the screams were coming from—a group on the lawn, closer to the house than that beside the tree. Most of the people there stood still, while others were running from the same spot. He sprinted, long legs carrying him effortlessly across the lawn to the crowd. He pushed his way forward, avoiding the women who ran from the place, yelling and screaming.

“What’s going on?” He demanded, confronting a man he knew from Cambridge who

was standing nearby. Damn the brandy! He couldn't recall his name. He'd never had a gift for names.

"It's Emerton," the man explained. "He fell. He was up there," the man rambled, slurring a little and pointing. "He was up there, and he fell. Broken bones for sure."

"What?" Sebastian went cold.

The Earl of Emerton was a distant cousin—albeit a very distant cousin—of the Prince Regent. If he had injured himself at one of Sebastian's drunken gatherings, it would mean trouble. The Regent might live a colorful life himself, but certain things he abhorred in his courtiers. Anything that led to violence and people being hurt was one of them. Sebastian's heart started to thump loudly, and he looked around desperately, searching for someone who might be able to help.

He glanced at the crowd. People had gathered around the spot, and the press of bodies was too tight for him to see.

"Out of the way!" he shouted, feeling his heart race. "Everybody! Get out of the way. Let me pass."

"Keep your hair on, Sebastian," a drunken man yelled at him. "Old fellow's not going to get up for some yelling."

"What happened?" Sebastian demanded.

"The earl of Emerton. He was on the balcony," a tall, slim man explained. Sebastian tried to focus; certain he didn't even invite the fellow to his party. He thought he might be someone else he knew from Cambridge, but he didn't remember him. "He was waving to somebody down here in the garden. I think he was watching the fun there." He jerked his head at the group around the man climbing the tree. "He leaned

too far out. He fell. I think...he could have broken something, my lord.”

“Oh...” Sebastian shut his eyes. The man could be dead. The balcony was on the first floor, but it was not impossible, if he fell truly badly, for the man to have broken his neck. The ground was stone hard. Sebastian waved his hands, trying to get the crowd around the earl to clear.

“Clear a path! Clear a path!” he yelled firmly.

Slowly, the people dispersed. He reached the body and bent down. He held his breath, heart thudding. The man was lying on his side, his face white, his body not moving. Sebastian put his hand at the man’s neck, taking his pulse. He slumped in relief.

“He has a heartbeat.”

He let out a breath he hadn’t known he was holding. The man seemed alive, if unconscious. He breathed in, smelling the strong smell of liquor. The earl was breathing, but slow, shallow breaths and Sebastian wanted to cry in relief. He wasn’t dead—he had most likely just passed out.

“Help me move him,” he called out to the group of people who lingered nearby. Two men stepped forward, one of them the tall, slim man who had explained earlier. They dragged the body over to the shelter of a nearby tree. As Sebastian stood up, he tensed. He could hear someone shouting.

“What in the world?” The sound echoed over the terrace. It was his father. Sebastian felt sick. His stomach twisted as his father’s voice continued in a roar. “What is wrong with Lord Emerton, there?”

Sebastian stiffened. “He’s fine,” he told his father, who stalked across the lawn, his tall form bent over. “He’s just...well...he fell. Not too far,” he admitted. He looked

into his father's eyes. Dark, like his own, they were slit with rage.

"You let the Regent's cousin fall? What did he fall off? Does he still breathe?" Papa demanded. Sebastian drew a breath. His father had always been indulgent, but his rage was a terrible thing. He felt his cheeks redden with shame.

"He is still living," he managed to say. "I will summon a physician to assess him. I believe...I believe he is just unconscious." He looked away, not wanting to see the rage in his father's eyes.

"This has gone too far."

"I know," Sebastian murmured. He looked around. Even in his own mind, he had started to realize that. The parties, with their loud laughter and outrageous guests, had not appealed to him for the last two days. He had gone too far, and he knew it. He looked around. "Wait a moment, Papa," he murmured.

"I'm not moving," his father answered.

Sebastian breathed in a sigh. He might be one-and-thirty, but Papa was still in charge of the estate, his own title of Earl of Glenfield and all the estates and privileges were just a courtesy granted him as the Marquess of Ramsgate's eldest child. He waved his hands, trying to get the people to listen.

"Everyone! We need to return home. The Earl of Emerton lives, but the physician needs to be summoned to tend him. I would appreciate it if you could all retire to your homes."

He repeated the message several times, until even the most inebriated guest was helped from the lodge by his friends. Then he turned to his father.

“It’s time you settled down, son,” his father murmured wearily.

“Papa...” Sebastian felt his hands tense at his sides. This was an argument he and his father had had several times in the last year. He didn’t want to hear it at this moment, with the shock of the earl’s accident still running like fire in his blood.

“No, son. I mean it. It’s not just...not just because of incidents like today. It’s for you. For me. I’m old. I’m not well.” His face—so like Sebastian’s own—was gray with weariness this close up, and haggard with lack of sleep. Gout plagued the older man, and he was often short of breath. Sebastian felt his heart twist with pain.

“Please, Papa. Don’t talk about...about...” he didn’t want to say it. Papa had been his only parent—his only companion in the world, besides Matthew. His mother died a few days after his birth, and he and Papa had become exceptionally close. Papa was his only family. He could not lose his father.

“Son, I know. But it’s a fact. I’m old and I’m not well. I don’t want to die before I see my grandchild. Please, son. I want you to do this for me. In fact, I’m telling you to do this for me. I want you to find a wife. I’m giving you a year. By this time, next year, you will be wed. Or else.”

“Or else?” Sebastian swallowed hard.

The old Marquess smiled; his dark eyes lined in wrinkles. In so many ways, they were exactly like Sebastian’s own. “Or else I’ll find you one, son. Think on it.”

Sebastian let out a breath. “Yes, Papa,” he murmured. He looked around. Servants had already begun to tidy up, moving tables and chairs back into the house, tidying up the terrace. The earl had been moved inside, and the physician’s cart was halted on the front lawn. He let out a long breath. It could have been worse. He was lucky—and he was lucky his father was not furious.

His father smiled again and sighed, turning towards him. “Good, son. I know you can do it.”

Sebastian felt his heart twist. “I’ll do my best, Papa,” he promised. He felt sick.

He heard his father limp indoors, and he stayed where he was. The lawns were dark under the night sky, which was midnight blue over black shadows of the trees. The air still smelled like dew and somewhere nearby the stream was audible again, babbling in the still night. He took a deep breath.

Life at the hunting estate might have become tiresome, but how much more tiresome would it be, shackled to a dull, uninteresting woman? Papa certainly wanted him to marry someone respectable—and respectable meant dull and ordinary. It would be horrid, being tied down into a respectable, boring, ordinary life.

Anyone Papa found would be tiresome and proper. And he just didn’t think he could share his life with such a person. No, someone in his world had to be lively and bold. And whoever Papa found was certainly not going to be like that. He was almost certain of it.

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Woodford House, October 1817

“Faster! Gertrude! Run faster!”

“I can’t,” the childish voice of a little girl protested. “You catch her.”

“Come on!” Eleanor yelled. “I’m right here. Come and get me.” She paused, giving the children—just four and six years old—time to catch up with her. She grinned, a delightful feeling of joy welling up in her as the two small children who ran after her pattered on down the hallway in earnest. Her bare feet gripped the wooden boards, and she ran on, hurrying ahead of them.

“Faster!” Little Johnny, the eldest at six, was urging his sister on, all the while racing ahead. Eleanor paused, letting the boy come within a few inches of her and then took off, her bare feet fast down the hallway.

“No! I almost had you!” Johnny yelled delightedly, then pattered on after her as she took off round the corner. She raced past the parlor door, colored ribbons that she held in her hands like streamers trailing along, a target for the children to catch. Her mother’s voice stopped her in place.

“Eleanor! Not so fast! And those children are making a frightful ruckus.”

Eleanor sighed, hanging her head. Her pale brown hair flopped over one eye, and she paused to tuck it out of the way. She frowned, her strong, squarish face transforming from delight to sorrow and then back to contentment as she exclaimed. “I have an idea! I’ll take them outside.”

Mama sighed. “If you insist. But do calm down a little—they will be overwrought all day if you play with them like that.”

Eleanor let out a long breath. She shut her hazel-green eyes for a moment, then opened them. “Very well, Mama,” she said slowly. “I’ll take them outside and we’ll play something different. Come on, Johnny! Come on, Gertrude. Where’s little Rebecca?”

“She has just woken,” Mama commented, gesturing to the hearth, where a small child lay curled up on a chair. At almost three, Rebecca was the youngest of the family, and the smallest of Eleanor’s nieces. She grinned at the small child, who grinned back.

“Ewwa,” the child murmured.

“Yes! I’m here,” Eleanor said with a smile. Rebecca could talk very well for herself, but the lisping nickname she’d given Eleanor had stuck. Eleanor lifted her off the chair and carried her to the door, pausing to glance at her brother, Jonathan, and his very tense-seeming wife, Rachel, who sat at the tea-table. Eleanor frowned as she carried the little child into the hallway.

There’s something bothering them in there , she thought to herself confusedly.

Her brother Jonathan and his wife, along with their three children, had arrived unexpectedly from London—just an hour’s drive in the coach—the previous day. Her parents had welcomed them, but Jonathan was not himself, and Rachel had barely spoken a word since they arrived. Eleanor had taken care of the children for the day, but the other adults had remained in the parlor, white-faced and interested in little else besides huddling at the tea-table talking in hushed tones. She had not had the opportunity to join them to inquire about it—the entire day from the previous afternoon had been filled with tending to the children.

“Look, now!” She grinned at the older two children, who had followed her outdoors. They stood in the middle of the lawn, which was soaked with late autumnal sunshine. It was chilly outdoors, but in the sun and sheltered from the breeze it was glorious. She breathed in deeply, breathing in the cool, fragrant air. “There are some chestnuts over there. Does someone want to collect them?”

“Chestnuts? Hurrah!” Little Johnny, eyes wide and round, ran to the proud chestnut tree in the corner of the garden and fell to his knees. Eleanor watched with delight as he scrabbled about, collecting as many as he could. His younger sister joined him, shrieking delightedly and doing her best to collect as many nuts as she could as well. Eleanor stood and watched, little Rebecca in her arms, peering out curiously. She stroked the child’s downy, pale hair.

Her gaze moved about the garden, the sunshine bright on the lawn around them. Woodford estate was a large property, settled on an acre of land. Her father, who had made his fortune in industry, had procured it when her brother was just three and she had just been born. The family had lived there for one-and-twenty years, enjoying the peace and beauty of the setting.

Rebecca stirred, drawing her attention back to the present. “Look at that. What are they doing, eh?” she asked the child softly.

“Nuts,” Rebecca informed her briefly.

“Indeed,” Eleanor said with a laugh. “They are collecting nuts. Do you think they’ll find the magic chestnut?”

“Magic?” The little girl’s eyes widened in amazement.

Eleanor laughed. “Yes. There’s a magic chestnut, that, if you say a little rhyme when you hold it, it turns into a coach. Then you can get up into the coach and travel

wherever you like.”

“Really?” Rebecca inquired, enthralled.

Eleanor chuckled. “It might be so,” she told her. “It’s a story I heard from the old witch in the woods.”

“Witch in the woods?” Rebecca asked, gazing up at her with apparent fear.

“Not a bad witch,” Eleanor assured her, patting her head fondly. She walked closer to the other two children, who were holding up their chestnuts to the light, rubbing and polishing them.

“You have to find the magic one!” Rebecca informed her siblings firmly.

“Magic?” Johnny asked, looking up inquiringly at his aunt, Eleanor.

“Yes. If you say a magical rhyme when you hold it, it turns into a coach,” Eleanor told them, biting her lip. She hadn’t planned the rest of the story yet—she’d have to make it up as she went along.

“She heard about it from the witch in the woods,” Rebecca said, her voice a shrill squeak.

Eleanor chuckled but the two older children gazed up at her in fear.

“A witch?” Johnny asked. “Really?”

“Um...” Eleanor tensed. She hadn’t really intended the children to believe her story—witchcraft was an uneasy topic, and she didn’t want them to be too convinced of the existence of a witch living nearby. She swallowed uncomfortably, trying to

think of a way to both refute the statement and keep on telling the story, but she was saved from the awkwardness by her mother coming down the path from the house.

“Eleanor! Children! It’s time for tea. Go inside, children! Look at your hands! They’re filthy!” Mama chided gently. “You have to go and wash straight away.”

“I’ll take them, Mama,” Eleanor assured her, looking down at her own hands, which were not much cleaner. Her mother sighed. “You’re not exactly presentable either, Eleanor.”

Eleanor smiled. “It won’t take me two minutes to tidy up, Mama. I promise. I just need to wash, tidy my hair and put some proper shoes on.” She glanced down at the outdoor boots she’d hastily pulled on, the soles of which were buried half in the mud.

“I know,” Mama sighed. “You’re a good girl, Eleanor.”

Eleanor felt herself relax. Rebecca wriggled in her arms, and she hoisted her a little further up on her hip. She looked around the garden, her gaze moving from the stand of chrysanthemums in the corner, their bright blooms a splash of color against the tall grass of the lawn, to the herbs that grew beside the patch of vegetables by the kitchen. She loved plants and worked hard to make the garden as beautiful as she could.

“I’ll take you up to wash now, Becca,” she promised. “We’re going to have some nice cake. Aren’t we, Mama?” She smiled at her mother, who ran a hand through her graying blonde hair.

“Yes. Yes, we are,” she assured the child. Eleanor, glancing at her, could see how tense she was. She rested a hand on her mother’s shoulder, trying to put her at ease.

“I’m sure we’ll all have a fine tea, Mama,” she said, sure her mother was worried about hosting five more people. The household was small—Papa was a prosperous

industrialist, but, after all the other expenses like the carriage and the horses, they could only afford one housekeeper, two maids, and a man who came in once a week to tend to the gardens. Much of the work about the house she and Mama did themselves, including tending the kitchen garden.

“You’re a dear,” Mama murmured, as they reached the house. “And look at you,” she said with a sigh, glancing down at the child on her hip, who was sleepily chewing her thumb. “You have a talent with children.”

“I like children,” Eleanor admitted. She kissed Rebecca on the head and lifted her so that she could wash her hands in the kitchen sink.

“I know. I hope you have plenty of children of your own soon,” Mama said seriously. Eleanor tensed, little Rebecca’s hands still in her own.

“I don’t think I shall, Mama,” she said carefully, setting Rebecca down on her feet. “After all, I am unwed. And it’s not so seemly to have them without being so.” She giggled.

Her mother sighed, looking serious. “Of course, Eleanor. But were you to wed, I mean...”

“An unlikely occurrence, Mama,” Eleanor said lightly. “I am one-and-twenty, and, as yet, I have found no man who appeals to me in the slightest. They’re all drunkards or fools—I mean, besides Papa and Jonathan, that is.” She blushed.

“You often say so,” her mother said dryly. “But, my dear, if you were to wed, I mean...” she began, drying her hands on her apron. Eleanor frowned.

“Mama, I don’t know why you say that. As I’ve said, I want a man like the ones in the novels I read—someone adventurous and bold, someone who’ll sweep me into a

life of unpredictable delights. And I don't think they really exist. I can't marry a man who only exists in my head." She chuckled at that.

"Eleanor...what if Papa found you a suitor?" Her mother's eyes held her own. "A serious one?"

Eleanor frowned; her mouth dry. "Papa wouldn't do that," she said at once, dismissing the unpleasant thought immediately. "You know that you and he have always said that you wish for me and for Jonathan to marry for love. You did, you always said that. Since we were tiny." she felt tense suddenly, without knowing why.

"Sweetheart...he has no choice." Mama's voice was serious. She looked up at Eleanor. She drew in a breath. Her mother's eyes, the same green as her own, were tight at the edges with worried lines. Her stomach twisted and she leaned back, gripping the table.

"What, Mama?" she whispered. "What do you mean?" She tried to hold herself upright, feeling dizzy. The world suddenly made no sense. Her father, her dear, funny father who had always wanted the best for herself and Jonathan, would never do that. He would never force her into anything, she knew that. Nothing made sense to her, and she gripped the table, holding onto the firm solidness in a world that had suddenly become shifting and unpredictable.

"He had to, daughter. The judge left him no other choice. He had to."

"The judge?" she whispered. "What in...what's happening, Mama?" The tension of the past day suddenly made sense, but she would never have guessed that it had something to do with her. Nothing made sense.

Her mother drew in a breath. "It's difficult to explain. I wish your father was here," she added, looking around tensely. "But it's Jonathan. Something he did in the

business—I don't know what it was—but it caused a lot of trouble.”

“Trouble?” Eleanor asked with a frown.

“Yes. He was up before the court, and he would have been sentenced to a long time in prison. He was terrified for Rachel and the children—what would happen to them, without his income? It would be the workhouse for them.”

“No!” She stared at her mother in horror, imagining the three little children trapped in the workhouse, starving to death while they were forced to sort rags or pick oakum.

Her mother rested her hand on her arm, quieting her terrified outburst. “It will not be like that. It's all well now. A friend of your father intervened. He spoke to the judge. The judge acquitted him.”

“And the judge...” Eleanor whispered. “What does he want? He wants to...to...” She couldn't get the words out.

“No. Not the judge. Your father's friend,” her mother explained, her voice soft as if she was talking to a scared child. “He wants you to wed his son.”

Eleanor stared at her mother in horror. She felt sick. She tensed her spine, trying to stay upright. She swayed for a moment on her feet, then caught herself. She would not let this bring her low. She would face it, whatever it was. If a life with a horrid, fusty merchant or accountant was what was in store, then she would find some way to face it. Or she could face it and then run away. She would find some way for them all to get out of this safely.

She had to.

Ramsgate House, October 1817

Sebastian shifted the knot in his silk cravat and breathed out a long sigh. He was standing in the corner of his father's study in Ramsgate House, London, and he felt wretchedly uncomfortable—his jacket felt too tight, his knee-breeches cutting into his calves. The room felt overly warm, despite the brisk wind and the clouds that drifted overhead outside.

“I can’t, Papa. I just can’t do it. It’s going to be horridly tiresome, and I don’t want to spend my life trying to hide my anger.”

“Son...” Papa frowned, his face a picture of distress. “I told you. I am not asking you to do this, I need you to. We made an agreement. At least meet the lady.”

“You did agree to giving me a whole year,” Sebastian argued. “And it’s eleven months. I still have a month to find a lady of my own choice.”

“Son...it’s not as though anyone has seen you trying to do that.” His voice was not angry—if anything, it was mild and a little upset. Sebastian’s stomach twisted. He could meet anger with anger, but that defeated look in his father’s eyes was something he couldn’t bear to see. Since Mama’s passing when he was just a few days old, it seemed as though he and Papa had relied on each other more and more for support until he was as responsible for the older man as Papa was for him.

“I know. I know lots of ladies, Papa, if it helps.” He smiled, wanting to make his father chuckle. His father just looked downcast.

“I know, son. And that’s just the trouble.”

Sebastian sighed. “Very well. But Papa...cannot you give me another week, at least? I like not the sound of this plan of yours.”

His father blinked. “I’ve hardly told you anything, son.”

“You told me exactly two facts,” Sebastian countered. “You said that you have found a lady that you want me to meet, and that she is the daughter of an acquaintance of yours. Neither fact gives me the slightest assurance of liking the lady. In fact, I strongly suspect that she will be a tiresome socialite and I will spend the evening trying not to upset anyone. I don’t want to do that.”

His father smiled a little sadly. “She is no tiresome socialite, son. I know how you feel on such matters. I wish for you to find a strong, respectable lady.”

“I’m not sure that sounds any more encouraging,” Sebastian replied jokingly. In truth, he was a little curious. Who was it that his father had found? The daughters of Papa’s acquaintances were all already known to Sebastian, and he had not yet met one with whom he even felt comfortable talking for very long.

“Son...” His father looked at him with a look of immense tiredness. Sebastian stood straight and tried to be humbler. His father really was serious about this. “Son...I am not well. I’m not long for this world.”

“Papa, please don’t say that,” Sebastian began, but his father shook his head.

“I need to. It’s a fact. My gout plagues me, my heart is not strong. My physician tells me I need to walk more, but what good is that, when my knee aches?” he shook his head, anger tight in his voice. “I have not too many years left, and I wish to see a grandson. A grandchild. Just one. Mayhap one will be all there is.” He trailed off sadly.

“You mean, because of the curse?” Sebastian said tightly. “Papa...please tell me you don’t really believe Aunt Tessa. Do you?” His stomach twisted uncomfortably. He hated it when his father talked about that subject.

His father fixed Sebastian with a hard stare. “Son...I know only two things,” he began. “Firstly, that my own mother labored hard and long to bring me into the world, and I was her only living child. She and my father conceived many times, but I was the only surviving son. And your mother and I likewise. She died bringing you into this world,” he began, and Sebastian stiffened.

“I know, Papa,” he said firmly. The guilt he felt whenever Papa said that, when his tear-stained eyes fixed on Sebastian, was more than he could bear on top of the news his father had already brought to him.

“I know you do, son,” his father said gently. “But the fact is, I cannot entirely rest easy dismissing Tessa’s words. Whatever the cause, curse or not, our family does not have many children. That is true. Curse or no; I am not qualified to say. I just know that I do not expect to have many grandchildren, and I would like to see my heir before I pass on. For this reason, I wish for you at least to meet this lady. I don’t ask more of you.”

Sebastian sighed. “If you say it in such a way, Papa, nobody could refuse you.” He took a deep breath, guilt twisting in his heart. He could not refuse his father—not when he raised the topic of his own death, which pained Sebastian greatly whenever he had to think of it.

“You will see her?” The hopeful tone in his father’s voice twisted his heart.

“Yes, Papa. I will see her. But I must ask you first, at least to tell me something about her. I know so little.” He was surprised to feel a twist of curiosity in his heart. He wanted to know everything he could.

His father sighed. "I have told you what little I know. I have met the young lady twice and thought her charming on both occasions. She is the daughter of a notable industrialist," he added.

"So she is silly, spoiled and interested in chasing after a title?"

"No, son." His father interrupted firmly. "It's cruel to dismiss all daughters of industrialists like that. You don't know all of them. Besides," he added, gently, "she is not like that. She seems very sensible and strong."

"And you talked to her a great deal?" Sebastian inquired seriously.

"No, son. Not long. I exchanged but a few sentences, I admit. She and her brother were visiting her father's offices. Her brother is a well-respected accountant. He worked first for the firm his father created and then began advising the wealthy as to their investments. They are a hardworking and well-reputed family." He sniffed a little hard.

"And this respectable industrialist wishes me to wed his daughter?" Sebastian raised a brow. "You're certain of that?"

"Son, you are descended of nobility," his father began slowly, but Sebastian interrupted.

"Yes, and I have a reputation that would make a demon blush."

"Son, don't be unfair to yourself," his father began, but Sebastian laughed.

"It's true. I know, Papa. I accept it." His voice was bitter. Only half the things people said about him were true, and then it was the milder half. He might have friends from the strangest professions and throw wild parties, but mostly the fun was innocent and harmless.

All the same, it was impossible to imagine a pious, hardworking family like the family that his father described, wanting him to be associated with them.

“Son...it’s not simple,” his father said slowly.

“It seems perfectly simple to me,” Sebastian interrupted, annoyed.

“No,” his father said firmly. “It is rather more intricate than you think. You see, after his son got himself into a spot of trouble, Mr. Montague owes me a favour.”

Sebastian gaped at him. “You mean, the favour is about me meeting his daughter? Father, what exactly have you done?” It was his turn to be shocked.

“Nothing. Nothing,” his father insisted, frowning as if the sound of raised voices pained his ears. “Nothing bad. Something rather beneficial, as it happens. I merely wish it to be equally beneficial to ourselves. Is that bad?” He frowned, the question sounding as though he meant it.

Sebastian sighed. “You would ask me? The man with the terrible reputation?” He shook his head, but the look on his father’s face made him more serious. “Very well. I will meet this woman, as you wish it so dearly. But I cannot promise more than that. Is that what you wish me to do?”

His father beamed. “Yes. I will go and order the carriage. We will take tea with them tomorrow afternoon.”