



A Simple Marriage

(Millionaires of Mayfair #2)

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Category: Historical

Description: In the high-stakes game of Regency London's marriage mart, Lady Pippa Ardeerton rolls the dice with a plan more audacious than wearing last seasons gown: snagging a husband to bankroll her dream dress shop. Dispatching marriage proposals like invitations to a ball, Pippa aims for a match made in mercantile heaven, where love is optional, but silk is mandatory. Enter Lord Hugh Calthorpe, the Marquess of Ravenscroft, her brother's dashing best friend, who accidentally intercepts her matrimonial missives. Hugh, whose commitment to bachelorhood is as firm as his abs, finds himself entangled in Pippa's quest for a Mr. Right Now, all while dodging his great-aunts threats of disinheritance.

As Hugh dons the unlikely hat of Cupid, he discovers that Pippa's kisses are more thrilling than any high society scandal. Suddenly, Londons most eligible bachelor is questioning his resistance to matrimony, especially when the bride in question is as enticing as Pippa. With time ticking faster than the latest gossip, Pippa and Hugh must decide if their accidental alliance can turn into a love for the ages or if they're destined to shop alone forever.

Will their hearts find a common thread, or will Pippas dream shop end up as just another unfinished project? In this comedy of manners (and manors), finding love is the ultimate bargain.

Total Pages (Source): 25

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:45 am

London, 1819

Only the thought of dresses could compel Lady Phillipa ‘Pippa’ Ardeerton to consider marriage. More specifically, a dress shop was the reason Pippa stood in Hyde Park, pretending to admire the lush trees before her as she waited for the first gentleman she had invited to meet her so they could discuss marriage.

The dress shop in question belonged to Mademoiselle Mignon, who was soon to marry. Like a fairy godmother, she had offered to sell her dress shop to Pippa. When they’d first met, Mignon had taken Pippa under her wing and taught her the business of running an exclusive dress shop. It was an opportunity of a lifetime to own her shop. Mademoiselle Mignon’s gowns were legendary as women from all over the British Isles traveled to London to visit the talented modiste. To don one of her dresses for a ton event ensured that the wearer would be the center of attention. It was an understatement to say that her dresses were works of art.

But so were Pippa’s creations. To own this shop was her destiny.

To buy it, she needed her trust fund. To receive her trust fund, she had to reach the age of thirty and still be unmarried. Waiting six years was out of the question. But the trust provided that if she married, the funds became hers on the day she said her vows. And she’d only consider marriage to a gentleman if he’d agreed to marry her quickly and leave her trust fund alone after they exchanged “I dos.”

Her lady’s maid, Alice Roberts, stepped closer and looked over her shoulder. The movement reminded Pippa of a spy, one in the midst of some clandestine affair waiting for the enemy.

Well, this was a clandestine affair, but Pippa didn't want to marry her enemy. All she wanted was one man, and she wasn't picky. Practically any man would meet her requirements if he agreed that she would control her trust fund.

And he must not mind that his wife was involved in trade.

"My lady, your first appointment should have been here by now," Alice murmured.

"There's no need to whisper. No one can hear us." Pippa bit her lip to keep from laughing. Alice was a little sensitive at times if teased about being too dramatic. She patted her maid's arm in comfort. "He's only five minutes late."

Alice pointed to her elbow. "You know how my elbow can predict things. Right now, it's stiffening up on me. That's a warning, my lady. It's telling me that your idea to fetch a husband by writing him a letter isn't going to work." Alice shook her head in disapproval.

Pippa normally adored the antics of her lady's maid. It helped keep the loneliness at bay. An affliction that had only worsened when her older sister, Lady Honoria Ardeerton, had married Marcus Kirkland, the Earl of Trafford, and had moved to his estate in Amesbury.

However, today was not the day for Alice's elbow to start acting out. Uncannily, it regularly predicted when it would rain or if there was a change in the weather. But Pippa very much doubted that it could predict when things were set to go awry.

"Sweet Alice, it's a perfectly conceived plan." Taller than an average woman, Pippa smiled down at her maid.

The maid shook her head and looked about the park again. "Don't you think your brother will think it's a little suspicious that you're going to Hyde Park for the next

five mornings for exercise? His Grace is a wily thinker.” Alice tapped her finger against her temple. “His mind is always working. He’ll smell it. Mark my words.”

“Well, it’s a good thing he has the sniffles,” Pippa retorted. Her brother, Dane Ardeerton, the Duke of Pelham, was a problem. Uncommonly astute, he was the one who had sole discretion over her trust fund. She’d already asked him to release her funds early, and he’d declined.

While her brother was her biggest supporter of her art, he didn’t particularly care for her going into trade. He’d always declared, “A duke’s sister is a rare creature. To lower oneself into mixing with the masses and handling money is unseemly. Unheard of for the Duke of Pelham’s youngest sister.”

However, Pippa considered his thinking to be a tad myopic. His focus was running his millionaire’s club and his gambling hell disguised as a coaching inn, the Jolly Rooster. Pelham created the millionaire’s club one day at Eton to develop a group where men and women with self-made wealth had a place to discuss business.

In Pippa’s opinion, there wasn’t much difference between a modiste shop and a gambling hell coaching inn. All were created to deliver a fantasy of sorts. The gambling hell promised that a man might win a fortune if Lady Luck sat beside him for the night.

A dress offered something just as thrilling. The perfect gown could turn even the most ordinary event into something spectacular. It could also turn that same event into something magical just by the way it could make a woman feel. Pippa considered it an honor to create such fantasies. Heaven knew her need to design was as vital to her wellbeing as her next breath.

Frankly, her plan was flawless and rather ingenious if she did say so herself. She’d picked five men from her brother’s millionaires club to meet and discuss her proposal

of marriage. Once she picked a man, her brother wouldn't object. He'd personally approved each of the members. It made little difference if they were titled or not. The only requirements? They had to have assets worth over million pounds, be trustworthy, and last but not least, be honorable. Pelham didn't allow riffraff into his club even if they did possess fortunes. If the men were part of the club, then Pelham would approve them as eligible men to marry. She was certain of it.

"My lady, look over there." Alice threw a furtive nod of her head in the direction of the paved walkway. "He's coming."

Pippa lifted her gaze. The man walking toward them wore a striking blue morning coat that fit him like a glove and emphasized his broad shoulders. She had little doubt that underneath his apparel, his body was fit and trim. Her eyes swept over his buff-colored breeches, another immaculate fit as they framed his muscular legs. Even from this distance, his clothes were expensive and of the highest quality. She could always recognize such clothing. It was her special power.

Yet, Pippa couldn't tell if it was Lord Bedford or not. She'd invited him to be her first bachelor to interview. She'd always found the viscount to be delightful. But she'd never remembered him being that muscular or tall. However, when they'd danced together at an event, he'd always found a way to amuse her. Humor was important in a marriage, more so than love.

As the man came closer, her confidence wilted like a cheese souffle. The viscount possessed hair a tad darker than Pippa's blonde mane. The man strolling toward her had locks the color of obsidian. Too long, it fell across his brow and brushed his shoulders. It was so dark that it blended into the black of his hat. She still didn't recognize him as the brim shaded his face.

Alice clapped her hands together in glee. "Look Lady Pippa, it's Lord Ravenscroft."

As her maid laughed in pure, unadulterated joy, Pippa gasped in horror.

Of all the men to meet in the park, it was just her luck it was Hugh Calthorpe, the Marquess of Ravenscroft.

He was her brother's best friend. He was also confident, intelligent, and funny. When he shared something with you, he'd lean close and lower his voice. His green-eyed gaze always held yours. He made you feel as if he were sharing something extraordinary only with you. That made him dangerous.

Pippa didn't need intimacy with a man.

She needed friendship, and that was all.

Pippa patted her hair to ensure everything was in place, then smoothed her dress. She would not let the appearance of the marquess deter her. She had every right to be in this park. Women of her stature went for walks every day.

She stood tall and tilted her chin slightly when Ravenscroft drew to a stop in front of them.

"Good morning, my lady." His gravelly voice reminded her of a cat's tongue against the skin, a sign of affection that was unexpected.

Or an unanticipated taste before a bite.

"Good morning, my lord," she answered as he bowed before her.

A man in possession of consummate manners, Ravenscroft turned to Alice. "Good morning, Miss Roberts."

“Oh, my lord, good morning,” Alice cooed. “Imagine meeting you here.”

That was the problem with her fifty-year-old maid. She adored Lord Ravenscroft and always tried to find a way to see him when he visited Pelham, which was practically an everyday occurrence. For heaven’s sake, the man had even bought an estate close to the Jolly Rooster just to be near her brother and their other best friend, the Earl of Trafford, her sister’s husband.

“Yes, imagine meeting me here.” Ravenscroft slowly turned his gaze to Pippa’s then smiled. The mirth in his eyes made them twinkle. It reminded her of pure mischief, the aggravating kind. The earl was a master at provoking her brother. Simply by throwing out a barb disguised as an observation was his *modus operandi*.

Whatever he said, she’d not take the bait. She smiled in return. “Are you just arriving?”

“Indeed,” he answered, never taking his gaze from hers.

“Such a shame that we’re leaving.” She nodded again in a show of manners. “Enjoy your walk, my lord.”

“My lady, how unfortunate that you’re departing. I wanted to join you.” A wicked smile that emphasized his full lips tugged at one corner of his mouth. Fine lines fanned the skin surrounding his striking green eyes.

No doubt they were a direct result of his constant exultant temperament. Truly, she’d never seen him angry or bored. Everything seemed to amuse him, which suited him. It enhanced his extraordinary handsomeness if that were possible. In all her life, she’d only seen a few beautiful men, and the Marquess of Ravenscroft was one of those rare individuals. His features were masculine and attractive. Sharp angles framed his cheekbones and square jaw. The only thing that wasn’t sharp about his features were

his full lips.

Making her wonder if they were as soft as they appeared. She shook her head slightly to clear such thoughts. She had no business considering the man's mouth. He was her brother's best friend.

"How do you know I'm here for a walk?" His voice broke her out of her reverie. "Perhaps I'm here for an assignation of some sort...or another."

The scoundrel winked at her.

"Seems to be the popular thing today," Alice added unhelpfully.

Pippa drew a deep breath and released it. She'd learned early in life that it was best to put your adversaries on the defensive. "Well, we don't want to keep you from your appointment." She waved a gloved hand in the air. "Or tryst or rendezvous," she said under her breath.

"It's my lucky day. It just happens that my assignation is with you." He held up his arm. "Walk with me."

"I can't..." She turned toward the entrance of the park. Bedford was nowhere in sight. Where was the blasted man? It wasn't a good omen. Perhaps he wasn't interested in her proposal.

The subtle fragrance of sandalwood mixed with a heavenly masculine scent wafted her way. Ravenscroft always smelled divine. That's why he was one of her favorite dance partners at an event.

He leaned near, almost close enough to kiss her. Then, his whisky-dark voice teased her ear. "He's not coming."

It was a wonder that Lady Pippa didn't injure herself when she whipped her head to face him.

Hugh didn't mince words this time. "You should walk with me. I think you'll find it highly enlightening."

Her eyes narrowed in wariness then blazed into anger. She wasn't pleased. Normally, he never involved himself in others' business, but this wasn't anyone ordinary. It was Lady Pippa Ardeerton, his best friend's little sister.

Honestly, she was also one of the most interesting people he'd ever met. Uncommonly beautiful with a rare wit, she could make anyone feel at ease, even Bedford, who was a nervous nelly.

Simply put, Lady Pippa was perfect. She'd make a perfect wife and partner.

If someone were looking for such a thing.

Slowly, she took his arm. As they strolled down the path, he chuckled to himself. They must appear as if they were two friends who, by happenstance, met at the park for an early bout of exercise. How wrong that observation would be. He'd purposely arrived at the exact time she was supposed to meet with Bedford.

When Hugh stole a glance at Lady Pippa, her eyes met his. They were royal blue, the same as her older brother's. But he'd noticed that hers had flecks of gold sprinkled throughout the irises. When he'd first met her, he'd been taken aback at her beauty. Even today, she could steal his breath. In a silken green morning gown with a jaunty little hat with peacock feathers, she was confident, assured, and carried herself with a grace that others could only wish to possess.

As much as he enjoyed counting her attributes, now was not the time. They had

business to discuss.

With a quick glimpse, Hugh ensured that Lady Pippa's maid was behind them. She was still within proper chaperoning distance but couldn't hear their conversation. With his free hand, he pulled Bedford's letter from the inside pocket of his waistcoat. "The reason your beau isn't coming is because your letter was delivered to me."

She stumbled, and instantly, he tightened his arm around hers to keep her steady. They'd stopped their casual stroll, and Pippa's defiant chin lifted as she stared straight into his eyes. How uniquely refreshing for him. He didn't have to strain his neck when conversing. Normally, women peered up at him, but Pippa was only a half-foot shorter than him. The censorious look in her eyes was also refreshing. Most women, particularly ones looking for a husband, simpered and whispered around him as if he thought such behavior was enticing.

They were all utterly boring. But he would never consider Lady Pippa boring, particularly when sparks of outrage flashed in her brilliant blue eyes.

"For your information, he isn't my beau." She snatched the letter from his hand and examined it. Her eyes widened in horror. "The seal is broken. You opened it?"

He winced at the incredulity in her voice.

"Not on purpose." He closed the distance between them until a mere six inches were between them.

Alice loudly cleared her throat in warning that he was too intimately close. He nodded his acknowledgment and stepped away until a respectable foot separated them.

"When my mail arrives, my butler organizes it on a silver salver and then places it on

my desk. All the correspondence is presented with the wax seal facing me. It makes it quicker to open the stack.” He shrugged slightly. “When I opened your letter and read it, I realized that it wasn’t addressed to me.”

“You even read it?” Heat bludgeoned her cheeks, and her voice had softened.

“I did.” Honestly, it didn’t feel as if he had anything to apologize for. She was on a fool’s errand that could end with her being ruined.

She flinched slightly before a mask of indifference fell across her features. With a stalwart gaze, she slowly surveyed the park, completely ignoring him for a moment. Ramrod straight and with a determined demeanor, she reminded him of Diana, the goddess of the hunt. An appropriate comparison since, no doubt, Pippa would like to shoot him with an arrow about now.

Eventually, she turned to him with a pleasant smile on her face. It was as bogus as the calves of the men who wore padded stockings to give the impression of muscular legs.

“I trust that you will be discreet and keep that letter secret.” She chewed on her lip, and her delicate brow furrowed into perfect lines. “As an honorable gentleman, you should do that.”

He wanted to roll his eyes at that statement. As an honorable gentleman, he should have gone straight to her brother.

But out of respect for her, he decided to keep the appointment this morning. As an honorable man, he had to warn her about Lord Bedford. More importantly, as an honorable man, he couldn’t allow her to ruin herself.

Bloody hell, she’d asked the man to marry her.

And if that wasn't enough, she'd written to four more men asking the same.

The puzzled look on Ravenscroft's face gave her pause. She asked him to keep her secret. It was a simple request. What was there even to consider?

"You will not share it?" She waited for a moment as dead silence greeted her. "Ravenscroft, please answer me."

"Let us continue our stroll," he said, extending his arm.

Reluctantly, she wrapped her arm around his. "Ravenscroft? You have not given me an answer."

"I'm considering it," he said curtly, then flashed a smile and nodded at an older couple who passed them.

She did the same and waited until they had some distance from the couple. "What's there to consider?"

When he turned his hard-as-nails gaze to hers, she blinked. Oh dear, she'd never seen him this serious before. But it made no difference what he thought. This was her life, and she knew what she wanted. No one, including the Marquess of Ravenscroft, would stop her.

Her conscience cheered, "Hear, hear." Since she'd been an adult, she'd promised herself that she would do whatever she needed to attain her dream. Even accept the first man who would agree to her proposal and conditions. She'd have one of Pelham's solicitors draft the settlement agreement since her brother had several on retainer. They were the best legal minds in London. Yet, it didn't eliminate the feeling of uneasiness.

They'd stopped by a scenic view of the Serpentine. This was normally her favorite part of the park, but she didn't see it. All her attention focused on the marquess. Everything felt on edge, as if she was about to fall into the lake.

He reached into his pocket and then handed her another open letter. Immediately, her heart slammed against her ribs in a near riot as her breath caught. This time, she was the one who closed the distance between them.

When Alice cleared her throat, Pippa held her hand out, palm facing the maid. "I understand you care about maintaining my respectability, but this is something very important," she said, never turning her gaze away from Ravenscroft. "If you'll give the marquess and me a little more privacy? This shan't take much more than a minute."

From her periphery, she could see Alice scooting back.

"Bloody hell," Pippa seethed softly. "How did you come by my correspondence?"

"I'm not really certain." He shrugged, then reached into his coat and pulled out more letters. "But this is all of it." He arched one eyebrow. "Unless you asked more than five men to marry you."

She slammed her eyes shut, then opened them once her anger was under control. "I personally gave those to the messenger boy that my brother uses. I asked the boy to hand deliver each letter."

He leaned a little closer. "And he happens to be the same messenger boy that your brother and I both use when we have letters and documents to be delivered."

"This is a little too coincidental, don't you think? I write to five different men, and you end up with every single letter?" Her anger simmered, ready to ignite in a full

boil of fury. “Are you trying to vex me?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” He innocently blinked.

“I’m not,” she parried.

“You’re absolutely correct. I apologize. You’re not ridiculous at the moment,” he answered, then clasped his hands behind his back. Even acting aloof, the man was too handsome for his own good. “But you were when you asked Lord Bedford, Lord Kingston, Lord Stanhope, and Lord Wexworth to marry you.”

Pippa lowered her voice. “Don’t be absurd. I did not ask them to marry me.”

He tilted his head and widened his eyes in disbelief. “You said, ‘Meet me at Hyde Park for the express purpose of discussing the possibility of matrimony with me.’” He widened his stance and stared at his perfectly polished boots.

His valet must use a gallon of champagne to achieve such a shine. What a waste of good wine. She counted five long, drawn-out breaths, each one calming her just a bit more.

He slid his gaze to hers. Another wicked gleam flashed from his eyes. “Oh, I forgot to add Lord Burrell. But it was brilliant on your part that you didn’t have them meeting you on the same day. One for each day of the week.”

“Are you finished?” she seethed.

“Hardly, madame.” He glanced at the ground and shook his head. “What a collection of men.” He lifted his gaze, the challenge in his eyes crystal clear. “Why on earth those individuals?”

“I don’t have to answer to you.” She pivoted on the ball of one foot to face Alice.

“But you do have to answer to your brother,” he said softly.

That one statement brought everything to a standstill. She blinked her eyes, then turned to face him. She hated to plead for anything. It always brought forth memories of her ignored pleas in the dining room on that dreadful day with her parents. It had made her feel helpless. Since then, she’d only done it once in her life when she’d begged her brother to allow her to attend one of his infamous masquerades at the Jolly Rooster. No matter how much she begged or cajoled, he wasn’t swayed. She promised herself she’d never put herself in that position again.

It wasn’t that her brother Dane was hard-hearted, but he did take his role as patriarch of the family seriously. He wanted his sisters happy and secure in their lives.

And that meant marriage.

Her brother was a bit of a romantic. He wanted her to fall in love and marry someone who would protect her and make her happy. She didn’t need that. She needed that dress shop, and if her brother was worried about her safety, she’d buy a guard dog.

Pippa took her role as an independent woman seriously as well. Dane had taught her to solve insurmountable problems with innovative solutions...even if they were unconventional. She was rather proud of her ingenuity in solving the problem at hand.

She didn’t want to disappoint Dane as he and her sister Honor were everything to Pippa. But she knew what was best for her future and a conventional marriage wasn’t the answer. So, that left her with no choice but to do things her way. Besides, living with her brother had taught her that it was much easier to explain afterward than to convince him beforehand.

She squared her shoulders, never tearing her gaze from Ravenscroft. Her fury returned with a vengeance. It reminded her of an inferno, which was a good thing. It would be fitting if the marquess was singed from the heat she radiated.

“Everyone has a price,” she said evenly, but there was no mistaking the menace in her voice. “What do you want?”

“Answers.”

She folded her arms across her chest. “Not that you deserve any, but if it’ll guarantee your silence, then ask away.”

“Why are you looking to marry?” He held out his arm.

She simply stared at it, not moving a muscle. She huffed a little breath.

“Are you in some sort of trouble, Pippa?” His voice had deepened, sending shivers through her. “No matter what it is, I will help you. Just tell me the truth.”

She still stared at him.

“My lady?” Alice asked with a small smile. “Remember my elbow? Also, remember what I said about flies and honey.”

Alice was right. She couldn’t be contrary. She nodded in agreement, then turned to Hugh. “I need my trust fund.”

“And...?” he asked with that infuriating smile he wore so well.

At that moment, she realized that she had to tell him the entire story if she wanted him to keep her secret. She lowered her arms and allowed a small smile to tug at her

lips. It was a peace offering of sorts.

“Mademoiselle Mignon is marrying. She offered to sell her modiste shop to me.” Pippa grabbed his arm and squeezed. The hard muscles beneath her hand flexed. “This is a chance of a lifetime.” She was practically bouncing on tiptoes. “If I marry, I have access to my trust fund, and I can buy the shop.”

A delightful smile tugged at his lips. “You’re excited about this?”

“I’m ecstatic. It’s my dream come true. I’ve been designing and sewing gowns all my life. I want to teach others how to create dresses.”

“That’s an admirable goal.” He smiled but then frowned. “Why did you pick these men?” He held up his hands as if not wanting to offend her. “I mean, they’re a rather eclectic group.”

She chuckled softly. “Easy answer. They’re all part of Pelham’s millionaire club. He’ll give his blessing that way.” She grew pensive and captured his gaze. “He doesn’t want me to go into trade before I marry. He thinks it’s beneath me.” She fisted her hand, desperate to make Ravenscroft understand. “I want this. I need this. It’s my calling, you see.”

He nodded. “Your brother can be a little set in his ways.”

That was an understatement if she’d ever heard of one. Pippa had no doubt that Pelham loved her without any reservation. However, he could be a tad protective at times, but it was time for her to spread her wings.

“Why wasn’t I on the list? I’m in your brother’s club.” His stare captured her gaze.

“You?” She laughed. “What a bouncer.” When she saw the flash of offense in his

eyes, Pippa knew she'd said the wrong thing. "I didn't mean that in a hurtful way." Heat, the kind that told too much, licked her cheeks. "You're my brother's best friend. You saw what he did to my sister Honoria and Marcus in their courtship. One day, he's threatening to shoot Marcus, and then the next, he was inviting him to dinner." She shook her head vehemently. "Pelham doesn't handle change well."

"Good point," he responded with a grin. "Your brother and I have a friendship that we both cherish. I'm as close to him as my own brother." He grew serious, an emotion that he wore infrequently. "But don't you want to fall in love the traditional way? Have men court you?"

She slid him a side-eyed glance. "Sir, you don't listen very carefully. I said I want to marry, not fall in love."

"Why don't you want to fall in love?" His straightforward demeanor took her aback.

But she was determined to quickly recover the upper hand. The man didn't need to know her thoughts and opinions about the elusive promise of love.

"Ravenscroft," she playfully chided, then tapped him on the arm with her folded fan. The smack of the ivory blades cracked like a warning shot across the lush park grounds. "A lady mustn't tell all her secrets." She batted her eyes in the most flirtatious manner she possessed, the one she'd practiced in the mirror for years. "Please, can I have your word as a gentleman that you won't tell my brother?"

"Lady Pippa, is there something in your eye?" Before she could deliver a proper retort, his tone grew as playful as hers. "Your wiles won't work on me."

Why was she surprised? She wanted to stomp her foot in frustration. She'd never been very successful with persuading men. However, she thought Ravenscroft was different. He was one of the few men in her brother's circle of friends who truly

listened to her.

“My lord,” she said, then inhaled a deep breath. She was actually going to do it, break her vow to herself. Her whole body shuddered slightly as she gathered the courage to say the words. “Please, Ravenscroft, I’m begging you.”

He stared at her for a long moment. The intensity of his gaze felt like a knife cutting her open and spilling all her secrets. She straightened her shoulders. Under no circumstance would she allow him to have them. They were hers and only hers. Miraculously, his expression had transformed from teasing into something way more serious and verboten.

“I’m a man with a conscience.” He slowly gazed across the park before he returned his penetrating stare back to hers. “I don’t want to interfere, but as a friend of your brother’s, it’s my duty to look out for your welfare.” Before she could protest that she didn’t need a keeper, he raised his hand. “Pelham invited me to dine with you and him on the morrow. Let me consider what you ask. I never betray a friend. And I consider you a friend.” He grinned. “I’ll give you my answer then. But I beg of you, do not send out more letters. We shall consider this a truce.” He widened his eyes with a roguish grin.

“Only enemies need truces,” she challenged.

He smiled as if pacifying a child. “Either way, I would be forever in your debt if you cease sending those letters. Consider it friendly advice.”

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:45 am

As Hugh's carriage rumbled through the London streets, his mind was on the youngest Ardeerton sister. To say Pippa was intriguing wasn't an exaggeration.

Highly unconventional, Lady Pippa Ardeerton had entered society before her eldest sister Lady Honoria. But it had been acceptable to Honoria. She hated London. Then, in Amesbury, Pelham's ancestral seat, Pippa's sister and the Earl of Trafford had found themselves in a bit of a scandal. That incident had forced Pelham to bring both sisters to London in hopes of getting out in front of the rumors that the eldest had ruined both herself and Trafford. It had worked.

When both sisters were in London together, it was a rare sight. Two beautiful women with substantial fortunes, who happened to be the siblings of one of the most powerful dukes in the kingdom, were unmarried. Every eligible man in town had thrown his hat into the proverbial marital ring.

However, Hugh knew enough to stay out of the fray. Trafford, who happened to be best friends with Hugh and Pelham, had fallen in love with Honoria and had taken her to his hunting lodge. To say that the duke was angry at the earl was like calling the sun a simple yellow dot in the sky. Hugh had never seen Pelham so furious. Funny, but Pippa had that same look about her today when he'd spoiled her plans. Truly he hadn't meant to cause her harm. But the idea that she'd just pick names from her brother's millionaire club list was ludicrous. As Pelham's best friend, Hugh had a duty to protect the duke's family.

To Hugh, family was everything. Pelham felt the same way about his sisters.

As the carriage arrived at his London manse, Hugh straightened his shoulders at the

thought of marriage. Even though he denied it, the idea that Pippa didn't include him on the list stung much like running into a briar patch. If she was only considering members of her brother's club, why wasn't he on the list? He was a member and one of her brother's best friends. But perhaps she was trying to spare both him and Pelham from an uncomfortable arrangement. Marrying your best friend's little sister wasn't compatible with an easy friendship.

However, most people considered him a desirable match. Though Hugh didn't claim to be boastful, there was no denying he was wealthy and titled. Marriage-minded mothers and their daughters seemed to think him handsome. Women pursued him whenever he hosted a society event, and they even occasionally called on his mother in hopes of catching a glimpse of Hugh.

But he wasn't interested in them.

The ton expected him to marry soon. He had a responsibility to the title to provide an heir. His father had done it before him. And his father's father before that. Even his own family prodded him to marry. His mother discreetly introduced him to eligible ladies of the ton. Hugh was respectful but not engaged. He didn't want love or the institution of marriage.

He ran a hand down his face as Lady Pippa Ardeerton came barging into his thoughts again. No telling what the lady would do next. She might send out another batch of notes. If Hugh was truly a friend to Pelham, he should tell him what had occurred. Yet, the idea of betraying Pippa didn't sit well with him.

When Hugh walked into Raven's Splendor, Burnett was waiting for him. His butler was wringing his hands. Always distinguished without a white hair out of place, Burnett was normally unflappable. Currently, his brow was glistening with sweat. That usually meant Hugh's Aunt Edith was in a high dudgeon. Something must not be to her liking in the household. That simple fact predicted that the entire staff was

in an uproar. Hugh had never understood how his great-aunt, who weighed no more than seven stones soaking wet, could carry that much weight around his home.

“Good morning, my lord,” Burnett said with a bow. “How was your appointment?”

“Interesting,” Hugh said as he handed his hat and gloves to Everett, the footman standing at attention. “I take it that my great-aunt is upset about something. What is it this time?”

“I can’t rightly say, my lord. But upset is putting it mildly. She received a letter from Lady Payne this morning.” Burnett lowered his voice. “She is waiting for you in your study. Lady Ravenscroft is with her.”

Hugh’s eyebrows shot upward. “Things must be serious if my mother is in attendance.”

“My thoughts exactly, sir,” Burnett murmured.

“Thank you,” Hugh said as he took one of the two split staircases toward the second floor of his Neo-classical manse. His study, private salon, bed chambers, and the marchioness’s chambers were on this side of the house. His mother, who no longer slept in the marchioness chambers, had a bedroom on the other side of the house. So did his brother and great-aunt. Hugh normally visited them in the family salon on their side of the manse. So, this was highly unusual.

Hugh chuckled to himself. Who needed to marry when he had two of the most obstinate, confident, not to mention head-strong women living with him? Truthfully, Hugh loved his mother and great-aunt and all their quirks. It would be a dull existence without them in his life.

As soon as he stepped into his study, two gray heads whirled in his direction.

“Come in, my boy.” Aunt Edith waved a bejeweled hand in invitation. “The tea is still comfortably hot.”

“Thank you, ma’am, for the invitation.” It didn’t make any difference to her that it was Hugh’s study. She still acted as if she were the queen of all her surveyed.

Hugh didn’t mind her attitude. Not when his aunt had dropped everything, uprooted her life, and rushed to his mother’s side when she needed help. Shortly after Hugh’s father had died from a heart ailment, his mother’s grief had become overwhelming. She wouldn’t eat or sleep. Hugh had been so worried about her that he’d invited his mother’s aunt to come live with them. As soon as Aunt Edith had arrived, she’d delivered a miracle. Aunt Edith had single-handedly cajoled and threatened his mother until she started to take better care of herself. Hugh was convinced that if his great-aunt hadn’t arrived, he’d have lost both of his parents that year.

So, he loved the grand dame for all her posturing and bravado, even if she was an acquired taste.

His mother and aunt were sitting opposite of each other on matching blue striped brocade sofas. His mother stood and presented a cheek. “Ravenscroft, thank heavens you’re here.”

Dutifully, Hugh pressed a kiss to her cool skin.

Aunt Edith waved him over and presented her cheek. He complied and pressed a kiss to her as well.

“There’s trouble I take it?” he asked as he sat down next to his mother.

“The worst kind.” Aunt Edith’s eyes narrowed as she picked up a letter from the elegant drum table beside her. She shook it in the air with the same urgency as a

cavalry commander signaling the troops. “This is an emergency.” She handed it to him. “Please read it, my boy.”

Though she phrased it as a request, he knew it was a demand. She never used such a commanding tone unless she was upset. He quickly scanned the letter. Lord Will Cavensham and Lady Eanruig, a countess in her own right, lived with Lady Payne.

“That’s good news that Lord Cavensham and his wife, Lady Eanruig, are expecting again. Congratulations to Lady Payne and her family.” He smiled and lifted his eyebrows. “Another child is always a cause for celebration.” He slid the letter toward his aunt. “I don’t see the emergency.”

“Do you understand the horrific travesty in this?” Aunt Edith picked up the letter and waved it in the air. When the sun caught the movement of the jewels on her fingers, an explosion of sparkles erupted in the room. “It’s humiliating. That’s what it is.”

Hugh’s gaze bounced between his mother and aunt. “Enlighten me. How is the happy news of Lady Payne’s great nephew expecting a child humiliating?”

“It’s Stella’s great nephew’s third child in three years.” Aunt Edith harrumphed. “Lord Will Cavensham married that delightful girl Thea, and they’re multiplying like rabbits.”

Her eyes locked with his. How many times had he found comfort in her gaze as he grew up? Too many to count. Aunt Edith’s eyes were still as blue as when Hugh was a child, but her face betrayed her age.

“While I have nothing to show except for a thirty-year-old perennial bachelor who prefers to bury his nose in account books for days on end.”

“I ride every day. Also, I took a walk this morning in Hyde Park.” Hugh lifted an

eyebrow in challenge. His irascible great-aunt returned the gesture. They were like two titans facing each other in a battle where only one would be victorious.

And Hugh planned to be the victor. “I’ll not marry just because you and your friend are in competition for whose great-nephew can procreate the fastest.”

“Aunt Edie,” his mother crooned the family nickname. “These things come in cycles. When Hugh settles down, I’m positive that you’ll have plenty of babies to boast about to your friend Stella.” She shook her head slowly. “But you can’t force my son to marry. Not when he hasn’t found the right one to love.”

Hugh didn’t move. He loved his mother. She was a saint to have raised him and his younger brother Bryce. However, Hugh didn’t share the same opinions about love with her. She’d be aghast that he believed the emotion was for fools. A person couldn’t trust that it wouldn’t turn into something hurtful. Frankly, he had enough experience in life to know it wasn’t cut out for him. Perhaps Lady Pippa had the right of it on how to go about finding a spouse. Simply pick someone out of the crowd.

His great-aunt huffed, then stood abruptly. She snatched the silver lion head of her walking cane, then started to pace in front of the bay windows. With her emerald morning gown and matching pelisse swishing behind her, she looked like a very unhappy fae queen who was ready to dismiss her subjects forever.

Things were spiraling out of control. Bloody hell, he adored the old lady, but what she wanted wasn’t something he would snap his fingers and fix. He’d never thought it urgent to marry. He was still young. Working was his only interest at the moment. Besides, he had a little brother as heir, and for now, that was enough for him.

“Aunt Edith,” he soothed. “We’ve been through this before. I’m not ready for marriage.”

His aunt came to an abrupt halt in front of him. “And why not?”

Hugh studied the elegant elderly lady standing in front of him. With a sigh, he stood and took her arm with his as he walked her to the sofa again. “I’m not the marrying type. My life is perfect the way it is. Perhaps you should be having this conversation with Bryce.”

Just then, his younger brother by five years, came into the study. “Did someone say my name?”

If anyone would marry before Hugh, it would be his brother. Handsome and rich, Lord Bryce Calthorpe had his pick of marriage-minded ladies. But like Hugh, Bryce wanted to make money. His goal was to be admitted to Pelham’s millionaire club within the next three years. And if Bryce’s investments continued in their current trajectory, he would be invited to join within two years by Hugh’s calculations.

“Aunt Edith was just discussing you,” Hugh offered innocently.

“No, I was discussing you.” Aunt Edith planted her walking stick in the thick Aubusson carpet beneath her. “And your lack of marriage prospects. It’s your duty to the marquessate to marry.” Aunt Edith batted Hugh’s arm away and then sat beside Hugh’s mother. “Margaret, what do you think about children in the house?” Aunt Edith batted her eyes in Hugh’s mother’s direction, compelling his mother to agree with her.

“Well, I don’t know since there aren’t any.” The dowager Marchioness of Ravenscroft smiled.

“Aha!” Aunt Edith cheered. “We’re in agreement.”

“Mother,” Hugh objected.

His mother held up her hand, then turned to her aunt. “You’re like a mother to me.” She leaned over and patted her aunt’s hand. “There’s nothing more in this world I want than to see you happy, particularly after everything you’ve done for me. But you can’t force someone to do your bidding over matters like these. I know that better than all people.”

Hugh’s heart stumbled in his chest. He and his brother exchanged glances. Their mother had not had the easiest life, especially after their father had passed away. Quite frankly, her grief had practically paralyzed the entire family.

As head of the family, Hugh sat opposite the two most important women in his life, praying he’d find the right things to say to appease them both.

“I’ll never say never, but it’s not something I’m interested in. At least, not now.”

“God forbid, but what if something should happen to you? You’re not getting any younger, my boy.” His aunt stared at him then slowly blinked.

“Then Bryce will take over the title,” he said gently.

Aunt Edith directed her attention to Bryce. “All right, then. When are you going to settle down?”

Bryce put both hands in front of him and started to back away. “I’m just a second son. No need for me to consider the holy state of matrimony yet.”

“Do not leave this room. Stay right where you are, young man,” Aunt Edith ordered. Her gaze swept around the room, first landing on Hugh’s mother, then Bryce, and finally on Hugh. “You leave me no choice, Ravenscroft. I’ll give you the same ultimatum that Stella gave her great nephew.” The old lady sniffed. “Hopefully, it’ll work for me.” She straightened her five-foot frame and tipped her gaze to his. “If you

don't marry within the next year, I'll disinherit you. I'll give my family's estate to Bryce."

She delivered a defiant tilt of her chin. Her chin was so high she appeared to be staring at the ceiling.

"And did the ultimatum work for Lady Payne?" Hugh asked wryly.

"Perfectly. I even helped Stella think up the plan."

Just then, Aunt Edith's favorite footman, Everett, knocked on the door. "Lady Edith, your solicitor is here. Mr. Burnett accompanied Mr. McIntyre to the formal rose salon." Cautiously, he walked to Aunt Edith's side and extended his arm. "If it'll please you, ma'am, may I escort you there?"

She nodded and stood. "At least someone around here is interested in my welfare." She turned one final time to Hugh. "I'm having McIntyre write a new conveyance of the estate. I'll ask him to leave the name blank. I'll write in who I'm giving it to."

With a nod of her head, she exited the room, holding on to Everett.

Collectively, they all let out a relieved breath after she was gone.

"I'm sorry, darlings. She really wants to have a baby in the house." His mother smiled. "I think she misses Stella more than she lets on. They've best friends since they were little girls, and they can't see each other as much as they used to. Aunt Edith and Lady Payne don't travel together anymore since Stella's great, great nieces and nephews have been born. I'm a poor substitute since I don't like to travel."

"Nonsense," Hugh retorted. "You're the best friend she's ever had. Aunt Edith can't have everything she wants on demand."

Bryce nodded in agreement. "Let's get her a puppy."

Their mother laughed. "Dearest, I'm afraid she'll see right through that plan. You'll be the one taking care of it."

In her early fifties, Hugh's mother was an attractive woman. She was still young. He wanted nothing more than to see her happy. Perhaps he should be taking her to more ton events so she could be meeting eligible men who were looking for companionship or perhaps a wife. At least she'd understand she had choices. There were honorable men who would be interested in her.

Bryce slid into a club chair and ran a hand down his face. "I hate it when Aunt Edith gets upset like this." He turned to Hugh. "But if she gives me the lodge, I'll give it to you."

His brother was beyond loyal and always had been especially since Hugh had been his caretaker for all those years when they were younger, and his mother was bedridden. "There's no need. Whatever Aunt Edith does, I'll live with it. But she knows how to turn the proverbial knife after she's inserted it."

He stood and poured himself a cup of tea. It was now lukewarm, but it was a welcome distraction. His aunt knew what the lodge had meant to Hugh. It was a place that held his fondest childhood memories. When his mother had carried Bryce, it had been a difficult pregnancy, and Hugh had been sent to live with Edith. It had been a magical summer. Whatever he'd wanted to do, Aunt Edith had allowed it. He'd leave early in the morning with his food packed and explore the estate. Sometimes, he would ride and fish all day. At night, he'd lay under the summer sky and watch for falling stars. After that summer, everything had changed. Bryce had been born. Some days, it felt like only yesterday. His parents had been overjoyed with two sons.

He let out a painful sigh.

“Ravenscroft,” his mother said gently. “There will be a day you’ll need to marry.”

“But it’s not here yet.” He turned to face her. “I know my responsibilities.”

Bryce came to stand by him and patted him on the shoulder. “Sorry, old man, I wish I could help you with these problems.”

They weren’t just his problems. They were his family’s problems. Suddenly, a brilliant idea began to take shape. He could tackle three tasks at once and solve all his worries.

He’d start making appearances at social events. He’d never attended anything unless Pelham or Trafford were there. But he could squire around his mother and aunt as they attended social commitments without too much bother. It would give his mother something to look forward to.

Hopefully, that would keep his aunt satisfied that he was making a good-faith effort to find a wife. He’d ask his mother to attend with him. She’d been lonely ever since his father had died. That would allow him to introduce her to men who might provide the perfect companionship. Plus, the cherry on top was that he could help Lady Pippa in her quest to find a husband, all the while safeguarding her from going about it in a way that might ruin her reputation. It would be keeping her secret and protecting her at the same time. Pelham couldn’t object to that.

Besides, he’d grown a tad bored with the monotony of his everyday life. Aunt Edith was right. He did spend an inordinate amount of time with the estate books. A new diversion would be welcome. Particularly if it gave him the opportunity to spend time with the delightful Lady Pippa.

The plan wasn’t just brilliant. It was superb.

“Perhaps Aunt Edith is correct,” he mused and snuck a peek at his mother. “I should be enjoying the social season.”

His brother’s mouth fell open. “What? You attend social events?”

“I host a ball every year, don’t I?” Hugh said a little defensively. He hated that tradition. Every Marquess of Ravenscroft had hosted a London ball since the title was created. His mother planned it and played his hostess. If it was up to Hugh, he’d never host another one. Last year, she’d informed him that she didn’t want to do it again.

Which was like manna from heaven. Whenever he had hosted a ball at Raven’s Splendor, his life was upended for weeks.

“What wonderful news.” His mother stood and joyfully clapped her hands. “Aunt Edie will be so pleased. I’ll go tell her.”

After their mother left, Bryce turned his way and narrowed his eyes. “What are you doing? You’ve never enjoyed the social season before. You’ve always sworn off marriage.”

“Who said anything about marriage?” Hugh winked. “I’m just performing several good deeds and doing my duty to the family.”

And protecting one charming duke’s sister in the process.

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:45 am

“My lady, look.” Alice stood next to Pippa at the top of the steps. “Lord Ravenscroft arrived.” She sighed in pleasure. “That man could wear a horse blanket and still look divine. I think you should add him to your list of eligible gentlemen.”

“You would like that, wouldn’t you?” Pippa laughed softly. “You could ogle him daily to your heart’s content.”

“You would enjoy it as well,” Alice challenged with a wink.

That was exactly why she was concerned about being in Ravenscroft’s company. The man would prove detrimental to her plans to find a husband. She turned to her maid. “How do I look?”

“Like you’re ready to conquer the world.” Alice eyed her critically. “I always thought blue was your color, but that pink is divine.”

Pippa’s gaze skated down the front of her gown. A blush-colored taffeta with a matching netting of crystals covered the bodice and skirt. With cap sleeves edged with a white ribbon, the gown was simple but elegant. It was one of her favorites, and no one had seen her wear it before.

“I’ll be anxious to hear what the marquess has to say.” Alice beamed at her. “Mark my words, he’ll not tell your secrets. He’s a man of honor.”

“I know his virtues,” Pippa scolded playfully, then grinned. “You remind me of them every day.”

“I know a good man when I see one.” Alice shrugged her shoulders. “I’ve been with you for over ten years.” A sheen of tears appeared out of nowhere. “I just want you happy, Lady Pippa.”

Immediately, Pippa’s heart melted at the affection in her maid’s voice. “Thank you, Alice.” She took her maid’s hand and squeezed. “I don’t think my brother would approve. Look what he did with Lord Trafford.”

Alice planted her hands on her hips. “My lady,” she scolded softly. “Could you blame His Grace for challenging the man to a duel? He found Lady Honoria and Lord Trafford together. Naked.”

“I see your point.” Pippa nodded knowingly. “My brother is scarred for life.” She fiddled with her gloves, not wanting to go down and face the marquess. But she was an Ardeerton, and nothing would defeat her. “I know what will make me happy, and it’s not a husband. It’s a dress shop.” She winked. “But I must have the former to receive the latter. So, that’s the price I’ll pay.”

She stole another glance at the marquess. He stood at the bottom of the stairs talking with Trafford and Pippa’s sister, Honoria. Dressed in a blue tailcoat and matching breeches, he cut a fine figure. He was muscular but not in an obtrusive way. She could easily see herself running her hands over his body, discovering his shape. How different he was from her. She was all curves, while he was straight lines, sharp angles, and hardness. How would their bodies fit together? Her blood heated at the thought, but it didn’t keep her from envisioning it. She clenched her legs together, hoping to tame her unruly body. It was nonsensical how she was reacting to him.

As if he knew her attention was devoted to him, Ravenscroft slowly turned his emerald gaze her way. He didn’t smile; he simply stared at her with a smoldering gaze that made her heated body burn hotter. She returned the favor. Under no circumstances would she allow him or his formalwear to disquiet her. This was her

home. As soon as she could speak with him privately, she'd inform him that his waistcoat was the wrong color to go with such a beautiful ensemble.

After a final tug of her gloves, Pippa descended the steps. As soon as her foot touched the marbled tiles of the entry, she was swept into a hug from Honoria, whom the family called Honor. That is, all the family called her except her husband, who preferred Noria.

Pippa sighed slightly. It was so romantic. Her sister, who had sworn she'd never married, had been caught in a scandal but thankfully had discovered the love of her life. The scandal had been buried under the rug once Marcus had convinced her to marry him. Now, Honor was the happiest person on earth along with her husband.

Her breath hitched when a twinge of something pinched her. It couldn't be jealousy. It had to be unease. Though it was lovely what had happened to Honor, it wasn't Pippa's future.

"Oh, Pippa, you look so beautiful," Honor exclaimed, then stepped away slightly to examine her dress. "For a moment, I thought you'd worn my Venus costume." Her sister blushed prettily, and her husband laughed.

"Darling, this must be a new creation. I have the original Venus costume at home." He winked at Pippa. "Your sister gave it to me as a wedding present." He leaned close to his wife. "Perhaps you could try it on for me latter," he whispered, but it was still loud enough that everyone heard it.

"Not that risqué gown that you wore when you snuck into my masquerade party?" Pelham growled as he came around the corner.

Pippa blinked. Lady Grace Webster was with him. Pippa's gaze flew to Honor's. Honor lifted her eyebrows. It was a secret sign between the two sisters that something

must be awry in their brother's world. Those two had a romantic past of some kind, but neither would discuss it in much detail. Lady Grace was truly a beautiful, caring woman and a wonderful friend to the Ardeerton family. When Honor and Trafford were caught together in flagrante delicto, it was Grace who came up with the master plan that restored their reputations.

"You're criticizing your sister's masquerade costume?" Grace smiled benignly at Pelham. "That's like the kettle calling the pot black, isn't it Your Grace?"

Pelham smirked. "In what manner?"

"From what I understand, you were running around half-naked as a Roman soldier. If the rumors around the ballrooms are true." she said sweetly.

"I think Lady Grace is a master at getting the better of your brother." The deep voice of Ravenscroft vibrated softly near Pippa.

Pippa should have realized he was nearby. The masculine smell of sandalwood and his own unique scent should have been her first clue. Careful not to reveal her interest, she inhaled the fragrance. Instantly, thoughts of wool and leather and pristine bed linens crowded into her thoughts. A vision of him naked in bed, propped up on a bent elbow while wearing a smoldering expression, came from nowhere. Immediately, she opened her fan.

"You look beautiful in that gown," he said.

When her gaze flew to him, he was smiling at Pelham. She slid her gaze to her brother, who was watching them with a frown on his face. She smiled sweetly. It must have been enough assurance for her brother as he allowed his attention to be directed toward Grace and Honor.

“My word,” the marquess said softly so no one could hear. “Your brother is protective of you.”

“Too protective,” she answered. “Thank you for the lovely compliment. I’ve never worn this dress. I made it last year.”

“You sewed this gown?” he asked with a hint of incredulity coloring his voice.

She nodded, then smiled at the shocked expression on his face. “Not only did I sew it, but I designed it.”

“I’m intrigued, Lady Pippa. I’m starting to understand your obsession with this dress shop.” He wore the same wicked smile that he had yesterday when he gave her all her letters. But this time, there was something else in his eyes. It reminded her of a banked fire ready to blaze in heat.

She studied his eyes to see if he might be making fun of her. Most people didn’t think it appropriate for a duke’s daughter or a duke’s sister to spend so much time on such work.

She moved her fan a bit quicker, hoping to cool the heat that bludgeoned her cheeks. “Try as I might, I fail to see the distinction between sewing a dress or embroidering a sampler. Both involve needles, thread, and fabric. Don’t you agree?”

He threw back his head and laughed. “Indeed, my lady.” He turned to face her, blocking the rest of the party from her view. “But there is one distinction that must be mentioned.”

“What’s that?”

“I’ve never seen such beauty in a sampler before.”

The silkiness of his voice slid over her and her body. She leaned near him much like a flower seeking the sun. Oh, for the love of heaven. What was happening to her? She never reacted this way to men. The only reason she's doing so tonight must be because of what he was wearing.

"My lord, I take that as a compliment."

"It was meant as one." He held out his arm. "It appears everyone has left us."

As she looked around him, everyone had gone. "I didn't even hear them leave."

"Of course, you didn't," her brother said from behind them. "You both were in another world."

"Pelham, how in the devil do you sneak up on people like that?" Ravenscroft shook his head in disbelief.

"Pure talent," her brother answered. "Come, you two." Without waiting for them, Pelham strolled toward the dining room.

"We've been summoned," the marquess said with a genuine smile.

Pippa took his arm. Instantly, her fingers danced across his tailcoat. "The craftsmanship of your coat is divine."

He waggled his eyebrows. "Sit next to me at dinner, and you can examine it in better light."

"You know exactly how to entice a lady."

He shook his head with a smile. "I know how to entice a specific lady."

Pippa angled her gaze to his. “Do you always flirt like this?”

“No.” For a moment, all expression faded from his face. “I don’t believe I ever have.”

“May I be blunt?”

He nodded.

“I believe a waistcoat with green embroidery would be exquisite with what you are wearing tonight.”

“You don’t like the cream?”

She shook her head. “It doesn’t enhance the color of your eyes.”

“I’ll tell my valet. He’ll appreciate the advice just as I do. If you want my green eyes enhanced, then I take that as a command.” He chuckled as his eyes widened.

By then, they were in the dining room. Pelham indicated that Pippa was to sit beside him. Honor sat on the other side of their brother. Trafford and Grace had already taken their chairs. That left Ravenscroft to sit next to Pippa.

As expected of a gentleman, he helped her with her seat before he took his. The first course was served, and the conversation flowed as easily as the wine. Even Pelham was on his best behavior which was a miracle since Grace sat at the table. Yet immediately, Pippa’s attention was directed to the man beside her. Every time Ravenscroft said something, his deep voice vibrated inside of her. She stared at her plate for a moment to gather her wits. She’d completely forgotten to ask him what his decision was about revealing her plan to find a husband.

To relieve her unease and the tickle in her belly, she adjusted her seat. Her leg

brushed up against his, and she hissed as if she'd been burned.

"Is something wrong?" His voice had grown quiet. Since everyone around them was talking, only she could hear him.

She wanted to shout that everything was wrong. Her reaction to him, his clothing, and whether he'd informed her brother of her actions yesterday were just the start. Finally, she trusted herself to speak. "Yes, something is wrong. What are you going to say to Pelham?"

"About?" His posture relaxed as he turned slightly in her direction.

Oh, the blasted man was tormenting her. "Come now, sir. About yesterday?"

"Ah, I see." He nodded as if finally understanding her turmoil. "I have a proposition for you that should alleviate your concerns."

Just then, Pelham cleared his throat. "Ravenscroft, I must return to the Jolly Rooster. Care to accompany me?"

Ravenscroft held her gaze for a moment. There was reassurance in his green eyes. Could she trust him?

The beat of her heart accelerated as he slowly turned his attention to her brother. As he started to speak, that very same organ in her chest slammed to a halt, seemingly suspended in mid-air. If he said anything about her plan, she'd not only have to answer to Pelham but to Honoria and Trafford as well. They were as protective of her as her brother.

"I think not, Pelham." The marquess relaxed in his chair and turned slightly her way. "You see, I've decided to stay in London for the remainder of the Season." At the

incredulous expressions on Pelham's and Trafford's faces, he held up his hand. "I'd like to escort my mother about town. It would do her well to strengthen some of her acquaintances. Make new friends." The ease in his smile charmed them all. "You understand."

Trafford nodded in agreement, then turned to Honoria. "We'll join you for part of the Season, but we're headed back to Woodbury Park on the morrow."

Honor looked at him adoringly. "I can't wait."

"Ahh, the luster of newlywed bliss," Grace sighed. "You both seem marvelously happy."

"We are," Honor answered, never taking her eyes from Trafford.

Pelham rolled his eyes.

Grace shot him a look designed to skewer him in two. "Good things happen to good people."

"Define good," Pelham retorted with an arch of one perfect brow. His gaze locked with hers in a battle of the wills.

Ignoring the piercing looks Grace and Pelham shared, Ravenscroft announced, "My mother enquired if Lady Pippa might be staying for the Season." He turned to her, then winked. No one could see it except her.

What in the devil was he doing? They'd never discussed this.

"That's a wonderful idea, Ravenscroft," Grace said with a nod. "I'm planning on attending most of the events myself. I have quite a few clients who need help

navigating this Season. There's a surfeit of eligible men this year."

"Meaning?" Pelham addressed Grace.

"My female clients are quite wealthy this year. We need to see who's serious about marriage and who is merely looking for an heiress."

"Aren't heiresses serious business?" Feigning innocence, Pelham swirled his wine in the leaded cut glass.

"I know you're not really acquainted with this concept." Grace smiled serenely. "But my clients are interested in making love matches."

"I want to stay for the Season." Pippa blinked, unsure whether she had said the words aloud. Slowly, her brother's gaze came to land on her. "I want to see what the fashions are this year." Coming from anyone else, the comment might sound a bit capricious, but everyone at the table knew that fashion was her passion.

Ravenscroft smiled at her as if she were a star pupil who'd flawlessly recited Shakespeare's Sonnet Number Eighteen.

"My mother would be delighted to host Lady Pippa," Ravenscroft offered gallantly. "She holds Lady Pippa in the highest esteem and admires her greatly."

"Just as I'm certain you do," Pelham growled sarcastically, then looked down his patrician nose at Ravenscroft. "Absolutely not. After what Trafford did to Honor, I'll not allow any further shenanigans along those lines."

Immediately, Honor, Trafford, and Grace objected to the duke's description of what had occurred between Honor and her husband. Thankfully, the argument grew in volume, giving Pippa the opportunity for a private word with the marquess.

“Sir, what are you about? We never discussed you inviting me to live at your house?”

Discreetly, he moved his right hand close to her left one, which rested on the table. She sucked in a breath when his little finger slid over hers. His heat and the roughness of his skin sent a scattering of goosebumps over her arms. It was the slightest of touches, but still, it felt intimate in a way that she’d never experienced before.

“I need you to stay in London,” he answered.

Finally, dinner was finished giving Hugh a chance to talk with Pippa privately. Pelham had decided that they all should take their after-dinner drinks outside since the weather was perfect. But more importantly, he’d agreed that Pippa could stay in London if Grace stayed with her at Ardeerton House until Pelham returned. Grace had readily accepted.

As Hugh was wont to do, he couldn’t help but needle the duke just a tad bit more. He offered to visit the ladies while Pelham was away. When Hugh had given the reason that it was only to ensure that they had everything they needed, Pelham’s grumble had finally abated, and he’d acquiesced.

After drinks, they all agreed to stroll through the formal gardens at Ardeerton House. As Pelham and Grace led the way, Hugh and Pippa hung behind the group.

“Why do you need me in London?” she asked quietly.

“I have a proposition that I think you’ll like,” he answered. Once they were a sufficient distance behind the other two couples, Hugh took Pippa’s hand in his and led her into a small maze.

She tilted her head up to his as if offering a kiss. If it was any other woman, he’d do

just that, but she was Lady Pippa Ardeerton and, therefore, completely off-limits to him.

“Now that we’re alone, tell me what you’re up to.” The moonlight played with her hair, making the golden strands shine as if dipped in liquid starlight. The glow of the lit lanterns danced across the paved pathway. Good lord, he didn’t have a romantic bone in his body, but he sounded like a lovelorn loon.

“My lady?—”

“Call me Pippa.” She smiled freely. At the perfect curl of her lips, he wanted to capture such a sight on a canvas to keep it forever.

“Pippa.” He cleared his throat. “Only if you’ll call me Hugh.”

“Hugh,” she repeated. “What a lovely name.”

“Yes, well. Uhm...” He forced himself to look away lest he become lost in the brilliant blue of her eyes. “Family name.” He dragged his gaze back to hers. “Ah...where were we?”

What an idiotic thing to say. She must think him foxed or worse.

“London?”

“Yes...well...my circumstances changed after we parted yesterday.” He held out his arm. “Shall we continue to walk?” Perhaps if he wasn’t looking at her, he wouldn’t become lost in ridiculous romantic musings.

Without a word, she wrapped her arm around his.

Slowly, they started through the maze. For all his life, he took moments such as escorting a lovely lady on a walk for granted. But tonight, with Pippa, everything felt different. Every sense was heightened. Her fragrance wafted in the air. He wanted to bottle its essence so he could remember this night forever. If this was enchantment, he never wanted to be free.

“Amazingly, it’s easier to chat if I move.” He slid his gaze her way. Her profile was a thing of beauty. It highlighted her full lips and slight nose.

She squeezed his arm as if she’d known his thoughts were not his own. “Tell me how your circumstances changed.”

“My great-aunt is on the rampage for me to marry. She won’t accept the fact that I’m not interested in changing my marital state. But I care for her deeply and would never want to purposely make her unhappy.”

“Oh dear, why does she want to see you wed?” Concern clouded her eyes. “Is she ill?”

His heartbeat skipped a beat at the tenderness in her voice.

“No. She wants babies in the house.” When Pippa stopped on the manicured path, Hugh was forced to do the same. “Her best friend lives in Northumberland and is constantly writing about her great-grandnephew and his wife along with their ever-expanding family.” Hugh shrugged slightly.

“That must be hard if she wants to see you wed.” She leaned a little closer creating a comfortable intimacy between them. “What does this have to do with me being in London? Do you want to marry me?”

His heart pounded at a fast beat, signaling he should run.

“No. But it’s a lovely thought.” He couldn’t stop himself and leaned in her direction until their shoulders were barely touching. Sparks of electricity seemed to ignite inside of him. “I’m not the marrying type. At least, not yet. I think my aunt might be appeased if I went out a bit more in society. I know my mother would benefit from it and I believe my aunt would enjoy it as well. They could rekindle old acquaintances and hopefully make new ones. It would give them other distractions besides matchmaking.” He tugged her a little closer and lowered his voice. “You could accompany us, and I’d introduce you to your potential husband candidates.” He waved his other hand, encouraging her to continue their walk. “I’ll tell you everything I know about them, and you can decide who might be your best choice for a husband.”

Her eyes widened, and a huge smile broke across her face, stealing his breath. It reminded him of a spectacular sunrise he’d seen one time at Willowbrook Abbey, his estate in Amesbury. He’d never forgotten it, nor would he forget her smile.

“That’s brilliant, Hugh.” She placed her other hand on his arm and squeezed. “I could see all the latest London fashions at each event.” She dipped her head slightly. “The thought of spending time with your mother and great-aunt would be something I’d very much enjoy.”

“You would?” This time, he was the one who brought them to a stop. He didn’t mean to sound leery, but why would a beautiful woman such as Pippa want to spend much with older women?

She turned away for a moment as if she didn’t want him to see her expression. But then, Pippa did what he’d come to expect from her when she faced a question she didn’t want to answer. She squared her shoulders and turned to face him. “We all need friends, don’t we? Since Honoria has left Pelham Hall, I’ve been lonely.” Then the clever minx turned the tables on him so he couldn’t pursue the line of questioning. “If you don’t mind my asking, why don’t you want to wed?”

Those electrical sparks he'd felt earlier quickly fizzled. Whenever the word wed or marriage was spoken, he wanted to duck and protect himself. But at thirty years of age, he was too old to be ducking from life.

He paused a moment. He wanted to be truthful with her but not air all the family's skeletons. "It's not something that I think I'll be good at. And I try never to take on a challenge unless I know I'll win. Matrimony is best left to others such as my younger brother."

For a second, he wanted to tell her the real reason and see her reaction. Would she understand that he never wanted to go through what his mother had suffered when his father died? Her grief and agony weren't something he ever wanted to see or witness again.

God forbid if he ever felt the same.

He'd called physicians, surgeons, and midwives to see if they could help his mother. One physician suggested his mother might not survive a grief spell if they continued to worsen. He was practically out of his mind with the idea that he might lose another parent so soon. That's when he sent for Aunt Edith.

He'd vowed never to subject himself to such heartache if he could help it.

Pelham's beloved retriever Emmy loped toward them with her tongue hanging out. Where Emmy went, the duke was sure to follow.

Sure enough, Pelham rounded the corner and drew to a slow stop. Wagging her tail judiciously, Emmy sat and looked between Pelham and Pippa. When Pippa pulled away from Hugh, he felt as if he'd been punched in the gut. The pain was acute. But what almost brought him to his knees was the shock that he didn't want to leave Pippa this evening. He enjoyed their talks and her company. She was utterly

delightful.

Nor did he want to have to wrangle his friend's anger and the resulting endless questions that were about to arise from catching the two of them together.

"Honor and Trafford are ready to leave. Grace is with them. They'd like to say good night before they depart." Pelham smiled gently at his sister.

"Good night, my lord." Pippa dipped a small curtsy.

"Good night, my lady," Hugh said in return and bowed slightly.

As she passed by, her brother watched her retreat. When she was out of hearing distance, Pelham deliberately turned his legendary ice-blue stare Hugh's way.

"What the devil were you doing alone with my sister in the maze?" he drawled.

"I wasn't alone," Hugh said good-naturedly. "You were here somewhere in the garden." Before Pelham bit his head off, he continued, "Remember, we're friends who look out after one another."

Pelham lifted one arrogant ducal brow. "I trusted Trafford, and he seduced my sister."

"He married her," Hugh argued. "Even you must admit they're gloriously happy together."

"I don't want to see Pippa forced into a marriage like our sister was," Pelham growled.

"You can trust me. I'm not looking for marriage."

Pelham stared at him for an eternity before he finally nodded.

The oddest feeling came over Hugh just then. It almost felt as if he were lying to Pelham.

And himself.

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:45 am

Pippa faced Honoria across the breakfast table the next morning. Her sister was Pippa's best friend and had been for all her life. But the perfect parallel lines that creased the skin between her brows made Pippa squirm in her seat.

"I should stay in London and help you with this Season business." Honor fiddled with her empty teacup. "I about fell off my chair last night when you said you wanted to attend numerous social events."

Pippa shrugged slightly. "I enjoy the events. Seeing the colors, fabrics, and various gowns makes me creative. My fingers itch to draw designs."

"I know." Honor reached across the table and squeezed Pippa's hand. "I'll miss you, though. I'd hoped you'd return to Amesbury with Pelham. Marcus and I are leaving as soon as I return home. But I couldn't leave for Amesbury without seeing you."

His sister's eyes glistened with moisture. Just seeing the sight caused Pippa's eyes to do the same. "I'll miss you as well." She squeezed her sister's hand in return. "More than you can ever realize."

"Come home, then," Honor coaxed. "We'll be close to one another."

"I can't," Pippa shook her head but didn't let go of her sister's hand. She was like a buoy that helped keep Pippa afloat and tamed her restlessness. "Mignon is getting married. So, she's selling her shop. I'm going to buy it."

"You are?" Honor leaned back, letting go of Pippa's hand. "Has Pelham agreed to give you the money?"

Pippa stood slowly from the table and walked to the windows overlooking the courtyard. It looked different this morning. Last night, as she walked with Hugh, the place had held a hint of mystery. Their whispers and touches had felt forbidden somehow, and they'd been irresistible—to her. That was a bad sign.

“Pippa?” Without her knowing it, her sister had risen from the table and stood by her side. “What did Dane say?”

“He told me no.” Pippa turned on the ball of her foot and faced her sister. “So, I’m on the hunt for a husband. That will free my trust account. Hugh...I mean Ravenscroft is going to help me find a suitable man.”

Her sister froze momentarily and stared at her.

“It’s time. Don’t you think?” Pippa would not be dissuaded. “I’ve considered my options and narrowed down the list to five men. They’re all in Pelham’s millionaire club. Therefore, I believe he’ll approve my choice. Ravenscroft is going to introduce them to me. He’ll ensure I know the men’s characters and reputations. I’ll make my decision after I’ve met all of them. Then I’ll ask one to marry me. I’m a progressive thinker, and my husband-to-be will have to be also if he’s going to consider my hand.” She winked, hoping to lighten the heaviness around them.

Honor held her forehead with her hand as if in pain. “Pippa, don’t you think that’s a bit too impersonal and unemotional?”

“I call it efficient.” Pippa delivered her best incredulous look. “This is rich coming from the woman who vowed never to marry.”

Honor blushed. “When your father promised to deliver a letter disowning me on the day before my marriage was to take place, that is reason enough to disavow marriage.”

“But you found the man of your dreams instead.” Pippa hugged her sister. “The old duke was a bastard.”

“Thank you, dearest,” Honor said as she pulled away from Pippa and wiped her eyes.

Honor did not share the same father with Pippa and Pelham. Both her mother and father were unfaithful to one another, and their father was convinced Honoria wasn't his child. Hence, he promised to deliver a letter that would ruin Honoria on her wedding day. He'd made Pippa's sister's life miserable. After he died, Honor had created a bogus fiancé for herself to draw out the letter. She'd planned to move to Florence for a year, then return as a widow. However, she'd created a bit of scandal for herself and Trafford when she'd decided to seduce him.

Thankfully, her sister had married the perfect man who adored her. It was everything that she deserved in life.

Honor's brow furrowed into neat rows. “What if I loaned you the money?”

Before the words were even out of her sister's mouth, Pippa was shaking her head. “I can't and won't accept your generous and kind offer. Even though we're family and look out for one another, I don't want you to be at odds with our brother.” She stole a glance outside, and once again, it reminded her of Hugh. “I know what I'm doing. I want to marry, but I'm not looking for love.” She slid a side-eyed glance Honor's way. “I want to find a man who's kind and won't interfere in my business. Nor will he object to my being in trade. The gentlemen of the millionaires' club are my safest choices. It's simple. All I want is a gentleman who enjoys reading in the evenings as much as I do. He'll share my meals and celebrate holidays and family events. All I want is for us to be friends.”

“Don't you think you might change your mind about love?” Honor asked gently.

Pippa shook her head without looking at her sister. It was easier that way.

“My parents treated me as a weapon to be used against each other. They gave their love conditionally only if I met their expectations of behavior and achieved their standards of beauty and decorum.” She turned to face Honor. “I was nothing more than a doll that they fought over.”

“Darling, I’m sorry.” Honor pulled her close. “Do you think you’ll be satisfied with friendship?”

“That’s all I want.” Pippa went to straighten the pillows on the sofa. It kept from being subjected to Honor’s intense gaze. She loved her sister with all her heart but once a person fell in love their perceptions changed. The last time Honor swore never to marry, she had a ring on her finger within a month of meeting her husband.

There was no perfect man for Pippa. Love was not for her.

“Friendship is all I need,” she repeated.

“Ravenscroft is your friend.” Honor tilted her head.

Pippa turned to face Honor, then propped her fists on her hips. “What does that mean?”

“It means that I saw how involved you two were at dinner.” She tapped a finger to her chin and stared at the ceiling. “I wonder what all those private conversations and furtive glances could have meant.”

Pippa grinned her eyes at the teasing, but her cheeks felt on fire. She did enjoy her time with Hugh last night. When they were together, the rest of the world seemed to drift away. She liked the way he looked at her as if she were the most fascinating

person he'd ever met. No one had ever made her feel that way before.

"He's simply a friend," she argued.

"Pippa," Honor exclaimed. "It's perfectly fine to enjoy a man's company." Her sister laughed softly, then walked to Pippa's side and helped her straighten the already straightened pillows. "When Marcus and I were courting, I danced with Ravenscroft at his ball. Remember? He was quite attentive and extremely curious about you."

She clenched her gown with one fist. "I love you, Honor. But believe me, there's nothing between Hugh and me. He's like that with every woman. We're merely friends."

"Hugh is it? What is that clever line from Shakespeare?" She tapped her chin again. "Oh, that's right." She snapped her fingers. 'Methinks she doth protest too much.' Midsummer's Night Dream."

Pippa picked up a pillow and playfully hit Honor in the arm. "Goose, it's from Hamlet. 'The lady doth protest too much, methinks.' It's a tragedy."

Honor pulled her close. "It's my story. I'll write it any way I see fit." She swept her arm slowly across the room. "I can see the stage now. It'll be a comedy that turns into a beautiful love story."

"What's the setting of the play?" Pippa grinned.

"London." Her sister gave a decisive nod of her head. "You and Ravenscroft are in the starring roles."

Hugh looked up from his desk when Burnett cleared his throat. "My lord, your guests have arrived. I've escorted them to the rose salon."

“Thank you. I’ll be there momentarily. I need to finish the last sentence of this letter to Lord Burgundy. Will you post it promptly? Also, will you see that a tea tray is prepared and let my mother and great-aunt know they’ve arrived?” Hugh went back to his letter, but the older gentleman still stood before him.

“If I may, my lord?” Burnett broke the silence abruptly. “You should drop everything and go to the Rose Salon.”

“What is it?”

“Your great-aunt is already in the room alone with the ladies. Your mother is on her way down...Lady Edith has decided to host an engagement ball.” The butler’s eyes widened. “Here.”

“Bloody hell.” With the letter forgotten, Hugh quickly placed his quill back in the stand. “We just hosted a damnable ball last month on behalf of Trafford and his countess. I barely survived that one. Who’s the engagement ball for?”

“You,” Burnett said without hesitating.

“Me?” For a moment, he couldn’t breathe at the audaciousness of his great-aunt. Swallowing a much-needed breath, he continued, “Oh, this will not stand.” By then, he was out in the hallway. His footsteps echoed down the hallway. “She’s gone too far this time.”

Burnett tried to keep pace while maintaining the decorum of a proper London butler.

Hugh was the first to enter the rose salon, followed by a harried Burnett.

By the wide-eyed gaze of Pippa, he could tell that his aunt had taken over the conversation. Lady Grace’s head was darting between Pippa and Aunt Edith. Her

look was one of total confusion.

Pippa instantly stood as soon as she recognized him. The spring green silk of her gown accentuated her eyes. But it was the cut of her gown that stole his breath. Every inch of it complimented her form. Though Hugh wasn't an expert on fashion, he recognized superb craftsmanship. Over the gown, she wore a pink spencer that should have complimented her cheeks. Instead, the normal luster and color of her cheeks were gone.

"Thank heavens, you're here, my lord." Pippa shook her head in obvious distress. "Your great-aunt is under the impression that you and I—I?—"

"Are betrothed," Aunt Edith interrupted. The old woman was practically gleeful. "Come in, dear boy. I want to hear all about the proposal." His aunt waved him over.

Hugh fisted his hands and bit the inside of his cheeks to keep from cursing.

His mother entered the room with a frown on her face. "Who's engaged?"

"Ravenscroft and Lady Pippa," Aunt Edith announced without hesitation. "There's to be an engagement ball. You and I shall host it with Bryce," she exclaimed. "We'll get Pelham and Lady Trafford involved. It'll be the social event of the Season." Overcome with giddiness, she rubbed her hands together. "I'll invite Stella. She'll be so envious."

The joy on her face should have been heartwarming. Instead, his heart was flipping in his chest like a fish out of water. An appropriate comparison, in his opinion. Hugh was out of his element also.

Pippa dipped a curtsy to his mother. "Good morning, Lady Ravenscroft. I believe there's been a misunderstanding."

Lady Grace curtsied as well.

His mother's shocked gaze met his.

"Get over here, Burnett, with paper and pencil," his great-aunt ordered. She waved her hand and pointed to a chair next to the sofa. "We must start the guest list, decide what food to serve, and pick a date to hold the event. The sooner the better in my estimation. I hate long engagements."

The butler nodded once.

"Margaret?" Aunt Edith snapped her fingers. "Do you have a gown for the engagement ball?"

"There is no engagement. I'm not engaged. Lady Pippa is not engaged." Hugh's words echoed around the room like the bong of the dinner bell.

Everyone grew quiet. Except, of course, Aunt Edith.

"I see. It's a secret engagement." She nodded her head. "It's not an insurmountable problem, my boy. We can hold the ball after the ceremony. Do you have a special license? Lady Pippa was just telling me that her brother has traveled to Amesbury along with the Earl and Countess of Trafford. Are you planning to wait for them to return before you marry?" she asked sweetly. Her eyes twinkled in that all too familiar manner that indicated that she knew what she was doing and thought she had the upper hand. "Ravenscroft could secure a special license and we all can travel to Amesbury for the wedding." Her eyes widened, revealing a mischievous glint. "We could have the wedding breakfast party at the Jolly Rooster. Stella and I always wanted to gamble there."

Ignoring his aunt, Hugh came to Pippa's side. "Afternoon, Lady Pippa." He nodded

to Grace.

“Good afternoon, my lord,” Pippa answered.

“I personally wouldn’t call this afternoon particularly good, would you?” His words were only for her ears. He glanced in his aunt’s direction. She sat on one of the room’s rose sofas with a satisfied smirk, clearly gleeful at the mass chaos she had created.

Pippa blushed prettily and smiled his way. He winked in return.

When he turned his full attention to his great-aunt, her gaze was locked on them. She clasped her hands under her chin and sighed happily. “There’s nothing like young love.”

He answered with a frown.

“Let’s all sit down and discuss this,” his mother said.

“Excellent idea,” Aunt Edith proclaimed. “Ravenscroft, sit next to Lady Pippa. Lady Grace, you come sit by me.” She patted to the side of the floral sofa where she sat in the middle. His mother took the other side. That left Hugh to sit by Pippa.

It felt as if he were in front of the Spanish Inquisition.

Quietly, Pippa sat on the edge of her seat with her back ramrod straight as she clasped her gloved hands in her lap. A slight tremble of her fingers revealed her anxiousness. The urge to lean over and take her hand in reassurance became nigh near impossible to ignore.

Instead, he smiled slightly and caught her gaze. It will be fine.

She must have understood as she nodded once.

He turned to his mother. "I invited Lady Pippa and Lady Grace here today so we all could become better acquainted. Lady Pippa has an interest in attending some of the social events of the Season. Since her brother is one of my closest friends, I thought we could offer her our escort." He situated his body so he could easily see Pippa's response. The look of relief on her face was palatable. "Let me repeat. We are not betrothed." He directed that last statement to his aunt.

"Of course." His mother smiled and served them all cups of tea. "Lady Pippa, your brother is one of my favorite people in this world. You're welcome to join us anytime you like."

"And visit too," Aunt Edith chimed in.

"Thank you." Pippa ignored the cup of tea that sat next to her. Her gaze skated over the furnishings in the room. "My brother spends the majority of his time in Amesbury and only comes to London monthly. It keeps me limited in what I can enjoy when we visit here."

Though she was out of sorts, she handled the awkward position his aunt had put them both in with aplomb. Her poise reminded him of Pelham. There was a quiet confidence about her that he found utterly beguiling.

A slight blush had returned to her cheeks as she glanced around the room again. "This is beautifully decorated. Very welcoming, and the colors are exquisite. It's perfect for meeting guests."

"Thank you." His mother smiled proudly. "As you surmise, red is my favorite color."

Hugh studied the furnishings. His mother had decorated the room years ago. She'd

chosen red, pink, and white as the color scheme. The upholstery was a mix of florals and stripes. It was beautiful, yet he'd never noticed it before.

"Lady Pippa designs gowns and finds inspiration everywhere." Lady Grace addressed his mother. "Her creations are magnificent."

His mother looked taken aback. "You sew your own gowns?"

Pippa nodded as a beautiful smile tugged at her lips.

Hugh couldn't look away. He was mesmerized by the sight.

"Yes, my lady." Pippa scooted to the edge of her seat. "I made this one." She waved her hand down the front of her dress. "I finished it last week."

"My word," his mother exclaimed. "May I see it up close?"

Pippa and Grace went to the marchioness's side. As the three ladies discussed Pippa's gown, Hugh turned his attention to his aunt.

After several seconds, she stuck out her tongue.

"Are you five years old?" he asked quietly.

"No. But you act like an old man." His aunt stood quickly, and in a movement that belied her age, she was sitting beside him. "What is the matter with you? I had that girl ready to marry you. A duke's sister." His aunt slid her gaze Pippa's way and grinned like a child who'd been successful in stealing the cook's dessert for the evening meal. "She's beautiful."

Her voice held a hint of affection. Hugh followed her gaze. His breath caught in his

chest as Pippa explained something about the trim around the gown. Her excitement and enthusiasm made her not just beautiful but stunning. He'd seen people talk passionately about their work, but Pippa took such fervor to an entirely different level. Her confidence when she talked about her craft could seduce him into doing anything for her. She was breathtaking as her eyes brightened with passion, and her expressions of mirth and pride as she talked about her work beguiled him.

His aunt was wrong. Pippa wasn't beautiful.

She was gorgeous.

What would she be like in bed with her golden hair spread behind her? A vision of him taking her in his arms as she arched her back, pressing her bare breasts to his chest. As he entered her, she'd cry out his name. His cock thickened at the thought. Immediately, he crossed his legs to hide the burgeoning erection.

For the love of God, he had to push such imaginations from his thoughts. Pelham would kill him. At the thought of his best friend's fury, any desire he had disappeared like a London fog on a summer's day.

"Ravenscroft, did you hear me?" His mother's voice jolted him out of his reverie.

"Pardon me." He stood and buttoned his coat to hide his affliction, then strolled over to where all the ladies had gathered. Pippa smiled in delight at something his great-aunt had said.

"Lady Pippa has offered to create gowns for Aunt Edith and me."

He hadn't seen that smile on his mother's face in years. It was one of pure joy and excitement.

“But it’s too generous, Pippa,” his mother shyly argued.

“It’s my pleasure, Margaret.”

Now, they appeared to be on a first-name basis. What exactly had he missed by not paying attention to their conversation?

“With your coloring, I’m thinking a beautiful waterfall silk in crimson with a seed pearl overlay or perhaps a pale grey satin trimmed with miniature jet jewels.” Pippa peeked over her shoulder. “Mr. Burnett, may I borrow your journal and pencil?”

Dutifully, Hugh’s butler came to her side with the items. His great-aunt followed.

Pippa took the writing materials with a polite thank you, then started to sketch. As the seconds ticked by, his mother and great-aunt’s eyes grew wider.

“What do you think?” Pippa asked as she handed them the journal.

“You are a true artist,” his mother said in wonder.

The smile on his great-aunt’s face was infectious. “Indeed. Thank you for offering to create these for us.”

Pippa took the journal and evaluated it with a critical eye. “May I take this with me?”

His mother nodded.

“I shall return it tomorrow and take measurements,” Pippa explained. “Then, I’d like to examine your favorite gowns, so I’ll have a starting point for cutting the sleeves, bodices, and necklines.” Her head whipped to Grace’s. “Grace, does your schedule allow for this? I should have asked you first.”

“Oh, Pippa. I know that look in your eyes. You’ll be completely obsessed with these gowns until you finish them.” Grace frowned. “Unfortunately, I have another appointment tomorrow that can’t be changed.”

“She helps people find a way out of the scandals they create,” Aunt Edith murmured for Hugh’s ears only. “Plus, she’s a matchmaker of sorts.” His aunt lightly tapped a finger against her cheek as she stared at Hugh. “I wonder if there might be someone who’d be open to such a service.”

Hugh wanted to deliver a stinging rebuke, but then his mother spoke.

“How disappointing,” she said glumly. “We’d love for both of you to come back tomorrow.”

“I have an idea,” his aunt volunteered. All their heads swung around to the spry older lady. “Ravenscroft can bring you here in his carriage.”

“No, ma’am,” Lady Grace said firmly. “Pippa cannot ride in Lord Ravenscroft's carriage without a chaperon. Her brother would not be pleased.”

“Oh, you’re right,” she said weakly, then turned his way with a smile.

The sly bird knew exactly what she was doing. Hugh couldn’t wait to hear what the next words were out of her mouth.

Or perhaps he could.

Aunt Edith turned to Grace. “Would you consider me an appropriate chaperon? I could accompany him in the carriage and bring Lady Pippa to Raven’s Splendor.”

His mother clapped her hands together. “Marvelous idea, Aunt Edie.”

“There won’t be any scandal in that,” Grace added in agreement.

“If that’s all right with you, my lord?” Pippa turned in his direction and smiled earnestly.

By God, she did want to spend time with his family, and she was asking him if he’d allow it. Something in his chest twisted at her words. He’d give her his entire clan, including his brother if she’d continue to smile at him that way. That smile convinced him that Pippa was concerned about what he wanted, and she liked his family.

A war of emotions roared through him. On one hand, he wanted to throw her over his shoulders and take her upstairs to his cave...he meant bedroom and never let her go. While on the other hand, he wanted to run out of the house and escape her even though he wanted her.

Her brother was his best friend. He had to keep reminding himself of that fact.

“That is if you’re not already engaged.” Pippa tilted her head, waiting for an answer.

“Pfft,” Aunt Edith piped up and waved her hand in dismissal. “Remember, Pippa? He’s not engaged. He already informed us of that when he first walked in.”

Pippa stifled a laugh as she turned his way. “I adore your family.”

Do you adore me?

Thankfully, he didn’t say it aloud. “You can have them for a very reasonable price,” he offered.

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Pippa critically eyed her ballgown in the full-length tri-fold mirror before her. She'd designed it in a dove gray silk trimmed in gold threading. It had cost a fortune, but she was pleased with the result. With a matching silk shawl trim in a matching gold cording, the gown was elegant in its simplicity.

Immediately, her mind went to whether a certain marquess would even notice it.

Miraculously, Hugh and his great-aunt had escorted Pippa twice in the past week to Raven's Splendor. Each time, as soon as they walked into the grand mansion, he'd bowed slightly, then retreated to his study. She'd never seen him after that. She would normally spend the days there chatting with the marchioness and Lady Edith while working on their dresses. The three of them would share a meal together and then walk the gardens. Hugh never joined them. When it was time to go, Grace would stop by and escort Pippa and Alice back to Ardeerton House.

Pippa loved visiting with Hugh's family. It made her loneliness practically disappear. Her evenings were devoted to sewing. By next week, the gowns would be finished. She couldn't wait for the marchioness and Lady Edith to see the finished works. They were some of her best creations, in her humble opinion. Plus, Lady Ravenscroft and Lady Edith had promised to wear them to an event this Season.

But tonight, they all would be attending the Earl of Langford's ball. The earl and his countess were hosting the event. Everyone who was anyone in London would be in attendance. She could interact with some of her husband candidates. But most importantly, it would give Pippa the opportunity to see what the fashionable set in London were wearing. While Pelham ensured that every issue of the latest *Belle Assemble* and Lady's Monthly Museum were delivered to Amesbury as soon as a

new issue was released, it wasn't the same as seeing the gowns in person. Plus, she wanted to study men's fashion as well. She had several ideas for riding habits based upon a gentleman's split-tail coat.

She loved attending balls. The food, the music, the scenery, not to mention the beautifully attired couples who swirled around the dance floor, made her breathless just watching them. However, secretly, she wanted to have the opportunity to chat with Hugh. Funny, the more you knew a person, the more you missed them when you didn't see them. That was certainly true of her regard for Hugh.

She missed him terribly. Hopefully, she hadn't offended him in some way. Tonight, she'd find out why he was keeping her distance from her.

A knock sounded. Alice quit straightening Pippa's dressing table and answered the door.

After greeting Alice, Grace glided into the room wearing a stunning cream and sky-blue brocade gown that Pippa had designed. Abruptly, Grace came to a stop. "My word, Pippa, you're beautiful," she announced as her gaze swept from Pippa's head to her feet.

"Aye, my lady," Alice agreed with her. "That gold"—Alice pointed to the trim around the cap sleeves, sweetheart neckline, and hem—"just matches Lady Pippa's hair." Her chest swelled with pride. "She'll be the belle of the ball, I wager." Alice's eyes widened at what she'd said. "No offense, Lady Grace. That's not to mean you won't be the belle of the ball too."

"Do not give it a second thought, Alice." Grace laughed and patted the maid's arm. "I'm not looking to be anyone's belle tonight."

Pippa drew near and picked up her hem not caring a whit that she was giving an

excellent display of her clocked stockings. “Come and feel this.”

When Grace drew nearer, Pippa put the hem in her hand. “It’s heavy from the gold thread. One good thing about it is that my dress will keep me grounded. I don’t think any man will sweep me off my feet.”

“At least, not tonight,” Grace said with a laugh. “That is heavy. But you carry yourself as if it doesn’t bother you.”

“It doesn’t.” Pippa glanced again in the mirror to look at her backside. Pleats lined the back reminding her of rippling water.

“I will say that you will cause every woman there a bit of a heartache.” When Pippa turned her quizzical gaze to Grace, she continued. “They’ll all want to be you tonight.”

“Tis true, my lady.” Alice beamed.

“You both must stop,” Pippa commanded as she felt her cheeks heat.

Her creations were her art. They weren’t designed to draw attention to herself, but truthfully, she didn’t mind it. Particularly if a certain marquess noticed her tonight.

She pulled on her evening gloves. “Shall we go downstairs and wait for our escorts?”

“Oh, I meant to say that I saw Ravenscroft’s carriage turning into the drive from my bedroom window. I believe they’re here already.” Grace took Pippa’s arm and together they made their way down the hallway to the top of the stairs. The white marble tile and the candles from the chandelier cast the vestibule in a brilliant white light. Pippa’s gaze automatically sought the marquess who was dressed in black eveningwear except for his gray silk waistcoat. It was almost as if he’d dressed to

match her gown.

His gaze lifted to hers. For a moment, she felt a strange magnetic pull between them. She couldn't have turned away even if she wanted to. It was as if they both suffered from that same affliction. She held her breath at the smoldering intensity in his eyes.

Good heavens, he made her feel as if she were the only person in the room. A flush crept up her cheeks.

Finally, he smiled, and she could breathe again. Ravenscroft strolled across the entry and came to stand at the bottom of the staircase waiting for her.

Without tearing her eyes from his, Pippa slowly descended the stairs.

When she reached the bottom step, the marquess extended his hand, and she slowly placed her hand in his.

"My lady," he murmured as he squeezed her hand. "It doesn't do you justice, but I must say it. You are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen in my entire life."

She waited for him to wink or tease her after such a statement, but the sincerity in his voice told her he wasn't in a joking mood. "I don't know what to say to such a compliment but thank you."

Still holding her hand, he leaned forward. "It's not a compliment. It's the truth."

Someone around them cleared her throat but neither of them moved.

"Ravenscroft, is your hand glued to Pippa's?" Lady Edith's voice cut through the air.

Immediately, they both stepped away from each other as if they'd been caught doing

something wicked.

“Apparently not,” the marquess drawled and turned to his great-aunt. “Is there a problem?”

“Not at all, my boy. Not at all.” She repeated rather cheerfully with a huge grin.

Pippa came forward and welcomed the marchioness who stood next to Grace and then greeted Lady Edith. “Ma’am, welcome to Ardeerton House.”

Lady Edith nodded regally. “Lady Pippa, you are stunning in that gown.” She leaned nearer, then lowered her voice. “Now, I see why he wouldn’t let you go.” She winked.

“Shall we depart?” Hugh grinned affectionately at his aunt. “Try to behave tonight, Aunt Edith. I don’t fancy being asked by the earl to escort you off the premises.”

The elderly woman giggled like a schoolgirl. “If you want to make a good impression, then you need to follow my lead.” She turned quickly, the movement upsetting the ostrich feather in her coral turban. “Come, everyone. I have a date at the card tables tonight.”

“Do you wager on games of chance, ma’am?” Grace asked.

“It’s never chance, Grace. I know how to count cards.” Without a look back, Lady Edith strolled out of the house and down the steps.

The marchioness grinned Pippa’s way. She and Grace followed Lady Edith, leaving Pippa alone with Hugh.

He shook his head as he watched the ladies climb into his massive coach. “I hope

you're not offended by her behavior." He turned his gaze her way.

"Never. I find her a breath of fresh air." Pippa arranged her shawl over her arms so it wouldn't drag the ground.

"Interesting. Some people find her a bit...much." He grinned.

"You're lucky to have her." Pippa watched as Lady Edith made her way into the carriage. "She loves you."

His cheeks heated slightly. "Despite everything, I adore her too." He held up his arm and nodded at Ritson, her butler. "What are the odds that those three crowded onto the rear-facing bench, leaving us the front-facing one?"

"A sure bet?" she asked.

"Besides fashion, I see you're good with evaluating risks, too." With an easy athletic grace, he led her down the steps. "Another attractive trait."

"My brother doesn't think so." By then, they were at the carriage.

When a footman offered his hand in assistance, Hugh waved him away, then took Pippa's hand in his. "Tell me more about Pelham's views."

Pippa shook her head. "Let us save it for later, shall we? I believe there's a trio waiting for us to entertain them." She entered the carriage and Hugh followed. He sat immediately next to her. Indeed, just as he described, the other three sat in bench seat with looks that could only be described as wildly curious.

With his tall stature, he had to maneuver his long legs around the other ladies' gowns. Without a word, Pippa arranged herself so that he had a bit more room. A grateful

smile was her reward. He knocked on the roof, and finally, the carriage lurched forward. The movement was a bit abrupt, causing his leg to slide alongside hers.

Pippa exclaimed softly at the unexpected contact. He didn't hurt her, but the heat of his body was completely unexpected.

"Pardon me," he whispered.

"There's no need to apologize," she answered in kind.

Aunt Edith observed them like a hawk with its prey within striking distance. A satisfied smile graced her lips. For the rest of the trip, the conversation continued amongst the other three ladies. Pippa remained silent as all her thoughts congregated on the man sitting next to her. Intimacies that she'd just shared with Hugh would be commonplace once she took a husband. Though she shouldn't allow herself to think in that direction, her mind wondered what it would be like if Hugh was her husband. He would attend these events with her and then escort her home. Would he be the one to undress her or would it be Alice?

She opened her fan and gently moved it back and forth. An image of him entering her room in a banyan she'd made for him flitted into her mind. She fanned herself a little harder. He'd unbutton it then slip under the covers naked. His leg would press against hers as it was now, marking her, possessing her. She pressed her legs together as a sweet torturous ache pulsed in her lower body. Every particle of her body seemed to be buzzing in awareness of the man sitting next to her.

After an eternity, the carriage came to a halt at the earl and countess's home. The streets were lined with carriages. Laughter and murmurings of conversations drifted past them. Every one of her senses was amplified. It was too much and at the same time, not enough. She'd never experienced such excitement before when she attended an event.

Grace, Lady Ravenscroft, and Lady Edith descended from the carriage with the help of the footmen who stood waiting to help the guests from their carriage.

Hugh shifted in his seat. "Are you all right?"

His words were quiet, like a lover's voice. Wasn't that a howler? She'd never had a lover, let alone a kiss. Perhaps she'd been mistaken. It was perfectly conceivable that he spoke to his dogs that way.

"I'm fine." Determined not to sit there any longer, she snapped her fan shut. "By the way, do you own any dogs?"

"What?" His eyebrows arched in the direction of his hairline, drawing attention to his dark straight locks. In the subtle light that glowed inside the coach, his hair fell softly across his brow. The locks glistened, making her fingers itch to touch him as she brushed the hair back in place. She had little doubt that his hair would be softer than the finest silk she owned.

"Dogs," she repeated.

He chuckled softly. "Interesting change of subject, but yes, I do. Your brother gave me two of Emmy's puppies. They're at my estate in Amesbury."

"My lord?" A footman peeked into the carriage.

The interruption kept her from asking him more. Hugh had an estate that was within thirty minutes of Pelham Hall. She'd be able to visit Honor and Pelham whenever she felt like it.

She had to stop such thoughts. She couldn't marry Ravenscroft. That was why she didn't put him on her list. He was dangerous to her sanity and her desire for a

“friendship” marriage. She wasn’t looking for the love of her life. She didn’t believe in such things. She viewed this marriage as a business matter—a simple transaction with the added benefit that she would have someone to sleep with at nights.

He quickly exited the carriage and then offered his hand. Only this time, he gently squeezed it as she descended the carriage steps. They followed the other three ladies into the beautiful Pallidum home that was bustling with activity. The Earl of Langford and his countess stood at the top of the steps into the ballroom greeting their guests. As Lady Edith and Lady Ravenscroft were chatting with the earl, Hugh put his hand on the small of Pippa’s back, the touch possessive and gentle at the same time. Instantly, she tingled from his touch.

It was a ridiculous thought. No doubt Hugh thought to act in her brother’s stead. However, Hugh’s touch was nothing like her brother’s.

“Good evening, Lord Ravenscroft.” The countess graced them with a genuine smile. “I’m so delighted that you and your family could attend along with Lady Grace. It’s been too long.”

“It’s an honor to be invited, Lady Langford.” He bowed elegantly. “May I present Lady Pippa Ardeerton, the Duke of Pelham’s sister?”

The countess’s eyes grew bigger, and a little laugh, much like the ring of the tiniest Christmas bell, sounded. “I should have known. You and your brother favor each other. Welcome to our home, Lady Pippa.”

Pippa delivered her best curtsy. “Thank you, Lady Langford, for inviting me.”

With silver hair and a lithe body, the middle-aged woman leaned close. “I know your brother quite well.”

“Do tell,” Pippa encouraged her with a laugh.

“Sometimes Pelham comes to visit Langford, and he’ll oblige me with a lesson in vingt-et-un.” She leaned close. “I can now play with my friends and win every hand. They’re about ready to toss me from the group.”

Instantly, Pippa liked the woman. She was not a typical snooty member of the ton. Anyone who enjoyed her brother was an instant friend in Pippa’s opinion.

Lady Langford took a step back. “That gown is exquisite. May I ask where you had it made?”

Before Pippa could answer, Hugh did the honors. “She designed and sewed it herself.”

“Really? I would love for you to come to tea sometime and discuss your talent with me,” Lady Langford said.

“I would like that, ma’am.” Before Pippa could say another word, another couple was there, ready to be presented to the countess. Since Grace and Hugh’s mother and great-aunt were still in conversation with the earl, Hugh offered his arm.

“Come with me. I know a place where you can see everyone and every dress without having to stop and be polite by engaging in conversation.”

Hugh led her to a set of stairs that was hidden by a set of curtains. He checked to see if anyone was looking, then opened it, and she stepped through. Amazing that Pippa didn’t even balk at such an invite. Once he was beside her, he took her hand and started their ascent.

“It’s all very secretive, isn’t it?” She whispered in a husky voice. “I love secrets.”

That low alto sent vibrations through him. It was exactly the type of voice he'd imagined she'd have when he made love to her.

For all that was holy, he couldn't be thinking about her like that. When he slid a side-eyed glance her way, her expression was enchanting. The look of sheer anticipation was becoming on her.

By then, they had reached a hidden alcove that overlooked the dancefloor below. They could see everyone, but no one could see them as curtains framed the balustrade. It allowed them a full view below but kept them hidden from sight.

"The only thing that would make this more perfect is a glass of champagne," she tilted her head to him. "Thank you, Hugh."

"My pleasure." And it was. For some unfathomable reason, he wanted as much time with her as he could steal tonight. Her eyes flashed with excitement as her gaze swept across the already crowded dancefloor. "What do you see?"

Pippa turned to him, then pointed toward the far end of the ballroom. "Do you see that lady in the yellow gown?"

He directed his gaze toward the woman. "Yes. That's Lady Hale. She's married to Lord Hale, a very wealthy viscount."

"She's wearing the wrong undergarments with that dress. She how stiffly she moves? I wager that her stays are too long for such a full dress. The design of that gown provides for the skirt to move in tandem with her steps. It should be swinging with the movement of her hips. She's walking awkwardly, and the gown is just hanging on her." Pippa's gaze kept sweeping through the crowd. "See the lady in the sapphire blue dress directly below us?"

He nodded.

“She’s wearing two petticoats under her dress and it’s ruining the line of the design.”

He was utterly intrigued. “Now that you mention it, I can see what you mean. How do you do that?”

She shrugged slightly, then turned his way with a winning smile. She leaned forward and lowered her voice to that husky alto that made him want to sweep her into his arms. “I see people’s bodies under their gowns.”

“What?” he asked incredulously.

“I do.” She laughed. “Just by looking at a person’s body shape, I know exactly how and where to cut the fabric, so the garment is exquisite. I’ve been this way ever since I learned how to sew.”

“Do you see men’s bodies as well?” Hugh feigned his most innocent expression.

“Of course,” she said confidently.

He stepped away and then held out his arms as if inviting her to critique his clothes.

“Tell me what you see?”

“Turn around.” She twirled her finger, instructing him in the proper direction.

Hugh did as commanded, slowly turning in a circle. When he faced her again, a mischievous smile tugged at one corner of her lips.

He matched it with one of his own. “I’m the perfect embodiment of a male.” He lowered his voice to match hers. “Since you can see my body, I’m sure you’ll agree.”

She playfully batted him with her fan, but he grabbed her hand and held it. “I’m waiting.”

Her cheeks turned a delightful pink, but she didn’t turn away from him. “I can see that you possess a broad chest so you must exercise regularly. You have a flat stomach which indicates that you’re not one to overindulge in food or drink. And I can see that your breeches are a bit too tight in the thighs.” Her blush deepened at the mention of his legs.

Instantly, his body went on alert. Was she flirting with him? Determined to find out, he leaned forward.

Her eyes deepened to a molten blue, reminiscent of hot flames, as her voice softened. “Was that by design, or does your tailor need a lesson in how to take measurements?”

He stepped closer until he was within six inches of her, otherwise known as the forbidden space. “Thank heavens Alice isn’t nearby. She’d be clearing her throat repeatedly.”

“Quit trying to change the subject at hand, sir.” Pippa closed her fan.

Slow but deliberate, he brought the underside of her wrist to his mouth and pressed his lips lightly to the satin gloves. The material was so thin he could feel her pulse pounding. “I think he needs a lesson in measuring. Better yet, perhaps you should measure me. Both of us would find it pleasurable, I wager.” Laughter sparkled in her eyes. “Did you know that Beau Brummel recommended that men should dress right but some dress left?”

“What do you mean?”

“He suggested that tailors cut the cloth for breeches larger on the right side as a way

to accommodate a man's appendage," he drawled as he lowered his voice.

She studied him for a moment. "Appendages as in..." A moment later her eyes widened as she raised her hand to keep him from elaborating. She bit her lip, but it didn't hide her laughter if the shaking of her shoulders was any indication.

The invitation in her gaze couldn't be overlooked. He'd always found her company delightful, but what he didn't realize or purposely ignored was how much he fancied making her laugh. To earn one of Pippa's smiles was more valuable than all of the jewels in the Tower of London. He'd never felt so carefree and enchanted by a woman.

"Well, you've certainly filled my head with visions of your evening attire," she said a little too breathlessly. "What if I told you I wanted to design something for you?"

He lowered her hand, unable to disavow that he was caught up in this moment with her. His gaze captured hers. Her blue eyes brightened with laughter and something else...perhaps, desire. He was certainly feeling that.

He was tired of denying what he wanted—what he craved.

Hugh lowered his voice until it sounded like a purr. "What if I told you that I wanted to kiss you now?"

She bit her bottom lip, the movement innocent and seductive at the same time. Instantly, his cock jerked to attention.

She licked the same lower lip with her delicate tongue as her eyes rose to meet his. "What if I told you that I'd never been kissed?"

His mind screamed not to do it as an image of Pelham interrupted his thoughts. "Your

brother,” he bit out.

“I don’t want to kiss him.” The desire and challenge in her gaze didn’t falter. As her voice grew raspy, his entire body vibrated as if he were a tuning fork, and she was his perfect pitch.

It was hopeless to fight the desire that seemed to swirl between them. He’d tried to avoid her in hopes that his need to kiss her would lessen, but it had done the opposite. He wanted her now more than he ever had. With a groan that signaled his surrender, Hugh edged closer and cupped Pippa’s cheeks with his hands. Slowly, he lowered his mouth to hers.

Their tender first touch revealed the softness of her lips. Gently, he swept his lips over hers, once, twice, then again. His blood started to thrum in his veins as he inhaled her sweet fragrance, lilacs and the feminine scent that was unique to Pippa. Melded together, the fragrance and her sweet taste held him captive.

He wanted to stay in this exact spot with her all night and sup from her tender lips. The orchestra and the guests’ chatter grew faint as he made to deepen the kiss.

“Hugh,” she said on a sigh.

His tongue slid into her mouth and met hers. She grew still for a moment, but Hugh gently coaxed her into kissing him back. She relaxed as their tongues tangled together, then she leaned into him. Her fingers brushed through his hair as he wrapped his arms around her. Their heartbeats pounded in sync. This was what mouths were made for—the give and take of pleasure between two people. God, if he never left this spot, it would be too soon.

Finally, reason marched into his thoughts, and he slowly pulled away. She faltered slightly as if drunk with desire. Hugh knew the exact feeling as he gently clasped her

arms.

Pippa's eyes fluttered open. "Is it always like that?"

"Always like what?" He said distractedly as he cupped her chin and brushed her wet lips with his thumb. Her softness sent another jolt of electric desire through him.

"Where you lose all sense of time and place?" she whispered. The awe in her voice made him want to sweep her into his arms again and kiss her until neither of them knew their names.

For a moment, he considered telling her yes to hide the effect on him that she had, but that would have been a lie.

Never had he lost himself in such a kiss before.

Never had the craving to hold a person in his arms been so desperate.

He brushed the back of his finger across her soft cheek. "What I'm feeling is the first time for me as well." He reluctantly took a step away from her, breaking the invisible thread that held them together. "Your brother is going to kill me."

He wanted to withdraw the words as soon as they had slipped free.

Pippa wore a tender smile as she shook her head gently. "My body, my choice. I had decided as soon as I entered the carriage in Amesbury for London that I make my own choices now." She glanced toward the ballroom. She turned toward him with an enigmatic smile.

"I'm glad that is out of our systems." It was a lie. His body was still humming from that kiss, and he wanted more. He had a hunch that he'd always be greedy for more of

Pippa's delightful kisses. If her heavy-lidded eyes were any indication, she might also. Yet, such thoughts were a recipe for disaster.

"Is it out of our systems, though?" she asked.

"Christ, I hope so." His throat tightened when he saw how swollen her lips were. He'd done that. He'd given her the first romantic kiss she'd ever received. To not have to deal with his feelings, he was on the verge of sending her into another man's arms.

He was being asinine.

"Thank you for that resounding endorsement of my kisses." She rolled her eyes. "I enjoyed the practice. In no time, I'm sure I'll be an expert. Don't worry. I remember that you're helping me, and in return, I'm helping you."

"I'm not helping you learn how to kiss other men."

"It's not as if you'll even know unless you're my chaperone."

"Right," he agreed and turned toward the ballroom himself. "There's Lord Kingston. He's on your list, correct?" Why did it feel as if he'd punched himself in the gut by pointing out the man? Because he wanted her attention on him, and not the other men in Pelham's millionaires' club. "To help you, we need to be downstairs."

"Indeed." She cocked her head in defiance. "We need to be downstairs, so you can introduce your mother to potential friends. And your great-aunt needs to see you socializing."

The hint of anger in her voice made him take a step back. Perhaps it was for the best. He nodded once, then waved a hand toward the exit.

With a crisp turn on the ball of her foot, Pippa turned toward the exit. Her skirt slapped against his breeches as if it too were displeased with him.

Before they reached the stairs, he gently grasped her arm. “Pippa, wait.”

When she turned, a mask of indifference shrouded her face.

“I apologize for my behavior.” He should let go of her arm, but he couldn’t. It was as if they were tied together.

She was furious by the glint in her eyes. “For the kiss or for experiencing regret.”

He took a step back and released her.

“Never mind. It makes no difference to me.” Pippa whipped around then proceeded to the staircase without him.

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:45 am

As soon as they descended the staircase, Pippa didn't hesitate. Grace's head was bent in conversation with Lord Kingston. Immediately, she headed their way without Hugh. Hopefully, their paths wouldn't cross again tonight.

If Pippa could have forgotten the etiquette lessons her mother had insisted that she learn, she would have given the marquess a dressing down that he would never have forgotten. The very idea that he asked if he could kiss her, then as soon as he remembered her brother, he became a cold fish.

She couldn't deny that her first kiss had been wonderful. It had been romantic and filled with all the lovely things she'd hoped for. Having Hugh sweep her into his arms and kiss her until they were lost in each other had been amazing—the urgent touches, the soft whispers, the feel of lips against lips, chest against chest, and those velvety moans. Quite simply, she had never wanted to leave Hugh's embrace. He'd exceeded her expectations. That kiss had been perfect.

Until he'd spoken about her brother.

And it had left her angry, frustrated, and dissatisfied.

For once in her life, she thought someone wanted her without any demands, conditions, or reservations. It was time to put Hugh Calthorpe, the Marquess of Ravenscroft, out of her mind.

“There you are,” Grace said triumphantly and beamed at her. “You remember Lord Kingston?”

Pippa presented her best smile. The one reserved for when she and her siblings opened their Christmas presents after the morning church service. It was her favorite day of the year.

“Lady Pippa,” Lord Kingston said with a wicked smile as his gaze slid slowly down her body.

Unable to help herself, she scowled slightly and took a step, creating distance between them. “Good evening, Lord Kingston.”

Adam Kingston was a viscount who lived near the coast of Cornwall. It wasn’t ideal as it was a tad far from her siblings, but still close enough that she could travel to Amesbury frequently whenever she desired. One thing in his favor was that his London home was within walking distance of Ardeerton House and Honor and Trafford’s home in Mayfair.

Lord Kingston smiled and delivered an elegant bow. His gold locks were almost the color of a light bronze. When his brown eyes met hers, they twinkled in merriment. But as his gaze skittered down her dress, they flared in appreciation. “You are a vision in that gown,” he murmured.

If she wasn’t mistaken, he’d just whispered, “Beautiful.” She didn’t acknowledge the compliment. People were always “oohing and ahing” over her creations.

She allowed her own critical gaze to study him. His clothing was composed of the finest wool, but the tailoring wasn’t as well-crafted as Hugh’s clothing. The marquess’s clothing fit him like a supple, well-worn glove. Kingston wasn’t as tall as Ravenscroft, but he was still a handsome man.

Though not as handsome as Hugh.

Enough. She had to get the blasted man out of her thoughts. She couldn't compare every man she met tonight with him. She had to keep her goals for the evening clear. See if she could find a man who would marry her.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance again, Lady Pippa. I've known your brother for several years." Lord Kingston looked over the crowd. "Is he here tonight?"

"Unfortunately, he had to attend to business at the Jolly Rooster. I expect him to return to London within the fortnight." She caught sight of Hugh, then deliberately turned from his direction. She didn't want any distractions.

The music started up again signaling another set.

"Would you do me the honor?—"

As Pippa waited for Kingston to ask her to dance, he extended a hand in a different direction from her. "Ravenscroft, I didn't know you were here. I thought you'd be in Amesbury since Pelham is there. It's good to see you again, sir."

Hugh slid up next to her and shook the viscount's hand. "I decided to stay in London and help a friend." His arm brushed hers sending goosebumps flying across her arms.

Pippa's body had never betrayed her like this before. Thankfully, she wore long gloves that reached beyond her elbow. They would help hide the marquess's effect on her.

Pippa glanced at the viscount. His joy at the marquess's appearance was the exact opposite of hers. She wanted Hugh to go away. She needed the viscount's total attention directed at her. How could she evaluate whether he was a suitable candidate or not?

“Are you heading to the card room?” the viscount asked.

“No, not tonight,” Hugh answered.

Lord Kingston’s visage immediately fell, completely dejected. “Shame. I thought we could play a couple of hands together.”

“Perhaps another night,” Hugh answered noncommittedly.

The viscount nodded then took his leave.

Grace’s eyes widened. “Never a good sign when he’s about to ask a lady to dance, then veers away to the cardroom.”

And ignores her completely. Pippa blew a non-existent stray hair from her face. She watched the viscount head in the direction of the cardroom but refused to acknowledge the marquess.

But the blighter made her do it.

“Lady Pippa, may I have the next dance,” Hugh asked as he bowed politely.

“Oh, how lovely.” Grace grinned in approval.

Pippa glanced in the corner where the dowagers and other mature women liked to congregate. Sure enough, Lady Edith was looking at them as if observing two animals in the wild. She held her opera glasses to her face, and a slight frown tilted her lips downward.

“Pippa?” Grace cajoled gently.

Drat the man. She could not turn him down without a hint of scandal starting to swirl around her.

“Thank you, my lord.”

Hugh extended his arm, but Pippa still refused to look at him.

He led her out to the dancefloor. Thankfully, it was away from the crowd on the edges of the ballroom. Grace could still see them, but Lady Edith could not. When he placed his hand on her waist, she jumped slightly as if burned. His touch branded her. He didn't smile, but his eyes gleamed in merriment as if he knew what she was experiencing.

“I feel the same way,” he said softly.

“Annoyed?” she asked sweetly.

He threw his head back and laughed. At the deep, rich sound, ladies turned his way and smiled. Many of them wore envious looks. Others had a “come hither” smile on their face.

“Do you know that practically every woman is staring at you?”

“I think they're staring at you in that magnificent gown.” He glanced around them. “It seems you've also captured every man's attention.” He grew serious. “I don't like it.”

“Why?” She tilted her chin an inch in a challenge.

He smiled ruefully. “Because I can't see you with any of them. You deserve the best.”

“See? That’s where you’re wrong. Good enough is exactly what I want.”

“If you say so.” Again, his gaze swept around the ballroom as they waited for the orchestra to start. “I still don’t like it.” He sighed gently. “But what can I expect when every twirl and sweep of your gown demands attention?” He wagged his eyebrows. “But to answer your question, I don’t care about any other women here. There’s only one whom I’m interested in tonight.”

“Who might that be?” She offered a sickly-sweet smile.

“You know who. I picked this spot on the dance floor, so we were out of sight of Aunt Edith. She doesn’t need to know everything that we’re doing. Just my sneaking away with you earlier will give her a thrill. She’ll drill me on it for days.”

As the music started, she wanted to groan. It was another waltz. That meant their bodies would be close and she had to face him. Hopefully, she wouldn’t start blushing as she thought about their kiss.

He continued to smile as they started to dance. His movements were fluid and graceful. It was as if they had done this a million times before. Their bodies moved in perfect harmony with one another. He leaned forward, his breath caressing her ear. “Your touch gives me a thrill as well.”

She relaxed slightly in his arms. His voice had turned husky just like it had upstairs. Not willing to acknowledge it affected her, Pippa leaned a little closer. Her breasts brushed against his chest. Instantly, the humor left his eyes only to be replaced by promises of more kisses and other things she could only dream about.

“What did you think of Lord Kingston?” His gaze never left hers as he skillfully twirled her around.

“He seems a lovely man.” Coyly, she batted her eyes. “And handsome, too.”

A hint of devilry darkened his eyes as a wicked smile formed on his lips. “Oh, he’s pretty. I’ll grant you that.” Nonchalantly, he glanced around the dancefloor. “He’s pretty fond of the cardroom. It’s a nasty habit of his.”

Immediately, Pippa’s senses went on alert. Pelham had told her to watch for men who were financially desperate. He’d reiterated time and time again that they would only be interested in her trust fund and dowry. He’d warned her never to allow herself to be vulnerable to being compromised by such men.

“How do you know?” she asked.

“He’s been spending more and more time at your brother’s establishment. His games of chance are increasing at an alarming rate. Pelham noticed and asked me if I’d seen it as well. I think the viscount may soon lose his place in your brother’s millionaire club.”

“So, you’re acting as my protector now?” She couldn’t help that her voice sounded a bit petulant.

Hugh narrowed his eyes. “No. I’m acting as your friend.” He twirled her around again.

Like raindrops on a hot July afternoon, her anger evaporated. He was acting as a friend. But friends didn’t kiss friends like the way he had her. She let out a deep exhale. “Could you introduce me to other men this evening?”

“No,” he said curtly. “We have an agreement. You’ll help me with my mother and great-aunt, and I’ll introduce you to the men you have under consideration. That means we attend more affairs.” He took a deep breath, then pinned her with his gaze.

“I must get my mother reaccustomed to going to society events. She’s been lonely.”

Pippa and loneliness were old friends. Her heart squeezed at his expression. There was a vulnerability about him that she’d never seen before. He adored his mother and wanted her happy. It was admirable that he cared so deeply for her. Most likely his parents had taught him that through their own affection and the love they shared for their children. It was quite beautiful and inspiring.

The only thing Pippa had learned from her parents was how to argue and create awkward, embarrassing moments.

“I need you to help with my mother.” His steadfastness had returned.

It suited him. But she was thankful that he’d shown a part of himself to her.

“Pippa?” He lowered his voice. “For the world, I don’t want to make you angry, and I know I did earlier. I am sorry for upsetting you. Forgive me?”

He looked so earnest she couldn’t help but nod her head. “You’re forgiven. If we’re clearing the air, I must ask, why have you avoided me this week?”

He lifted his gaze and scanned the crowd again. He pointed toward a group of ladies, one of which included his mother. “I thought it would be good for my mother to have you to herself.”

“Good.” She nodded once. “I thought I’d done something wrong.”

“Never,” he murmured.

“We cleared all the air then. It smells divine.”

A sudden smile broke across his lips, causing his entire face to brighten. It reminded her of the sun breaking through the horizon on a foggy dawn. Suddenly, everything seemed more luminous in the ballroom.

“When we were leaving your house, you said that Pelham didn’t approve of you buying Mademoiselle Mignon’s dress shop.” Hugh slowly brought them to a stop. The music faded to nothing, and the dancers clapped their approval. Through the din of noise, he asked, “Why?”

“Besides me being in trade, he worries I won’t have a head for business.” She forced herself to meet his gaze. “I’ve written all my ideas for how I’ll run the dress shop. I’m waiting for the right moment to show him. I hope my numbers are good enough that he will consider it.”

Hugh nodded, then tilted his head. “If he approves, will you still need to marry?”

“Probably.” She smiled sheepishly. “It depends on how adamant he is about me marrying and if I can convince him it’s not necessary.”

“I manage several estates and have nearly a thousand successful tenant farmers. I look at the bookkeeping and the plans for the next year’s harvests on a constant basis.” He took her arm and led her back to where Grace stood at the sidelines with his mother and his great-aunt. “I could look at your plan and tell you what I think of it. But only if you’d like to share.”

Her heart pounded and she found it nearly impossible not to jump for joy at his offer. “I would be forever in your debt. You could help me see if I’ve missed anything. Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“I wouldn’t offer if I didn’t mean it.”

It was like manna from heaven. Hugh's assistance would help her convince Pelham to give her the trust fund early.

"Could you come to Ardeerton House tomorrow? I would very much like your opinion on what I've done and how I've planned to operate the shop."

"It would be my pleasure." By then, they were almost to his mother's side.

Her mood turned suddenly buoyant. "Will you stay for dinner?" She lowered her voice. This was a conversation only between the two of them. If his great-aunt heard them, she'd have the banns announced the following Sunday. "That is if you don't have any plans."

"My only plan is to spend whatever time you give me...with you."

The next afternoon, Pippa stood and smoothed the papers on the library table for the fifth time since she'd entered the room as she prepared to meet Hugh. Thankfully, Grace had left to call on a friend. That meant that Pippa didn't have to include her into her plans. She could concentrate on Hugh. She meant her plans. This was business—strictly an exchange of ideas. But sometimes he was the only thing she could concentrate on. Hopefully, the affliction wouldn't affect her tonight.

With a glance at the longcase clock against the wall, she'd only been here for a half hour even though it felt like three. It was ridiculous to be so worried about his visit, but after last night, she'd come away from the evening with hope. Yet, once again, she had to wipe her palms down her skirt.

She wanted her revenue forecasts, budgets, and contingency plans to be perfect. Though she'd never operated a business before, she was adept at keeping inventories of her fabrics, buttons, lace, and all the accompaniments for making a dress. She'd even studied some of her brother's estate management books, trying to glean the

proper methods of accounting for profits and expenses.

Pippa grasped her leather satchel tightly to her chest. She hated being this nervous. It reminded her of all the times when she'd been called down to her mother's study for her weekly etiquette assessment. It was nothing more than an opportunity for the duchess to tell Pippa everything she'd done wrong over the week. As soon as she would enter the room, her mother would criticize her hair or the wrinkles in her clothing. She'd list all the faux pas that Pippa had made during the previous week's dinners.

It would have been so much easier to ignore the criticism, but she was desperate to ensure her mother and father loved her. After all, they were her parents. Weren't they supposed to love their children no matter their faults?

Not her parents. They only showed affection when Pippa was perfect in looks, manners, and decorum. Which meant that they rarely showed her any love. It wasn't just her either. Both of her parents ignored Pelham for the most part. Poor Honoria was loathed by their father while their mother disregarded her eldest daughter.

After each session Pippa had alone with her mother, the duchess would practically throw Pippa into her father's study. Pippa had enough of these weekly visits to know what was expected of her. She had to sit dutifully in front of her father's desk until he acknowledged her. Sometimes, it would only take a quarter of an hour. But most times, it was at least a half hour. One time, she made the mistake of sighing aloud after an hour. Her father had banished her from his sight for the following two weeks for her impertinence.

That meant that her mother would do the same.

She'd learned that love was conditional and could be taken away without notice no matter how hard a person tried to please their parents. Thankfully, her brother Dane

was always there to whisk her away before any other punishment could be delivered. He'd always said that out of sight was out of mind.

By a niggle always was at the edge of her thoughts. What if a husband did the same thing? Diminish and dismiss her without a care. How could she protect herself? Only with her family did she feel safe and secure.

A brief knock sounded on the door, and Pippa whirled around to see who was there.

Her heart stumbled in her chest. It was Hugh looking too handsome for his own good.

"I've never been jealous of a piece of leather before now," he said with a wry grin.

"What?" He looked as if he'd just walked out of an advertisement for the finest men's clothing that money could buy. She couldn't quit staring at him. He dressed in a black tailcoat with matching breeches and black boots. His snow-white cravat was immaculately tied and fell in precise folds that were tucked into a scarlet red waistcoat.

He pointed to her chest. "Your satchel."

She glanced down and realized that she still clung to the leather piece. Hastily, she placed it on the table. By then, he was by her side.

"I hope you don't mind. I told Ritson that I could find my way to you without the formality of an announcement." One of his black brows arched, but his eyes glowed. He was confident of his place in the world and never seemed to doubt himself or his actions except for last night. He understood her feelings, and he wore that empathy well.

If only she had his self-confidence. But if that was the case, she wouldn't be asking

for his assistance.

“Why the worried look?” At ease, Hugh leaned one hip against the library table.

“It’s nothing.”

He scratched his jaw and examined her. “Why do I not believe that?” He ran a hand down the length of his body. “Is there something wrong with my choice of clothing?” He snapped his fingers, and his potent smile flashed again, almost blinding her. “I have it. You can’t see my body, and you’re disappointed.”

“Quit teasing me.” Pippa turned away, hoping to get her unruly emotions under control. One minute, she wanted to kiss him, and the next, she wanted to punch him. Yet, as it always was with the marquess, she couldn’t stay indifferent. The man was a master at goading her into revealing herself.

“Ah, there it is. One of those beautiful Pippa smiles.” He turned his attention to the table and pointed to the papers she’d laid out earlier. “Are these your plans?”

“Yes.” She smoothed her hands down her dress twice, praying for the fortitude to hear his thoughts. No matter what he said, it was best to hear his criticism. She was no stranger to criticism. Her parents had endlessly railed her about her mistakes and missteps. Perhaps Hugh would see her as a failure as well.

Her thoughts accelerated like a runaway horse. She just had to remember that he was here to help.

But old habits were hard to break.

“Pippa,” he said gently, drawing her gaze to his. “What’s wrong?”

She blew out a breath, upsetting a loose curl that had fallen across her forehead. “I’m afraid you’ll think it’s an inadequate plan. I almost believe it’s a juvenile attempt at best.” She wrung her hands and stepped away. “Perhaps this was a ridiculous idea. What do I know about running a dress shop?”

In a flash he stood in front of her and gently clasped her shoulders. “What is this about? I’ve never seen you so unsure of yourself. At first glance, I can surmise that you’ve put forth an extraordinary effort with these figures and budgets. Don’t doubt yourself before we even start.” He reached up and brushed that flyaway piece of hair from her face. The warmth of his fingers left a trail of fire across her skin. “Will you do that for me? More importantly, will you do that for yourself?”

Her pounding heartbeat threatened to break through her chest. She opened her mouth to speak, but she couldn’t utter a sound.

As he studied her face, his brow furrowed slightly at her distress. “Do I make you nervous?”

Petrified more like it. Heat, the kind that told too much, blazed across her cheeks. “I don’t know if it’s you or not.” It was the truth. She didn’t understand if it was because of being alone with him or the idea she’d share something so vital to her identity. If he dismissed her plans, it meant he dismissed her.

“Come with me.” He took her hand and led her back to the table. He pointed to a chair, indicating that she should take a seat. Once she obliged, he took the one directly across from her. “Would you like to do this another time?”

“No,” she managed to squeak out. “When my brother returns, I want to show him my plans.”

He nodded, then set his elbows on the table and rested his hands under his square jaw.

“What can I do to make this easier for you?”

She glanced at the plans. Hugh was correct in his assessment. She had spent hours and hours creating them. Slowly, she raised her gaze to his. “Would you mind sitting next to me? If I can’t see your expression, I won’t be second guessing myself or my work.” Such a request showed her weakness at receiving criticism, but if she was to survive his evaluation, she didn’t want to see his reactions.

“Of course,” he said. He rose and brought his chair next to hers. Once he was seated, they were side by side.

She took another deep breath, willing herself to calm down.

Without warning, he slid his hand underneath the table and found hers. Gently, he interlaced their fingers together. “Whenever you’re ready. I want to hear your thoughts.”

Those were the kindest words he could have said to her. She felt her eyes water at his gentleness. Honor and Pelham were patient with her, but to have him say that to her and mean it, made her...appreciate him even more.

She nodded, then pulled the first sheet of parchment toward him. Without looking at him, she pointed to the first row of numbers. “This column represents Mignon’s income from last year.” She cleared her throat to dislodge that pesky hint of doubt. She pointed to the next column. “This represents what I believe will be the first year’s income.”

He leaned slightly to study the paper. A hint of his fragrance wafted her way. The familiar scent was comforting. From her periphery, she noticed that his eyes skated down the page.

“Why is your forecast fifty percent less than Mignon’s actual numbers?” There wasn’t a hint of accusation in his tone.

She released the pent-up breath she’d been holding as soon as he spoke. If it had been her mother or father, they’d have been disparaging her lack of commitment.

“I believe that with the change of ownership, people might try another modiste.” Her finger trailed along the column, then slowly moved to expenses. “Yet, I’ve kept the expenses the same as I’ll still have to keep an inventory.” With each word, she grew stronger. “I want to make a few gowns and have them on display in the small windows. I believe that will draw in clientele.” Her hand quickly moved to another column. “I’ll make several gowns for friends and family and ask them to wear them to several popular events. I’d like for your mother and great-aunt to wear my designs if they’re so inclined. Those gowns will be a true representation of my craft. From those showings, I expect to find a few new patrons. They’ll wear my dresses. Then, hopefully, I’ll garner a few more clients. I’m counting on word of mouth.” Finally, she turned and looked him in the eye. “I know gowns and their appeal. Everyone is always looking for the latest fashions. That’s my strength. I know what is flattering for different body types.”

His eyes narrowed for a moment as he considered another parchment. “How will you make all these gowns? You can’t do it yourself.”

She pulled the paper forward so they both could consider it as she explained. “I’m going to offer employment to every seamstress that currently works for Mignon. If anyone leaves, I plan to offer sewing lessons for free. It’ll be like apprenticeships. Once the student reaches a certain level of achievement, then I’ll move them into the store. They can start working on petticoats and other undergarments. Once they’ve shown they’re proficient, then I’ll move them into the actual gown making.”

“Let me see your inventory sheets. There are always hidden costs there.” After his

gaze ran through the numbers twice, he returned his attention to her. “This is very thorough. Good work. Don’t doubt yourself.”

She nodded her thanks. Quickly, she pulled out the inventory sheets. “This is what Mignon has in stock. Once I tell her I’m buying it, I’ll go and meet her vendors.” She pointed to the list of French vendors. “Except for these. I’ll write and introduce myself.”

His eyes scanned the document before he looked at her. “There’s a lot of velvet inventory. What are you going to do with all of it?”

She didn’t hesitate for a moment. “Sir, do you know that it’s the one number chosen fabric for holiday gowns? Plus, there is always the opportunity to sell the customer a matching cloak or shawl. Plus, redingotes, winter riding habits, and the like.”

“Your assuredness is very becoming.” He squeezed her hand. “Anyone who doesn’t agree with me is a fool.”

“You’re very easy to talk to.” She swallowed as the moment turned suddenly serious. “May I ask you a question?”

“Anything.”

“What do you think my brother will do when he sees this?”

“He’ll be impressed with your diligence on investigating every aspect of this purchase.” He turned in his seat until he faced her.

Though he grinned slightly, the warning in his eyes gave her pause. “Your expression is a tad disquieting.”

He leaned near until only inches separated them. There was no judgment in his eyes. Instantly, she felt herself relax. The urge to kiss him grew near nigh impossible to ignore. However, she didn't move and hardened her stomach for him to express his concern.

“As a man of business, he'll see that the numbers are sound and that you've thought about unexpected scenarios that could occur during your first years running the shop.” He placed his arm on the back of her chair. “If you asked him to invest, he would do it.”

Like a magnet attracted to another, she leaned in another inch. “Why do I hear a ‘however’ in my future.”

“Because there is one, I'm afraid.” He played with several curls at the back of her neck that escaped from her simple chignon. “He's your brother and his protective streak hasn't lessened over the years when it comes to you and your sister. He won't simply see this as a business opportunity. He'll see it as about you. It's not that you aren't competent, but society looks down on people in trade. Even you, the sister of a powerful duke. Dare I say you have more at risk than a titled man who makes his own money? Some men would forbid their wives from working. Your brother wants you to take your place in society and be respected. He'll do what he sees best for your future. That means he might not give you the funds to proceed.”

His fingers brushed the tender skin of her neck, and she trembled slightly from the touch. Yet, she didn't move an inch. She reminded herself of a barn cat starving for affection but scared to accept it. As long as he was caressing her, she'd stay in this position for the rest of her days.

What was happening to her? She was not supposed to come under any man's spell, especially a certain marquess who didn't want or believe in love either. But this was Hugh.

“What should I do?” Whether she was asking about kissing him or about Pelham, she didn’t know.

“I don’t know,” he said.

Perhaps he was just as confused as she was about the kiss. She shook her head, determined not to think about the shape of his mouth or the softness of his lips.

“But don’t give up,” he said.

For some reason, that answer left her with a forlornness or perhaps it was a bleakness that she feared she’d never recover from.

She would have to marry. It was the easiest way.

But why was her mulish heart challenging her decision?

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:45 am

Hugh looked out the window as the carriage came to a slow stop. The coach bounced slightly as a groomsman jumped down to open the door.

His own home was close by, a mere thirty minutes away by carriage. If Hugh was on horseback, he could make it within twenty minutes by crossing over the neighbors' fields. It was magnificent here in Amesbury. The rolling hills and fertile green valleys were a feast for the eyes.

The carriage door swung open, and Hugh stepped out into the courtyard of the Jolly Rooster, the Duke of Pelham's personal gambling hell and coaching inn. When Pelham had decided not to spend much time in London because of his sisters, he bought the old Jolly Rooster inn and transformed it into his own playground of sorts. Men from all over the British Isles came to gamble with Pelham. All hoped they'd be the one to best the duke's game. Many have tried, but none have succeeded. Hugh was too fond of money to even sit at a card table with his friend.

Pelham was one of the most intelligent persons Hugh had ever met. And his play at the card table proved it. He always knew when to throw in the cards and when to place a higher bet. Some accused him of creating his own luck. When they did, they found their open invitation to the Jolly Rooster revoked. Pelham wasn't lucky. He was a master at the games that were played in his gambling hell.

From the outside, the Jolly Rooster resembled a large, well-kept coaching inn and pub. But when you walked inside, every inch of the place was fit for a king. The fabrics were of the highest quality, and the dishes you ate off were the best made china in all of England. Each room had been decorated by designers from London. To say it was opulent was like saying that the Prince Regent's home was merely a quaint

cottage.

Both were major understatements.

With the number of carriages and horses at the inn, it appeared one of Pelham's extravagant games of chances was in full swing. Young lords from London were inside, willing to give their money to the duke.

When Hugh stepped through the door, the majordomo greeted him.

"Good evening, Lord Ravenscroft," William Anson said with a bow. "Will you be staying in your regular bedchamber this evening, or will you be going home?"

"I'll stay here tonight, Anson." Hugh doffed his hat and coat and gave it to one of the footmen waiting to assist him. "Is the duke nearby?"

"He's in his study, my lord." The man smiled kindly and pointed up the steps to a passageway. "Shall I escort you?"

"No need. I know my way." Hugh nodded his thanks, then headed straight toward the study. With each step he took, cries rang out. Some were boisterous and happy, particularly if the cards favored them this evening. Of course, there were also the accompanying groans when Lady Luck left the table and went elsewhere.

Such a scene was so mundane anymore.

Perhaps Hugh was tired of that life of leisure. Even the ladies of the demimonde didn't interest him anymore. The men who frequented the Jolly Rooster weren't even his close friends. No wonder Pippa picked her potential grooms from members of Pelham's millionaires' club who, for the most part, weren't into gambling. Those men were more interested in making money.

At the top of the stairs, Hugh peered over the balcony. Every table was full of gamblers. He shook his head with a smile. That should mean that his friend would be in a good mood when he opened the discussion of Pippa.

Hugh had decided last night that he'd make this trip and see if he could talk Pelham into allowing Pippa to buy that shop without the need for marriage. By what he'd seen of her plans, she was ready to take over the shop immediately.

He struck his knuckles against a closed door.

"Come in." Pelham's deep baritone sounded.

Hugh opened the door and stopped. One of the bar maids Pelham employed sat facing him wringing her hands.

Pelham looked at Hugh but didn't acknowledge him. Immediately, he turned his attention back to the girl. "Think about what I said, Sarah. You'll not have to go through this by yourself."

The girl nodded. "Thank you, Your Grace." Slowly, she rose from the chair. She glanced at Hugh, then bent her head to stare at the floor. Tears stained her cheeks.

As soon as the door closed, Hugh took the seat she'd just vacated.

Pelham was already up and pouring them both whiskeys.

"What's wrong with her?" Hugh took the glass offered. "She seems mightily upset."

"She's carrying," Pelham answered as he lifted his glass to Hugh. "You're a sight for sore eyes."

Hugh held up his glass in return. They both took a drink.

Pelham collapsed into his chair. "One of the coachmen fancied her and pursued her. She thought it was love." The duke shook his head.

It was a rare occasion when he saw his friend so contemplative when he was at the Jolly Rooster. Normally, the duke welcomed everyone with good cheer. It was a testament to how he took care of his employees.

"Where is the man now?" Hugh asked.

"Gone," Pelham sighed. "He told the innkeeper that his mother was sick." The duke finished his drink. "I told her that I would ensure she and the babe have a place here. She can wash the Jolly Rooster linens. That will provide her with a livable wage."

"Where does she live now?"

Pelham leaned back in his chair and regarded Hugh. "With her parents. They'll make her leave when it's obvious there is a babe. I own most of the small homes in town. One of them is vacant. She can live there."

"That's one of the many things I admire about you," Hugh swallowed the rest of his drink. When Pelham offered more, he shook his head. "Your care for the people who work for you."

"Thank you. They're like a second family to me. They always look out for my welfare. I try to return the favor." Pelham propped his feet on top of his desk. "Why am I so fortunate to have the honor of your company?"

Hugh smiled at his friend. The man had given him the perfect opening without even knowing it.

Hugh leaned forward and rested his elbows on his thighs as he stared straight at Pelham. “Another thing I find admirable about you is the way you take care of your family whether your real family or the servants who work for you.”

The duke’s eyes narrowed. “Is something amiss in London? Is Pippa all right? Tell me now.”

Hugh shook his head. “Steady, old man. Your youngest sister is in the best of hands.”

“If you’re referring to you and Grace, then I doubt it.” Pelham slowly lowered his feet and leaned across the table, giving Hugh his undivided attention. “What happened to Pippa in London? Answer me,” he growled. “And don’t try to irritate me like you normally do.”

Hugh raised both hands in surrender. That was the thing about Pelham. With a word or a look, Hugh knew exactly how to make the duke angry. But today, aggravating the duke before him was the last thing Hugh had planned.

“She’s fine and spending time with my mother and great-aunt.” Under no circumstances would Hugh divulge that he’d kissed Pippa.

Perhaps it had been a one-time fluke. Both he and Pippa were aware that they’d crossed a line with each other. Both valued their friendship too much to allow it to happen again. And Hugh valued his lifelong friendship with Pelham. He couldn’t jeopardize that. Yet, if his friend ever found out, there would be pistols at dawn.

That was the thing about Pelham. He was the greatest friend that a man could ever wish for except if one was interested in one of his sisters. When Trafford had taken Pelham’s eldest sister to bed not knowing her true identity, Pelham had found them. He’d instantly demanded satisfaction from Trafford, who happened to be his other best friend. Somehow, Lady Honoria Ardeerton, Pelham’s oldest sister, had calmed

her brother down before the situation had escalated out of control.

That adventure had taught Hugh several things. He never wanted to cross Pelham that way, and anything involving his sister had to be handled with kid gloves.

Hugh finished his drink and then set the glass on the edge of the desk. “I was fortunate enough that Pippa showed me her plans for taking over Mademoiselle Mignon’s dress shop.” He lifted his gaze to his friend and held it. “Her work is thorough and impressive.”

“Why am I not surprised that the little minx would do something so creative?” Pelham chuckled, and the look of affection on his face was charming. But then, he narrowed his eyes. “That would mean that you were over at Ardeerton House visiting my sister.” One side of the duke’s mouth tipped in a smirk.

But Hugh knew the danger in that expression. He’d seen it hundreds of times directed at others. When one of those smiles appeared, a sharp rebuke or dismissal would shortly be coming.

“Did she ask you to come here and plead her case?” Pelham ever so elegantly laid his hand on the desk, then fisted it as if prepared to pummel him for any misstep with his sister.

“Not at all. She asked me to review it before she presented it to you.” Hugh refused to be intimidated. “Friends helped friends, and I consider Pippa my friend.

“How charming that the two of you are in an alliance against me,” Pelham drawled never taking his eyes off Hugh. With a deceptive air of unconcern, he poured another drink then sat his glass on the desk.

“She has a good plan. I made some suggestions on how to strengthen her numbers.

She wants to show it to you.” He smiled slightly. “I’m here today to ask you to keep an open mind.”

“I have my reasons for not wanting her to purchase that business.” He waved a dismissive hand in the air. “Not that you’re entitled to know what they are. But I’m a fair-minded fellow, and I’ll share with you what my thoughts are.” He rested his elbows on the desk and leaned forward. “Pippa seems carefree and lighthearted, but I’m afraid that it’s all a ruse.”

Hugh’s brow furrowed. She wasn’t carefree when he’d last seen her. She was nervous. A better description was terrified of facing him and her brother. But he’d not divulge that to Pelham. It wouldn’t help her. “That was my first impression when we met, but after becoming better acquainted with her, I believe I know her better. There are so many facets to her that I’ve been privileged to see.”

Pelham rested his chin on his clasped hands and sighed with a warning smile flavored with a sarcastic gleam in his eyes. “Do tell me more, and don’t leave a thing out.”

Hugh chuckled to himself. There was no mistaking the challenge in those words. Well, if he wasn’t facing the barrel of a pistol by nightfall, it would be a miracle. He cleared his throat. “I’ve had the opportunity to spend more time with your sister.” When Pelham raised a haughty eyebrow, Hugh continued with his more earnest expression, “She has become a favorite of my mother and great-aunt.”

Pelham relaxed a bit, and a smile of fondness creased his lips. “I could believe that she’d charm your mother and aunt. She’s always liked female companionship. Your mother and great-aunt are wonderful role models for her.”

Hugh fidgeted in his chair. He didn’t want Pippa forced into marriage, but he couldn’t share that with Pelham. It was ironic in a way. She was the one forcing herself into marriage. He took a deep breath, reminding himself to watch what he said. Hugh had

promised Pippa that he wouldn't disclose her plan of trying to negotiate her own marriage.

"She believes that if you don't accept her plans for the shop, then the only solution for attaining ownership is through marriage."

"And that's a problem, why?" Pelham's face was devoid of emotion.

He was in the muck and mire with his friend. How to explain Pippa's thoughts without telling her secrets? "Do you really want your sister considering marriage to a man just because she wants the funds to own a dress shop?"

"No," Pelham said slowly, then leaned back in his chair. "But I do want her to marry. She, out of three of us, needs the security of a family and a spouse the most. She craves it whether she realizes it or not." Hugh was about to object, but Pelham raised his hand. "I lived with her for over twenty-four years. You haven't."

Hugh nodded his acceptance of the statement. "But you don't want her to marry just anyone."

"Of course not," Pelham scoffed. "Not that it's any of your business."

"Pelham," Hugh retorted. Typical of the duke to try to put him on the offensive, but the man should realize that it just made Hugh all the more eager to aggravate. But today was not the day. This was for Pippa.

Pelham nodded once. "Hear me out. Pippa suffered lonely years as a child when Honor and I were away at school. That's when she became fascinated with clothing. While it's a hobby she can pursue, I don't think it's in her best interest to pursue a business." He clasped his hands together on the desk and stared at them. "She deserves to have a husband and a family who will love her. She can marry a good

man who would cherish and protect her and give her a loving and happy life. But I'm aware that same man might also not tolerate her being in trade whether she was a duke's sister or not."

"Well then, is this paragon of a male really the one for her?" Hugh asked seriously.

Pelham sighed. "Listen, I want her happy. The best course is for her to marry. Once her husband sees that the shop is her passion, then he can acquiesce. I believe it'll make for a happier marriage."

"What if he's so small-minded that he refuses her?" Hugh could feel his blood pounding through his veins in outrage. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for her. She wants this. If she was my sister, I couldn't refuse her."

"Well, she's not your sister." He slammed his fist on the table. The anger in Pelham's voice was unmistakable. He took a deep breath and slowly released it. "Ravenscroft, you and I have been close for years. Tell me honestly. Do you have feelings for my sister? Are you interested in marrying her?"

"What?" he gasped.

"Perhaps the real reason you're here is that you want her." He quirked an eyebrow, but his voice had warmed with hopefulness. "I wouldn't mind as long as everything was in the open." He arched a warning eyebrow and lowered his voice. "Not like Trafford and Honor." He smiled like a sly fox. "Are you asking for her hand in marriage?"

"Don't be ridiculous," he scoffed. "You are well aware of my attitude toward the holy state of matrimony. I consider Pippa a good friend." He quirked his own eyebrow in answer. "Perhaps I'm trying to save her from marriage as well." He squared his shoulders. "Friends protect friends."

Pelham stared at him. “Which friend are you protecting? Me or Pippa. From my side of the desk, it appears that you’re only concern is Pippa.”

“I’m friends with both of you.” He shook his head. “Try to understand my reason for being here. She’s quite determined to purchase that shop. You don’t want her to make a decision that she’d regret the rest of her life.”

“Hmm,” the duke said noncommittedly.

“What if she turns to E. Cavensham Commerce for a loan?”

“You mean the bank owned by Lady Somerton?” Taken aback, Pelham sat up in his seat. “Her bank only does business with women.”

Hugh nodded, quite pleased with himself. It was a good argument if Hugh said so himself. “From my understanding, these are the type of loans that Lady Somerton favors. She likes to help women attain their dreams, particularly if it makes them financially independent and secure.”

Pelham looked off in the distance in deep thought. “Pippa’s trust dissolves when she reaches the age of thirty. She would only have to have the loan for six years before she could pay it off with those monies.” He leaned back and tapped a finger on the arm of his chair. “I know Lady Somerton. She’s a force to be reckoned with. I’ll write her a letter and ask that she not do business with my sister.”

“Pelham!” Hugh rested his head in the palm of one hand. “What are you doing? You would interfere with your sister’s business?”

Pelham lifted a brow. “Like you’re not doing that already? But to answer your question. I’d do it in a heartbeat if I believed it was in her best interest.”

His friend had a point.

“I appreciate your concern on my sister’s behalf. But let me make it clear to you.” His friend grinned, but it held no real humor. “I love her. She’s my sister, and I’m trying to protect her. But make no mistake if you interfere, you’ll rue the day, sir.”

“Is that a threat?” Hugh challenged.

“A prophesy.” Pelham regarded him with a cocked head. “Are you falling in love with her?”

“Of course not,” Hugh answered a little too quickly.

But then why did it feel as if he’d failed her by not getting her brother to agree to give her the funds?

He was overthinking this entire interlude. He was just a friend helping a friend.

Of course, that was all it was, and all he would ever let it be.

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The next week, Pippa sat with Grace at the Winters' musicale. She hadn't seen Hugh once this entire week. Every day, she'd been at his home spending time with his great-aunt and mother as she worked on their dresses. The irritating man had promised to introduce her to eligible men in exchange for spending time with his family. It's not that she didn't enjoy their company. In fact, she loved spending time with them, but an agreement was an agreement.

Just then, Grace leaned near Pippa. "I think we should invite Lady Ravenscroft, Lady Edith, Lord Bryce, and the marquess to dinner next week."

Pippa clenched her gloved hands in her lap. She merely nodded. Perhaps Grace would forget about the invitation if Pippa didn't encourage the conversation. The last thing she wanted to do was to invite Ravenscroft and his family to dinner. Besides giving Lady Edith ammunition to declare that a betrothal was forthcoming, Pippa was at a loss as to how to handle the growing friendship with Ravenscroft and the need for her to find someone to marry.

The man was simply too charming. With little resistance, she'd give him all her secrets. Last week, after she'd practically bared her soul to Hugh, Grace had finally arrived for their perfunctory dinner. Pippa still couldn't believe how she shared all her doubts about whether she should be taken seriously about her own abilities to run a successful business. But Hugh soothed her with a kindness and gentleness that was encouraging. He had also been honest. Her ideas were sound, but that didn't mean that Pelham would agree.

She suspected as much, but now she had to come up with another argument that could convince her brother.

Pippa glanced around the sitting room of Mrs. Winters, their hostess for tonight's musical. The room was close to capacity, and the murmurs of the restless crowd were growing in volume. Since she and Grace had arrived late, they were sitting on the back row.

"One of your beaux is sitting on the front row."

Pippa scowled momentarily at the deep, low cadence of the voice behind her. As she slowly turned her gaze to see who addressed her, Ravenscroft took the empty seat next to hers.

Ravenscroft greeted Grace with a nod, then faced forward, completely ignoring Pippa.

"What did you say?" Pippa couldn't be as nonchalant as Hugh. She stared at his profile.

He shot her a glance. "Stanhope." His gaze returned to the front of the room. "Third seat from the right, front row."

"Will you take me to him?" she asked softly so the others around them couldn't hear.

He wrinkled his nose.

"Do you smell something offensive?"

"Yes. Desperation." He turned to her.

She bit her lower lip to keep herself from laughing.

"Of course, I'll introduce him to you, but don't be too anxious, darling." He leaned

close enough that the scent of his soap teased her nose. “However, if that’s what you want...”

She straightened in her seat as the crowd quieted. The performing string quartet was warming up, signaling that their performance was about to start. Pippa nodded once but didn’t turn in his direction. “Yes.”

“Speaking of which, tell me again what you want in a man?” Hugh’s voice seemed to echo around the room.

The crowd turned his way and shushed him with looks that were reminiscent of surly governesses and tutors reprimanding their charges. With a pugnacious smile, Hugh nodded in apology.

He leaned across her with his shoulder brushing hers and placed an arm across the back of her chair. “Lady Grace,” he said softly.

Grace acknowledged him with a smile.

“May I take Lady Pippa to the back of the room?” He pointed toward the back of the room. “She can’t see the performance.”

“Of course, my lord.” Grace smiled benevolently. “Stay where I can see you both, hmm?”

“I’m always looking out for Lady Pippa’s welfare.” Hugh flashed an incendiary smile toward Grace and his great-aunt who’d accompanied them this evening. Lady Edith grinned in approval.

His smile reminded Pippa of a naughty angel who knew exactly how to extricate himself from a quandary of his own making. No doubt, his mother and great-aunt had

seen it hundreds of times. To Pippa, it was a marvel and a wonder. Proof in point was the fact that her stomach looped in a perfect circle at his smile.

Goodness, she had to put such thoughts aside. He was simply a man helping her secure a simple marriage. “Where were you last week?”

“Amesbury. Now, come with me.” He slipped his hand under her elbow and helped her from her seat. With an ingrained elegance, he escorted her to the back of the room. They were the only ones in the back. As the fawning crowd became engrossed with the performance, Hugh took her elbow once again and led her out of the room.

“Where are we going?” Pippa looked over her shoulder to see if anyone had noticed them. Not a single person gawked in their direction. The talented quartet was all they were interested in tonight. Which suited Pippa perfectly. She wanted to grill the handsome marquess about his question about what she wanted in a man. Hadn’t she answered the man already? She just needed a man her brother would approve of. Plus, he had to be someone that she would feel comfortable with. He had to treat her kindly and let her run her dress shop.

“I have a surprise for you.” Stealthy, Hugh led her up the steps to the second floor. A balcony overlooking the salon was before them. Instead of taking her there, Hugh turned right and soon they were walking down a deserted hall. By then, he’d taken her hand in his and interlaced their gloved fingers together. At the end of the long hallway, a set of double doors greeted them.

Without hesitating, he turned the handle to one of the doors and threw it open. With a sly smile, he whispered, “After you, my dear lady.”

Hot, moist air rushed forward. The intensity of it stole Pippa’s breath. She knew exactly where they were. “It’s an orangery.”

He leaned and whispered in her ear. “With a bounty of fresh”—he leaned close and dropped his voice—“ripe, lush fruits waiting for us.”

When she stepped inside, the smell of ripe oranges and lemons surrounded her. It was a marvel of architecture to have the building be a two-story orangery with entrances on the first and second floors. There was a set of wrought iron stairs that connected the floors from the inside.

She twirled in a circle as she took in the magnificence of the structure. “This is amazing.”

Laughing, Hugh took a bow. “Thank you, my lady. It’s too dark, but I am blushing.”

Pippa joined in his laughter. “You’re taking credit for this?” she challenged playfully.

“Unabashedly,” he retorted. “Winters built it because I told him it couldn’t be done.”

She arched a brow and continued smiling. “I’ll keep that in mind. You tell people things, so they’ll prove you wrong.”

He nodded and took her deep within the space. “It’s my special power just like yours is creating dresses.”

She dug her heels and regarded him. “Wait. So, you told me that I would succeed with my purchase of the shop just so I’d fail?”

He turned her way. “Absolutely not. I know you’ll succeed with the dress shop.” He slowly closed the distance between them and gently took her chin in his hand as he looked into her eyes. “You possess the will and intelligence to make it a success. Your brother won’t stand a chance in telling you can’t do it.” His hand caressed her cheek, and his gaze turned tender. “He can’t deny that you have the social and

financial acumen to accomplish it all. Your biggest challenge will be to tame your brother's highly protective instincts."

"Thank you." She nodded, never taking her eyes from his. She wanted to stretch on her toes and press her lips to his. When a flicker of interest flashed in his eyes, she answered with one word, "Hugh, why did you ask me what I wanted in a man?"

"I wanted to make certain you hadn't changed your mind."

She shook her head.

"Excellent. Now, I want to show you something." He took her hand and entwined their fingers again as he'd done before. She imagined lovers would do something similar when they wanted to steal away from a crowd to be alone. They rounded a corner to face a bank of windows that overlooked the formal gardens. Small lanterns flickered with the soft lights from the candles.

"It's like a fairyland." She squeezed his hand as she looked her fill. "How beautiful. I've never seen such a sight."

"Neither have I." When she turned to him, his intense gaze was locked on her.

Something magical swirled around them. It was as if destiny had planned for them to be here and there was nothing in this universe to keep them apart. Her heartbeat pounded at the hungry look in his eyes. She licked her lips anticipating...praying...for his kiss.

Instead, he turned and plucked an orange from a potted tree. The smell of tart, tangy citrus filled the area. "I'll show you the proper way to peel an orange."

She leaned nearer as he pulled out a small pocketknife. With quick movements, he

cut off the bottom and the top. Next, he carefully scored the skin's circumference. He pushed his thumb under the skin and like a surgeon, pushed the skin away revealing the perfectly ripe fruit. He broke it into segments.

"You make it look like an art." She inhaled the fragrant orange scent that surrounded them.

"It is. You don't want to waste any of the juice." Hugh brought one segment to her lips and lowered his voice to a seductive purr. "Taste."

Hugh's gut tightened at the same time as his cock twitched when Pippa's lips opened to imbibe in the succulent fruit. He should have his head examined for stealing her away from the music, not to mention Grace. If anyone found them alone, there would be hell to pay. Namely, the hell that would arise from a forced marriage because he'd compromised her. He wouldn't even consider how Pelham would react if such a thing occurred.

Yet, he believed it was worth the risk.

Pippa hesitated for a moment to study the orange piece he held in his fingers. If this was what the serpent felt when it offered Eve the forbidden fruit, then Hugh fully understood and empathized with the poor fellow. There was no way to deny the hunger, or the temptation promised by that sweet taste of fruit. Every inch of his skin tingled at the sight of Pippa's breasts rising and falling with each shallow breath. He had to tamp down the urge to lean and press his lips against her pulse that pounded against the soft skin at the base of her throat.

It would take little for him to hold her in his arms, then ravish her with his kisses. She lifted her gaze to his. He was riveted by the red lusciousness of her lips. Slowly, she opened her mouth and took a bite.

When she moaned at the sweetness that exploded on her tongue, he groaned in answer. Now was as good a time as any to ask his question. He'd been stewing on it ever since he'd first spotted her at the musical. "Pippa, you're still determined to marry one of the Mayfair millionaires."

Her gaze sharpened as she turned her focus to him. "Marrying one of those boring, staid men is my best chance for attaining everything I want in life."

"Ah, yes. You want to marry 'a friend' if I recall correctly." He popped a segment of orange into his mouth and held out another to her. She opened her mouth and he fed her. "What about kisses and embraces on the long winter nights when the snow howls and the north wind sings through the chimney."

"Howling? Singing?" She laughed then tilt her flirtatious gaze his way.

"Appropriate since we're attending a musical." He lifted one brow and was rewarded by another sparkling laugh from her. "What about kisses and embraces?"

"What about them?" She shrugged. "I could ask the same of you."

"Touché." He lowered his voice. "Even I'll admit that the winters are long, and I sometimes wish..."

"Wish for kisses?" she teased. "And the warmth and comfort another would give by your side?"

Slowly, he closed the distance between them. She closed her eyes when his mouth met hers.

"Christ," he whispered against her lips. "You make me want things that I've never wanted before."

“It’s not too farfetched for me to say the same.” Pippa wrapped her arms around his neck, anchoring him in place.

The need to hold her became nigh near impossible to ignore. Like those winter nights he’d described, he had the undeniable need for her heat. Hugh pulled her into his arms and crushed his mouth against hers. The tart taste of fruit lingered on her lips and in her mouth. He licked her lower lip, and when she opened her mouth, his tongue met hers. Tonight, he wouldn’t leave a single inch of her unexplored. She melted against his chest as he ran his hands slowly up and down her spine.

Pippa mewled softly as she moved closer, pressing her breasts against the hard planes of his body. She ran her hands up and down, cataloging every dip, sinew, and muscle of his chest. The intensity of their embrace grew as he growled in approval of her exploration.

On a whimper, she grasped one of his hands and brought it to her breast. “Touch me.”

Hugh stilled for a moment, then broke their kiss. “Friends don’t touch each other like this.”

“Then let us not be friends.”

“Please,” Pippa whispered. She wanted Hugh to be the first man to touch her in such an intimate fashion. She trusted him.

The hardness of his hips met hers, and a breathless sigh escaped. There was nothing she wanted more than to feel the hard length of hard length brushing against her, entering her, and bringing her to completion.

Such a thought should have scandalized her, but with Hugh, the growing need for such an intimate touch couldn’t be ignored. Every inch of her body felt on fire. He

caused it, and he was the only one who could put out the flames. Pippa canted her hips, grinding against him.

“God, how I missed you,” Hugh murmured. With a slight movement, his leg was between hers. She whimpered at the change of position.

He whispered in her ear. “Move against me.” He kissed her ear, then brushed his lips against the sensitive skin below.

She moaned in response and angled her center until it met the hardness of his thigh. For a moment, she stilled at the sensation of his heat and hardness.

He was a masterpiece.

“Oh, the things I’d do to you if we were in my bed,” he teased, then nipped her ear lobe.

“Tell me,” she begged as she continued to grind against his leg. She took his hand in hers and brought it to her gown. Slowly, with their fingers tangled together, they lifted her skirt.

“I’d strip you bare, then I’d push your tits together and suck them until you screamed my name.”

“I want that.” She pulled her bodice down then pressed his hand against her stays.

He leaned close and buried his head against her hot skin. The feel of his lips and exploring tongue lit a fire within her.

Her heart pounded. For a moment, she feared it would break out of her chest to reach him. “Tell me more.”

“Oh, sweet darling,” he crooned. “I’d fall to my knees and lick every inch of you.” He licked the tender skin of her neck. “Christ,” he murmured. “You make me greedy. All I want to do is lick and lick until you cry out my name again. I would be unable to stop worshipping every delectable inch of you.”

He rocked against her, but it wasn’t enough. She wanted things that she should only ever do with her husband.

“I’d take my cock...”

“Yes.” The promise of release was a hairsbreadth within her grasp. “I’m close.”

He stilled for a moment. “Close to what?”

“A climax.” Pippa refused to be embarrassed. Her body was hers. “Tell me what you’d do with your cock.” She brought her hand and pressed against his hard length.

He groaned at her touch.

“Would you push it inside me?” Her voice turned into a gossamer slip of a whisper. “Would you fuck me?”

He pressed his forehead against hers and stilled. But he struggled for breath as if he’d run a mile. She could see that he was struggling for control, and she’d never been more pleased with herself. She’d done that to him. For a crazy, wild, and wonderful moment, she had Hugh speechless and unable to move.

“Where did you learn such things?” His lips skated across her cheek.

“Honor brought several erotic books with her from York when she returned home for good after finishing school. I have known about climaxes since the age of sixteen. I

know how to pleasure myself.”

His breath became ragged, and he cursed slightly as if in pain. “This is pure torture. But if we were alone, I’d torture you in return.”

At the deep rumble of his voice that promised unspeakable pleasure, she sucked in a breath of air.

He growled softly, then pressed his lips against her ear. “I’d take you to bed and put my mouth on you down there. I’d kiss and suck until you screamed my name. As you succumb to all that, I’d put my tongue in you and feel your body squeeze it, desperate for my seed.” He pulled her tighter against him. If possible, his member was even more engorged. “I’d enter you over and over...pumping everything I have into you until I scream your name in ecstasy.” He trailed his other hand slowly down her ribs, taking his time to squeeze and pet her. “But since I can’t do that.” He slowly and elegantly dropped to his knees and tilted his gaze to hers.

He could have been a knight of old pledging his fidelity to her. But she knew that once he touched her, she’d be the one pledging her allegiance to him. Her breath caught at the desire in his eyes. She had no doubt that if they were anywhere else, Hugh would take her to bed.

And she’d welcome it.

Slowly, never taking his eyes off hers, he carefully bunched her skirts and brought them to her waist. “Hold this,” he commanded. “Spread your legs.”

The feel of the cool air against her hot center did little to temper the need for an orgasm.

He lifted her leg and put it over his shoulder.

“I’ll fall.”

“I won’t let you, darling.”

She closed her eyes at the sound of the endearment on his lips.

He pressed a gentle kiss to her thigh, then the other. At the first swipe of his tongue against her sex, she sagged against the wall behind her. She couldn’t hold back the low moan. When he found the bundle of nerves that begged for attention, he set off a chain reaction. Everything inside of her swirled into waves of pounding sensation. She pushed her center hard against his mouth, begging.

No, she didn’t beg. She demanded.

He chuckled against her folds, but the dastardly man kept on devouring her. He continued to swirl his tongue around her nub, then suck it until she thought she’d scream. Somehow, she held on tight until he pushed his tongue inside her. Everything combusted into a vortex of colors that exploded behind her eyes as her muscles contracted in response. With each ragged breath, it felt as if her body had burst into pieces above her. As her heartbeat slowed, those pieces came together. Then, like a feather, they floated until she was once again grounded.

After he kissed the sensitive nub a final time, Hugh rose to his feet and pulled her close then straightened her gown. Like she was something precious, he kissed her tenderly. She could taste herself on his tongue. It was inappropriate, not to mention utterly wicked, but she craved more. “Hugh,” she cried softly.

“I’ve always thought you exquisite, but it pales in comparison to seeing you come. I’ve never tasted anything as beautiful as you.”

She struggled to catch her breath. That’s when reality returned like a bucket of cold

water. What had she done? No one of her stature allowed such passion to erupt without the benefit of marriage.

She'd laugh if what she'd thought wasn't so ridiculous. She didn't want a marriage with emotions, passion, or anything that resembled affection...or, God forbid, love. She wanted to be free of such chains. She didn't want what her parents had—a marriage based on passions that would somehow transform to hatred.

Yet what she felt tonight in his arms wasn't something that could be so easily diminished. If she married a man who didn't stir her passions, what would become of her in the dead of winter when those chimneys sang with the howling winds? She'd be miserable because she'd always be reminded of this night when she'd come undone in Hugh's arms. From now on, every time she pleased herself, she would think about this night and him.

Pippa shook her head to make sense of it all. She would not allow herself to fall under some false sense of true affection for Hugh just because he'd pleased her.

Heat enveloped her cheeks, and her body was on fire. Which begged the question, how could she ever face him again? What must he think of her? She tried to create distance between them by pushing against his chest.

"Darling, what is it?" Hugh reluctantly released her.

She quickly set herself to rights, then slowly raised her hand to her mouth. "What have we done?"

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“What we’ve done is share an intimate kiss.” Hugh kept his expression even so as not to upset Pippa even more. He could see by her wide-eyed glare that she was panicked. Oddly, he should be as panicked as she was, but for some reason, he felt the exact opposite. Instead of alarmed or terrified, he felt oddly grounded. When had bringing pleasure to a woman ever done that to him before?

Never.

“Well, I’ve never shared a kiss like that before with anyone. I’ve never even shared a kiss with anyone but you. And it was on the lips.” She walked back a step, then buried her forehead in one gloved hand. “I have to think about this.”

He wanted to tell her that thinking about it wouldn’t make things right and might even make things worse. He could tell by how her eyes shifted from right to left that she was becoming more upset. There was only one thing to do. Put her out of her misery.

“This is just an idea,” he said gently. “We could marry,”

“Do. Not. Say. Another. Word.” Her gaze shot to his.

By her narrowed eyes, he knew instantly that he’d said the wrong thing.

“You want to marry somebody. I don’t want you to feel as if you don’t have any options,” he offered. It was a logical thought if he did say so himself.

What balderdash. He had no clue what other options might be considered. Frankly,

marriage was such a frightening and foreign concept to him. Hugh was astounded that he sounded so calm and in possession of his wits.

“Options,” she huffed and started pacing in front of the orangery windows.

With the silver and gold train of her dress snapping briskly behind her, Pippa's movements became more and more agitated. She moved with such speed that she might be mistaken for a rare shooting star.

One that repeatedly bounced between two window frames.

As a gentleman, he couldn't allow her to torture herself. He strolled forward and took both of her hands in his. “Pippa, stop. This is not the end of the world.”

She pulled one hand free and started to shake a finger at him. “Maybe not for you, but it is for me. What if Pelham finds out?” She threw her hands in the air and resumed her frantic pacing again. “Alice believes that he has eyes in the back of his head. I think she's right. He's omnipotent.”

He shook his head vehemently. “No, he's not. Besides, your brother is my worry. I'm not going to let you commandeer my worry for your own.” He arched an eyebrow to mark his point. “You'll have to find your own obsession.”

“What?” she asked incredulously. “What nonsense is that?”

He sniffed slightly and tilted his nose in the air. “You can't worry about your brother. He's mine. Think of something else.”

“He's my brother.”

“He's my best friend.”

“Brother trumps best friend.”

“Under what section of Edmond Hoyle’s rules regarding trumps, hmm?” he challenged.

She stopped and put her fisted hands on her delightful hips. “Seriously? What are you talking about?”

“Hoyle codified the rules for various card games. He wrote *A Short Treatise on the Game of Whist* in 1742 that included trumps. There is no mention of brother trumping best friend. Your brother has a copy. We could ask his opinion.” He sniffed to keep from smiling. “I’m always serious about trumps.”

She stood stock still with her lips parted. Just her pose made him want to grab her and plant another sensual kiss on her swollen lips. They were a deep shade of red and looked as if they’d been stung by a bee.

She looked ravishing, and he’d done that to her. Though his cock still demanded attention, he never wanted either of them to regret what they’d shared this night.

But she was smiling now, and that had been his aim all along.

“Hugh,” she said in exasperation.

“Darling,” he answered in the same tone. “Be logical about this. How could he ever find out?”

Her brow furrowed adorably. “You’re right, I suppose. He would only find out if someone told him.”

“Exactly,” Hugh agreed. He didn’t add that Pelham would find out if someone

walked in on them. Which meant he needed to return Pippa downstairs as quickly as possible. He came to her side and ran a critical eye over her dress and hair. Gently, he pushed a renegade blond lock under a hairpin. “But we should return downstairs before anyone notices we’re gone.”

She nodded her agreement. Silently, they exited the orangery, then descended the same staircase they took to reach the second floor.

As the quartet faced the audience taking their bows, the guests stood clapping their enthusiastic appreciation for the performance. Thankfully, a crescendo of “bravos” rose from the crowd, ensuring that he and Pippa were not noticed entering the room.

As they joined in the applause, Great-aunt Edith turned around. Her expression of “Aha, I caught you” nailed him in place.

At that same moment, Pippa leaned close. “That can never happen again.”

“If you think that wise.” Clapping a little louder, he leaned closer to her. “Didn’t you enjoy it?”

“Too much,” she confided.

He grinned like the star pupil who’d received the well-earned praise from his tutor.

He completely agreed with her assessment.

With one caveat.

It could never happen again when they were near this many people.

Pippa wore a benign smile as she faced the quartet, but her heart was beating at such

a breakneck speed that the vein in her wrist visibly pulsed under the white satin. Anyone with half a clue would see that she'd been well-pleasured that night. Her gaze skidded down her gown. At least it wasn't wrinkled.

Heavens, she had to calm herself down. Thankfully, Grace was coming her way with Lord Stanhope in tow. She pasted on a welcoming smile as they grew nearer. Hugh had edged even closer to her as if claiming her. What a fiasco the night had turned into, especially since a potential husband was heading her way.

"There you are, darling," Grace said happily. "I hope you enjoyed the performance."

Hugh leaned slightly toward Pippa. "I can guarantee that she enjoyed the performance, my lady," he said with a wicked but soft laugh in his voice.

She wanted to kick him in the shin right there. Heat marched up her neck and would soon color her cheeks. All because of the arrogant knave beside her.

Grace nodded politely at Hugh, then turned her attention back to Pippa. "You remember Lord Stanhope?"

Lord Stanhope smiled in her direction and bowed. When he straightened, he didn't glance around the room. He kept his gaze on hers. "What a pleasure to see you again, Lady Pippa."

With his tall, lithe frame, handsome features, golden blond hair, and sky-blue eyes, he could steal your breath.

But that was only if someone else hadn't stolen it before. Much like the way Hugh had stolen hers repeatedly when he kissed her. Her lips still tingled, and it took every ounce of willpower she possessed not to press her fingers to her lips. She could still taste herself from Hugh's kisses.

She could not keep thinking about Hugh. She meant Ravenscroft.

Determined to be her best charming self, Pippa dipped a curtsy. “Good evening, Lord Stanhope. The pleasure is all mine.”

“I beg to differ. Don’t forget, I had pleasure, too,” Ravenscroft whispered in her ear. Thankfully, they stood several feet away from Lord Stanhope. Hugh stood at an angle that kept Stanhope and Grace from seeing what he was doing.

“Is your brother here also?” Stanhope asked.

Pippa did her best to ignore him and continued to smile. “Alas, I’m afraid my brother is in Amesbury because of business. Lady Grace and Lord Ravenscroft’s mother are chaperoning me.”

Stanhope gestured toward the front of the room. “It was an extraordinary performance, wasn’t it? I had a front-row seat. I didn’t want to miss a single note.”

“I’ll do him even better,” Hugh murmured again. “I had a front-row seat to the most beautiful sight in the world. You coming in my arms.” Hugh nodded to someone off in the distance, but his soft voice still reached her.

Every part of her traitorous body was alert to him and his dark voice. It was as if her hearing and, frankly, her entire body were attuned to him.

She turned to him with a false smile, willing him to stop. He exhaled an exaggerated sigh.

Grace narrowed her eyes at Ravenscroft’s expression, but Stanhope was completely oblivious. He was simply happy to be in their company.

“Lady Pippa, what was your favorite piece?” At the word ‘piece,’ his voice cracked.

“What a pup,” Ravenscroft muttered.

Pippa whirled toward him with a stern look. “That’s enough.”

“I do apologize,” Lord Stanhope offered with a sincere smile. “I must be nattering on.”

Oh no. The poor man thought she was talking about him.

“On the contrary, sir.” Pippa slowly turned her gaze to his. “I find our conversation delightful.”

“Delightfully boring,” Hugh whispered. “You would never be bored with me.”

Stanhope’s gaze settled on Hugh, but the young lord didn’t stop smiling. “What was that, Ravenscroft? I didn’t hear you.”

“I was just saying delightful,” he said with a suave ease that was entirely infuriating.

Lord Stanhope’s smile grew a little brighter. He turned to Pippa. “May I call on you tomorrow, Lady Pippa?” He smiled at Grace. “If that’s all right with you, my lady.”

Grace beamed. “We would enjoy your company.”

“Indeed,” Pippa offered. “I look forward to it.”

She turned to Ravenscroft with a lifted brow. Let the exasperating marquess respond to that. It was wicked of her, but he had to know that she wouldn’t become a chess piece in whatever game he was playing. They both had agreed that what had

happened to them in the orangery would never be repeated.

Stanhope took his leave. Grace became engrossed in a conversation with Lady Ravenscroft and Hugh's great-aunt, who had joined their group. Bits and pieces of conversation floated in the air about the outstanding performance.

"Are you happy?" Pippa purposely kept her face pleasant, but the urge to scowl was fierce. "You infuriating man."

"What did I do?" Hugh raised his hand to his heart with a smirk of a smile. "Are you growling?"

She stopped for a second. For the love of all dogs everywhere, she had been the one making that godawful sound.

"You sound just like your brother." Hugh laughed and held out his arm. "Come, let's take a walk around the room."

She studied his arm and then slowly lifted her gaze to his. "And why would I want to be in your company after your appalling display?"

"Because you enjoy my company. Much more than Stanhope, I'd wager."

"I'll take that bet, sirrah," she seethed. "Really, Ravenscroft, I thought you had agreed to help me."

He winked, then leaned close. "I have agreed, and I honor all my promises." He lowered his voice to a whisper, one that a lover would share with another. "I'll help you find a husband and give you pleasure along the way."

It sent a cascade of sensation down her back, much like a thousand butterflies landing

on her naked skin, slowly stroking her with their wings.

She was in trouble and getting deeper the more time she spent with the man. How could he be so outlandish and then so utterly charming the next minute?

“I look forward to Lord Stanhope calling on me. I’ve met him several times, but it was always in the company of my brother. He always seemed nice and attentive when we were in his company.”

“So is a lap dog.” Hugh threw back his head and laughed. The rich sound echoed around them, drawing his mother’s and aunt’s attention. They smiled affectionately at him.

At the sight, Pippa swallowed the lump in her throat at the sight. For a moment, she couldn’t breathe. Their deep regard for him was reflected in their smiles and the brightness in their eyes. They loved Hugh. At that moment, she wanted what he had. It was the unconditional love from a mother and a mother figure who didn’t judge you.

She was just overwrought. She had a loving brother and sister, and that was enough.

“Stanhope has always sought Pelham’s approval.” He grew serious.

“You don’t approve of Lord Stanhope?” She forced her attention to the marquess. For some odd reason, she desperately wanted his answer.

“I didn’t say that. I...I want you to be careful.” A tender smile pulled at his lips. “Allow me the chance to redeem myself and win back your good graces.”

Then the reason for his behavior dawned on her.

He was jealous.

Then and there, she decided that perhaps this husband-hunting business wasn't so tedious after all.

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:45 am

After barely sleeping, Pippa had surrendered.

Perhaps surrendered was too harsh a term. She'd relinquished any thought of rest as her mind had been consumed with images of Hugh in bed.

With her.

First, it had been simply kisses.

Oh, she was lying to herself. There were no simple kisses with that man. Her lips still tingled from the feel of his mouth against hers. His lips were softer than she'd ever imagined. Every kiss had led her farther down a path that she had hoped never ended.

Last night she'd been inundated with endless, sensual dreams where he was over her, under her, beside her, all the while teaching her lessons of pleasure. Good heavens. If the heat of her cheeks were any indication, she was blushing in the privacy of her own room.

But when she had dreamed that they had finally joined their bodies together, her body had rioted in a complete dereliction of duty. Every inch of her had burned with the memories of his tongue enchanting hers. As she grew more feverish, the dastardly man conquered her dreams like a Viking. She'd awoken drenched in sweat, and she ached for something that only he could satisfy. As her hand drifted down her stomach to relieve the achiness, she knew it would be short-lived.

As the hours crept by like a slow-moving worm, she'd given up any hope of additional sleep. She had risen at the ridiculous time of seven o'clock in the morning.

But she didn't call for Alice. She donned a dress that didn't require her maid's help. If Alice had taken one look at her fevered brow, she'd have insisted that Pippa stay in bed all day.

She couldn't do that. Not when she and Grace had invited Lady Ravenscroft and Great-aunt Edith to come for tea, then a fitting immediately afterward and Lord Stanhope was supposed to call.

An hour later, Pippa entered the family sitting room.

Grace looked up and smiled. "Darling, are you all right?"

They were sitting in the family sitting room on the second floor of Ardeerton House. Alice pretended to be busy with her mending, but Pippa could see that she was anxiously waiting Pippa's answer.

"I'm fine, Grace." She reached over and patted her friend's hand.

"By the state of her bedlinens, she wasn't fine at all, my lady," Alice added unhelpfully.

Pippa shot her maid a look of censure, but Alice ignored her.

"What does that mean?" Grace turned her attention to Alice.

"Just that Lady Pippa had a restless night," Alice explained with an innocent look on her face. "When I went to wake her, practically all the linens were on the floor this morning."

"Alice," Pippa hissed. "Grace doesn't need to know the status of my room in the morning."

“I don’t think she had much sleep,” Alice added unhelpfully.

“Why is that?” Grace’s brow creased, revealing her concern.

Thankfully, Ritson chose that moment to interrupt them.

The butler cleared his throat. “My lady, your guests have arrived.”

Pippa had never appreciated her loyal butler more than she did at that moment. She stood quickly and smiled. “Excellent. Yes, please show them in my dear, dear Ritson.”

At the term of endearment, Ritson stilled, and a frown slowly appeared. “Lady Pippa, pardon me for asking, but are you all right?”

Alice shook her head. “No, she isn’t. I was just explaining to Lady Grace how Lady Pippa?—”

“Not now, Alice,” she scolded.

At the first sight of the gray hair topped with a round turban that looked remarkably like the orange she’d eaten with Hugh, Pippa walked to greet her guests. “Lady Edith and Lady Ravenscroft, welcome.”

Her voice might have been laced with a tad of hysteria, but no one seemed to notice. Or they were too polite to point it out.

Lady Edith swept into the room with the marchioness following her. “Thank you, darling girl.” She smiled with affection, instantly relieving the tension in the room.

The marchioness grinned and came to her side. “Ravenscroft will be joining us.”

Instantly, Pippa's stomach dropped to her feet. At least, that's what it felt like. It hadn't even been a day since they'd done that thing in the orangery.

Grace lifted her brows, waiting for Pippa to do something, but what? Good heavens, she had never been this rattled in her adult life.

"Perhaps you should ask your guests to come in and join you for a cup of tea?" Grace whispered.

"Oh! Of course," Pippa cried in relief. "Please, do make yourself at home. We just had a tea tray delivered."

Lady Ravenscroft and Lady Edith sat on the red and gold striped sofa that faced the two matching floral club chairs in the same colors. Pippa prepared the tea, and as it seeped, she placed several cherry tarts and slices of fruitcake on individual plates. Such routine tasks allowed her to calm herself. No matter what Ravenscroft did today, she wouldn't allow it to upset her. She glanced at her guests, who were chatting with Grace. All seemed to be completely unaware that she was flustered about the event last night.

"So, darling girl," Lady Edith smiled. "I couldn't help but notice that you and my great-nephew were a bit at odds last night."

Pippa stopped preparing the tea. What could she say? She struggled with something witty, but everyone's gaze was on her.

Thankfully, Grace took over and served their guests the plates of food and poured the tea. "Really? I didn't see that." Grace turned to Pippa. "Is that true?"

Pippa laughed but the high-pitched sound betrayed her nervousness. "Not in the least." She waved her hand in dismissal. "Ravenscroft was simply teasing me last

night.” She took a deep breath and forced herself to smile. “That’s how friends treat friends.”

Lady Edith nodded, then smiled coyly at her niece. “Margaret, that’s the secret code that they haven’t kissed one another. I knew that boy would let a golden opportunity pass him by even if it hit him up the side of the head. Last night when they snuck to the back of the room, that was the time for him to make his move.” She winked at Pippa, then turned to Lady Ravenscroft. “You owe me five pounds.”

Lady Ravenscroft’s brow furrowed, then she took a sip of tea. Carefully sitting it down on the table, she turned to Grace. “Please pardon us. We don’t mean to offend. We’re simply a tad unorthodox.” She lowered her voice. “Aunt Edith and I had a wager if Ravenscroft would kiss Lady Pippa last night.” She scrunched her nose. “I bet that my son would see what a jewel Pippa is.” She let out a dejected sigh. “As the old saying goes, you can lead a cow to water.”

“Horse,” Lady Edith corrected, then turned to Pippa. “Don’t feel alarmed, dear. Ravenscroft is brilliant when it comes to finances, but romance?” She shrugged. “I don’t want to imply that he’s dull-witted or not interested.” She picked up her tea and took another sip as if they were talking about the weather. “He’s shy and needs a little help. Perhaps you should make the first move.”

Pippa choked on her first sip of tea. “He’s not shy. He’s very sure of himself.”

Perhaps a little too sure of himself. She glanced at her teacup and smiled. No matter what, she’d remember the night in the orangery for as long as she lived. He’d held her tightly as if he’d never let her go. The hunger in his kiss mirrored her own. She didn’t want to think what might have happened if they had been someplace more private than the orangery.

“I see.” Lady Edith leaned back against the sofa with a smile reminiscent of a

satisfied cat licking the remaining cream in a bowl. “This is good news. Margaret, I am in debt to you it seems.”

Pippa’s cheeks heated instantly at the old lady’s smile. It was apparent to them all that Pippa had said too much. She had inferred that she and the marquess had shared more than just an appreciation of music last night.

Grace’s gaze bounced between Lady Edith and Pippa. “In debt? Over a supposed kiss?”

Thankfully, Ritson entered the room with Lord Stanhope at his side. “My lady, his lordship is here to see you.”

Lord Stanhope’s eyes widened, but a smile of pure joy graced his face. “What good fortune. I came early to call on Lady Pippa only to discover that the most delightful ladies to ever grace London are all assembled in the same room.”

He was about five hours too early, but it mattered little. Wistfully, Pippa watched as all the ladies tutted in appreciation at the viscount’s kind words. Stanhope was certainly a man of good humor. But so was Hugh, even if his brand of wit was a little more on the devilish side.

And a little more on the seductive side.

When the viscount approached, she stood to welcome him. He was fit and remarkably handsome. Curious that her heart didn’t trip in her chest like it did with Ravenscroft. Perhaps the organ preferred men with dark hair rather than blond.

The viscount took her hand in his and, with an exaggerated bow, brought it to his lips.

If it had been Ravenscroft greeting her, undoubtedly, he’d have found a way to kiss

her without anyone knowing. A shiver skated down her back at the thought. Heavens, the man could invade her thoughts without any warning.

“Lord Ravenscroft,” Ritson boomed.

Instantly, Pippa jerked her hand away from the viscount. Her gaze met the marquess, who quirked a brow.

“I see the party has started without me,” he announced, then turned to Ritson. “Thank you for seeing me in.”

Ritson nodded. “No need for thanks, my lord. You know your way around here almost as well as I do.”

“Good to see you, Ravenscroft.” Stanhope smiled at the marquess then turned to Pippa. “My lady, these are for you.”

It was a small posey of lilacs tied with a pretty pink ribbon. She smiled at such a gift. “You’re very kind. They’re my favorite.”

Lord Stanhope's cheeks reddened. “I asked Lady Grace what your favorite flowers were. I bought them from a flower girl on my way here.”

“You could have come to my London home. We have dozens of those bushes.” Ravenscroft joined them at the table and took a chair between the sofa and the club chairs. “Lady Pippa, you are welcome to come and pick whatever and whenever you like.”

Pippa slowly turned her gaze to him with a smirk. “Oh, but you see, Ravenscroft, it’s the idea that Lord Stanhope brought me a bouquet because he was thinking of me.”

The viscount grinned as if she'd set the moon in the sky. "Indeed, my lady. A pretty posey for a pretty lady."

Aunt Edith nodded in satisfaction. "So true, my dear."

Lady Ravenscroft regarded Hugh. "She has the right of it, son. I always appreciated a lovely bouquet, particularly if your father personally picked it out for me."

"Lady Pippa, I wish you could see my ancestral estate. We have hundreds of lilac bushes." Stanhope turned to the others. "I wish you all could see it." His eyes widened with a huge smile. "Perhaps a house party could be arranged."

"Excellent idea, my boy," Aunt Edith cooed in approval.

Hugh frowned for a moment before smiling. "How many acres do you have, Stanhope?"

"Ten thousand," the viscount answered.

"At Raven's Abbey, I have a hundred thousand acres. Every one of them profitable," Ravenscroft boasted.

Stanhope sat on the edge of his seat and curled his hands around the arms of his chair. His knuckles turned white with the force of his actions. The man was riled. "I have a tin mine and a coal mine on my land."

Lady Edith cackled in glee, clearly egging on the competition between the two men. "That's impressive, my lord."

"And interesting, Lord Stanhope." Pippa smiled politely. She had to change the subject, or they'd be here all day like two roosters crowing at each other. No wonder

the hens in the farmyard ignored the beasts. They were loud, obnoxious, and utterly boring.

“Is anyone going to the Graydon’s soiree next week?” Pippa asked innocently.

Grace smiled in relief at the change of subject. “Excellent question.”

“Before we get to that, I need to tell Stanhope something.” Ravenscroft leaned back in the chair with ease. “Mine is more fertile.”

“What is more fertile?” Aunt Edith asked but then immediately giggled. “Could you elaborate?”

Then Pippa caught the gist of the conversation. For the love of heaven, was Hugh talking about his private parts or his land? Heat, the kind that told too much, crept up Pippa’s neck. This was unacceptable for Hugh to monopolize the conversation like this. Stanhope was her guest, and she’d be damned if she’d let that man insult her guests.

But the jut of the marquess’s chin, he was determined to win whatever this was between him and Stanhope. The current bickering and sniping in her presence made her pulse pound. She needed gloves to hide her sweating palms.

“I’m as fertile as you,” Stanhope challenged. “I have a prize ass that’s been declared the largest in the county.” He nodded as if that settled the underlying competition between the two men.

“Did you say your arse is the biggest in the county?” Ravenscroft drawled with a winged eyebrow.

“That’s enough.” Pippa’s voice ricocheted around the room like a gunshot.

She swallowed her nausea. Each terse word felt like a bee's sting. All she wanted to do was to curl up in a protective ball and hide. Their argument reminded her of the way her parents fought. One time when she was dining with them alone, she'd stood from the dinner table to escape their vitriol only to be scolded and told to sit until she was excused. Hours later with all her tears caked dry on her cheeks, she was finally allowed to leave. But new scars had been formed. The fact that her parents used their infidelity as weapons against each other was bad enough. But in front of her made it unbearable.

Stanhope had the decency to cringe. Hugh bit his lips to keep from laughing and that just infuriated her more.

Aunt Edith innocently drank a cup of her tea, and Lady Ravenscroft couldn't even look at Pippa.

"A fresh pot of tea would do everyone a world of good," Grace said softly.

"I'll ask Ritson to bring one." Pippa stood immediately.

"Allow me," Grace offered.

"I need the air," Pippa murmured, then sailed from the room. As soon as she was outside, she wrapped her arms around her waist, took a deep breath, and closed her eyes. She couldn't get away from Hugh fast enough. Whatever good qualities her brother saw in the man were invisible to her.

At least they were today.

"Pippa, do you need help?" Hugh's deep rich voice was behind her.

She whirled around. "Why are you here?"

He delivered one of his carefree smiles. “To see if you needed help with the tea tray.”

“Ritson can bring it,” she clipped. “I mean why are you here with me now?”

He swallowed, then looked down the hall. He shook his head gently. “Honestly? I can’t stay away.”

“Hugh,” she seethed. “You can’t manipulate or force me one way or the other. Let me see if...” Her throat burned with the words that she needed to utter but couldn’t quite force out. She cleared her throat then stared at the man before her. “Let me determine if Stanhope is the one.”

Her chest felt like it had collapsed, and her lungs refused to move. This only happened when she cried. But she would not allow it. Not now.

But then one traitorous tear slipped free. It had to be the lack of sleep that caused all these unruly emotions. She tilted her head and closed her eyes. Under no circumstances would she allow Ravenscroft to see how upset she was.

“Sweetheart,” he murmured as he took her chin in between his thumb and forefinger and coaxed her to look at him. “You’re hurting.” He cursed softly. “And I’m the reason.” Without another word, he took her in his arms.

A stuttered breath escaped. For the first time since last night, her world felt moored. She was no longer reeling from all these emotions that seemed to consume her. Without thinking too closely, she burrowed her head into his chest.

“I’m sorry.” He held her tight against him.

His chest vibrated with the words. She inhaled his familiar fragrance of sandalwood and his own unique clean scent. She wanted to drown in it so then she wouldn’t have

to return to the room where her guests were. But she was never one to push aside her responsibilities. She had a dress shop to buy.

After a moment, he took her hand and pulled her into the small music room across the hall. “We need privacy.”

Slowly, she pulled away, but he didn’t let her go. He clasped her arms gently in his hands, slowly squeezing and releasing her as if reminding her to breathe. His emerald eyes studied her face.

“Why did you act that way?” She didn’t hide her disapproval.

“Why did you act that way?” He echoed with a challenging grin.

“Because this is becoming too real.” She refused to look away.

“Meaning?” His brow furrowed into concerned lines.

“Meaning what we did last night....I need to know if—if.” She took a breath to calm herself, but it did little to ease her anxiousness. “I’ve never felt before what I felt last night with you. What if I can’t find that type of physical pleasure with another? I’ll be miserable.”

He nodded, but a satisfied grin pulled at his lips. “Miserable, ah?”

“Hugh, stop it.”

“You’re upset?”

“Of course, I’m upset. I’m going to have to marry to attain my dreams. And you’re not making it any easier to judge if Stanhope could make me happy.”

He took a sudden step back as if she'd slapped him.

"Men don't have to marry, but women do." Her hands fluttered, betraying her distress. "I want to like my future husband. It would make the marriage bed enjoyable. Don't you think? I don't know what to do. My brother is a good man. He wants the best for me. But all I want is that dress shop."

"He loves you." Hugh stepped forward and cupped her cheeks in his hands. His gaze locked with hers. "He's trying to protect you." Then, without another word, Hugh wrapped his strong arms around her and pulled Pippa tight.

Was this what she wanted? There was no denying that it was what she craved. Comfort and acceptance.

As she allowed herself to enjoy this moment, a niggling thought worked its way into her peacefulness.

What if Hugh Calthorpe haunted her dreams every night from now on? She pursed her lips in determination.

She had better put the man out of her mind. It was best for all of them.

But the worry persisted. What if she started to regret saying no to Hugh's offer of matrimony? They had chemistry between the two of them. The man kissed divinely. She could easily see herself craving such kisses every day.

Oh, she was fooling no one, including herself. She wanted those kisses hourly.

There was only one thing to do.

And that was to spend more time with Lord Stanhope.

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:45 am

Never in his life had Hugh felt like such a brute. Perhaps a better description was a careless oaf. With his jealousy and self-centeredness, he'd hurt Pippa. He'd never truly stopped to think how difficult it must be for her personally to go through this husband-hunting business. But the selfish truth was that he didn't want her to see Stanhope as the perfect man to marry.

With her nestled in his arms, it felt as natural as riding his stallion Eros. Not that he was comparing Pippa to a horse. He and Eros had been together for over fifteen years. They practically knew how each other would move when they went for a ride. That type of familiarity was something priceless.

He felt that same sense as he held Pippa in his arms.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. Tenderly, he rubbed his hands down her back, tracing her vertebra one at a time. She was exquisite, a true treasure.

She pulled away, and he wanted to roar like a wounded lion at the loss of her in his arms. Instead, he smiled slightly, hoping to convey his remorse.

"I'm sorry as well." She rubbed the tender skin under her eyes. "Does it look like I've been crying?"

"No?" He cocked his head. "Not outside of that one tear?" Egad, what if she'd shed more tears over this? He felt lower than the earth beneath his feet.

She shook her head. "We've been gone long enough that everyone will wonder where we've been."

She walked toward the door, then turned around. “Are you coming?”

Without a word, he followed.

Outside in the hallway, laughter rang clear and bright. It was coming from the sitting room. As soon as Pippa and he entered, it was easy to tell everyone was in jolly good spirits and that they hadn’t missed either of them. His great-aunt leaned near Stanhope as if he were her best friend. His mother positively sparkled with the smile that creased her lips. Lady Grace was even giggling at something Stanhope said.

When Hugh glanced at Pippa, she was smiling because of Stanhope. He could see her being happy married to the viscount. He would make her a priority in his life and keep a smile on her face while he did it. The scoundrel would probably support her dream of buying Mademoiselle Mignon’s dress shop.

When he thought of Stanhope coming to her at night, Hugh’s stomach roiled. A vision of the viscount slipping into bed with Pippa made him suck in a deep breath. He could not think such thoughts. It hurt worse than plunging a knife into his own chest.

“My word, what is so funny?” Pippa strolled to the group and sat down.

His aunt howled with laughter. “Stanhope was sharing with us how his little sister had stolen the dessert that had been prepared for their father’s birthday. She ate as much as she could, then hid the evidence in his bedroom.”

Hugh’s mother wiped a tear from her eyes as she continued to laugh. “Tell them what happened next, Adrian.”

Adrian? Since when did the man give them leave to call him by his Christian name? Hugh’s gaze bounced between the four ladies. This was worse than he imagined.

Stanhope had not only charmed Pippa but his own family as well, along with Lady Grace.

Stanhope offered a loveable sheepish smile. “Well, she hid it under my bed. At dinner that night, when our butler was beside himself because there was no dessert, my sister confided that I was the one who had stolen it. She smugly told them that it was in my room.”

“Why would she be so cruel to you and your father on his birthday?” Pippa cocked her head.

Rightly so. Hugh wanted to shout, “Hear, hear.” What kind of family would steal from one another, then blame the others for their misdeeds?

“It was her favorite dessert. Cream cake,” Stanhope said.

Hugh wanted to roll his eyes. The man even shrugged charmingly.

“Sure enough, we all found half of the cake in my room. My father ordered everyone out except me. I knew I was in trouble. As I tried to tell him that it wasn’t me, my father put his hand on my shoulder and told me that he knew that. He’d seen Penelope take the cake into my room. He didn’t want to punish her because she’d been sick all day from eating so much cake.”

“What happened next?” Hugh asked, then wanted to kick himself. Even he was becoming invested in the story.

Stanhope shook his head with a smile. “My father and I ate the remaining cake in my bedroom.” He looked away for a moment, then turned to Hugh. “We pretended to be two spies who had figured out where the missing cake was.” He waggled his eyebrows, then he grew nostalgic. “It was one of my fondest memories of him and

me together. I miss him.” He smiled slightly.

Hugh’s mother stood and went to Lord Stanhope’s side. “I miss Ravenscroft’s father every day.”

Hugh braced himself to run to her. He could tell by the red in her eyes and the wobble of her mouth that she was about to lose her composure.

Aunt Edith batted her eyes, completely at ease with what was happening before them all. “I think you both are lucky to have had such fine men in your lives. You should celebrate.”

“Wise words, Lady Edith,” Lord Stanhope took Hugh’s mother’s hand and squeezed. “Thank you for your solace.”

A blanket of silence rested over all of them. That was why Hugh never wanted to marry. He’d fall in love, and inevitably, it would crush him.

“That’s a lovely story.” Pippa reached over and patted the viscount’s on the arm. “Thank you for sharing that with us.”

When Stanhope placed his hand over hers and squeezed, it took every ounce of restraint Hugh possessed to keep from catapulting over the sofa and tackling the menace to the ground.

“Lady Pippa, might I ask if you’d accept my company for a ride tomorrow through Hyde Park?” He smiled, and the look was entirely too enchanting for Hugh’s tastes.

Pippa blinked several times as if she couldn’t understand what he’d asked.

Which proved Hugh’s point. The man mumbled way too much.

“How delightful.” Pippa finally smiled.

It was a smile that reminded Hugh of the sun slightly cresting the morning horizon promising a dazzling display of warmth and light.

God, he hated when he possessed those thoughts. He sounded like a love-sick poet.

But there was no time to consider his metaphors. He had to rectify the situation with Stanhope. There was no way under Hugh’s watch that he’d allow that young pup to squire Pippa around without an escort.

His great-aunt’s gaze caught his. Her eyes had widened as if she thought the viscount was a bit too forward. Hugh wanted to reach over and hug her. She was of a like mind. If he knew his aunt, she would be the first to tell Stanhope how inappropriate it was to ask Pippa without first seeking permission from her chaperone if Pippa could attend.

Stanhope turned to Lady Grace. “If that meets with your approval and you can attend?”

Lady Grace beamed at the viscount. “I can certainly make myself available.”

For the love of heaven, the man must have been reading Hugh’s mind.

Hugh’s aunt leaned back against the sofa and addressed Pippa. “It will be such a lovely day for a ride. I’m glad you accepted.”

Aunt Edith was a traitor.

“I have an idea,” Stanhope said as he let go of Pippa’s hand.

That simple moment allowed Hugh to finally breathe again. He'd been gripping the back of the sofa where Pippa sat, and for a moment, he thought he'd ripped part of the upholstery.

"Why don't you all come to my house tomorrow evening for dinner? My sister and her husband will be there. Along with my mother." He looked around the room like an eager puppy begging for treats.

"No," Hugh announced.

"Of course, we'd be delighted," his Aunt Edith said at the same time, then swirled her head his way. "Are you not available tomorrow?" She tsked for a second, then discreetly winked at him.

The saucy wench. Good thing he didn't say it aloud.

"We'll miss your company, my boy," Aunt Edith added, then turned around to Stanhope and inquired about the details.

Pippa glanced at him with a worried brow. "Can't you join us?"

"Let me check my schedule when I return home. Perhaps I have the wrong night for my appointment."

There was no way he'd miss Stanhope's impromptu dinner party for the world.

The next night, Pippa stood in the entry of Stanhope's home. She stole a glance to see if a certain marquess had made an appearance or not.

"Mother, allow me to introduce Lady Pippa," Stanhope had her arm wrapped around his. As soon as she and Grace entered the home, the viscount had been there to

welcome them.

The middle-aged woman who stood before them gave a shocked look to her son and then turned back to Pippa with her brown eyes dancing. “Lady Pippa, welcome.” She took Pippa’s hand in hers and squeezed. “Stanhope has told me so much about you.”

“Thank you. You have a beautiful home.” Pippa couldn’t help but smile at the bubbly warmth in Lady Stanhope’s voice. “Whatever Lord Stanhope shared, I hope most of it was good.” She pretended to whisper, but she made sure that the viscount could hear her.

“Lady Pippa, it was all wonderful,” Stanhope laughed, but the resulting smile on his face raised his prominent cheekbones.

For a moment, she couldn’t help but stare. He was far more handsome than she’d first thought.

“He told me you were lovely, but now I know he wasn’t being truthful,” his mother confided. “You’re beautiful.”

While his mother greeted Grace, Stanhope escorted her into the salon where everyone else had gathered.

Pippa glanced at Lady Edith and Lady Ravenscroft who were on the other side of the room talking with a man who had to be about Ravenscroft's age. She continued to smile, but her gaze swept the room, looking for Hugh. Apparently, he did have an engagement this evening.

A lady approached with a smile on her face.

“Lady Pippa, this is my sister Penelope.” Lord Stanhope murmured loud enough for

his sister to hear. “She’s the cake thief.”

“Guilty as charged.” Penelope laughed with true affection that brightened her eyes.

They all three laughed.

“I enjoyed that story.” Pippa nodded. “And it’s lovely to meet you.”

Penelope pressed her hand against her chest. “Stanhope has been quite out of sorts since he invited you to our weekly family dinner.” She leaned forward as if divulging a secret. “It’s the best china, and he’s serving a rare vintage of wine.”

A crimson blush spread like an ink blot across the viscount’s cheeks. He studied the ground as he shook his head. “Penelope,” he warned.

“It’s true,” His sister planted her hands on her hips, but her eyes sparkled with mischief. “Did he tell you that we’re twins?”

“No,” Pippa exclaimed. “How wonderful. You both must have never been lonely growing up.” The idea of always having a sibling around sounded like heaven to her. Many times, she’d been lonely during her childhood when Pelham had been sent to university and Honor had been sent to finishing school. That left Pippa at home with their parents and their games.

The two siblings shared a look of affection.

“Indeed. I’m the oldest by five minutes.” Stanhope straightened a bit and looked around the room. He pointed to the man talking to Lady Edith and Lady Ravenscroft. “That gentleman is the lucky man who swept Penelope off her feet.”

“That’s my husband Lord Michael Garrison.” Penelope waved at him when he caught

her gaze and smiled. “We all three grew up together.” She turned back to Pippa. They always tried to include me in their games when we were younger. When Michael returned from university, he asked me to marry him.” Her eyes flashed with humor. “It was inevitable.”

Pippa stole a peek at Stanhope. He truly was a kind man. What would it be like to wake up every day living with him? His nature was gentle, and the love he shared with his family was precious. Any woman would be lucky to have him as a husband.

If they married, would Stanhope hold her like Hugh did with a hunger so powerful it could devour her?

What was she thinking? She could not be considering Ravenscroft as a husband-husband for her marriage partner. A husband-husband was someone you fall in love with. She had to remember that she only wanted a husband. Someone whom she could share her life with, but under no circumstances would she lose her heart. Frankly, the idea was not as brilliant as she had once thought, not since she and Hugh had been intimate. She closed her eyes. Hugh had kissed her with such fervent longing that she didn’t know which way was east, west, north, or south. Frankly, she loved being lost in his arms even if it made her a wanton.

“Shall we go in for dinner?” Stanhope announced.

By then, everyone had joined them ready to stroll to the dining room. When she turned to leave, she stopped abruptly.

Hugh leaned against the wall next to her with a glass of whisky in his hand. That explained why she didn’t see him. He was staring at her with an air of haughty insouciance. When he straightened and came near, he wore a look of pure aristocratic arrogance, the type designed to make someone quiver. Little did he know that she’d seen that look a thousand times before. The best weapon against such haughtiness

was kindness, the kind that killed a person or, at least, their attitude without them ever knowing how you charmed them.

She stole a quick glance around the room. Everyone was trailing off to the dining room. Stanhope warmly smiled her way, and she returned the smile. He didn't seem to mind that she was staying behind to talk to Ravenscroft.

Oh, how tangled webs are woven and all that other Shakespearean nonsense.

She had nothing to feel guilty about. Ravenscroft was a family friend who was close to her and her brother.

But she was lying to herself. He was more than a family friend to her. She straightened her shoulders. She'd already decided tonight that she would focus on Stanhope. Thinking of Hugh Calthorpe, the Marquess of Ravenscroft, was a fool's errand. She didn't want him, and he didn't want her.

But none of her reasoning explained why a thousand protesting butterflies were fluttering in her stomach.

"Lady Pippa." He said her name with a slightly mocking tone in his deep baritone. He bowed, and when he captured her gaze, his normally mischievous grin was missing. He looked as if he were ready for battle, and she was the one he wanted to go to war against.

She dipped a curtsy. "Lord Ravenscroft. I see you could attend the dinner party after all. How wonderful for all of us."

His eyes narrowed. "As you can tell, I'm practically giddy with excitement."

The low rumble of his voice vibrated against her chest, making everything inside of

her tremble with anticipation. With his wide-legged stance and flaring nostrils, he looked like Zeus, ready to throw a thunderbolt directly at her.

“How was your afternoon with Stanhope?” His gaze locked with hers.

“Fine.” She demurely clasped her hands in front of her. “It was more than fine. It was wonderful. He is a gentleman, and I enjoyed his company.”

“Did you ask what his thoughts were about his wife working in trade?” He lifted a mocking brow.

“No.” She looked at the guests, who were still enjoying each other’s company. Aunt Edith was charming Stanhope, and Lady Ravenscroft and Lady Stanhope seemed to earnestly enjoy each other’s company. She swallowed the sudden thickness in her throat, then turned to attention back to Hugh. “Why would I? There’s not a marriage proposal yet.”

“I told you he was a pup.” He stole a peek at Stanhope, then studied her.

“He’s a year older than I am,” she argued softly.

“You should pursue the next name on your list of acceptable husbands.”

“Why would I do that?” she asked. It was a rhetorical question, but she wouldn’t put it past him to answer it.

“Because whatever this is with Stanhope has no chance of success. Excuse me.” He nodded his head, then left her to attend his great-aunt who was motioning him forward with a wave of her hand.

“Of all the nerve,” she mumbled as she clenched her fists. The arrogance of the man.

As if he knew what was in her best interests more than she did. She closed her eyes and took a deep calming breath. She would not allow him to upset her any further. Stanhope would never challenge her like that. That was why he was perfect for her. They could have the type of marriage she craved. One of respect without the highs and lows of emotion that defined her own parents' marriage.

As Pippa stood alone, gathering her scattered composure, she took a good look at the group of people before her. Everyone seemed to enjoy each other's company. Grace laughed with Penelope and her husband. Aunt Edith still commandeered Stanhope, but Hugh was by her side, grinning at something she had said. No doubt, it was outrageous. Lady Ravenscroft had her arm wrapped around Lady Stanhope and they had their heads bowed together like best friends sharing secrets. Naturally, her gaze drifted back to Hugh. The datted man had ingratiated himself with Stanhope who had an adoring smile as he nodded at something Hugh had said. Then Stanhope's laughter rang through the air as he slapped Hugh on his back. Everyone came to his side, and he made room to include them. Everyone belonged.

Except her.

She felt like the proverbial little girl looking into a candy shop or a bookshop—or even better, a fabric shop—who couldn't go in because she didn't have any money. Of course, she had money. She was even rich if you counted her trust fund. But she didn't have the riches a family brought to a person's life.

Her eyes blurred with tears, and she shook her head slowly to push the emotion away. She would not cry. She had her brother and her sister always. Though they had their own lives, they would be there for her if she needed them. Yet, what she craved was the scene before her.

She wanted all the love that these two families and their friends represented. She wanted to be a part of a large, loving family with a husband who doted on her. She

would dote on him in return and think her life was rich beyond measure.

She couldn't deny it any longer. Perhaps, she should consider a marriage with a husband who would kiss her for no reason, would warm her at night, then whisper secrets and murmur sensual words in the dark.

For heaven's sake, what had she done? All of her rational thinking of having a simple marriage had been destroyed. And she'd allowed it to happen. One night with Ravenscroft had ruined everything. Now, she'd allowed all her hopes and dreams to transform into something she'd always declared she never wanted.

Love from a man.

And it was all Ravenscroft's fault.

Then and there, she vowed that she could not, for her own sake, spend any more time with him. And if that meant she couldn't enjoy Lady Edith's and Lady Ravenscroft's company anymore, then so be it.

She did not want a husband-husband.

She would finish the gowns she had promised them. Once the final fitting was done, she would not allow herself to visit them ever again.

It was too risky. For her own peace of mind, she must avoid Ravenscroft at all costs.

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:45 am

Ritson met Pippa and Grace at the door. “Good evening, my ladies. I trust you had a pleasant evening.” With a snap of his fingers, two footmen appeared and took their pelisses, gloves, and hats.

“It was magical,” Grace cooed. “I adored the Stanhope family.” She turned to Pippa and lifted her eyebrows as if wanting her to say something.

“Enchanting,” Pippa murmured, but her heart wasn’t in it. Frankly, she just wanted to work and leave all her loneliness behind her.

“Would either of you ladies like a tea tray or a glass of brandy before bed?” the butler asked with a warm smile.

Pippa shook her head. “Thank you, Ritson, but no. I need to work this evening.” She smiled at Grace. “But you go ahead.”

Grace frowned at her. “It’s after midnight, Pippa. Aren’t you tired?”

“No. Dress designs are swimming in my thoughts. I need to work a little to get this excess energy out of my system before I retire. I’ll be in my study.” She waved good night to everyone and then went into her sanctuary, her own study.

Pelham had the duchess’s study redecorated for her several years ago. It had floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the courtyard. It was light and airy and the perfect place to sew when the mood struck her. Her desk sat in front of the windows and allowed her the best lighting when she was designing dress patterns.

As the sweet scent of beeswax candles surrounded her, Pippa examined the marchioness's dress and Lady Edith's dress which were spread out across a large table. Slowly, she trailed her hand across the beautiful brocades. Lady Ravenscroft's crimson fabric captured every speck of light. It would highlight her beautiful gray hair and green eyes. Lady Edith's dress featured a glorious sunset rose silk that would bring out the color in her cheeks when she laughed. That night, Pippa had never seen the woman so animated. She certainly kept both Stanhope and Hugh on their toes, peppering them with questions about politics, society, and their opinions on the current scandals in town.

Stanhope smiled at her throughout the evening as Ravenscroft ignored her. They were like day and night not only in appearance but in their temperament toward her.

A knock sounded on her door, and Grace's head peeked in. "May I come in?"

"Of course." Pippa waved her in. "I changed my mind about a brandy. Would you care to join me?"

"That would be delightful." Grace came to the small sitting area by the fireplace and curled her legs under her.

Pippa poured two snifters. She handed one to Grace, then sat in the opposite chair.

"Did you enjoy yourself this evening?" Grace took a sip of the fiery liquid and then closed her eyes as she swallowed. "Heaven," she murmured as she opened her eyes.

Pippa nodded, then took a sip as well. She smiled as the liquid slid down her throat. Its warmth reminded her of one of Hugh's kisses. She shook her head slightly. She had to remember that not everything revolved around the marquess.

Grace elegantly placed her glass on the table, then turned her razor-sharp gaze to

Pippa's. Nothing escaped Grace. When Honor was plunged into London society with Trafford, Grace had helped steer her through the traps that could ruin a woman's reputation if she wasn't careful. And she did it with aplomb even though Pelham had seemingly fought Grace at every move. It was during that time that Pippa had discovered that Grace and Pelham had a history, a romantic one that neither felt needed to be discussed. It was intriguing and frustrating at the same time. Whenever those two were in a room together, Pelham couldn't keep his gaze from following Grace wherever she was.

And in return, Grace couldn't help but tease and needle Pelham, hoping to get a reaction from him. More times than not, she was successful. But no matter what Pelham's history with Grace truly was about, he trusted her to watch out for Pippa. He was the one who asked Grace if she would stay with her even though she was known as the Governess. She helped people weave and navigate their way through the pitfalls and dangers of a London Season. She was highly sought after and successful.

Thankfully, Pippa wasn't in danger of being the ton's latest prey. At least, she didn't believe that she was.

"Darling, I'm going to be honest. Something is not right with you. Yesterday, you were lively and vivacious. Today, particularly tonight, you seem like an empty shell." Grace tilted her head and caught Pippa's downcast gaze. "Tell me. Is it Stanhope? Did he say or do something to upset you?"

Pippa shook her head no. "He was wonderful to me tonight."

"And that's a problem?" Grace took another sip of brandy, waiting for Pippa to continue. When she didn't, Grace did the honors. "What if he proposes?"

"What?" Pippa cried. "Did he say something to you?"

“No.” Grace chewed on her lip. “I’m just going to say it. I’ve helped a lot of couples, and I know when a man is preparing to propose. Stanhope has that look about him.”

“You think so?” Pippa lifted her glass and took a sip. It gave her a little time to get her thoughts in order. Even if she had until next week, she didn’t think she could put the scramble in order.

“Pippa? Aren’t you excited?” Grace leaned closer and placed her hand on Pippa’s arm. “Do you not want a proposal?”

“I think I do.” Pippa placed her hand over Grace’s and squeezed. “It’s just a little confusing right now.”

Grace leaned back with a knowing look on her face. “Does this confusion have anything to do with a certain marquess?” She held up her hand when Pippa opened her mouth to protest. “When he thought no one was looking, he kept stealing glances your way. His nostrils would flare when Stanhope talked to you. He’s obviously jealous.”

“That may be, but he and I are not suited to one another. He doesn’t want marriage, and I do.” She smiled and wanted to reach around and pat herself on her back. She sounded remarkably calm.

Grace studied her for a moment as if trying to divine all her secrets. Pippa straightened slightly under her friend’s regard. How could she share her secrets when she wasn’t even certain what they were?

Grace nodded once. “You know I consider you a dear friend.”

Pippa nodded.

“I am always here for you if something is troubling you.” Grace smiled. “Sometimes just saying the words aloud can put a whole new perspective to a conundrum.”

“I don’t know what those words would be. I’m just tired.” Pippa yawned, hoping Grace would take the hint. In many ways, Grace was like a relentless badger when she was trying to ferret out the truth. Therefore, Pippa had to be careful of what she said. She didn’t want anything to get back to her brother that she couldn’t explain. It was certainly true she couldn’t explain the convoluted, confusing, yet enticing thoughts about a certain marquess.

Grace came to Pippa’s side and took her hand and squeezed. “Don’t stay up too late.”

“Good night, Grace.” As soon as the door closed, Pippa released a breath, hoping to release the tension that filled every inch of her.

She walked to her sewing table and sat down. She picked up a threaded needle and started to sew. She’d always found it comforting or at least distracting. But not so tonight.

If she had her druthers, she wished her thoughts would go to bed without her.

It would give her some much-needed peace.

For the first time since last night, Hugh felt like the vise around his chest had loosened. Ever since the dinner party at Stanhope’s, Hugh had felt off-kilter, like a top that kept spinning but never really slowing down. He refused to think of how Stanhope had looked at Pippa. The viscount had a wonderfully friendly countenance, except when he looked at Pippa. He looked like a wolf ready to take down his prey.

The most frightening thing of all? It was exactly the way that Hugh felt about her. All of this agreement between the two of them was becoming more complicated. This

constant feeling of unease was not what he'd bargained for.

Thankfully, his friend Marcus Kirkland, the Earl of Trafford, was sitting before him. Besides Pelham, Trafford was his best friend. The earl had arrived in town yesterday. Just having him in Hugh's study put him at ease. It was as if they were once again at university just enjoying each other's company.

"Honor will be back tomorrow. She had a few things that needed her attention before we host the house party for the children." He took a sip of tea and studied Hugh over his cup. "You're invited."

"I'd be delighted to get out of the city," Hugh said distractedly. Perhaps with Pippa's sister arriving in London, she could help Pippa in her husband-hunting. Hugh could brush his hands of Pippa and go back to his regular routine of examining estate books, reviewing investments, and visiting Pelham. But even those activities didn't sound very appealing at the moment.

Nothing did except Pippa.

"Did you hear what I said? The house party is for the children." Trafford chuckled.

The deep sound immediately pulled Hugh away from his thoughts. "You mean the children that are the beneficiaries of your charity?"

"Yes. The ones who are orphaned and need role models. You'd be a perfect fellow for the boys to emulate." Trafford set his cup down on the table.

They were sitting at a round table off to the side of Hugh's desk. When he had company, it was where he preferred to sit.

"What is wrong with you this morning? You're distracted." Trafford cocked his head.

“I’ve never seen you like this.”

“I’ve been attending too many ton events.” Hugh picked up his cup of tea and swallowed.

Trafford smiled knowingly. “Pelham said you were squiring Lady Pippa around. I’m sorry you’re not enjoying yourself. I find her to be good company.”

Good company? How about delightful company? But Hugh didn’t say anything. He simply grunted in answer.

“My lord?” Burnett peeked his head around the door. “Lord Stanhope to see you.”

Trafford’s gaze shot to his. “Stanhope? I didn’t know you were friends.”

“Acquaintances,” Hugh murmured, then turned to his butler. “Send him in.”

Perhaps the viscount wanted to challenge him to a round of fisticuffs at Gentleman Jim’s. Hugh would savor getting into the ring and knocking the young pup on his arse. It would be even better if Pippa could see him do it.

“Good morning, Ravenscroft,” the viscount chirped as he entered the room. Dressed in a bright blue morning coat and buckskin breeches, he looked like a spring bird ready to charm the world.

Hugh tamped down the urge to sneer. Instead, he called out, “Stanhope, come join us.”

By then, both he and Trafford had stood in welcome.

Stanhope crossed the room wearing a smile that was reminiscent of Christmas

morning.

The man was entirely too happy for Hugh's tastes.

"Trafford, good morning." The viscount shook his hand, then turned to Hugh. "Lord Ravenscroft, it's always an honor."

Hugh waved at a chair. "Tea?"

The viscount smiled and shook his head. "Thank you, but no. If I have another cup, I'm afraid I'll be floating down the Thames."

If only the man were floating down the Thames, Hugh would see him off with a fond "bon voyage." It would certainly make his day brighter. Instantly, he poured the viscount a cup. "In case you become thirsty later on."

After they were all sitting, Stanhope smiled. "I'm glad you're both here. I need your advice."

Trafford straightened in his chair. Hugh didn't move.

"Do either of you believe in love at first sight?" The viscount wore an earnest look on his face, then smiled self-consciously.

"I do," Trafford spoke after a minute. "I fell in love with my wife the first time that I saw her."

"Oh, that's a welcomed relief," Stanhope exclaimed. "I believe in it, too." He turned to Hugh with a curious look on his face. "How about you, Ravenscroft?"

Hugh shook his head.

The viscount's brow furrowed in disapproval.

Trafford bit his bottom lip and studied his teacup, but the grin on his face was plain as day. He cleared his throat in an attempt to clear his smile. "You'll have to forgive Ravenscroft. He's a bit of a curmudgeon."

Stanhope nodded.

Hugh gritted his teeth. "Trafford, please. I take offense with you teaching young Stanhope here such a lesson. He's impressionable."

"I'm not that young, sir. I'm not as old as you, but I'll see my twenty-sixth year next month."

Hugh narrowed his eyes. "I hope you're not insulting me."

The viscount shook his head so swiftly, it was a wonder he didn't make himself dizzy. "Not at all. I meant no harm. But I know you well enough to realize that you're a bit..." He looked to his new best friend, Trafford, for help.

"Set in his ways?" Trafford offered.

"Yes, that's it." The viscount sat on the edge of his seat. "No offense, Ravenscroft."

"Why are you here?" Hugh said curtly. If he was going to be insulted by a pup in his own study, Hugh was determined to make the experience as uncomfortable for the viscount as it was for him.

Stanhope visibly swallowed. He stole a peek at Trafford.

The shoulders of Hugh's former best friend bounced as the traitor tried to hide his

mirth.

“I’m wondering if the Duke of Pelham will believe my suit for Lady Pippa is real since I’ve only been courting her for a short while.”

“Courting?” Trafford’s eyes widened to saucers. “Lady Pippa?”

Hugh gripped the handle of the fragile teacup as if it were the only thing holding him back from lunging across the table and grabbing the viscount by the throat and growling his warning, “Mine. She’s mine. Do you hear me? Mine.”

Thankfully, he didn’t say it aloud. He ran his hand down his face. What was happening to him? He was becoming a barbarian.

Completely oblivious to Hugh’s turmoil, the viscount nodded woefully. “I’ve fallen in love with her. She’s kind, witty, and someone I want to spend my life with. She’s stolen my heart and my family’s too.”

Hugh couldn’t breathe as if he’d fallen off his galloping horse and had all the air knocked out of him. After a moment, the feeling started to wane. He gulped all the air he could. At the sound, Trafford offered a look of concern. Hugh waved him off.

“That’s why I’m here. Do you think that the Duke of Pelham would honestly consider my suit?” Stanhope glanced at Trafford before studying Hugh.

“Why would you ask me?” Hugh arched an eyebrow.

Trafford shook his head. “He’s asking both of us.” Trafford leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. For a moment, he was silent as he considered what to say. He clasped his hands between his legs and nodded as if coming to a decision. “I think the duke would definitely consider your suit. You’re a member of the

millionaire's club. You don't have a reputation as a rakehell or someone with loose morals. Your family is well-respected with no skeletons in the closet."

"No skeletons." Stanhope's brow furrowed into neat lines.

Hugh wanted to roll his eyes. The viscount even made such an expression look elegant.

"My family is my pride and joy. They all give me great comfort." His cheeks heated slightly. "They adore Lady Pippa as much as I do. They would welcome her with open arms."

Hugh eased back in his chair and let out a silent breath. Pippa would love to be a part of Stanhope's sweet, kind, demure, and pleasant family. It was something that Pelham had said that she'd craved. He wanted her to have a family who would love and cherish her.

Stanhope's family wasn't at all like his boisterous and outspoken group of kin, particularly his great-aunt. Granted, his family adored Pippa as well. But would she feel comfortable with having to maneuver around Aunt Edith when the grand dame exploded into a high dudgeon? Would Pippa be terrified if his mother had one of her spells?

For Christ's sake, even his great-aunt favored Stanhope, which was really saying something when she was the one who had originally tried to wrangle both himself and Pippa into a betrothal.

"Ravenscroft?"

The sharpness in Trafford's tone broke Hugh's train of thought.

“Hmm?” he asked.

“What’s your opinion of Pelham’s thoughts about my suit?” Stanhope asked.

What could he say? It was everything Pippa wanted. A husband with a loving family who would all welcome her with open arms.

But even he wasn’t that magnanimous. He scowled at the viscount, hoping to intimidate the man. He’d not let Pippa go so easily. “What are your thoughts about women in trade?”

The viscount’s eyebrows shot upward. “I haven’t considered it.”

“Perhaps you should.”

The viscount nodded. “Does Lady Pippa want to go into trade? Highly unusual for a duke’s sister, but we’re all in trade somehow. Daily, I manage my investments and estate business. I try to stay abreast of the current financial news in London. That’s work. I’m happy to do it because I cater to a highly opinioned group, my family and tenants.” He laughed at his own joke.

The pup was endearing as well as infuriating.

Trafford grinned as he slapped Stanhope on the back. “Quite right, my good man.”

“Wouldn’t you agree?” The viscount smiled at Hugh. “I would encourage her in whatever endeavors she desired.”

Hugh fisted his hands discreetly at the viscount’s perfect answer.

Trafford and Stanhope continued to converse, but all Hugh heard was the whirring of

his thoughts as his heart catapulted in his chest.

He had to face the stark facts. The viscount truly was the perfect gentleman and would make a wonderful husband.

Hugh also had to face another reality.

He was going to lose Pippa to Stanhope.

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:45 am

“My lady?” Ritson stood inside the small formal sitting room.

It was the one that Pippa always used in the morning. It faced east, always delivering the best light for sewing.

“Good morning,” she said with a smile. Ritson always checked on her to see if she needed anything when she was consumed with her sewing. She was just about finished with the evening gown for Lady Ravenscroft.

“Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Lloyd are asking if you’re taking callers.”

Pippa cocked her head. She didn’t recall anyone by such a name.

“It’s Mademoiselle Mignon.” Ritson lowered his voice so no one could hear. “And her new husband.”

“She married?” Pippa stood quickly. The red brocade dress in her lap swooshed to the floor in an elegant heap.

The butler nodded.

“Send them in, please.” Pippa quickly picked up the dress and looked in the mirror. Good heavens, she looked a fright with dark circles under her eyes. But it couldn’t be helped. She had to finish the two dresses as soon as possible.

No doubt Mignon wanted her to make the acquaintance of her husband. Pippa and Mignon had become fast friends when Grace had introduced them at Mignon’s shop

when Honor and Trafford had been forced to participate in the London Season.

“Mignon,” Pippa exclaimed as she came forward to hug her friend. A tall, handsome gentleman with chestnut-colored hair and warm brown eyes hung a few steps back with a brilliant smile on his face. His eyes never left his wife.

Eventually, Mignon pulled away from the hug and took Pippa’s hands in hers “There’s someone very special I want to introduce you to.”

Pippa gazed at the man with a warm smile. “Please do.”

Mignon smiled and blushed at the same time. It even made her more attractive if that was possible. With her dark hair and deep brown eyes, she looked gorgeous.

“This is my husband. My Tom,” she gushed as she let go of Pippa’s hands and wrapped her hand around her husband’s and urged him forward. “Tom, this is Lady Pippa, the one I’ve been telling you about.”

“It’s just Pippa,” she answered as she held out her hand to Mignon’s husband.

He took her hand in his and made a courtly bow. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. After everything Mignon has told me about you, I feel as if we’re friends.”

“If you’ve swept Mignon off her feet, then we’re definitely friends.” Pippa waved to the sitting area. “Do come in. Would you like for me to ring for tea?”

“No, thank you, Pippa,” Mignon said as she sat next to her husband on the other sofa.

“When did you marry?” Pippa smiled warmly. “I knew that Thomas had proposed, but I thought you were waiting until you went to Cornwall.”

“Two days ago. You’re the first of our friends to know. We couldn’t wait,” Thomas offered. When Mignon laughed, he shook his head with a smile. “I couldn’t wait. I didn’t want to lose her to another.”

“As if,” Mignon chided playfully as she batted him on the arm. For the first time, she gazed at the gown Pippa was sewing. “How gorgeous. May I look?”

“Of course,” Pippa said proudly. “I’d love to hear your thoughts.”

“My thoughts?” Mignon laughed. “It’s exquisite, just like the rest of your work.” Mignon trailed a finger across the embroidered bodice. “Is it for you?”

Pippa shook her head. “A friend.” She didn’t say it was for her friend’s mother. She didn’t quite know how to characterize Hugh Calthorpe, the Marquess of Ravenscroft. He wasn’t in the friend category or the beau category either.

Perhaps the best way to define him was simply Hugh.

By then, Mignon had returned to her seat next to her husband.

“Well, you have my sincerest wishes for a happy and long life together.” Pippa’s stomach twisted into a knot at the fleeting look that passed between the couple. Trouble was afoot with the dress shop. She was certain of it.

“We won’t take up much of your time.” Mignon looked at her husband, and he nodded his head in encouragement. “We wanted to ask about...the dress shop.”

“Well, I’ve completed my budget and forecast for the next eighteen months. I’m waiting on my brother to return to London so I can discuss the matter with him.” She smiled anxiously as her heart thundered in her chest. She had to convince Pelham this shop meant everything to her. “I’m certain once he sees the figures, he’ll agree to my

purchase. You've been extraordinarily patient, and I can't tell you how grateful I am. But if you'll give me a few more weeks."

That would give her enough time to find someone to marry if Pelham wouldn't agree.

Hopefully.

She twisted her fingers, praying that Mignon wouldn't change her mind or the terms of the sale.

Thomas took his wife's hand in his and squeezed. "Darling, just tell her."

Mignon nodded, then took a deep breath. "We have another offer on the shop."

The words felt like a punch to her midriff. For a moment, she couldn't utter a word. Everything, including the room, started to spin in a dizzying swirl around her. She grabbed both chair arms to keep upright. "Pardon me?"

Two small parallel lines appeared between Mignon's eyes when she frowned. "I received an offer from an interested party last night." A remorseful smile pulled at her lips. "We...I wanted you to be the first to know. Of course, you're my first choice to sell to. I know that you'll continue to make the dress shop successful."

Pippa nodded, not trusting her voice to say a word without collapsing on the floor.

Mignon shared a look with Thomas, then came to Pippa's chair and knelt beside her. "Pippa, I know that I said I would sell the shop to you, but it's been two months. I'm ready to start my life with Thomas. And that's not here in London."

"I understand why you want to leave." Pippa scooted to the edge of her chair.

Now was not the time to fall apart. She had to see if she could convince them to allow her to have another chance before they sold the shop right out from underneath of her.

“Is it a cash offer? You know that mine is, don’t you?” Pippa’s gaze darted between Mignon and her husband.

“It’s my wife’s decision,” Thomas said softly to Pippa.

“The other interested party has made a cash offer as well. The funds are available now. There’s a contract for purchase sitting on my desk as we speak.” Mignon slowly rose and took her seat next to her husband. “I’m a wife now, but I’m still a businesswoman, Pippa. I have to make the decision that’s best for Thomas and myself, along with the shop. You must understand.”

“I do,” Pippa said softly. She sounded defeated, and the breathlessness in her voice emphasized that. She never allowed herself to be in a position of weakness if she could help it. She’d been helpless in the battle of the wills between her parents. She learned quite a bit from their hellacious fights. Namely, you have to come at an argument from all sides and see what weaknesses her opponent possessed.

Not that Mignon was an opponent, but the woman loved the shop and her customers. She would not allow the shop to go to someone who wouldn’t cherish it as much as she did.

At Mignon’s smile and the hint of sympathy in her eyes, Pippa cringed inside. She’d always thought of herself as a businesswoman similar to Mignon. When her brother turned down her request for her trust, she took matters into her own hands. That’s what ladies of business did. They didn’t wait around for the men in their lives to make decisions. Women crafted their own destinies with their own hands and efforts to create opportunities.

That was what she did when she set out to find a husband so she could have her trust funds. There was no way that Pelham would give those funds to her husband. He was protective of her and would make certain that those funds were for her and any children she might be blessed with.

Pippa straightened her shoulders. “Mignon, I know how much hard work, tears, and love you put into your endeavor to make it a success. I will do the same thing. You know that.”

Mignon shifted in her seat as if uncomfortable. Perhaps she was making some headway. “I have my plans in the other room if you care to see them.” One thing that Mignon wanted more than anything else was for her staff to continue with the shop. It was another point that Pippa could emphasize. “All of your seamstresses would still have employment with me.”

Mignon stole a glance at her husband.

“It’s your decision, darling,” Thomas said.

Mignon nodded, then turned to Pippa. “I don’t need to examine your plans. I’ll give you two weeks. If you don’t have a contract for me by then, I’ll have to accept the other one.”

Pippa rose from her seat. “Thank you for the chance. And thank you for believing in me.”

“I always believed in you.” Mignon’s gaze slowly swept down Pippa’s form, then back up. She was taking her measure. It was the same gaze that Pippa took from other women when she made a dress for them.

Mignon had studied her numerous times before, and Pippa always welcomed her

evaluations. It made them equals and not a dress shop owner and a duke's sister.

"I'll visit the shop to keep you informed," Pippa said not hiding the hopefulness in her voice.

Her friend didn't answer.

Thomas helped Mignon stand. "We should be going."

Mignon embraced Pippa one last time, then they were gone.

Pippa collapsed back into her chair and took a deep breath.

God, how she hated husband hunting.

After dismissing his driver and coach for the night, Hugh stood in front of Ardeerton House. Every window was dark except for the front entry and a room on the side of the house that overlooked a small garden. He knew by sight that it was Pippa's study. Pelham had shown it to him several times. The duke had been delighted with the way Pippa had decorated the room. There was a connecting door that led to Pelham's study. The duke had made the quip that his duchess would love it.

Hugh could remember that exchange like it was yesterday. When he'd lifted a brow in disapproval, Pelham had shrugged his shoulders with the reminder that they'd all have to marry one day.

He shook his head, then walked toward the left perimeter of the house. There was a small garden terrace attached to Pippa's study. He made quick work of the three steps that led to the entrance, then stood in front of the French doors.

Pippa reclined on the sofa staring at the fire. She looked as dejected as he felt.

Perhaps she was worried that Stanhope wasn't going to ask for her hand. If he was the friend that he pretended to be, he should tell her about Stanhope's visit and put her out of her misery.

He didn't want to knock for fear that he'd rouse Ritson and a footman or two. They were as protective of Pippa as Hugh was.

With as much stealth as he could muster, he turned the handle of one of the doors and then stepped inside.

She was so lost in her thoughts that she didn't even hear him. Or, if she did, she didn't deign him worth her notice. He couldn't blame her. Not after the way he'd acted at Stanhope's the other night.

"Pippa," he said softly.

Slowly, she turned her head.

"May I come in?" he took a step inside the room but stopped, waiting for her to answer. If she didn't want him here, then he'd leave immediately. "Or should I leave?"

"You should leave. I told myself I needed distance from you to clear my thoughts. But now?" Her painful sigh swept across the room and squeezed the organ in the middle of his chest. "But now, I would welcome your company," she said quietly. "I'm quite bored of talking to myself. I know all the answers."

For that infinitesimal moment of time, he'd convinced himself that she was happy to see him. But then, she turned her attention back to the fire, completely destroying that fantasy.

As he walked to her side, she called out, “There’s whisky in the decanter to your left. Will you pour me a fingerful? Help yourself.”

Pelham had always allowed his sisters to drink whatever the gentlemen drank at the duke’s table. It was unusual but so was Pippa. Perhaps a better word was unique. That was one of Pippa’s most charming traits. You never knew what to expect from her.

He silently poured two glasses, then came to her side. Without a word, he sat on the sofa closest to her and handed her the glass. Without even toasting one another, which was the custom, she lifted the glass to her lips and drained it.

“I never like drinking alone,” she murmured.

“Would you like another one?” He didn’t even touch his. Instead, he placed it on the table in front of her, much like an offering to a goddess. With her pale green silk dressing robe, she could have been Aphrodite, who had come down from Olympus, to walk amongst the mortals for a time being.

“No.” She still wouldn’t look at him.

“About the other night at Stanhope’s home.” Deeply inhaling, he couldn’t remember apologizing as much as he had in the last two weeks, but she deserved it for how he’d treated her. He’d practically ignored her.

That wasn’t the truth. He couldn’t ignore her even if he’d tried. If they were in a room together, he knew exactly where she was. He would know what she wore. He’d know her fragrance. He’d recognize her laugh. He’d know everything about her. It was as if he had a sixth sense about her. He shook his head slightly. Now, he was talking as if he believed in such a thing.

“I owe you an apology for the other night at Stanhope’s?—”

“I thought what marriage would be like with you. And I found myself cringing.”

“You’re fearful of me?” Good God, what had he done?

Pippa held up her hand. “Let’s be honest with one another. You scare me. The reason is that I have strong feelings for you. I wonder what marriage with you would be like if I acknowledged those strong feelings. All my fears that I’m destined to have a marriage like my parents take flight when I think about you and me and marriage. I don’t want to give you that power.”

Her voice was flat as if everything that made Pippa vibrant had disappeared into thin air.

“Pippa—”

She sliced her hand in the air. “I’m not finished. You ignored me at Stanhope’s dinner. It reminded me of my parents.”

“Pardon?” He’d never heard Pelham say much about his parents except that they were selfish, self-centered cows.

“Imagine your parents always judging you and finding you were lacking. You’re not smart enough. You’re not graceful enough and fail in all the qualities that are indicative of a lady. You’re not pretty enough.” She studied her hands clasped demurely in her lap. “Then when you were starving for their attention their praise, they’d give you a scrap. They give you enough morsels of praise to make you hungry for more. I thought they wanted to spend time with me. I was so naïve.” She shook her head. “They’d asked about each other. My mother would ask about my father and vice versa. Because I was so thrilled with the attention, I’d tell them everything I knew about the other.” She straightened her shoulders. “Then, they’d hurl my words like knives to hurt each other. They’d each claim that I preferred them over the other.

Then they'd accuse each other of horrible things." She swallowed painfully. "It was a battle I could never win. I didn't even know the rules."

"Your mother and father used you to hurt each other?"

She nodded.

Never in his entire life did he ever see such rancor in his parents. Naturally, he'd seen them argue, but they were never malicious. They always ate together as a family unless his parents attended a social function. Most importantly, his parents ensured that he and Bryce knew they were loved and that an argument was not a threat to their family.

"Did they treat Pelham the same?"

She shook her head. "No. And my brother doesn't know. It was silly things but to a young girl, it was devastating. My father would ask if my mother had any new gowns. I'd tell him about the new ones in her wardrobe and how pretty they were. I'd tell him how beautiful I thought my mother was when she wore them. He'd ask what my favorite gown was. I thought he was interested in me. I now realized he just asked to keep me talking, hoping I would spill more secrets. Of course, I'd ramble endlessly about the designs and the fabrics. He'd listen, then he'd call my mother into his study. Then he'd accuse her of wasting more money. He'd ask her if she was trying to lure another lover into her grasp. They'd end up having a row about it. 'Pippa said this' was thrown into their conversations quite frequently. My mother was the same. She'd ask about my father's travels during the week."

When she shrugged slightly, he could see the pain and grief on her face. It was ironic that wounds from the past could still devastate a person in their adulthood.

"What she was really seeking information about was my father's mistress. I didn't

realize that he even had one until she railed against him having a mistress and denying her the right to have a lover. My father was very possessive. I think that's why I became so interested in designing and sewing dresses. I could lose myself in my craft. It kept me from seeking their company. An upstairs maid took pity on me. She was once a seamstress and taught me how to sew. She was my oasis when I needed to escape." She ran a hand down her face. "I've said too much."

"If you don't want to share anymore, I understand." He placed a reverent kiss on her head. It killed him that she had to witness such a marriage. What parents wouldn't treat Pippa as a delightful gift? None that he'd ever seen before. No wonder she didn't want a husband. His heart thudded in his chest. It all made sense now why she was so upset when he and Stanhope had acted like rutting bulls, trying to impress her by trying to one up the other. She was terrified she'd marry a man like her father.

This explained so much of Pelham's need for her to marry and have a family.

"I'm sorry about your parents."

"Save your breath."

"Please hear me out. I don't want you to think that I'm like your parents." He do anything to make her see that she safe with him. "I don't want you to worry. I apologize that I made you fearful. I would never do anything to hurt you. I was jealous, and I wanted to prove to myself that I could ignore you." He dropped his head and let out a painful breath. "But I can't."

Pippa reached out her hand, seeking his.

Without hesitating, he squeezed her hand gently. "Have you thought of telling your brother what happened and how you feel?"

Pippa shook her head. "I don't want to hurt him."

Hugh entwined their fingers together. "He might see things a little differently if you did share."

She ignored him. "Mignon came to see me today. She's married and ready to start a new life."

Holding his hand, Pippa turned her gaze to his. What he saw startled him. Her face was blank. All her vivaciousness and joie de vivre were gone. It was as if she'd been stripped of everything that brought her joy in the world.

"Pippa?" The disappointment in her voice stole his breath.

"She's received another offer for the shop. A cash one." She allowed her gaze to return to the fire. "I have two weeks to come up with the money." She let out a breath that sounded like defeat. "I've been trying to think of other options." She lowered her voice. "I could call on Lady Somerton and ask if she would give me a loan. It's her mission to help women make their dreams come true." She shook her head slightly. "Pelham would be furious. I don't want to make him angry. I want him to approve. I always want his approval." She sniffed softly. "And Honor's too. They were the only ones who ever gave it to me. My mother and father...well." She chuckled bitterly. "What a wasted effort to please them."

This was a stoic but resigned side of her he'd never seen before.

Like a garden statue, she didn't move. He couldn't even see her breath.

Without a word, he pulled her close. She nestled her head under his chin. She fit perfectly with every one of her soft curves molding to him. Where he was hard, she was soft.

A perfect but dangerous situation.

But Hugh didn't care. All that mattered in this moment was that she was hurting. He would do everything in his power to take her sadness for his own.

"Perhaps I should ask Stanhope to marry me."

He laughed softly as he shook his head. "You tried that before and look how well that turned out." He lowered his voice. "I could talk to your brother again."

She nuzzled against his neck. "Thank you. I don't want you to jeopardize your friendship. He'll be angry with you as well as me." She pressed a chaste kiss to his neck, then inhaled deeply. "You smell divine." She chuckled slightly. "But you always do." She pulled away slightly to look at him. "I'm glad you can't stay away from me." She gazed up at him with such longing in her eyes. It made him want to take her in his arms and whisk her back to Raven's Splendor. "It's so much easier for you to sneak in here than it would be for me to sneak into your house."

"Minx," he said softly as he caught an escaped lock of hair that had been curled. It was softer than a swan's down.

"Beast," she volleyed in return. "But a handsome one."

Then, without warning, she straddled him. The dressing gown was tied in the front, so her movement was unencumbered. Her heated gaze never left his as she scooted her body until they were chest to chest and wrapped her arms around his neck. "This is cozy, wouldn't you agree?"

"Pippa," he managed to bite out. The warmth of her lower body met his hardening cock. "This isn't a good idea."

“I think it’s brilliant,” she murmured as she began to slowly undulate against him. “I want to do what we did the other night in the orangery, but this time, I want to see you.” With unhurried grace, she angled her head to kiss him.

The closer her lips came to his, the more he believed it to be a bad idea. “Darling, we shouldn’t do this. You’re upset.”

“Then give me a respite from my worries. I want to see all of you.”

Her breath teased his lips. The second her lips met his, she moaned.

Hugh never claimed to be a saint. No doubt, he would go to hell for this, but he didn’t even try to discourage her. This was Pippa. His Pippa. And the fact she hungered for him the same as he did her meant everything right now. It was their own world that they’d created.

He gently flicked his tongue against the seam of her lips as he bracketed her waist with his hands. When she sighed, opening her mouth, he slipped his tongue inside. Clever Pippa chased his tongue with hers. But it wasn’t frantic. On the contrary, they slowly stroked and supped on each other’s mouths. It was like a prelude, and he wanted to experience everything and anything with her tonight.

Yet, it was her decision as to how far they would go as they pleased each other.

He ran his hand slowly up one vertebra at a time. He was learning her body, specifically what she liked and what caused her to moan his name.

She broke their kiss and pushed his coat off his shoulders. She bit her lower lip as she concentrated on her work. Once it was off him, she carefully folded it and placed it beside them on the sofa.

“A fine piece like that shouldn’t be carelessly discarded.” She leaned forward and nipped his jaw as she unbuttoned his waistcoat.

The flash of pain just sent every single nerve ending he possessed into a pounding rhythm. He grabbed her hands in his and rested his forehead against hers. “We must slow down.”

“Why?” she asked as she pushed his waistcoat down his sleeves.

He chuckled low. “How in the world did you get that off so quickly?”

“I know buttons.” She pulled his cravat loose and began to untie it.

He grabbed her hands. “What are we doing here?” He studied her face. The look of determination she wore instantly reminded him of Pelham. The set of her jaw, the flash in her eyes, and the smirk on her lips. He groaned at the thought. If he and Pippa did this, his friend would never forgive him.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Your expression reminded me of your brother.”

She laughed, the alto sound vibrating against his chest. She nibbled on his lower lip. “I’ve always been fascinated by your mouth. I imagine you can perform some wondrous feats with those lips. Forget Pelham.” She nipped a little harder this time, then licked the same spot.

“My lady, you’re determined. You have a side to you that reminds me of steel. I’ve never seen before tonight. I think it enticing.” He swept this tongue into her mouth. When she moaned, he continued to explore every inch of her. But the siren didn’t stop there. She rolled her hips against his, purposely centering her mound against his

cock.

“I’m certain that my ‘hard side’ isn’t as hard as your cock,” she teased with a smile.

He could imagine them together like this when everything in the house was quiet. He could be in his study, and she would come in...to seduce him. They’d make love in every chair, sofa, and on top of every hard table in the room. Then he’d take her to bed and do it all over again.

Cherish her.

Worship her.

He was still devouring her mouth, but his hands were now on a mission. Carefully, he placed his hands under her gown.

Instantly, he froze.

She was naked. There was no chemise. Nothing. He pulled away from their kiss and swallowed.

“Yes, I’m naked.” She didn’t shy away from looking at him. “I planned on having a whisky, then I was going to pleasure myself in the privacy of my own study.”

He closed his eyes as the image of her touching herself crowded out every thought he possessed. This time, he was the one to nip at her jaw, then he ran his tongue slowly up her neck. Once he reached the spot under her ear, he licked and then nipped the tender skin. “Show me.”

She drew back and smiled slowly. “And you’ll show me everything?”

The wicked, sensual gleam in her eyes promised all sorts of pleasure for him this evening. It didn't even matter if he came or not. Tonight, he'd see every glorious inch of Pippa. And for this evening, he'd pretend that she was his.

And only his.

"Wrap your legs and arms around me." That was the only warning he gave her before he stood with her in his arms. He walked to the nearest wall, then took her in the kiss he'd dreamed about for the last fortnight.

"Hugh," she cried softly.

This time he was the one to rock his hips. By the whimper that escaped her, he could tell he was pressing against the most sensitive part of her. She was wrapped tight about him. But it wasn't enough. He palmed one of her breasts through the expensive silk. Her nipple hardened, and he pinched it.

"Do it again," she murmured.

"I could do this all night. Is that what you want?" He canted his hips again and again.

She cried out softly. "Is this what it would feel like to be fucked by you?"

Oh, for the love of everything holy, he was going to come if she kept on talking like that. He buried his head against her neck and increased his speed. The agony of not being inside her was softened by the mewling sounds she was making. She was close to coming. This was the way she was the other night—frantic for his kiss and expressing every sensation she was feeling through her cries and groans.

"When I take you, all thoughts of other men will disappear."

She smiled. “When I take you, you’ll never be the same.”

That was exactly what he was afraid of. “Let us lay in front of the fireplace. It’ll give us more light.” He took her to the rug in front of the fireplace. “I want to see every inch of you.”

She nodded.

He stopped for a moment. “The door?”

“I locked it.” She worried her lip.

“Good girl,” he whispered as he took her mouth in another scorching kiss.

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:45 am

By all rights, Pippa should be mortified and doing everything in her power to hide from Hugh. She should have her mouth washed with soap. But when your parents threw filthy words at one another instead of rocks, you quickly pick up the meaning of such things. Thankfully, Honor's small library of erotic literature and poems gave new meaning to those words, and when a man had his hardened cock between your legs teasing you, it seemed as good a time as any to try out the new vocabulary.

She nestled her head under Hugh's head as he walked to the fireplace. "Slow down."

"Hmm?" he murmured, then stopped. "Have you changed your mind?"

"No." She pressed a kiss to his neck where the first signs of his evening beard had appeared. Like a cat, she rubbed her face gently against his skin. "I thought if we would take it slow, then I'll be able to remember everything."

He pressed a kiss on her forehead. "I quite like the sound of that." Gently, he set her down but held her arms tight until he was certain that she could stand on her own two feet. He made quick work of laying a throw on the blue and green Axminster rug in front of the fire.

He pressed his mouth to hers then groaned. "You taste like summer and fresh berries. Lay down for me, darling."

As she scooted into position, Hugh grabbed a pillow from the closest sofa and placed it under her head. Never taking his gaze from hers, he slowly pulled the linen shirt over his head. Inch by inch, his waist and chest were revealed. She always sensed by the cut of his coats and waistcoats that he had a narrow waist, but seeing his naked

skin was another matter entirely. From his abdomen to his chest, every inch of him was perfection. Dark hair swirled at the center of his chest, then tapered to a line that extended below the falls of his breeches. Her fingers itched to trace all the beautiful dips and curves of his muscles. She longed to tangle her fingers in his chest hair.

When she was at Pelham Hall, it wasn't unusual to see some of the laborers and tenants without shirts when they worked in the fields during the blazing heat of summer. Most of the men were lean, but they didn't have the definition that Hugh possessed.

If she had her way, she'd suck and lick the two small brown nipples that adorned his chest. A vision of her exploring his body caused her to suck in a breath which elicited a chuckle from him.

He made quick work of his boots and stockings, then lay down beside her. A soft sigh reached her ears as the heat of his body melded with hers. She couldn't tell whether the sound came from him or her. Perhaps both. But it didn't matter. This was paradise, and she never wanted to leave this room or him. For the first time in her life, she wanted a man beside her, one who would share kisses and touches with her but also her dreams and disappointments.

He covered her body with his and rested his full weight on his elbows as his lips met hers with a slight touch. Instantly, her arms went around his chest as if it were the most natural thing in the world to hold Hugh Calthorpe, the Marquess of Ravenscroft, in her arms. His warmth and scent were heady things. She almost felt drunk as the sensations began to build. His body was so different from hers. Where she was soft, he was hard—his chest, his legs, his cock. Good lord, he was in her embrace, and she didn't think she'd ever let him go. But he was hesitant. He wasn't kissing her. Instead, he was staring at her. She didn't know if the tentativeness was because of the new level of intimacy they'd achieved or if he thought he might hurt her.

“I’m not breakable,” she whispered against his lips.

With a groan, his tongue invaded her mouth. It was a sweeping kiss, and she met his fervor with the same intensity. It was as if a bonfire had ignited between them. Their tongues clashed but they would both be the victor in this exchange.

He pulled away and balanced his weight on one elbow. He took one of the strings of the tie knot on her dressing gown. “May I?”

“Please.” For a moment, she couldn’t even recognize the huskiness of her own voice.

He grinned slightly as he pulled the knot, then spread the sides of the gown. He swallowed as his gaze swept slowly down her chest. When he reached the apex of her thighs he closed his eyes.

“Absolute perfection.” He inhaled deeply and stared at her. “Do you know what I’m going to do now?”

She shook her head, unsure if she could speak. The smoldering desire in his eyes promised untold pleasures awaited her. Perhaps her wish to take things slow was offered in haste.

“I’m going to taste every inch of you. Not a single part of you will escape me.” He leaned down and kissed her before he dragged her mouth over her jaw. He licked the indentation of her neck, then trailed light kisses over her collarbone. He trailed a line of kisses down her chest, then nestled between her breasts.

Every touch, lick, and kiss sent her skin on fire. She lifted her head to see what he was doing as she angled her fingers in his luxurious black locks.

“Please,” she moaned.

Gently but firmly, she encouraged him where to place his mouth on her body.

“Ah, ah, ah,” he chided. “This is my exploration. You can have yours next.”

“It’s unfair,” she whispered. Even with him over her, she arched her back. The effect of which moved her breasts closer to his mouth.

He pulled back, then cupped one of her breasts. The feel of his large, warm hand on her skin teased her. She wanted more of his touch. More of him.

While still cupping her, he rubbed his thumb around and around her nipple. His gaze swept from her face to her breasts. “I always imagined your nipples would be pink like raspberries. But I was wrong.” His gaze met hers. “They’re the most beautiful blend of persimmons and peaches.” He lowered his head and swiped his tongue against one nipple.

She moaned at the tender touch.

“They’re my favorite fruit, but there’s a difference.” He lifted his gaze to hers. “You’re sweeter.” He lowered his mouth again, but this time he sucked her nipple into his mouth and swirled his tongue.

This time, she wasn’t gentle with him. She grabbed his head and pulled him close for a kiss. The force of her actions seemed to increase his own desire. He groaned against her mouth, then nipped her lower lip. The exquisite pleasure followed by pain was more than she could bear. Everything within her seemed to be exploding. She arched her back, begging for more.

Hugh transferred his attention from one breast to the other. His lips were tender this time. In turn, she combed her fingers through his black locks. He knew so much about lovemaking, and he was teaching her. When the passion became

overwhelming, he became tender, slowing the heat that threatened to turn into an inferno between them.

Her heart ran laps in her chest as she tried to focus on his touch. Like a cartographer, he mapped every inch of her with his mouth and tongue. He trailed kisses across her ribs, her navel, and then a hip bone. His lids were lowered as he hummed softly, relishing her.

Well, she certainly relished him and everything he was giving her this evening. No matter what her future held, this night with Hugh would be a memory that she would treasure. Whenever she felt lonely or alone in the world, she would think of this night and how he made her feel as if she was someone precious whom he cherished above all others.

By then, he was between her legs and staring at the most intimate places of her body. Slowly, never taking his eyes from hers, he trailed a finger through her nether curls until he traced the line of her folds.

She closed her eyes as her legs fell open.

He reverently kissed one of her thighs as he watched her. On the other thigh, he trailed kisses from her knee to the apex where her leg met her hip. He pulled back and studied her there.

“So perfect,” he murmured as he placed a kiss on her there.

A ragged sigh escaped her. Good heavens, he was playing her like a cat with a mouse. She couldn’t escape him or the sensations. Thank heavens she didn’t want to. Everything within her was screaming for more.

“Please,” she begged.

“Patience,” Hugh soothed. He ran his tongue through her folds until he found the most sensitive part of her.

Instantly, she canted her hips. Her breath grew shallow as she became demanding, wanting more. Needing more. She had no doubt that she would savor kissing every inch of him. He was a divine specimen of a man. It was almost as if heaven itself had created him for her pleasure.

Such ridiculous thoughts to be having when a man was making love to you with his tongue.

But there were other matters that needed her attention. Namely, Hugh’s mouth. With his eyes still watching her, he licked her clitoris, then sucked it gently. Every nerve ending stood at attention as waves of sensation washed through her.

At first, he was gentle and slow in his ministrations. But the more he tasted of her, the more frantic he worked his tongue and mouth against her. He groaned when he entered her with one finger.

Every muscle within her tightened at the invasion. But as she became accustomed to it, he withdrew, and she groaned in disapproval. But then, he entered her with two fingers. All the while, his mouth was doing heavenly things to her sensitive nub.

Her climax built as he devoured her. But throughout it all, his touch was tender and attentive. Her heartbeat raced as her pleasure multiplied. She couldn’t get close enough to him as she twisted her lower body. She anchored herself to the blanket with a tight grip. It was the only thing that kept her in place.

“Hugh,” she cried when his tongue entered her, taking complete possession of her. It all became too much. She was at a pinnacle, unable to control anything.

“Let go,” he demanded. “I want to see you come. I want to feel your pussy clamp down on my fingers. I’ll imagine it’s my cock inside you, milking me until I come, making you mine.”

Pleasure radiated throughout her entire body. Everything within her tightened, pushing for her release. The tension climbed higher, much like a tightly wound coil. When it exploded, Pippa cried out as her every muscle spasmed. Everything ceased to exist except her and the blissful orgasm.

“Oh, my god. Hugh.” She couldn’t keep her eyes open.

As her body slowly came back under her control, Hugh whispered sweet nothings against her skin as he continued to kiss her most intimate parts.

Slowly, she released her death grip on the blanket and moved her hands to his shoulders. Hugh slowly kissed his way back up her body. He took care to kiss the tender skin of her wrists, and the insides of her elbow. She never dreamed those parts of her body would be so sensitive to his touch.

He turned his attention to her breasts once again, but only briefly. His gaze was locked with hers. He rested above her, staring as if memorizing her appearance. She closed her eyes to escape the intensity of his gaze.

“Look at me,” he demanded. “I want to see you.”

Slowly, she opened her eyes.

“I don’t ever want you to forget this moment with me.” His dark eyes burned from within. “I won’t. You belong to me tonight. You’re mine.”

She bit her lip but refused to look away from him. If any man spoke to her in such a

manner, she would give him the cut direct and never look at him again. Yet, when Hugh Calthorpe, the Marquess of Ravenscroft, uttered them, they excited her. She wanted to beg him to say it over and over.

They were words a lover would share, and they stole her breath.

Under no circumstances had Hugh experienced anything remotely astonishing as Pippa falling apart in his arms. But that wasn't half of it. Her beauty was only enhanced by the sensual sounds she uttered when he pleased her. She tasted like something heaven sent—sweeter than ripened strawberries with her own unique musk. He could feast on her for days and never tire. Such was the magic of Pippa.

When she bit her lip, he groaned aloud. He wanted her to experience everything that he had when he pleased her. As his mouth met hers, she slid her tongue across her lower lip, then nibbled it.

The woman was driving him insane. Such a simple act, but the feel of her mouth against his sent pleasure roaring through his body. His cock ached with need, and he rubbed himself against her. When she brought her legs around his hip, he pulled back. It would take little for him to free his member and plunge into her molten heat. It was everything he wanted.

However, he would not dishonor her. He cared for her too much.

“Pippa, we must stop.” He cupped her cheek and caressed her skin with his thumb.

She turned and pressed a kiss against his palm. The movement was so endearing his breath caught.

She grinned up at him, her blue eyes rivaling the midnight sky. Carefully, he rolled onto his side and then pulled her close. Her hand traced the contours of his chest,

paying particular attention to his nipples. When he couldn't take it anymore, he pressed her hand against his heart.

"Sensitive as mine?" she asked.

He nodded.

"That's information I shall remember. Her gaze slowly skated down his chest. Her brow furrowed when she saw the evidence of his arousal. She looked up at him.

"May I touch it?"

Hugh said a brief prayer of thanks to the powers that be. His conscience shouldn't object to a bit of exploration. "Please."

Before he could do himself the honor of unbuttoning the falls of his breeches, Pippa had already completed the task. He swallowed hard as she pulled the material away from his body. Her eyes widened when she saw his thick, ruddy cock, but a wicked smile tugged at her lips.

Her delicate hand wrapped around him, and he was bewitched by the sight. He hissed at the pure agonizing pleasure of her touch.

"Hugh?" She stilled for a moment, then looked at him. "What did I do to cause you pain?"

"Nothing, darling." He flipped on his back. "Do what you like to me." If he was going to hell, he might as well make the trip exquisite.

She nodded, but her gaze was trained on his body. She gripped him again, then rubbed her thumb across the crown. "You're wet too."

At the words, he rocked his hips, thrusting into her hand. “Because of you.”

“I want to see you come,” she purred.

“Then I’ll need your help.”

“Do you want my mouth on you?”

At the image of Pippa’s plump lips around his cock, his eyes practically rolled back in his head. “Next time.”

It was amazing that he could say the words. He placed his hand around hers and tugged. “I like it when you pull hard. Let me show you.”

He jerked his hand several times. When she smiled up at him, he felt like the king of the world. The movement of her hand made her breasts jiggle. He bit his lip at the sight. All he wanted to do was suck that tender skin into his mouth and feast.

Searing pleasure started to build at the bottom of his spine as his sac swelled. It wouldn’t be long before he reached his orgasm. He pulled harder and faster as he focused on his pleasure. With Pippa’s soft hand under his, he surrendered everything. He growled as he closed his eyes and threw back his head. Ropes of his hot seed hit his stomach.

After several moments, his body relaxed. Pippa’s hand was still wrapped around his semi-hard erection.

She looked up with a satisfied smile. “That was amazing.”

“Because you’re remarkable,” he countered, then took her in a blinding kiss. Instantly, he felt the blood rush to his cock.

He closed his eyes and willed away the vision of plunging into her heat and making her his forever.

For the love of heaven, what was he thinking?

With his eyes still shut, he gently took her hand off his cock and brought it to the middle of his chest. “Do you feel that? The bloody pounding of my heart? You did that.”

She giggled softly. “I must be a sorceress then.”

“The best kind of magical being.”

Pippa took her hand away from him to slip it into a pocket on her dressing gown. She pulled a handkerchief and started to wipe his stomach.

“I can do that.” He placed his hand over hers.

“Let me,” she said. Slowly, she wiped the soft cloth against his skin. “May I ask you a question?”

He propped himself on one elbow and studied her. There was a new seriousness about her. “Ask away.”

“I imagine you’ve had all sorts of lovers. Is it always like that?” She smiled timidly.

“Is it always like what?” He brushed a lock of hair from her cheek and slipped it behind her ear. “That’s better. I can see you.”

Her gaze dipped below his stomach. If she kept looking at him like that, chances were that they would do more than just pleasure themselves. Neither one of them could

take the chance. He took her hand in his and entwined their fingers together.

“Look at me,” he commanded softly.

Slowly, her gaze lifted to his.

“I’ve had my share of lovers.” He wouldn’t lie to her. Ever. “Just as I told you when I kissed you for the first time, I’ve never felt what I felt tonight.”

“What does that mean?” Pippa tilted her head with a look of bemusement.

“It means...that when there’s affection between two people, sharing each other’s bodies is something extraordinary.” He sat up but didn’t release her hand. He expected her to make some quip about him having affection for her. Instead, she turned to stare at the fire. Worry seemed to surround her.

Gently, he tilted her chin until they were staring at one another. “What is it? Didn’t you enjoy it?”

“I did. Too much, I’m afraid.” After she donned her dressing gown, she scooted away from him.

Though it was only a couple of inches, it felt like a mile. She was withdrawing from him for some reason, and he would not allow that to stand. Not after what they shared. “Tell me what’s wrong?”

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:45 am

Pippa struggled with what to say. But she'd never been shy around Hugh, particularly this evening. No man had seen her completely naked except for him. And by the appreciation in his eyes, he enjoyed her body. Well, she adored his, but that fact wouldn't help her in her cause.

He buttoned his falls and slipped his shirt over his head. She wanted to mourn the covering of his beautiful body. Once she was alone, she would try and draw him complete with an erection. It would allow her to always remember this evening and him. She would keep it locked in her desk along with her private journal. After she drew Hugh, she'd write down everything she'd experienced this evening. The wetness of his mouth after he'd pleased her. The taste of her arousal on his lips. The surprising heat of his hard body against hers. Simply thinking about what they'd shared made her want to do it all over again. Was it any wonder? He was a beautiful specimen of a man.

"Mignon graciously gave me another two weeks to see if I can come up with the funds to purchase her shop." She twisted her fingers, a nervous habit when she was trying to figure things out.

"I could loan you the money." Hugh scooted closer and pulled her onto his lap.

The warmth of his embrace offered a comfort she didn't know that she needed. She buried her head against his chest. It was a sanctuary that kept her from dwelling on her future.

"I can't take money from you," she said softly as she slipped off his lap and sat beside him. "I would never jeopardize your friendship with my brother."

She had to create some distance, or she'd be kissing him again. Funny, but she'd never realized how much she enjoyed touching him. She'd always enjoyed his company, but tonight was so much more. He was her confidant and for just this one evening, her lover.

"I need to meet more men." She peeked at him as she rested her head on bent legs.

"Do you?" he asked with a sardonic lift of an eyebrow.

She lifted her own brow in answer.

He strummed his fingers on an outstretched leg and looked at the ceiling as if deep in thought. He snapped his fingers, then turned to her. "I have the perfect solution. It's brilliant. I can marry you."

She shook her head before he finished. "We've discussed this. You don't want to marry. I don't think I can marry you."

"Of course." He laughed, but there was a bitterness to it. "Tell me again your reasoning."

She reached over and took his hand in hers. "Hugh, I can't marry you because I don't want a husband-husband. I just want a husband."

"What's the difference?" He played with her fingers.

"With a husband-husband, you fall in love and your whole world falls apart. My mother and father had a love match that quickly turned into a hate match. They were unfaithful to one another. Every time my mother had an interaction with my father, she'd come away crying until she eventually withdrew into herself. It was as if there was no emotion in her anymore." She released a halting breath.

Hugh ceased his playful touch, but he didn't let go of her hand.

"I hated being the person between my parents' hatred of each other. You see, with their grand passion, they developed 'grand hatred,' and sometimes, that hatred was directed at me." She pulled her hand away and curled her arms around her bent legs.

He studied her. Finally, he broke the silence. "For a moment, I didn't understand, but I think I do now," Hugh whispered. "Love maims a person. My own mother is proof of that. She practically fell apart after my father died. I almost lost her. She wouldn't eat. She wouldn't leave her bedroom. It was as if she wanted to die. It took the will of Aunt Edith to pull her through." He shook his head. "I can't go through that again. I won't do it."

"Your mother?" It's hard to believe that his beautiful mother had grieved so deeply that she wanted to die. She would have left two young boys behind. A chill ran up Pippa's spine at the thought. "I've always admired your great-aunt. I knew she was strong-willed. But her strength with your mother is rare." She grew quiet for a moment, then stared at Hugh. "I also admire your mother. She's not still grieving, is she?"

"Rarely, but she still has spells when she becomes lost in the past." This time, he was the one to stare into the fire. "But I have a problem."

"What is it?" she asked.

Slowly, his gaze met hers. The reflection of the fire in his eyes made them appear indigo. "I can't leave you." He pressed his mouth to hers. The touch was sweet and tender. "I couldn't leave you any more than the earth could leave its orbit." He rested his forehead against hers. "Or a wave could leave the sea."

His confession was like tinder to a fire. Tenderly, she kissed him and closed her eyes.

He destroyed her with those words as they would forever be engraved upon her heart.

And she was afraid her heart couldn't take much more.

"I can't imagine you with another man. It would drive me mad."

"I can't imagine you with another woman either," she said softly then shrugged. "But the truth is that I've never seen a good marriage."

"What about Honor and Trafford?" His voice had grown quieter, but she could hear every word as he cupped her cheeks and rubbed his thumb over her bottom lip.

"She went through hell to have him. I'm not strong enough for that."

This time, he pressed his lips to hers. "I believe the opposite. You're stronger." When she started to shake her head, he put his forefinger to her lips. "Hear me out. Your work on your financial plan and budget is nothing short of phenomenal. Your designs are creations of art that you labor endlessly with until they're perfect. And I'm in awe of how you care for others, such as my great-aunt and mother. All of that is you and your strength and your heart."

He slayed her with his pure, poetic words, then cut her open, spilling every hope and desire on the floor in a pool of need. She'd never be able to put herself back together, and he was the reason why.

She had to remember that truth if she wanted to protect herself from heartache.

Hugh walked up to the entry of Ardeerton House. He'd been here thousands of times and knew every inch of it as well as his own homes. However, he'd never been this nervous before.

But everything changed last night when he'd held Pippa in his arms. He'd come home at four o'clock in the morning and had fallen into bed. He'd slept for six hours and then dressed. He waited until an appropriate time to call on Pippa. It was four in the afternoon, and he'd been consumed with seeing her again.

He wasn't lying when he confessed that he couldn't not be here.

A footman dressed in the gray and gold livery of the Duke of Pelham swung the door open. "Good afternoon, my lord."

"Welcome to Ardeerton House, my lord." Ritson waved a hand for Hugh to enter.

"Thank you," Hugh said in return.

As soon as he stepped inside, Ritson appeared with a brief bow, then peeked behind Hugh's shoulder. "Are Lady Ravenscroft and Lady Edith with you?"

"No." He swept the beaver hat off his head and gave it and his formal dove gray gloves to the footman who had let in the house.

Ritson blinked twice in confusion, then smiled. "Since the Duke of Pelham isn't in town, I assumed that you were bringing the ladies to see Lady Pippa."

"No, I'm here to see Lady Pippa."

"Lord Ravenscroft." Pippa stood on the stair landing looking like she'd stepped out of an Ackerman's fashion plate. The salmon-colored dress was beaded across the bodice with puffed cap sleeves. She wore an ivory shawl that matched the ivory ribbon tied around the empire waist. It amazed him that he was starting to notice women's fashion and it was all because of her.

“Lady Pippa, it’s a pleasure.” He bowed and then flashed his most winsome smile her way.

She continued down the stairs, but a blush that rivaled a basket of ripe cherries colored her cheeks. She had to be remembering last night just as he was. His cock thickened slightly. He had suffered from the condition all day.

There was only one cure for his affliction. Plows and sheep manure. That’s where he needed to direct his concentration.

By then, she stood before him. “What are you doing here?”

“To see you.” His gaze went to Ritson and the footman, who were in discussion across the entry and completely oblivious to Pippa and him. “Let’s go to your study.”

She blushed again, but his stalwart Pippa never turned away.

“Last night, I was thinking about your plans. I’d like to review them again.” It took every ounce of restraint he possessed not to take her in his arms. “I’ve thought of something that might sway your brother.”

Her eyes lit up like fireworks over Vauxhall Gardens. She turned to her butler. “Ritson, when Lady Grace returns from her errands, will you inform her that I’m meeting with Lord Ravenscroft? She’s welcome to join us.”

“I will, my lady.” Ritson smiled. “I’ve already had a tea tray prepared and sent to your study.”

“You are a treasure,” Pippa said affectionally. The butler blushed at her compliment, proof that it wasn’t just Hugh who was under her spell.

“Shall we?” She turned and started down the black and white tiled hallway that led toward her study.

“Should Alice attend you?” Even he was aware of propriety when it came to a young lady’s reputation. If someone else called upon her, it wouldn’t do if he was alone with her. Of course, he sounded like a hypocrite since he’d been naked on the floor with her in his arms.

Pippa shook her head. “She’s gone to the market to pick up a few pieces of trim for me. We can leave the door open. We’ll be fine. I’m not expecting any visitors.”

As soon as they were in the room, she went to her desk and picked up her journal and several pieces of parchment paper. “I’ve neatly copied my budget and business proposal into this journal. These pages are my scrap paper.”

“Excellent.” Hugh took the items from her. “Where shall we sit?”

“At my worktable.” Pippa went to her sewing area and cleared the table of the fabric and trim that she had been working with last night when he’d come to see her. “The dresses for your mother and great-aunt are finished.”

He felt as if a brick had been thrown into his stomach. He grew silent at the news. That meant he might not see her as often as he had over the last two weeks. He had to find other reasons. “I see.”

Well, he’d tell her his thoughts and be on his way. It was true that he’d thought of a few things she could do to sweeten her proposal so her brother would agree to her purchasing the shop. Perhaps he’d shocked her last night with the things that they’d shared. But she’d seemed as eager to be with him as he was with her. He was overthinking her every word.

“I finished these so they could wear them to the Cartwright’s soiree this week.” She walked to the sitting area and gently laid the fabric and trim across a chair back. “At first, I thought if I finished the dresses then I’d see less of you. I thought it would be a good thing since Stanhope had expressed a clear interest in me. But after last night...”

When she started to wring her hands, he walked to her side and took both of them in his. “But after last night?”

Her lips were turned up in a smile, but there was a sense of sadness or melancholy about her eyes. “Last night, you said you can’t stay away.”

When she bit her lower lip, he leaned down and kissed her. To hell if any servant saw them. She pulled away and blinked once, then twice, as if coming out of a daze. He knew the exact feeling.

“I don’t want to stay away from you either. I also want to continue visiting your mother and great-aunt.” Her smile wobbled, and her eyes grew a bit misty. “Thank you for sharing them with me. It’s almost as if I’m part of your family.”

Pelham’s words rang through his thoughts. The sense of yearning on her face was unmistakable. She desperately wanted a family of her own. He’d give her anything and everything if he could erase the hint of grief around her face.

He smiled softly. “I know my family feels the same way.”

Her face brightened with warmth. “I can’t tell you how much that means to me.”

Hugh vowed not to say another word. Otherwise, he’d sputter all sorts of words about devotion and adoration. Heaven forbid if love was mentioned. Pippa would run in the opposite direction. He had to have his own mind and thoughts clear, or he would say

something that would damage both of them. He had no doubt she cared for him, and he for her. But neither was ready to see what, if anything, their future held. Much less say the words aloud.

“Shall we sit?” Hugh held out a chair for her.

Elegantly, she crossed the room and took her seat. The hint of lilacs surrounded her. He inhaled deeply. It was the pure essence of Pippa. He’d recognize it anywhere. He wanted to bathe in her scent.

Heaven help him.

He took the seat beside her.

She pulled open the journal to her proposal and her budget. She pointed to a column marked inventory. “I’ve decreased the amount of stock by twenty percent. I won’t carry the heavy wool and velvets until early autumn. There won’t be much demand for cloaks, redingotes, and formal winter gowns until then. That will help defer costs. The only risk is whether my vendors will have sold out by then.” She swallowed but didn’t look at him. “It’ll be too late to order any of the gorgeous fabric from the continent, but I’ll make do.” She pointed to another column marked wages. “I’ve also thought about doing most of the sewing myself at least for the first year. I’ll still employ Mignon’s current staff. But I can hire apprentices after the first year.” She swallowed. “That presumes I succeed.”

He rested one arm over the back of her chair, then placed his free hand over hers. “I don’t think you have to cut your costs.” When she turned to look at him, he squeezed her hand and smiled reassuringly. “What your brother understands more than anything is profit. If you can show him that this venture will make money and that you’re willing to put your all into it to make it a success, you might be able to change his mind.” He played with the fingers of her hand. “You’d still have to go out into

society. He wants you happy and believes marriage is the vehicle for that.”

A resigned sigh escaped her. “You make a good point about him. Instead of only emphasizing the cost savings, I should concentrate on the profit projections for the next three years. I should have thought of that earlier.”

“I find that sometimes it’s hard to see what’s beneath our noses when we get too close to something. That’s what happened here.” Lud, would she think he was referring to her proposal or them? Even he wasn’t certain what he meant as the temptation to lean in and kiss her was becoming harder to resist.

Pippa leaned toward him as she studied his face. Her gaze heated as she swept her tongue across her pink lower lip. He groaned at the sight. He should just put himself out of his misery and kiss her again like he did last night. Maybe that would satisfy their hunger. He wasn’t fooling himself any longer. Only she could satisfy him. For his own sake, he should stay as far away from her as possible if he wanted to keep his thoughts intact.

But of course, his mind had other ideas. Suddenly, he found himself a tad closer to her until there was barely an inch between them.

“Hugh, what else can’t I see because it’s too close to me?”

“To answer your question, it’s me. I’m the one you can’t see because I’m right behind you,” the Duke of Pelham bit out. “What I see clearly is that he’s about to maul you.”

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:45 am

Pelham's eyes flashed with fury, and all of it was directed at Hugh.

"Pelham." Hugh stood slowly. "Good to see you."

"Is it?" the duke retorted. He swung his gaze to Pippa. "Darling, what in the bloody hell?" He headed straight for the table that held various whiskey bottles and poured one. He lifted a glass Hugh's way.

He nodded in answer.

Pelham eyed him again with a hint of disgust, then finished his glass before he poured another. "It's a good thing my sister enjoys whisky as much as I do. Otherwise, we'd have to adjourn to my study." Only then did he pour Hugh a glass. When he picked it up, Hugh walked to his side and took the glass that was offered.

"Lucky for you that I didn't wear my poison ring," Pelham murmured.

Pippa glided to Pelham's side. Without a word, the duke swept her in his arms and squeezed. He kissed her on the cheek. She returned the sign of affection.

Hugh moved back slightly, giving the siblings room to express themselves. He'd never seen Pelham this emotional with anyone. He had his eyes closed and held his sister as if he'd never let her go. With the slightest of movement, he rocked to and fro, offering comfort.

Probably as much for himself as Pippa.

When they finally pulled away, Pelham murmured, “Let me look at you.”

Wearing an impudent grin, Pippa leaned back and examined her brother at the same time he studied her. “What are you doing back so soon?”

“The Jolly Rooster was too quiet. A bit boring to be truthful.” A look of chagrin crossed his face. “I needed to come back to London.” He took a swig of whisky. “It’s a good thing based upon what I saw.”

“What did you see?” Pippa planted her fists on her hips. “Before you go off half-cocked, let me tell you something about your friend here. He offered to look over my project again. The one that he made the effort to discuss with you. I found his advice and observations very instructive and comforting.”

“Along with his lips about to land on yours. That type of instruction where you both are alone? What does that have to do with a dress shop?” Pelham challenged with a lift of an arrogant brow.

“Pelham,” Hugh warned. “Do not embarrass your sister.”

The duke nodded once as if considering Hugh’s advice.

“Pippa, I apologize. If I should be angry at anyone...” He let the words trail off and turned to Hugh. Instantly, Pelham’s gaze turned intense, much like a hawk observing its prey. “We’ll finish this in a bit.” He glanced around the room. “Where exactly is Lady Grace? I’d like to have a word with her as well and discuss what I discovered in your study when I arrived.”

Pippa tilted her chin in the air. “Grace received a summons to attend a young lady who found herself compromised through no fault of her own. She and a gentleman were locked together in a dressing room overnight.”

Pelham ran a hand down his face. “Let me see if I understand this. Your chaperone left you alone with Ravenscroft so she could see about a client who was ruined.”

“She didn’t know that Ravenscroft would be calling. I sent Alice on several errands on my behalf.” Pippa smiled and clasped her hands in front of her demurely. “There’s no cause for concern.”

“So, she left to see about another woman and left you here alone.” Her brother lifted a perfect ducal brow. “How many times have you had Ravenscroft as a visitor?”

Pippa slid a side-ways glance at Hugh. They both knew what Pelham was trying to do. He was a master strategist at twisting the tables to the exact position that he wanted. Afterward, he upended it to see where all the broken pieces landed.

“Pelham,” Pippa growled softly, the dulcet sound oddly reminiscent of her brother’s voice. “Hugh...I mean, Ravenscroft and I are friends.” She lightly stomped her foot. “For God’s sake. He’s your best friend.”

“And you’re my sister,” he pointed out with a wave of his half-empty whisky glass in his hand. “Look at Trafford and Honor. I trusted my other best friend. He ended up compromising my eldest sister.”

Hugh froze. If Pelham had caught wind of what he and Pippa had done last night, he’d kill him. His conscience wanted to slink out of the room before they went into greater detail. Or if he or Pippa said something they shouldn’t.

“Don’t, Dane.” Pippa’s alto voice deepened. “Make your life and ours easier. Don’t turn this into something it isn’t.”

She was correct, as usual, that it wouldn’t do any of them well if Pelham turned their meeting into a circus or worst. Yet, in that unfathomable moment, he wanted to decry

her statement. The intimacy that they'd shared at the orangery and last night in this very room was something to him. Yet, her words rang true as Pelham was known for the dramatics, at least where his sisters were involved.

He ran a hand down his face. This was a recipe for disaster for both of them, but he didn't think he could stop. He was drawn to her like no other woman he'd ever met before. She was unique on so many levels, and he was intrigued. Her passion for work, family, and especially her kisses kept him tied in knots.

Pelham lifted his gaze to Hugh's without acknowledging his sister's words. Slowly, he turned to Pippa. "Darling, I'm famished. Will you see if Cook is ready to serve the meal?"

She nodded once. "Ravenscroft, I hope you'll stay as well." Without waiting for his answer, she turned back to her brother. An air of challenge swirled around her.

In Hugh's opinion, it made her irresistible. He'd always found self-assurance attractive in a woman. Pippa wore it better than any one of her gorgeous gowns.

"I know what you're about to do. If I'm out of the way, then you can rail and fulminate all you want." Pippa gathered her papers from the table and carefully pushed them into her satchel. "Don't do it. I shall return shortly."

Both he and Pelham watched her as she walked from the library. The slight sashay of her hips made Hugh's gut tighten in a way that he was coming to recognize as unique to only when he was with Pippa. As her steps retreated down the hall, he slowly turned to his friend.

"Welcome home."

Pelham lifted an arrogant ducal brow. "I do not believe you for a second." He

whipped around and faced Hugh. “So, what did I interrupt?”

“You mean you’re not going to go into a tailspin of a tirade because you saw me with your sister? You’ve learned something the way you handled Honoria and Trafford’s affair.” He didn’t take his gaze from his friend. He knew Pelham well enough to understand that just because the duke appeared calm, that wasn’t necessarily the case. Pelham had a nasty habit of cutting a person in two without them even knowing it until they walked out of the room without their head.

Figuratively, of course.

Pelham tilted his head slightly and examined Hugh. For a moment, he felt as if he were a new species of insect that had just crawled onto the table, and the scientist couldn’t decide whether to smash it or put it in a jar for safekeeping. “For curiosity’s sake, what are you doing here? Don’t lie to me.”

“We told you the truth. I offered to review her plans once again for running Mademoiselle Mignon’s dress shop. We just finished discussing them, and she seemed a little disquieted about discussing them with you. I was comforting her.”

“Oh ho!” Pelham let out a boisterous but feigned laugh. “I could see that when I came in and saw your hands all over her and leaning in for a kiss.” He walked over to the side table and refilled his glass. “At least, I hope you dissuaded her from pursuing the purchase.”

Hugh didn’t move or react to his friend’s attack. If it was his sister, he’d probably feel the same, particularly if he’d known that they’d shared more than a passionate kiss last night.

However, he’d not let Pelham dismiss Pippa’s accomplishment with the plan and what she’d done on her own.

“I did not. In fact, I encouraged her.” When Pelham turned on one foot to confront him, Hugh held up his hands. “Let me continue before you explode into objections.” He walked to his friend’s side and placed his glass on the table. The leaded glass hit the light, and a cascade of rainbows danced across the oak tabletop. “She’s your sister all right. Her sales and expenses for the next year are meticulous. She’s thought of every contingency and problem that might arise. Her mind works like yours. She can ferret out opportunities where others might see only problems.” He picked up his glass and poured a fingerful of whisky in his glass and downed it in one swallow. “She’ll be a success.”

Pelham lifted his brow non-committedly, then ran a hand over his face in frustration. “Do you think I am not aware of that? I’m even considering asking her if she’d like to handle a portion of my investments. That’s how much faith I have in her. But I have no doubt she will retreat into that business if she buys it.” He turned a pleading eye to Hugh. “I want her to have a happy life with a family. Pippa deserves that. She’s been...like the Rock of Gibraltar for Honor and me. She always acted as the buffer between our parents and the rest of us. Only she could lighten the mood when our parents fought. She used that charm to smooth the way for Honor and me. Is it wrong for me, her brother, to want more for her as an adult? I’d like nothing more than to see her take her rightful place in society. But I want her to have the support of a wonderful family.”

Hugh leaned closer and chose his words with care. “There is nothing wrong with wanting such happiness for your sister.” When Pelham slowly let out a sigh of relief, Hugh pulled away. “However, I think she might know how happiness is defined for her better than you, my friend.”

“Turning into a philosopher again, Ravenscroft?” Pelham’s tongue was heavy with sarcasm.

“No. All I’m asking is if you’ll listen to her.” When Pelham nodded, Hugh continued,

“She was quite nervous to discuss her thoughts. I believe she was concerned that you might judge them harshly. Why would she think that?”

Pelham waved him off. “You’re imagining things.”

“Just like I’m imagining she wants her trust fund so she can purchase the shop,” Hugh retorted, keeping his voice even.

A cough sounded, and they both looked to the door of the study. Pippa stood there with a stone-cold expression on her face. “Imagine my surprise to hear a conversation about me without me being invited to participate.” She pressed her lips into a terse line. After a moment, a weak smile appeared. It was one that a hostess might give to an unwanted guest. “Gentlemen, dinner is ready.” Without another word, she turned on the ball of her foot and marched down the hall.

Pelham’s gaze darted to Hugh. “What in the bloody hell have we done?”

Hugh turned to follow Pippa. He didn’t wait for his friend. Pippa was absolutely correct. Hugh had no business discussing this with her brother without her being here.

At this moment, he didn’t care if Pelham was likely to take a swing at him.

He had to find a way to get back into Pippa’s good graces.

By the time Pelham and Hugh had reached the dining room, Pippa was already seated and taking a sip of wine. She didn’t acknowledge either of them when they came to the table and sat down. Normally, she would wait for Pelham to assist her with her seat, but after overhearing the discussion between the two of them, she’d not allow them the opportunity to think everything was satisfactory between any of them.

The footmen dressed in the formal gray and gold livery served the three of them. The

mood was so fraught with tension that she half expected the crystal on the table to shatter from the stress. Her brother and Hugh tried to ease the mood by trying to draw her into the conversation, but she'd have none of it.

As soon as the final course was served, Pippa nodded to the two footmen. "Thank you both. If you'd be so kind as to shut the door behind you, we'll serve ourselves dessert and after-dinner drinks."

Both men nodded, then took their leave.

"Excellent dinner," Hugh said in an obvious attempt to change the ambiance around them.

Pelham readily agreed as he poured them all a brandy, a common ritual that she enjoyed. But Pelham always treated her as an equal...at the dinner table. She was thankful for that. However, discussing her situation privately with Hugh was another matter entirely. When she'd come into the room, she'd heard Hugh asking why she was so hesitant to share her plans. Well, even her brother didn't fully realize what scars their parents had left her with.

And he never would. They were her secrets to bear and hers alone. Pelham had protected her and Honor constantly. Being a battering ram for her parents' vitriol was the least she could do. If Pelham knew, he'd be devastated. But she would not hide her plans any longer from her brother, particularly when their handsome guest had weaseled them out of her with his charm, his deep voice, tender touches, and kindhearted words. She wanted that shop. And she was going to lose it if she didn't do something drastic. Hopefully, it would force her brother's hand.

"I want to tell you what I've done, and why I've done it," Pippa addressed her brother. "You should know that I sent out five letters to various members of your millionaire's club."

“This sounds ominous,” Pelham chuckled as he reached over to her side and squeezed her hand. “Wait? What did you do?”

“I sent letters, and it’s hardly ominous,” she answered, not encouraging any lightheartedness between them. “It’s fortuitous. You see, in my letters, I asked each of them if they’d meet me in Hyde Park ‘to discuss matrimony.’”

Suddenly, Pelham choked on his drink. Hugh stood to come to his side, but her brother waved him away. When he could finally take a breath without coughing, he stared straight through her.

She would not fold like a house made of cards.

Pelham’s eyes rounded into saucers. “You did what?”

“I asked them if they’d consider marriage to me. It’s the only way I can access my trust fund without angering you unless you agree to release the funds to me now.” She turned to Hugh with a lifted brow, daring him to contradict her. “I want that dress shop. I have two weeks to purchase it. Mignon has another offer.”

Hugh leaned against the back of his chair. With his hawk-like gaze, he studied her. If she wasn’t mistaken, there was a hint of appreciation in what she’d just done. If it had been any other occasion, she would have been pleased with such a look. It was everything she’d always wanted—to be appreciated for who she was and her abilities without any conditions being foisted upon her.

Being with Hugh taught her one thing this evening. There were many ways to get what one wanted in life. Perhaps the one course she had avoided was the easiest. She would show her brother how desperate she was to purchase that business.

If she was going to confess, she was going to have a grand time at it or at least try. “I

picked out five men whom I knew you approve them. All members of your millionaire club. Stanhope, Kingston, Grantham, and Wexworth.” She turned to Hugh with a sickly-sweet smile. “Who was the fifth man?”

“Bedford,” Hugh said. His voice didn’t waver, but there was no telltale humor in it.

“How the devil do you know whom she sent the letters to?” Pelham demanded.

A muscle twitched in Hugh’s left jaw. “The letters were mistakenly sent to me.” He continued to stare at her as he addressed her brother. “I met Pippa at the assigned spot and time that she was to meet Bedford. I thought it appropriate to return them to her.”

Then something miraculous happened. He actually smiled.

“Brava, my lady,” Hugh continued. “I admire your initiative. Shall we say superbnous to change the situation to one that you control?”

She indulged him with a single nod as an overwhelming sense of giddy righteousness washed over her. “I’m glad you approve.”

Hugh inclined his head then finally turned to Pelham. “I was going to explain it all to you. But your clever sister convinced me not to. We agreed that she would proceed with her plan and help me at the same time.”

“And what might that be?” Pelham’s voice had turned to a menacing growl.

“That she would be a companion to my mother and great-aunt as I helped them start to participate in society events once again. I would point out the gentlemen she wanted to meet, and she would befriend my family. Though, I must say that I’m getting the better end of the bargain. With Pippa spending time over at our home, I can see my mother start to come out of her shell. She’s even invited a few old friends

to come calling.”

“I’m also making dresses for them. They’re such lovely women. They’ve helped me, too,” she confided. “I’m not so lonely. You should know that Lord Stanhope hosted a dinner for me, Grace, Ravenscroft, Lady Ravenscroft, and Lady Edith.” She could feel herself turning sentimental, particularly when she thought about Hugh’s loving family, but she couldn’t allow that right now.

“Dane, time is of the essence. I only have two weeks. It’s a good investment,” she emphasized. “Nay, I would say an excellent one.”

“Oh, for the love of heaven,” Pelham growled. “I leave, and anarchy breaks out in my own home.”

Just then, Grace entered the room and called out, “Good evening.”

Hugh stood and bowed at Grace’s entrance. “Lady Grace.”

Pelham followed at a more leisurely pace. “Governess, why did I ever agree to allow you to chaperone my sister? I should have known that this was all your fault.”

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“Since when do accusations replace a hello?” Hugh challenged Pelham with a frown. “Have you lost all sense of manners?”

Pippa didn’t say a word. Instead, she walked to Grace’s side. “Ignore him. He’s just out of sorts about dinner.”

Grace tipped her nose in the air as she regarded Pelham. “Was the fish not to his liking?”

Pippa laughed. The sound soothed like a gentle waterfall. Instantly, Hugh felt his ire slowly subside. Pippa’s confession about the letters came out of nowhere. The adoring look when she mentioned Stanhope and his family made his stomach roil.

An image of a smiling Stanhope crowded into his thoughts.

He had to be losing his bloody mind as he discreetly glanced her way. Enthralled in a conversation with Lady Grace, she was animated and vivacious. An image of her standing in Raven’s Splendor, welcoming him home from a long day at the House of Lords, eased into his thoughts. Her laugh would greet him, and she’d press her lips to his cheek, but he’d trick her and take her in a kiss that would steal her breath.

His heartbeat settled into a comfortable rhythm at the thought. It was the first time he’d ever imagined a woman sharing his home with him as his marchioness.

He shook his head and studied the brandy. Perhaps Pelham had indeed slipped something into his glass to bring forth such thoughts.

“Duke?” Lady Grace regally stood in front of the table and demanded Pelham’s attention. “I wasn’t aware that Lady Pippa had invited the marquess to dinner. However, I fully intended to partake in the evening activities with Pippa, but unfortunately”—she shrugged—“it couldn’t be helped. An emergency arose that had to be dealt with.”

“Oh, really? I’m intrigued,” Pelham answered with an arrogantly lifted ducal brow.

As Grace and Pelham square off like two bulls in a too-small enclosure who’ve had enough of one another, Pippa edged to Hugh’s side.

“Let’s adjourn to my study, Grace.” The words from Pelham’s mouth sounded like an edict and not a request. “I’d like to speak with you privately.”

Grace’s nostrils flared. “I couldn’t think of anything more delightful.”

For a moment, Pelham stopped at the sarcastic tone of her voice, then waved a hand for her to accompany him. “I’m delighted you enjoy my company so much, Governess.” With a sniff, he pointed at Hugh and Pippa. “Neither of you do anything to displease me while Grace and I are chatting. We’re not finished with this conversation.”

“Let’s go for a walk in the courtyard.” Pippa turned on the ball of her foot and led the way to the double-door exit.

Hugh glanced at Pelham, who was silently fuming as he led Grace to his study through the side door.

Pippa waited for him by the exit. “Coming?”

He wouldn’t miss this conversation for the world. Surely, she wasn’t going to tell him

that she'd decided to marry Stanhope. If that was the case, then he needed another bottle.

He gently wrapped her hand around his arm. They descended the marble steps that led to the expansive courtyard at Ardeerton House. They would be guaranteed privacy here. There were mazes, sitting areas, and even paths that wove around throughout the grounds.

Pippa pointed to a fountain in the distance. "There's a lovely sitting area there where we can talk."

They walked in silence until the soft gurgle of the fountain surrounded them. Hugh waited for Pippa to sit down before he claimed the seat next to her. He rested his elbows on his thighs and clasped his hands between his legs.

"What are your plans?" He couldn't even look at her because he didn't want to see her expression when she said she would marry Stanhope. He'd be gutted right there in front of her. Perhaps it would be for the best. He would finally be put out of his misery.

"Simple, really. I plan on continuing to talk to Pelham." She shifted in her seat closer to him. "I won't leave him alone. I'm determined to secure that business. If he still won't allow me the funds..."

Her lilac scent wrapped around him, holding him in place. "Stanhope?"

"He hasn't asked me." Her voice was so clear and soft, much like a nightingale.

Finally, he could turn and face her. "And if he did?"

"Honestly, I don't know." She shook her head slightly. "I would like to ask you if

you'd set an appointment for me with your family solicitor to review the trust documents to see if there's a way around the marriage clause." She turned and stared at the cascading fountain in front of them. "If there isn't a way to break the trust, then I'll see Lady Somerton. I would, of course, tell Pelham first." She heaved a sigh. "Even though it probably won't work."

He filled his lungs with the cool, night air. It released most of the tension he'd felt ever since Pelham had returned home.

"I could tell by my brother's expression that I didn't change his mind about buying the dress shop. Perhaps I should continue with the original plan." When he turned to face Pippa, she didn't even blink. "I need to meet more men quickly if I want a proposal." Then she placed one hand over his. "I promised to help you with your mother." She looked down at their joined hands. "Truthfully, after I finished their dresses, I wanted to be done..."

He didn't move a muscle. As long as she was touching him, he stay in this same position all night. "Be done with what?"

His voice had deepened.

"Be done with you."

"Pippa," he closed his eyes when he uttered her name. His voice had deepened betraying his pain. "Do you not want me to seek you out?"

"I don't know." She moved closer. "We're both so much alike. Scared to take that step forward to commit...to something that's becoming all too real."

He nodded. He was well-familiar with her dilemma. It ate him up inside.

Pelham stood outside on the courtyard steps. He looked like a Viking, ready to step out of his longboat and tear someone apart with his bare hands.

No doubt that someone was Hugh.

Hugh walked home from Ardeerton House after Pelham came hunting for him. He and Pippa had left things dangling between them. She was running out of options to purchase her shop. She wasn't harried about it, but thoughtful. Most women he knew would be frantic at the prospect of losing something so valuable.

The damp air had turned murky from the fog. It matched the muddle in Hugh's mind. Perhaps he should cut to the chase and ask Pelham for her hand before Stanhope did. Then she could have the shop, and he'd, hopefully, be free from the worry of Stanhope's proposal that currently resembled an albatross wrapped around Hugh's neck that was squeezing tightly.

When Hugh had escorted Pippa to Pelham, thankfully, his friend didn't berate him. But Pelham seemed to be as forlorn as Hugh was. Neither said much to the other as they were both lost in their own worlds. But the duke wore a certain chill about him that was unusual. When Pippa had reached Pelham's side, he'd said that woman was waiting for her inside.

Hugh understood that woman meant Lady Grace. Perhaps Pelham was going through something with Grace that resembled what Hugh was going through with Pippa.

Hugh climbed the steps of Raven's Splendor. As soon as he reached the door, Burnett was waiting for him.

"Good evening, my lord." Burnett bowed. "Did you enjoy yourself at His Grace's this evening?"

“Yes.” If being skewered in the heart could be considered enjoyment. He had to quit feeling sorry for himself. This was what he had wanted all along. He needed to let Pippa live her life, and he’d live his. “It was good to see Pelham back in town.” Hugh handed his hat and gloves to a waiting footman and thanked him with a nod. “I’ll be in my study.”

“Ravenscroft,” Bryce called out as he barreled down the stairs from Hugh’s living quarters. “I’ve been looking for you.”

“Miss me?” Hugh teased. “Let’s go to my study.”

He needed to spend more time with his brother. Bryce always had a way of putting Hugh into a better mood. His younger brother cared for Hugh’s thoughts and offered his advice when he thought Hugh needed it, whether Hugh wanted it or not. That was true loyalty. And Hugh often did the same for him.

As soon as Bryce was by his side, he took Hugh’s arm and tugged him in the other direction toward the other side of the house where Bryce and their mother and Aunt Edith resided.

His brother stole a quick peek at Burnett and nodded, then lowered his voice. “I was on my way to have Burnett send a carriage to bring you home. It’s Mother. You need to come quickly.”

Hugh froze for a moment. “Is she ill?”

“It’s Father.”

That was all Bryce needed to say. Their mother was lost in her memories again. When that happened, she became inconsolable.

Side by side, they took the stairs two at a time.

“What caused it?” Hugh asked while practically running up the steps.

“After Lady Stanhope called on Mother, Lady Beauchamp arrived. Everything was fine at dinner. Aunt Edith and Mother went to bed. Then I heard Mother crying. I don’t know what happened.”

Once they reached the landing, they continued at their quick pace until they were standing outside their mother’s room. Hugh didn’t hesitate. He knocked on the door, then opened it.

Their beautiful mother sat on the bed with letters and books spread about her. Her eyes were red and swollen from crying. She held a handkerchief to her mouth as if trying to hold it all in while her other hand rested against her heart as if trying to ease her own pain.

As soon as she saw Hugh, she tried to smile bravely, but it failed.

“Mother,” he said gently as he and Bryce entered the room. He went to sit beside her on the bed. He took his dear mother in his arms and rocked her. “Do you want to talk about it?”

She sniffed softly but didn’t answer. Her hands fluttered slightly, but then she wrapped her arms around him and held on for dear life. At least she was allowing him to comfort her. That hadn’t always been the case in years past.

Bryce sat on the other side of her and looked at Hugh. His brother’s gaze revealed the helplessness he felt at not being able to console her when her sadness became too much for her to bear.

How many times had Hugh sat in this exact situation? Too many to count. In the early years after his father had passed away, his mother had cried herself to sleep every night. Their marriage had been a love match. She'd always said that when he died, a part of her did too.

As a boy, he'd always thought it strange that he was the one who had to offer comfort. As the parent, she should have been strong enough for both of them. But as he grew older and wiser, it became clear that sometimes those feelings were so overpowering that there wasn't anything she could do to keep from falling into the abyss of her grief.

Though his father had been gone for almost twenty years, his mother still suffered from a darkness that haunted her about his death.

Slowly, she pulled away from Hugh and sat between him and Bryce. With a trembling smile and watery eyes, she took Bryce's hand, and with her other hand, she took his. "Marie came to see me today. She told me about a book her husband had bought for her on the spur of the moment. When she showed me the novel, a pressed rose fell out of it."

"That was a thoughtful gesture on Lord Beauchamp's part." Bryce smiled softly.

"It was." She let go of their hands and walked to a small bookcase that she kept in her bedroom. She pointed to a shelf. "Your father gave me these books. There were no special occasions. He was simply thinking about me." She pulled one off the shelf and opened the cover. She withdrew a folded letter and held it in the air. He'd always write me a note telling me why he'd bought this particular book for me. It always had to do with a memory that we shared with one another."

Hugh stood and came to stand beside her. "I never knew that about Father." She was so frail at that moment, he was scared a light breeze might topple her over. So, he

took her hand and brought her back to bed. “Would you like a sleeping tonic?”

She shook her head. “I already took one an hour ago.” She smiled sheepishly. “This won’t be like the other times when I was up all-night wailing. I promise.”

“Mother, no need to make promises or apologize,” Hugh said.

By then, Bryce had collected all her letters, books, and notes from the bed and placed them on the table beside the bed.

“We’ll stay with you as long as you like, so you’re not alone.” Hugh pulled back the covers, and his mother crawled in. He tugged the top cover over her and tucked her in, then pressed a kiss to her cheek. “I could sleep on the sofa if that would make you feel better.”

This was what a father did when their child had a nightmare. He gave comfort until all the monsters were dispatched from their dreams. There were no monsters for his mother. Only lovely memories that had the power to tear her apart.

“I’m fine, both of you.” She turned on her side away from them. “Good night.”

They both said their good nights. As Hugh opened the door, his mother sat up again. “Thank you, Bryce, for getting Hugh.” Then she smiled at Hugh. “Thank you, darling, for everything.”

They both nodded, then closed the door softly.

Hugh motioned for Bryce to follow him. Together, they made their way to Hugh’s study. “When did you find her?”

Bryce closed the door softly, then sat in front of Hugh’s desk. “About an hour before

you arrived home. I stayed with her and tried to comfort her, but it wasn't working. She needed you." He took a sip of the whisky, then leaned back against the chair and closed his eyes. "I was fearful she was having one of her spells."

Hugh stayed silent as he watched his brother's anxiety finally lessen. His shoulders relaxed, and the tenseness in his jaw loosened.

"She needed both of us," Hugh murmured.

Bryce smiled. "Thank you for saying that. I sometimes feel powerless when she becomes so distraught." He stood and nodded. "I think I'll read before bed. I need to concentrate on something else. Good night."

"Good night." Hugh waited until the door closed before he ran his hand over his face.

This was the reason he didn't want any part of romantic love. All the memories tore a person apart. He refused to even put himself into such a position that might subject him to such soul-rotting grief.

He tilted his head and stared at the ceiling. What his mother went through at times wasn't for the weak of heart. He'd seen her unable to get out of bed in the morning. She didn't want to eat and didn't want any visitors. When she cried, he tried to comfort her. But there were times when she grew silent, and it petrified him. He always worried that she'd become so lost in her grief that she'd lose herself completely.

All because she'd fallen in love with his father.

Frankly, Hugh wanted no part of it. He'd seen enough through the years of his own mother's pain to see the damage it caused to everyone in the family. When Bryce was younger, he'd become frightened of their mother when she grieved heavily. He still

was cautious around her.

Only he and Aunt Edith helped her. Tomorrow, he'd share with his great-aunt what had happened last night. She needed to know in case his mother had another spell tomorrow.

Funny, but he wanted to tell Pippa as well. He wanted the comfort she'd give him. For the first time in his life, he wanted to tell her because he knew she'd comfort him. He'd never had someone to help him afterward.

Frankly, it was beyond tempting to go over to Ardeerton House right now and tell her what he'd walked into once he got home.

Was that love?

If he even allowed himself to believe that he was in love with Pippa, he only had to remember his mother's paralyzing grief. Yet, the thought that Pippa might marry Stanhope felt as if his stomach had been set afire. It was excruciating even to contemplate. And what was worse, he was certain Pippa felt the same. He could see it in her eyes.

They were both tangled in a knot of their own making. But Hugh bore the brunt of the responsibility. He should have never kissed her in the first place. He hadn't a clue that his life would be in an uproar. He was feeling things he had no intention of ever feeling. Now, he had no idea how to remove himself from this entanglement without his heart being pulverized one way or another.

The problem was that he wanted Pippa.

And this yearning for her was only getting stronger.

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The next day, Pippa sat in her study, finishing the final trim and touches to ensure that Lady Ravenscroft's and Lady Edith's gowns were the talk of the ton. She'd truly finished them yesterday, but having something in her hands to work on usually kept her demons at bay. But so far, it hadn't helped much.

She never finished her conversation with her brother about her plans to do whatever was necessary to secure that dress shop. After she'd said goodnight to Grace, Pelham had insisted Grace return to his study, where they stayed for hours. Pippa finally retired. Perhaps her brother would realize from their earlier discussion that she would do whatever she had to do to secure that dress shop.

A knock sounded on the door.

When Pippa looked up, she dropped everything in her lap and ran to answer. It was Honor and Pelham together. She launched herself into Honor's arms, and they swayed back and forth side to side as if they hadn't seen each other in a year instead of two weeks.

"You're back," Pippa exclaimed as she took a long gander at her beautiful sister. With her pink cheeks, red lips, and a blonde head of hair that had been kissed by the sun, her eldest sister was a sight. "And more beautiful than the last time I saw you."

Pelham crossed his arms and simply grinned at the two of them.

"I couldn't stay away any longer." Honor pulled away but kept holding Pippa's hands to look at her. "You're simply beaming."

“Of course, I am. You’re home.” Pippa waved a hand in dismissal. “Are you staying the afternoon? Is Trafford joining us? We could have a family dinner.”

Pelham tilted his head back and closed his eyes. “If I didn’t possess so much self-assurance, I’d be devastated with how you greet Honor. When I arrived last night, you greeted me as if I was chopped liver.”

“What are you about?” Pippa retorted in glee.

Honor smirked, but there was playfulness in her expression. “Our brother needs sisterly affection, I’m afraid.”

With that, they each took one of his arms and kissed him on the cheek. They both led him to the sitting area where Pippa had been working.

“That’s more like it,” Pelham murmured with a wink and a grin.

“To answer your question, I can’t stay long.” Honor frowned slightly. “But Marcus and I will be here tomorrow to have a family dinner.”

“Tell Pippa your news, darling,” Pelham said, pride ringing through his voice.

“What?” Pippa sat on the edge of her seat.

“Marcus and I are building a foundling home.” Honor’s brilliant turquoise blue eyes flashed with exuberance. “The staff will be the best and most talented in their fields.” Honor’s cheeks flushed and her eyes widened. “We’re picking up the plans from the architect this week.”

Pippa grabbed her hands. “You and he have been talking about that for ages. I’m so happy for you.” She turned to Pelham. “And happy for us. That means we’ll be

seeing Honor and Trafford more frequently.”

“I’m thrilled with seeing our darling sister,” Pelham drawled. “But Trafford?”

“Careful, old man,” a voice called out from the doorway. “Your sister and I are one. If you’re thrilled to see her, then you’ll be seeing me. But we are both aware that you’re thrilled to see me too whether you admit it or not.”

Without pausing, Pelham rose to greet their brother-in-law. In a thrice, he had one arm around Marcus’s shoulder. “Welcome home.”

“Thank you.” Marcus returned the affectionate gesture.

They all knew how much the concept of family meant to Marcus. He’d lost his family as a young child. With Honor, he’d found it and had become closer to Pelham also.

Pippa continued to smile, but that familiar emptiness lodged in her chest. Honor and Trafford had a love that was all-consuming. They each thought the other had hung the moon and the stars just for them.

She couldn’t imagine having that with anyone.

That was a lie. That “anyone” was a certain marquess by the name of Hugh Calthorpe, the Marquess of Ravenscroft. She had no doubt that his proposal was an impulse. He didn’t mean it. After he’d shared the pain and hurt he’d experienced seeing his mother’s paralyzing grief, she was more certain than ever.

“Hello, everyone. What have I missed?” A deep baritone filled the room.

Pippa didn’t have to glance at the door to see who it was. It was as if the devil himself had conjured Hugh out of nowhere.

As Trafford and Pelham made their way to greet Hugh, his great-aunt glided into the room as if she owned all of London. She stood inside the door and placed both bejeweled hands over her cane.

Pippa glanced at Honor and lifted her eyebrows. This was unusual behavior even for Lady Edith. Pippa rose to greet the elderly woman, and Honor followed.

Before Pippa could offer a proper greeting, Lady Edith pointed her cane with the silver lion head directly at Pippa. “Is it true?”

Pippa shook her head, taken aback. “Pardon?”

Honor stopped beside Pippa and clasped Pippa’s hand. “Is what true?”

Pippa’s heartbeat started to accelerate. Had Lady Edith discovered what she and Hugh had done the night of the musicale, or worse, what they’d done in this very room two nights ago? Heat crept up her chest and was surely painting her cheeks scarlet.

Lady Edith turned to look at the three gentlemen. “Trafford, good to see you.” Slowly, she turned her gaze to Pelham, who bowed. She acknowledged him with a nod. But her eyes burned a hole through her nephew.

Without turning away from Hugh, Lady Edith continued, “Pippa, the gossip today is that you’re going to receive a marriage proposal from Stanhope. Is it true?”

“Aunt Edith,” Hugh interrupted her.

But the grand dame held her palm up.

Immediately, he halted in his place.

“Lady Ravenscroft is in bed because of the news. Stanhope’s mother came to see her.” Aunt Edith notched her chin up an inch.

“Aunt Edith, enough,” Hugh bellowed. He took two steps and blocked Lady Edith from Pippa’s view. “You know that’s not the truth. Mother doesn’t feel well.”

“Do you deny that Lady Stanhope came to visit your mother yesterday?”

Hugh rolled his eyes. “No.”

“Do you deny that Margaret didn’t come today because she doesn’t feel well?” Lady Edith peeked around Hugh. “Pippa, Margaret wouldn’t miss a visit with you for the world. The news has devastated her.” Hugh’s aunt whipped her gaze back to Hugh. “Answer me, my boy. Is that not true?”

“Yes, it’s true,” Hugh acknowledged reluctantly. “But that’s not why Mother doesn’t feel well, and it’s a private matter.”

This time, Aunt Edith turned to Pelham. “He’s just making excuses.”

“A marriage proposal?” Honor turned to Pippa. “What’s this about?” When Honor’s attention turned to her husband, her eyes widened. “Did you know about this?”

“Darling, I had no idea,” Trafford said softly. “Pelham hasn’t said a word.”

“Dane?” Pippa placed her hand over her heart to keep the runaway organ from galloping out of her chest.

Everyone started talking at once. Honor quizzed her husband on what exactly he knew. Aunt Edith lectured Hugh about his inability to act and his disregard for society’s machinations. She continued by accusing him of not taking his

responsibilities seriously enough. She wanted great-great nephews and nieces.

“Everyone, please cease this incessant chatter.” Her brother called out in an effort to calm everyone down.

Pippa stood in the middle of the room, speechless. If this rumor had spread throughout London, then there was little chance another man would even consider marrying her. No gentlemen of good ton would encroach upon another’s fiancée or some-to-be fiancée.

She glanced at her brother. Pelham had narrowed his eyes as he studied Hugh. Pippa turned in Hugh’s direction, and that’s when Pippa saw it. The haunted look that had dulled his green eyes.

“That’s enough,” Pelham announced loudly.

Finally, everyone quieted.

Her brother turned to Lady Edith. “Madam, I assure you that if there was a marriage proposal on the table, I would be the first to hear about it. Pippa would be the second.” He took the elderly lady’s hand and bent over it. “And you would be one of the first I confide in. I know how you like to share such tidbits with your friends.” He winked at her. “Stanhope is a fine man, one whom I respect.” He smiled, then continued, “He wouldn’t announce his plans without seeking me out first.”

Pelham turned in her direction, and his brow furrowed. “Darling, you’ve grown pale. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” She shook her head in direct contradiction to her words.

Lady Edith studied her. “You look as if you’ve seen a ghost.”

Hugh turned so quickly that the tails of his morning coat flew in an arc behind him. Their eyes met.

What was happening to her? As soon as he entered the room, she always admired his figure and clothing. It was one of the first things that had attracted her to him. She bit her lip and stared at the floor. She had to get her wits together. She should be ecstatic that Stanhope appeared ready to propose. It was exactly what she needed. She hadn't yet persuaded Pelham, and it was a longshot at best that she could break the trust. Perhaps this was her only chance to get the money for the shop in time.

Slowly, she lifted her head. Her gaze met Hugh's wide eyes. He hadn't recovered his earlier shock and neither had she. The urge to fall in his arms and comfort each other was nigh near impossible to ignore. She took one step toward him then stopped when Pelham cleared his throat.

"I can assure you that if Stanhope asks for permission to court Pippa, she and I will have that conversation before anything is agreed to." Pelham's gaze swept to hers. "Now, if you all will excuse me and Lady Pippa? We have something of the utmost urgency to discuss.

Pippa turned her gaze to Hugh and gave him a brief, private smile. Then she drew in a deep breath and stood tall. Now was not the time to crumble.

Somehow, her brother had shooed everyone away, including his two best friends, then brought Pippa into his study. His big hand dwarfed hers. He'd always held her hands when he had bad news to share, such as when their parents had sent Honor away. The last time she remembered him holding her like this was when their mother had died.

Without a word, he brought her to a sitting area that overlooked the same courtyard that her study overlooked. Whereas her furniture was light and airy, his possessed the

style and bearing of a powerful duke.

He walked to his desk and poured two cups of tea. Without a word, he handed her a cup then sat across from her. Pippa took a gulp of the hot liquid, hoping to calm her racing heart. The liquid burned her throat, and she burst into a coughing fit.

Pelham put his cup down and walked to her side. The concern on his face made her feel even worse. After a moment, she managed to get control of her body once more. Without a word, he hugged her.

“Thank you.”

“I knew you were upset, but I didn’t realize how upset.” He let her go until they were looking at each other. “Are you all right?”

She dipped her gaze again and shook her head. Dane had always been her champion. Anything that went wrong in her life, he was the one who was by her side, helping to wrong the rights. Her parents never did any of that for her. Only her loyal brother.

She forced her gaze to his. “I think I’m all right, but I don’t know what to say. I think we saw a prime example of pandemonium in there.”

“It was quite a spectacle.” He nodded in understanding, then smiled. “Let me start.”

She nodded.

“Last night we didn’t finish our conversation. I needed to chat with Grace and ask her advice about how to handle this situation.” He sat across from her on one of his brown leather sofas, then rested his elbows on his knee. He clasped his hands and let them dangle between his legs. His gaze never let hers. “After Ravenscroft left the Jolly Rooster, it wasn’t long before I had another visitor. Stanhope.”

She let out a stuttered breath. “I see.” She tangled her fingers together.

“He did things correctly when one wants to court a duke’s sister. He came to see me first before he called on you.” He leaned back slightly. “Unlike some people I’m acquainted with, like our brother-in-law, Trafford.”

“Honor and Trafford are happy together,” she argued softly. Suddenly chilled, she wrapped her arms around her waist. A proposal was exactly what she thought she wanted. Now, she wasn’t so sure. She had to remember that she wanted that dress shop more than anything else in the world even if that meant sacrificing her own happiness.

“Do you want to marry Stanhope?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” He stood, then sat beside her on the sofa. “I hate to see you so sad.” Her brother put one around her shoulder and pulled her close. “Why don’t you start at the beginning?” he asked gently.

“I just wanted the dress shop. If I had to marry to acquire it, I would do it. I thought it wouldn’t be complicated, but now, I’m confused.” She leaned her head against his shoulder. “Mother and Father were a poor example of marriage.”

“The worst,” he agreed as he gently ran his hand up and down her arm offering her comfort. “Is that why you don’t want marriage?”

“It’s not that I’m against marriage. But I want no part of love.” She sniffed as he continued to comfort her. “I wanted a marriage exactly opposite of theirs. I didn’t want any emotion. I’ve always assumed I’d be happy with a marriage to any man.” She tilted her gaze to his. “If I married, then I could acquire Mignon’s dress shop

with your blessing.”

“A rather unromantic view of the sacred institution,” he drawled with a grin.

“After seeing our parents together, I don’t think it is romantic.”

“Oh, darling,” Pelham murmured, his voice laced with empathy.

He was so earnest and forthright. She closed her eyes. He loved her like no other. How fortunate to have him as her brother and champion. It was hard to keep it in any longer. Everything hurt. Perhaps Hugh was correct. Mayhap she should share everything with Dane.

“Remember when it was my birthday, and I was in my room?” She swallowed, hoping she wouldn’t cry. “I told you that I didn’t want to come down and celebrate as I was perfectly happy in my room.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Yes.”

“I lied.” She swallowed the abject humiliation that she’d carried for years and forced herself to continue, “The night before, Mother and Father made me sit at the dining room table for three hours and forty-five minutes as they argued about their lovers. I’d had so much tea listening to them that I was in pain, mentally and physically. I begged them repeatedly to let me go to the retiring room or my own room. At first, they refused, and then they just ignored me. Every single time they mentioned my name, I cringed, which just made it more painful to hold it in.”

“My sweet girl.” His voice softened in the way it always did when he was listening to her stories about their parents.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Perhaps it was time to share the truth

about everything. Dane had always taken care of her and Honoria. He'd shielded them from as much of the ugliness of their parents' marriage as he could. As their father's heir, he could do no wrong...mostly. But as he'd become older, his arguments with their father had escalated. She knew how those arguments upset Dane. Sometimes, he'd storm from her father's study with his eyes red, but he never cried. One time, she'd seen him leave with a bloody lip.

Pippa never would have forgiven herself if she'd caused him more pain. And that's exactly what would have happened if she had told him about that night. Dane would have fought their father.

He would have fought for her.

But the time had come to show her scars. She was tired of living in her parents' shadow.

"I soiled myself at the table." She closed her eyes as the horror and humiliation of that night enveloped her. She shivered, unable to get warm. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I couldn't hold it any longer." She sobbed and covered her mouth.

Her brother simply held her tighter. "Go on."

"Suddenly, the only sound in the room was water hitting the floor." Her voice grew weak, but she wouldn't stop. "Father and Mother turned to me. Father's lips were shaped in a vile sneer, and Mother wore an expression of shock." She shook her head. "Nine years old, and I had peed at the table like a baby."

Pelham took her hand and squeezed. "You couldn't help it. They were cruel to keep you there."

"Father banished me from his sight for a week. I asked if I could leave my room on

the morrow since it was my birthday.” Her father’s face loomed before her, his hatred still as vivid now as it was then. Her shoulders curled inward. “Father said... ‘untrained heathen don’t deserve birthdays.’”

“Oh, my love,” Pelham murmured as his lips rested on the top of her head. “He was a monster.”

Dane’s warmth gave her comfort, and she squeezed his hand in return. “But that wasn’t the worst of it. Whenever I was alone with either of them, they’d ask me questions about the other. They were extremely clever. They’d mention me in their questions, and I foolishly thought they were interested in me.” A tear fell down her cheek. “I was so stupid. I didn’t see what they were doing until that dinner. They kept on saying, ‘Pippa shared this or that.’” She bit her lip. “They were so cunning and knew exactly what questions to discover information about the other.”

“You’re not stupid. Don’t ever say that,” he growled. “Damn them for making you sit there. Damn them for hurting you like that.” He tilted his head and stared at the ceiling for a moment. “They were the heathens. Not you, Pippa. Never you. God, I wish you would have told me on your birthday. I would and should have taken you from them.”

“And have you confront Father?” She shook her head. “He would have banished you just like he’d done to Honor or worse.”

He stared at her. His eyes had reddened and glistened with tears. He swallowed thickly and turned away. “I wasn’t afraid of him.”

She reached for his hand. “I know but I was afraid for you.”

He took it and squeezed. “So, my little sister was trying to protect me.”

She leaned toward him and smiled. “Your little sister learned that from her big brother. He always defended his sisters. It was time he had someone who would protect him.”

A tear fell down his cheek, and she brushed it away. “Don’t try and take the blame for those two years you and Honoria were away at school.” She leaned against him again. “It was inevitable when you’re the youngest of three siblings that you’d be left at home while your dashing siblings were at Eton and Mrs. French’s Finishing School.” She grew serious. “I witnessed Mother and Father’s love turn to hate. I can’t go through that again. I can’t risk it.”

He groaned and squeezed her. “People should have to take an exam before they procreate.” She laughed slightly, and he smiled. “Thank you for finally telling me. Now I understand your hesitation about marriage. Tell me, what do you want?”

“I thought with a dress shop, I could make my own found family without ever having to put a husband’s interests before my own.” She sighed slightly and shook her head. “But now...I don’t know. I think I might want a real family.”

“And you don’t think Stanhope could give you that? Or perhaps, you don’t think you’d be happy with him?”

“I don’t know.”

“What about Ravenscroft?” He asked gently. “Would he make you happy?”

She shook her head. “He doesn’t want to marry me. Besides, what happens if there are feelings? Could I trust those? All of it is too great a risk.”

He brushed another kiss against the top of her head. “Sometimes it’s worth the risk.” His voice broke, and he cleared his throat. “Love can bring you happiness. And there

is nothing wrong with expecting happiness.”

“My, my. You’re turning into quite the sage.” She poked him in the rib with her elbow. “Do you ever worry about your own happiness?”

He nodded. “But I’m not going to dwell on it until I see my sisters happy. I have one down.” He gently returned her poke with his elbow. “I have one to go.”

“Thank you for helping me. You’re the best brother anyone could have.”

He tightened his grip around her shoulders and lowered his voice. “I have the best littlest sister anyone could have. She’s brave, protective, and has a heart of gold.” He took her hand in his. “Pippa, you can’t make the right decision until you know what’s going to make you happy.”

Her brother had never spoken more truer words. “I know the dress shop will make me happy. As regards to marriage, I’m still trying to determine what I want.”

Frankly, she didn’t want to make a mistake. That’s why it was so hard to acknowledge what would make her happy.

“Perhaps you should hear Stanhope’s proposal. You might know what you want by talking with him.” He winked with a lighthearted grin. “Let me share a secret that you’ll find hard to fathom. I believe in love. It makes us stronger. ”

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:45 am

“I thought I’d stop by and see how you are holding up?” Trafford slid into one of the club chairs in front of Hugh’s desk.

Hugh buried his face into his hands. “I feel as if I’ve been run over by a coach and four at full speed.” He leaned back against his chair and stared into his friend’s gaze. “Stanhope is going to ask for her hand. I could tell by the way Pelham announced that he needed to discuss something privately with Pippa. Stanhope has approached him, and either Pelham has agreed or wants Pippa to tell him her preferences before he agrees.” His voice cracked, betraying that his emotions were on thin ice. “Did you know?”

Trafford shook his head. “Whatever our friend had in mind, he didn’t share it with either of us. Your great-aunt almost caused a riot within the salon earlier.”

Hugh flinched slightly. Aunt Edith had walked into Pelham’s salon with her cane as a cannon and leveled it at everyone. He had no idea that she would do that or that she even had knowledge of Stanhope’s forthcoming offer for Pippa. Well, he hadn’t offered yet, but it was safe to assume that he had Pelham’s permission to court her. And Pippa would likely consider this as manna from heaven. With a special license, she could be married and buy Mademoiselle Mignon’s modiste shop before the end of the day.

Perhaps that was why he felt so downtrodden. She’d looked at him from across the room as if asking him to help her. But how could he? Unless he kidnapped Stanhope. “Whatever Pelham wanted to discuss with Pippa, he kept it a secret from me. I was there last night for dinner.”

Trafford cocked his head. “Doing what?”

“Looking over Pippa’s financials for the dress shop. The woman has a keen business sense and insight. She reminds me of Pelham when he sits down with his bookkeeping.”

Trafford nodded, then he arched an eyebrow. “And what else were you doing?”

“What are you referring to?” Hugh lowered his voice and fought not to growl at his other best friend.

Trafford leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knee. “You have feelings for Pippa. We all have known that for ages. When Honoria came to town with me to announce our betrothal, she told me that when you danced with her, all you wanted was to discuss Pippa.”

Hugh studied the courtyard outside the window with his hands clasped across his desk. He had to turn the conversation to another topic, or his friend would discover every secret he had locked away. “When are you returning to Amesbury? Perhaps I’ll tag along. A change of scenery might do us all good.”

“Not for a while.” Trafford shifted in his chair, suddenly unsettled. “There’s a family dinner tomorrow night.”

Before Hugh could ask more, Burnett stood discreetly inside the door. “Lord Stanhope is here to see you. Are you receiving?”

For a moment, Hugh imagined himself leaving his study and throwing Stanhope out of his house by the back of his collar like unwelcome vermin. But then, Trafford’s gaze locked with his.

“Ravenscroft? Burnett is waiting,” his friend murmured.

Hugh nodded to his butler, who left to retrieve the unwanted guest.

“We all know what he’s going to say.” This time, Hugh didn’t hide his sneer.

Stanhope entered the room with his hat in his hands. “Ravenscroft, thank you for seeing me.” He nodded at Trafford. Afterward, he extended a hand for Hugh to shake.

It took every ounce of fortitude not to crush the man’s hand into pulp. But somehow, Hugh managed the simple handshake, then waved a hand at the empty chair beside Trafford. “A drink?” Hugh asked.

“No, thank you.” Stanhope shook his head, wearing a rueful smile. “Another cup of tea?—”

“And you’ll float away...” Hugh finished for him. Everything about the man was predictable. He probably wore a sleeping gown when he made love to a woman. Sweet, sensual Pippa would be bored with such a husband. She adored touching Hugh’s bare skin. He inhaled loudly. He was getting hard just thinking about her. “I was referring to a brandy. Would you care for one?” He arched a brow, hoping to intimidate him.

But the pup just smiled. “My visit is brief.” He twirled his hat in his hands and studied it as if trying to find the courage to speak his mind.

Hugh decided then and there that he would not ease the man’s discomfort. If anyone had a right to feel such pain, it was Hugh. Yet, it was a sure bet that Stanhope was here to gloat over the fact that he would be the one to win Pippa’s hand in marriage.

But Hugh had been the first one to kiss her.

But Stanhope would be the one to make love to her.

He'd also be the one to make all her dreams come true.

Hugh clenched his hand into a fist as the agony of such thoughts almost brought him to his knees. He had to keep his wits about him. Otherwise, it would take little to roar that Pippa was his and would always be his.

"I traveled to the Jolly Rooster to visit Pelham. We discussed his sister's future. I'm going to ask her to be my wife as soon as possible." He looked at Hugh with a quiet determination.

Both knew whom he was referring to. Hugh had never seen such a serious countenance on Stanhope since the man usually wore a smile and possessed good humor. He'd made the decision to marry her rather quickly. Hugh would have been mightily impressed with the blasted man if he wasn't talking about Pippa.

His Pippa.

"Do you want a medal for that pronouncement?" Hugh drawled. Stanhope had been a genius asking her to dine at his home with his entire family. He must have heard from Pelham that one of his demands for Pippa's hand had to be her marrying into a loving family.

Hugh's blood slowly turned to ice, freezing him in place. The ache in his chest wouldn't leave him be. He couldn't say or do anything. He should get up and demand the man leave immediately, then race to Pippa's side and beg her to marry him. But what good would it do? Stanhope was everything she wanted. She wanted a husband. Not a husband-husband.

And she saw Hugh as a husband-husband.

Stanhope shook his head and stood. "I stopped by to personally tell you my plans. I don't think it would be honorable to hide this from you." Stanhope nodded to Trafford then Hugh. "Good day, gentlemen."

Like a specter who'd grown tired of haunting someone, he was gone. If only Stanhope was a ghost. Pippa couldn't marry a ghost. Hugh exhaled loudly before the quiet in the room exploded.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Trafford asked softly.

What he really wanted was to throw his glass across the room. Instead, he calmly picked it up and downed the remaining brandy. Nonchalantly, he turned his attention to Trafford. "Talk about what exactly?"

His friend shook his head. "Get your head out of the sand. You're going to lose her."

"Lose whom? He didn't say who he was asking to marry him."

"Pippa, you arse." Trafford pursed his lips.

Hugh had only seen him do it on one other occasion. It was when Lord Carlyle had tried to steal Honoria from him.

"We all know your feelings for her. Honor knows it. I know it. Pelham knows it. Even Stanhope knows it. He was here to soften the blow when the marriage is announced."

"What makes you so sure she'll say yes?"

Trafford was correct. He was an arse.

His friend shook his head. "I can only goad you so much before I grow tired of you myself. Stanhope can give her what she wants. Access to her trust fund. But the most important question is, 'What are you going to do about it?'"

Hugh ignored the lecture. "You were saying something about a family dinner at Ardeerton House?"

Trafford leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling as if trying to control his temper. After a long, torturous moment, he returned his gaze to Hugh. "Pelham is having a family dinner tomorrow."

Hugh frowned. "I wasn't invited. Perhaps Pelham forgot to send me the invitation." Then he smiled benevolently as if everything was perfectly normal in his world. However, the truth was that his world was collapsing around him. He swallowed to keep his wretched tears from falling from his eyes. "I'm sure it'll arrive this afternoon."

"It's just for family."

"Well, as Pelham's best friend, I'm sure he'll invite me." Hugh shrugged. "He always has before."

Trafford looked away for a moment, then exhaled painfully. "It's better to lance the wound, I suppose," he murmured to himself before turning back to Hugh. "As I said, it's for family. Stanhope and his entire family will be there." He stood and walked around the desk, then gripped Hugh's shoulder. "As one of your oldest friends, let me give you some advice. Do something. Otherwise, you'll regret it for the rest of your life." Trafford squeezed his shoulder. "Do you hear me?"

Hugh didn't answer. He couldn't since his entire body was numb.

Trafford shook his head as if Hugh was a hopeless cause, then walked out the door.

Finally, Hugh blinked and then let out a painful groan. He never cried as a child. The only time he'd experienced such emotion was when his beloved father had died. But now, his eyes burned as they filled with tears. One rogue tear skated down his cheek. He sniffed, determined not to let another fall. He was stronger than this. He tilted his head to the ceiling. He'd never doubted his strength until a certain woman came into his life.

Lady Pippa Ardeerton had the power to bring him to his knees, and she'd done so.

He wanted her. He'd always wanted her, but he didn't want the pain or the grief that came with falling in love. The truth was that there was pain in love. All he had to do was look at his darling mother. With every tear she shed, he could see another piece of her destroyed.

Hugh forced himself from his desk and walked to the window. With his hands clasped behind his back, he contemplated his future.

Or the bleak lack thereof.

"Was that Stanhope and Trafford?" Aunt Edith chirped as she walked into Hugh's study.

Hugh didn't look at her. "Yes."

The swish of her silk gown indicted that she'd settled onto a sofa. "Come and sit next to me, my boy."

Hugh turned and slowly made his way to one of the matching sofas that framed the massive fireplace in his study.

“Did I ever tell you about Martin Sloan?” Without waiting for Hugh to answer, Aunt Edith continued, “I’d been smitten with him since I was a little girl. He was blond, blue-eyed, and had thighs that could melt a woman’s?—”

“I understand. He was a regular Adonis.”

“That he was, indeed,” his mother chimed in as she glided across the room to join them. “Of course, I hadn’t been born yet, but your darling great-aunt has shared this story with me before.”

His great-aunt waggled her eyebrows. “And I beg to differ, my boy. There was nothing regular about him.” She chuckled. “But I digress.” She waved a hand in the air. The jewels covering her fingers sprinkled prisms of rainbows around the room.

The damnable things looked like fairies dancing about the room in celebration of his unhappiness.

“As I was saying, one day, I decided to tell him how I felt.” Aunt Edith leaned close and lowered her voice. “Then I grew timid.”

“You?” He managed to say with a chuckle.

“Indeed. I would walk by his house practically every day praying that he would be outside. It would be my chance to start a conversation with him. You see, I’d loved him forever, but I never pursued him as I didn’t think he was wealthy enough for me.”

His mother sat beside her aunt and poured herself a cup of tea. A sweet but melancholy grin tugged at her lips.

“Mother?” Hugh asked gently.

She waved her hand in dismissal. "I'm fine." She turned to her aunt. "Please, continue."

Aunt Edith nodded. "He lived comfortably in a modest home. Finally, I matured enough to understand that material wealth wasn't everything I needed to be happy. I needed him. Hence, why I finally gathered the courage and knocked on the door."

"Did he answer?" Hugh took her hand in his. Her wrinkled skin reminded him that time waits for no one.

"He didn't. The house was completely empty. My heart cracked slowly, then broke into at least one hundred pieces. I checked every day to see if he had returned. After a few months, I asked several of the villagers if they knew what had happened to Martin." She smiled wistfully. "Seems nothing was holding him here, so he moved to the States. Married a society girl from Philadelphia, moved to Boston, and became a successful businessman."

Hugh leaned near and kissed her cheek. "I'm sorry."

"Thank you." She took his hand and held it. "Not a day passes that I don't regret knocking on his door sooner. I should have told him everything. I don't know if it would have made a difference. But I didn't even try. Because of my stupidity and fears, I lost the love of my life." She squeezed his hand that she was still holding. "I would go through anything just to have had him in my life." She tsked softly. "Wisdom is wasted on the old."

"Why are you telling me this?" He stole a peek at his mother to see how she was taking this story. Hopefully, it didn't remind her of his father.

His mother stared at him with an expression that reminded him of all the times in his past when she waited for him to find the answers to the simple math quizzes that his

tutor had assigned to him.

He shook his head in consternation. "This has nothing to do with Pippa."

His mother arched a single eyebrow.

"I'm telling you this because I believe that the pain of losing the man I loved is worse than never marrying at all. Your mother had many years of happiness that I didn't. I missed so many of the important things in life. I never had the family celebrations, yuletide gatherings, or even the chance for a family of our own. Who knows what fate would have blessed us with? But most of all, I missed having someone I could call my own. Even though your mother's memories of losing the love of her life are painful in so many ways, long-term, they will sustain her." Edith turned to him with a shrewd look in her eye. "I'm also telling you this because you love that girl. And she loves you."

He ran a hand down his face. The pain surrounding his heart reached out to crush him again. "She doesn't want me. I asked her to marry me, but we agreed that wasn't what we wanted."

Aunt Edith nodded as if understanding. "My boy, did you ever consider it from her standpoint? She has her own pain, too. She sees Stanhope as a safe way to get what she thinks she wants. Maybe she's scared."

Hugh just sat there. It wasn't even worth trying to make his mother and great-aunt understand.

Aunt Edith patted his hand. "Well, I'm certain you tried your best. I'm sorry you couldn't give her what she really wanted." Slowly, Aunt Edith rose from the sofa. "I think I'll rest upstairs for a bit." She placed a kiss on the top of Hugh's head. "Make an old woman happy. Think about what I said."

“You’re not old,” Hugh scoffed.

“Perhaps not. But I’m not lucky. But you are. You see, I didn’t even know what Martin wanted.” She shrugged. “So, I couldn’t even offer it to him.” She shrugged, then quickly exited, leaving Hugh with his mother.

“I don’t think she’s going upstairs,” Hugh murmured, then stared at his mother. “Did you two plan this?”

His mother took another sip of tea. “Hardly, but I do hope you were listening to what she was saying. You must be brave when you’re presented with an opportunity for true love.”

“Mother, I don’t mean to be insensitive, but after seeing everything you’ve gone through...” He had no earthly clue how to tell his mother the effect her grief had on him and Bryce after their father passed. It would devastate her.

“Hugh,” his mother said softly. “I’m sorry that you’ve had to suffer with my grief. You’ve always protected me. But one thing, I don’t think you see or perhaps, don’t understand. I would experience the pain again and again if it meant that I would still have had the chance to love your father for all those sweet, tender years.” Her smile was bittersweet. “I still love him and always will. He was the greatest gift I’ve ever received.” She stood and cupped his cheeks. “Along with you and your brother. I have this wonderful life because of your father. We both took a chance at love.” She kissed him on his cheek, then whispered, “And we won.”

She released him and then took a step back. “One thing that I’ve learned from loving your father with my whole heart is that it’s an act of love to allow another person to love you in return. Perhaps you can let Pippa love you. I promise there’s no sadness in that.” There were tears in her eyes, but they weren’t the soul-crushing ones he’d seen before. “Nor is there shame in admitting how much you love someone.”

“Why are you crying?”

“Tears of joy, son. I’m sure you’ll find the right path.”

With that, she turned and left Hugh with his demons. He blew out a breath and buried his head in his hands. Pippa had been adamant about marriage. It was just a device to get what she wanted which was the shop. It was a place of her own to hone her craft and work with others. But Stanhope could easily make her fall in love with him. Hugh could see her welcoming Stanhope into her shop with a smile and kiss of welcome when he came to escort her home after a long day.

What a nightmare.

Whether she loved Hugh was not the question. But if it was within his power to give her what she wanted more than anything else in the world, he would do it without hesitation.

How and when he’d fallen in love with her, he couldn’t answer. Perhaps he’d loved her since the first time he saw her. Definitely by the second time. He chuckled to himself. There was no denying that he loved her more and more each day.

The question that begged an answer was simple. What could he do to give her what she wanted more than anything else in this world?

As importantly, did he know what that was?

Alice peeked into Pippa’s study where Lord Stanhope waited, then turned and lowered her voice. “My elbow’s been bothering me, my lady. It’s undoubtedly due to your visitor being here.”

“You don’t think it has to do with the rain shower we’ve had all day?” Pippa asked

innocently, then entered the room. “Please, sit down, my lord.” Pippa waved a hand toward a pair of sofas that framed the fireplace. Perhaps, if she directed where Stanhope should sit, she could keep distance between them.

And delay the inevitable.

Alice had already taken the furthest seat from them. She could still watch them, but she couldn’t hear the conversation.

“Please, call me Adrian.” Stanhope waited for her to take her seat. “Unless that makes you uncomfortable.” He clasped his hands together as if determined to wait her out.

Reluctantly, Pippa sat on the sofa farthest from him. Instantly, memories of her on Hugh’s lap took siege, stealing her breath. How could she listen to a proposal when all she could think about was Hugh’s body and the way he had held her as if she were something to cherish? She pursed her lips as she remembered the softness of his lips and the way he kissed her as if she were the very air that he breathed. The way he listened to her, treating her as an equal.

Without a clue as to the turmoil she was feeling, Stanhope sat down next to her and smiled.

Ruefully, Pippa returned the smile. He wouldn’t be smiling if he knew what she and Hugh had done on this very couch. It was a horrible thought, but she couldn’t help it. She’d already decided that she would never get rid of this sofa in her lifetime. It was a constant reminder of what she’d shared with Hugh that night.

“Lady Pippa, there’s a question I’d like to ask you.” He took a deep breath and then reached for her hand.

Without gloves, she could feel the dampness in his palm. He was as nervous as she was.

“I’m listening.” She straightened her back and turned toward him slightly. A wee bit of hysteria bubbled up within her, desperate to escape. She had no earthly clue how she would answer his proposal. Last night, when she lay in bed, she had decided to say yes. It was what she’d said she’d always wanted. Perhaps she was being a little dramatic. She didn’t know what he was going to ask, but the way he kept staring at her gave her pause. She’d never seen him so serious before.

“Yes. All right.” He laughed slightly. “I’m a bit nervous. It’s the kind of hesitation that is similar to deciding to jump into the lake after a long, cold winter and spring. You want to do it, but you dread the effort.”

“Are you comparing me to a cold pond?” She asked in mock horror.

He threw back his head and laughed. “No. And I apologize if it sounded that way. I had hoped I was giving you an appropriate analogy so you could understand my nervousness.”

“Well, I would say that if you’re that nervous, perhaps you shouldn’t jump in the lake.”

“You wound me, Lady Pippa.” Then he winked. “Thankfully, it’s not a fatal blow.” He leaned near as if sharing a secret with her. “But you see, I know once I become accustomed to the water, I’ll never want to leave. It’s the same thing with being with you at this very moment.” He placed one hand over the middle of his chest, and with the other, he squeezed her hand. “It would be my greatest honor and privilege to call you my wife. Will you marry me?”

Her breath caught in her throat. She’d hadn’t been expecting the proposal to slip out

in ordinary conversation. She'd expected him to announce his attentions by getting down on one knee, declaring his eternal devotion, and singing her praises. That would have given her notice of what was happening.

She'd read that's what transpired when proposals were forthcoming. But you couldn't believe everything you read. Her own sister's proposal had been different. She'd received her proposal shortly after their brother had found her in flagrante delicto with his best friend.

Her thoughts careened out of control. She felt like a top spinning and weaving trying to stay upright. For the love of heaven, she was being ridiculous.

"I..."

Still holding her hand, Stanhope tilted his head slightly and waited.

"I..."

His gaze captured hers.

Stanhope was giving her what she wanted. He was giving her the ability to buy Mignon's dress shop. She should not hesitate. How hard was it to answer yes? But for some convoluted reason, she could not say it. All she could think about was Hugh Calthorpe, the Marquess of Ravenscroft, holding her as they lay together in bed.

In that finite slip of a moment, she realized that she would never love Stanhope.

Her heart belonged to another. Every beat was his. She took a deep breath, then slowly released it as she squeezed Stanhope's hand. It was as if the chain tied around her chest was unlocked, and she could finally breathe freely.

“You are the one giving me the highest honor.” She studied their clasped hands, then lifted her gaze to his. “I am truly sorry, but I cannot marry you.” Slowly, she slid her hand from his. “You’re a wonderful and kind man, but I don’t love you. Truthfully, I don’t know if I’ll ever marry. And you deserve love, Adrian.”

He smiled slightly. “You’re in love with him.”

“What?” Pippa forced out as her jaw dropped open.

“Ravenscroft,” Stanhope said with a smile.

“You’re not angry?”

“Of course not,” he playfully dismissed. “I visited him yesterday and told him what I was going to do.”

“Ravenscroft?” When he nodded, Pippa’s spirits dropped instantly like a murmur of starlings in the evening sky. She didn’t breathe or move. Hugh was aware that Stanhope would propose marriage and did nothing to stop it. It was unfathomable. He really didn’t want to marry.

Or, at least, he didn’t want to marry her.

Her eyes burned with unshed tears, but she refused to let them fall. Hugh didn’t do anything wrong. Of course, he didn’t do anything to stop her either. She shouldn’t be surprised. He’d been honest with her all along. The proposal he made was a simple marriage offer, one designed to help her attain the dress shop.

As her brother always said, she was an Ardeerton. She sniffed slightly and lifted her chin. She was the mistress of her own future, and that meant she had to find a way to buy that dress shop as quickly as possible without using marriage as the solution.

And quit dwelling on Hugh Calthorpe, the damnable Marquess of Ravenscroft.

“Well, I won’t keep you.” Stanhope stood slowly.

“I’m truly sorry,” Pippa said as she followed suit.

Then Stanhope’s familiar grin appeared. “Don’t be. It was good practice for the next time. Any suggestions on how to improve my performance?”

“Well, when that lucky girl finds you, it would help if you told her why you wanted to marry her.”

“That’s an excellent idea.” He scowled slightly. “What about getting down on one knee?”

Pippa laughed. “I was thinking the same thing. It would never be frowned upon to be dramatic when impressing one’s future spouse.”

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:45 am

Pippa waited for Pelham in his study all afternoon. She'd been there ever since she'd refused Stanhope's marriage proposal. As she sat on the window seat, she stared at the raindrops that meandered down the window. It reminded her of all the tears she had shed today.

"Pippa?" Pelham strolled into the study and came to stand beside her. He took her hands in his. "You're chilled. Ritson told me you've been in here all day."

When he held out his arms, she didn't hesitate. She needed the warmth and the strength of a hug that only her brother could provide her. "I told him no."

"I assume you're referring to Stanhope." He pressed a kiss to the top of her head as he sat beside her on the window seat. He shivered slightly. "Shall we sit near the fireplace?"

He tugged her to the sitting area and sat after she did. "You didn't think you could be happy with him?"

"No." She took his hand in hers. With every ounce of courage, she turned to her brother, the man who'd been more of a parent to her than her real ones. "I love you dearly."

He nodded. "I feel the same for you."

There was no sense in holding back. "I've decided that I will ask Lady Somerton's bank for a loan. I'll pay Mignon more than her asking price to make the offer more appealing since she'll have to wait for the funds. I know how you feel about me being

in trade. If you prefer, I'll live in the apartment above the dress shop."

He stood instantly and faced her. "No. Your home is here for as long as you like."

She nodded in relief. Losing his respect would have been a wound she didn't think she could survive without scars.

Gently, he grabbed her upper arms. "You are always welcome to live here or at Pelham Hall. You're my family." He shook his head. "Don't ever think that when we disagree, what I feel for you would be jeopardized. You're my sister. My family." His voice grew tender. "Understand?"

She nodded.

He released a heavy sigh. "Darling, I have something upsetting to share with you."

Instantly, she sat on the edge of the window seat. "Tell me."

"Mademoiselle Mignon's shop has been sold. There's a sign on the door. I went there today to buy it for you."

One hot tear splashed against her hand.

Then another.

She never cried, but today was extraordinary. She'd lost everything, the shop but most importantly, Hugh. She had no future. She dropped her head into her hands as tears fell. "No," she cried softly. "I can't believe it."

"I'm so sorry. It's my fault. I should have never tried to convince you to marry before I gave you the shop. But Ravenscroft said something that stuck with me. Life is

fleeting, and I want you happy. My love for you is unconditional. I don't want you to think that you must prove yourself to me. Otherwise, I'm no better than our parents. Nor do you have to prove yourself to anyone else. You deserve that shop because of who you are—a brilliant and responsible artist who makes any person she dresses beautiful beyond measure. I believe in you. I don't need to see any business plans. If you want to be in trade, that's your decision. Not mine and not your husband's."

"Oh, Dane. Thank you." Another tear fell, and he hugged her again, which made her cry harder. Only her brother could make her feel this way. For once in her life, she could leave her parents and the scars they left in the past. Finally, those ghosts were gone. She deserved and had earned the right to live the life she wanted.

But everything she wanted was not to be. First, it was marriage, then the shop, but the thing that hurt the most was Hugh.

"Don't cry, sweetheart," her brother crooned softly. "I have my solicitor combing through the recent sales of businesses. When I discover who bought it, I'll buy it from them." He placed his hands on her shoulders and lowered his gaze to hers. "I'll forever regret not buying it for you sooner."

"Dane, don't blame yourself. Mignon told me that she would give me the courtesy to match her previous offer. Perhaps she received another that was more money." She stared at the blue Aubusson carpet beneath her feet. The pattern was intricate and melded colors of the rainbow together in a symmetry that she normally found fascinating. But today, it reminded her of mud which exactly matched her thoughts. She scoffed as she wiped the tears from her face. "As for marriage? It's not in my future either."

By then, Pelham had stopped his pacing. "Why would you say that?"

She lifted her gaze to his. "Because there are very few people I could imagine

spending the rest of my life with if they weren't my family."

Pelham shook his head. "Help me understand. Wouldn't the person you marry be your family? Look at Honor and Trafford. We didn't lose her. We gained a brother. It will be the same when you choose a husband."

"I don't want to discuss it." Quickly, she stood. "If you'll excuse me?"

"No, I won't," her brother retorted. "Family is important. That's why I'm concerned about who your choice is for a husband."

"Well, if it's so important, then why aren't you married?" It was obvious to both of them that she was trying to start an argument, but she didn't care. "Why didn't you marry Grace?"

"We're not discussing my marriage prospects," he pointed out. "Dreary as they are."

"Perhaps we shouldn't be discussing mine either. If yours are dreary, then mine are abysmal." The more she thought about Hugh not caring whether she married Stanhope, the angrier she became. "There is only one person I can imagine marrying, and he doesn't want me," she shouted.

Pippa brought her hand to her mouth. How could she have let that slip from her most hidden thoughts into the open? If Dane discovered her true but unrequited feelings for Hugh, her brother would give him the cut direct and never talk to him again. That's how loyal Dane was to her and Honor. For the love of heaven, she would never forgive herself if something happened to their friendship.

Her brother's devilishly sharp mind sliced through her unspoken words. "Ravenscroft? What did he do?"

“Nothing,” she said softly. “And that’s the problem.”

“Darling...” He said softly in an effort to soothe her. “I’ll buy you a building, and you can build your business there. You’ll be even bigger than Mademoiselle Mignon’s. I promise.”

That dress shop had consumed her life for the last month. It was inconceivable, but she couldn’t think about it or her future without feeling as if she’d been stabbed in the chest. The only thing she could concentrate on was Hugh.

He didn’t even fight for her.

She stood and came to his side. “I’m tired.” She gave him a sad smile. “I meant to tell you this earlier, but I forgot. Welcome home, Dane. I missed you.” She kissed him on the cheek, then turned toward the door. “We can discuss this more tomorrow.”

Once inside her bedroom, she softly closed the door then flopped onto her bed and stared at the floral canape above her head. Alice had been in to turn down her bed. There was a nice fire and several candles lit to provide light. It didn’t help.

She was still wrapped up in a darkness that she didn’t think she’d ever find her way out of. This was the problem with falling in love. She had no doubt that Hugh felt something for her, but it wasn’t enough for him to fight for her.

A tear skated sideways down her cheek. She didn’t even bother with it. Perhaps she wasn’t enough for anyone. Her parents had certainly thought that.

She blew out a breath. She was an Ardeerton. Besides Dane had told her she was worthy of what she wanted in life. She was good enough. Dramatics would not serve her tonight. Her brother and sister loved her. Even if Hugh didn’t, she would survive and craft a life for herself filled with people she loved and who loved her. Perhaps

after her broken heart healed, she could find the strength to visit Margaret and Lady Edith. She'd just have to make certain that Hugh wasn't there when she called upon them.

Another tear fell, and she wiped it away. She was beyond fortunate. Even if Hugh didn't love her enough to fight for her, she still had experienced the most memorable few weeks of her life. She wouldn't trade the experiences she had with him for anything.

She had no doubts that she'd made the right decision about marrying Lord Stanhope. He was not her destiny. She just had to find out what it was by herself.

A soft knock sounded on the door before it opened.

Alice stepped inside her room quickly and then closed the door. "My lady, I have a note for you."

Pippa quickly dried her eyes before turning to her maid and taking the folded piece of parchment.

Alice's face fell. "My lady, what has happened?"

Pippa did her best to smile. "Nothing that I can't manage myself."

And indeed, she would manage her life to her own satisfaction.

When she opened the letter, Hugh's bold masculine handwriting greeted her.

My darling P,

I must see you. This cannot wait until a respectable visiting hour on the morrow.

My carriage and two groomsmen are waiting down at the mews at the end of the alleyway. The carriage is unmarked. Please find a way to escape your brother's protection and come to me.

Your most ardent admirer,

H

"What does it say?" Alice asked.

"It's Ravenscroft. He wants me to meet him outside the mews. He sent a coach for me." She reread the note again. There were a few ink blots as if he'd written in haste.

"The marquess's messenger boy brought it." Alice bounded on her toes. "Lord Ravenscroft," she sighed dreamily. "This is so romantic."

"This is not my idea of romance," Pippa said wearily.

Alice dismissed her grumbling with a smile. "You'll see, my lady. Besides, my elbow has been bothering me since Lord Stanhope called on you today. Change is in the air."

"I thought it was an omen of bad luck," Pippa replied sarcastically.

Alice ignored her remarks as her gaze evaluated Pippa. "It's fortunate that you're dressed so lovely. Let me get your pelisse, and we can be on our way."

"Who said I'm going?" Pippa asked defiantly. That man might think he could simply snap his fingers and she would come to him.

Obviously, he didn't know her very well if he thought that.

“My lady,” Alice chided softly.

“He’s not interested in me.”

Alice took her hand and squeezed. “A handsome man, who watches every move you make when you’re in his presence, wants to meet with you tonight.” She arched an eyebrow. “Privately.” She paused dramatically, then continued, “That same handsome man has visited you numerous times and at least, twice during those visits, helped you with your plans to purchase that dress shop. That same man went to Amesbury to plead your case with your brother even at the risk he’d jeopardize their longtime friendship. That same man always finds a way to be close to you whenever you’re under the same roof together.” She smiled gently. “That same man is begging you to meet him tonight. If that’s not romantic, then I don’t know what is. Now, are you really going to refuse him?”

Pippa had known the answer the moment she’d read the note. “Would you fetch my pelisse? I’ll also need a way to sneak out of Ardeerton House without anyone noticing.”

Somehow, Alice worked miracles and in mere moments, she’d escorted Pippa down the servant’s staircase and through the back entrance without a single person seeing them, including Ritson, who was almost as omnipotent as Dane. It never seemed to fail that he found her when she didn’t want to be found. But fate was smiling on her tonight. She walked down the alleyway toward the mews and then stopped.

Hugh was pacing in front of the carriage as if the demons from hell were on his heels.

“My lady, he looks mightily upset,” Alice confided softly.

“Or perhaps he’s nervous.” Pippa turned to her maid. “I’m nervous. How do I look?”

“Like a delectable treat he won’t be able to resist,” she chortled softly.

Pippa stole another peek at Hugh. That’s when he saw her and stopped his pacing. A ghost of a smile tugged at one side of his mouth. She’d seen him wear that expression a thousand times before, but it still stole her breath. He was happy to see her. Without hesitating, she closed the distance between them.

Hugh didn’t say a word when he took her hands and squeezed. “I’d like to take you somewhere.”

“Where?” She squeezed his hands.

“I can’t tell you. It’s a surprise.”

“My lady,” Alice whispered. “Remember my elbow.”

Pippa didn’t take her gaze away from Hugh. “Alice’s elbow predicts a change in weather.”

Hugh smiled at the servant. “I imagine that’s very handy when you’re helping Lady Pippa dress.”

Alice nodded. “But it also predicts when there’s a change coming in someone’s life.”

Pippa bit her lip, but it didn’t hold her soft laugh. Her maid was a superstitious woman, but she adored her.

Hugh reached into his pocket and pulled out a freshly starched cravat. “I need to blindfold you.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Because I want it to be a surprise where we’re going.” A grin tugged at his lips, but this was not one of his ordinary smiles. It promised kisses and tender touches in private.

Pippa frowned slightly, then laughed. She was allowing her imagination to run away with her. “Blindfolding me won’t do a bit of good. Alice will tell me where we’re going.”

“She won’t be joining us,” he murmured.

Pippa turned to Alice. She fully expected her maid to object to such a statement. But Alice merely grinned her way. “My elbow is telling me to return to the house. You’re in safe hands with his lordship. Take all the time you need. I’ll see you when you return, my lady.” She turned on the ball of foot and strolled back to the house.

“Her elbow? Since when does her elbow have anything to do with this?” She turned to Hugh. “Why is she leaving?”

“I wrote her a letter as well.”

She’d never been blindfolded and taken into a carriage. It was a bit dramatic, mysterious, and not to mention clandestine. As she thought about being alone with Hugh in a closed carriage, goosebumps flew across her arms.

“What did it say?” Her voice was breathless.

“That I want you alone,” Hugh said seductively. “One last time.”

The moonlight kissed Pippa’s cheeks. The soft glow made her skin luminescent.

Hugh’s hands itched to take her in his arms and kiss her until morning. He stood

there, simply watching her as she watched him. They were having a conversation without either of them speaking a single word.

I trust you.

I'd protect you with my life before I'd let anyone, or anything hurt you. You're mine.

Their intimacy was shattered when one of the horses stomped impatiently.

"Turn around," he said gruffly. As Hugh placed the cravat over her eyes and tied the ends around her, he leaned near and inhaled. Her sweet scent rose to greet him and for the first time in hours, he felt himself relax. Only after the silk was tightly tied did Hugh press his lips against the tender skin of her neck.

The thought that this might be the last time to touch her, hold her, or cherish her, made his chest tighten up once more. Only her husband would be allowed to touch her that way.

He sighed deeply.

"Hugh? What is it?"

It's Stanhope. I don't want that man to touch you. Nor do I want any man near you except me.

Thankfully, he didn't say it. "We should leave before the coal man makes his nightly delivery."

He held her hand as she entered the carriage. He tilted his head to the sky. He'd never considered himself a religious man, but he needed help.

He tilted his head to the sky and closed his eyes. Please don't let me be too late.

After a final look at the moon, Hugh entered the carriage and settled next to Pippa. Without a word, he took her hand in his. With his free hand, he knocked on the carriage top, signaling for the coachman to proceed to their destination.

"Are you going to give me any hints?" she said softly.

"None." He squeezed her hand. "Are you frightened?"

She shook her head.

He leaned near. "Good. You have nothing to fear from me."

The coach veered to the right as it took a sharp turn. The movement sent Pippa sliding across the bench and into his arms. Without the slightest hesitation, he put his arm around her to secure her to his side. She fit perfectly as she always did.

God as his witness, it would take little for him to make her his right here in the carriage.

Yet, she was likely promised to another.

He didn't know that for certain, and he should ask her if Stanhope had come to see her.

Selfishly, he would wait. As long as he didn't know the answer of whether she was betrothed, what they did in this carriage didn't matter.

And he could pretend that she was still his. But that was selfish and would harm her and her chance of happiness with Stanhope. For the life of him, Hugh would never

hurt her.

Bloody hell, he should have thought this through before putting her in his carriage. He should have asked her outright if she had agreed to marry Stanhope. If she had, he'd take her home immediately. He wouldn't be able to bear being in her presence otherwise.

“Pippa?” The hollowness of his voice betrayed his agony. He tipped his head back and stared at the ceiling. He didn't think he could look her in the eyes when she answered. “Did you tell Stanhope yes?”

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:45 am

When Pippa had slid across the carriage bench and into the warmth of Hugh's body, she instinctively tilted her head toward him.

"Did you tell Stanhope yes?" The tentativeness of his voice echoed softly through the carriage.

"No. I couldn't," she murmured.

"Thank God. Then I can do this." His arms came around her as he pressed his lips to hers in a kiss that could only be described as tender and mellow. When she wrapped her arms around his neck, she deepened the kiss. Her tongue traced the seam of his mouth, and he moaned deeply as he allowed her to deepen the kiss. Her tongue instantly found his in a dance that slowly revealed the passion that always swirled around them.

As she kissed him with everything she possessed, her mind whirled with one thought. She wanted him. She always had. Every time she'd ever seen him at her home or at a social event, she always made certain that she had an opportunity to chat with him. No one made her feel seen as he did. Whenever she was by his side, he turned his attention to her. He made her feel important just by the way he treated her.

For all her life, she'd remember this night. She could tell by the yearning in his kiss that he still wanted her. But it still didn't answer the question of why he didn't fight for her.

The carriage came to a slow halt, and Hugh broke away. But as if he couldn't resist her, he pressed another kiss to her lips. "We've arrived." He stood as the door

opened.

She realized he'd exited the carriage by the gentle swaying motion. But it was still pitch black, and she didn't have a clue where they were.

"Come toward me. He leaned in and took her hand. Careful of falling, Pippa stood, and with Hugh's help, she found the carriage door. As she took a step, her world tipped upside down. She was falling but she never hit the ground. Instead, she was swept into Hugh's arms. She wrapped her arms tightly around his neck.

He chuckled softly. "Did you think I'd let you fall?"

"I don't know what to think," she softly retorted.

"My lord, it's open," a voice called out.

Someone closed the carriage door, followed by a creak of wood, which indicated that someone had climbed onto the driver's bench.

"Thank you, John," Hugh called out. "I don't know how long we'll be."

"Take your time, my lord. We'll wait for you in the back."

"Who is that?" she asked.

Hugh opened a door while balancing her in his arms. "My coachman John and groomsman Jasper. They're loyal and won't tell anyone what we're doing."

"What are we doing?"

"We're crossing a threshold. Are you ready?" When she nodded, he carried her inside

somewhere, then gently set her down to stand. “Don’t take the blindfold off until I say.”

“When did you become so overbearing?” The slight smell of bee’s wax permeated the air, indicating that a candle was lit. Pippa couldn’t deduce much else as the cravat was still tied around her eyes. She took a deep sniff to see if she could tell anything else about her surroundings. A deep floral scent fragrancd the air. It was something she’d smelled before but couldn’t place.

“Are you ready?” His deep voice wrapped around her.

“Yes.”

In seconds, he had untied the necktie and took it away from her face. Instantly, she opened her eyes.

“Mademoiselle Mignon’s shop,” she said in awe as she turned slowly around. The familiar rolls of fabric that decorated the shop stood like soldiers against the wall. Each one arranged for whatever dress they were needed for. “No wonder I recognized the floral scent.” She pointed to a vase of flowers. “Mignon always has fresh flowers delivered every day.”

But the flowers would stop soon. It wasn’t Mignon’s shop anymore.

Nor was it ever going to be hers.

She turned to Hugh. “I discovered today that Mignon sold the shop.” She wiped away an errant tear. “Pelham tried to buy it for me today, but it had already been sold. So, it must have happened recently. I don’t know who owns it.”

“I know who owns it,” he said nonchalantly.

“Is that how you got the key? Why are we even here?” She didn’t hide her sarcasm or the exasperation in her voice.

Hugh bit his bottom lip and then smiled sheepishly. “Because this is yours.”

She shook her head, too afraid that she’d start crying in earnest.

“It’s yours, sweetheart,” he crooned. “I bought it for you. I don’t want you to have to sacrifice your happiness to have the life you want.”

“What?” Her eyes blinked rapidly as she tried to make sense of it all. “Why? When?”

It was inconceivable. The dream that she’d had for the last several months had evaporated. It had slipped through her fingers like water. Now, Hugh was giving it to her?

“Why would you buy this for me?” We never even discussed such a scenario.” She closed the distance between them and grabbed his lapels as she looked him in the eyes. Giddy, she shook her head. “What does this mean?” Was it an apology for not fighting for her when he’d known that Stanhope would propose to her?

Did it mean that he had feelings for her?

Did it mean that he wanted her as his wife?

She let go of his coat and took a step back.

He reached for her and placed his hands on her shoulders. “This is for you. All of it.” He squeezed her shoulders as his eyes shined with emotion. “If you had wanted to marry Stanhope, then I promised myself I’d walk away and accept it. However, I wanted you to have a choice. I don’t want you to have to marry a man that you don’t

love.”

She rested her hands on his chest. Instantly, she could feel the pounding of his heart with his racing beat matching hers. She closed her eyes, refusing to shed any tears, though she felt as if the world had fallen beneath her feet, leaving her in a freefall with no idea where she’d land.

Once she felt in control again, she opened her eyes.

“Sweetheart,” he crooned as he cupped her cheeks. “I had an epiphany, and I won’t let you go until I say my piece.” He smiled slightly. “One thing I realized is that your happiness is paramount. I can’t be happy if you’re not. Even if you marry another.”

She shook her head slightly, trying to understand. His words contradicted his actions...or lack of action. “I thought you didn’t want to fight for me.”

He scowled, and the urge to smooth away the lines on his face was nigh impossible to resist. So, she didn’t.

Pippa pressed her fingers against the furrows that lined his brow. He closed his eyes then took her wrist in his large hands and brought it to his lips. He pressed a kiss to her pulse, then licked her tender skin, sending a cascade of sensations through her.

“Stanhope said that he told you that he was going to ask for my hand, and you didn’t say a word.” Her dratted eyes filled with tears. “I never saw you. And that hurt, Hugh.” A single tear slipped, and he quickly brushed it away.

His eyes slammed shut as if she’d just slapped him. “No. Darling, no. That’s my problem. I did and do care, but I was incapable of moving. I didn’t know how to act. I want you more than I want my next breath, but I didn’t think I could give you what you wanted and needed.” He tilted her chin until their gazes met. “I didn’t know

how....”

“Then what changed your mind?”

He swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing as it betrayed the heavy emotion in his voice. “Aunt Edith and Mother shared some of the lessons they’ve learned through the years. Life is made for giving, and love is the greatest gift. I want that for you. I don’t ever want you to regret your decisions. I don’t want to regret mine. And I was doing that.” He exhaled, and his breath kissed her cheeks.

That’s when she knew that he loved her. He didn’t have to say the words, she knew the depth of his feelings for her. He had to give her this shop as it was the only way he could show her how much he truly cherished her.

She wanted to shout to the heavens as her heartbeat quickened. He did care, and he did fight for her once he found his way.

“Tell me,” he whispered. His eyes searched hers. “Why didn’t you say yes to Stanhope?”

Another tear fell, but this time she didn’t brush it away. She couldn’t help but smile tenderly. “Oh Hugh, I told him I could not marry him because I was in love with someone else.”

Relief and something else blazed in his eyes. “For the first time this evening, I feel like I can breathe. Tell me.” His thumbs caressed her cheeks. “Who is the lucky man who has won your affection?”

“You.” She kissed the palm of his hand. “You’re the only man I think I could ever love.”

He let out a shuttered breath as he rested his forehead against hers. "Thank you. I don't know what I would have done if you'd married Stanhope. Trafford told me that there is a family dinner planned and I wasn't invited. I knew then that there was a good chance I'd lost you. But I had to try." He pressed his lips to hers. "I had to."

"I know." She returned the kiss. "Come. I want to show you something." She took his hand, and together, they went upstairs to the second floor. Without hesitating, she opened a door. It was Mignon's old living quarters.

"What are we doing here?" Hugh said as she opened the tinderbox and made quick work of lighting a candle.

"I wanted to show you the rest of the store." She looked over her shoulder. "Shall we make a fire?"

He took the candle and went to work preparing a fire. It didn't take long until the glow of the fireplace lit the large room. When he was satisfied with his work, he brushed his hands then came to her side. "Am I ever going to get to kiss you?"

"Perhaps," Pippa teased as she pulled him to the bed against the far wall of the room. "This coverlet? I made it for Mignon as thank you for teaching me how to make black velvet manteaus." She pulled the ribbon that kept her simple chignon in place. Her hair fell in waves around her shoulders.

"Beautiful," he answered with a smile. He took her hair and wrapped it around his fist and pulled her in for a kiss. "Just like you."

"Now, we're going to teach each other something." She gently pushed him onto the bed.

A smile tugged his lips as he propped himself on one elbow and reached for her hip,

pulling her on top of him. “What shall we learn?”

She pressed her lips to his. “How to make love to one another.”

Her world tilted as he quickly rolled them over, being careful not to lean his full weight on her.

His chest shook with laughter. “I plan on being a star pupil.”

Hugh pressed his mouth to Pippa’s. His darling didn’t need any coaxing. She opened her mouth on a whimper, and boldly, he deepened the kiss. His tongue tangled with hers, and he groaned. She was perfect in his arms. Pippa Ardeerton made him want to be everything she thought he was. His future was with her, and hers with him. For the first time in his life, everything old was new again. And it was all because of Pippa.

He pressed two rushed kisses against her lips. “This is my first lesson. Exploring everything that makes you wonderful.” Hugh trailed his lips up her neck and nudged her ear with his nose. “What would you like?” He bit her earlobe. “Shall I kiss you everywhere or focus on one specific part?”

Nothing in his world had felt so perfect than having Pippa in his arms. She was his, and he’d make love to her in a way that she would never doubt how much she meant to him.

“Quit teasing me,” she grumbled. “Make love to me.”

He leaned on his elbows and regarded her. “The first time I make love to you, I want to see all of you.” He moved from the bed and took her hand. His Pippa appeared to be drunk with desire. Her smile was warm, and her gaze was bright. The smile she wore was one he’d never seen. Somewhat shy and somewhat bold. That was Pippa. The beautiful woman who stood before him would always surprise him with her love

and zest for life. No matter what he did in this world, there would be nothing greater than loving her and ensuring her happiness every single day they had together.

He quickly untied her gown and let it slip to the floor. She quickly pulled the laces of her stay and discarded that piece of wardrobe. The only thing left was her chemise.

“Now you.” She pulled him to a mirror that stood close to the bed. She tapped her finger as she walked a circle around him as if he were a statue.

Which was appropriate as his cock was so hard it could be mistaken for marble. Without an invitation, he pulled off his coat, unbuttoned his waistcoat, then pulled his shirt over his head. When he unbuttoned one side of his falls, she placed her hands on him. “Allow me, please.” Her eyes flared with passion. “I want to feel you. All of you tonight.”

“All right.” He held her gaze as he toed off his slippers.

She knelt and untied the ribbons holding his socks.

“I’ve never had someone do that for me.” His voice had turned husky with desire. “Do you have any idea how much I want you.”

“As much as I want you.” She slipped off his stockings and threw them off to the side. Then with a grace a ballerina would envy, she stood and unbuttoned his falls. Immediately, they fell to his hips, revealing his swollen cock. She took him in hand and pressed her thumb on the glistening crown, spreading his leaking seed. “Just as I thought. You’re perfect with or without clothes.”

“So are you,” he said softly as he pulled the tie at the neck of her chemise. She wriggled slightly and the garment fell to the floor.

In the firelight, Pippa stood like Aphrodite. He reached out and brushed the back of his hand against one hardened nipple. She sucked in a breath at the intimate touch. He stilled when he found the creases and lines that marred her perfect skin. “Oh, darling, what is this?”

“It’s from my stays.” She shrugged. “Because of the size of my breasts, my stays have to be tight, or else the dresses don’t fall correctly.

“Face the mirror,” he commanded gently.

She turned and he pulled her into his embrace with his chest meeting her back. He cupped her breasts and squeezed. She closed her eyes and tilted her head back until she was resting against his shoulder. Then, he caressed each and every line and dip he could find.

“I don’t like it,” he growled in a deep voice. “You should never wear them again. I think I’d prefer you never wore a single stitch of clothing again. You’re beautiful as you are.”

“Thank you for saying that.”

“I did it for you as much as for me, he declared. “However, I believe I’ll change my mind. I don’t want anyone staring at your beautiful body except for me. I don’t care if I’m being selfish. It’s all for me, and I don’t share.”

She giggled softly. “Let’s both be selfish. I’m not sharing you with anyone either.”

This was the way it should always be with them. Easy, loving moments designed to strengthen the bond between them.

Still cupping one breast, he slid his hand down her ribs, past her mid-drift, until he

ran his fingers through her curls. The blond strands glistened with her arousal. His cock twitched as his fingers moved through her soft, wet folds. When he circled her clitoris, he canted his hips.

“I want you. I want all of you.” He murmured into her hair. He let her go, then stood before her. He dropped to his knees and pressed a gentle kiss to her folds. “I’m a starved man, and I’m going to feast on you before I take you to that bed.” He slid his tongue through her folds.

She moaned at the hunger of his kiss, then placed one hand on his shoulder as she gripped the long sides of his hair.

He chuckled, then ran a finger through her wetness. He pulled away slightly and held up his wet finger. “This is what I’ve wanted since the first time I met you. I want you. Just like this. As anxious for me as I am for you.” He sucked his finger, and her eyes widened. “You’re all I’ve thought about and desired. I’ve taken myself in hand at least three times a day since I met you in Hyde Park.” He pulled her leg and placed it around his shoulder. “Now, be a good girl, and let me taste your sweetness. Hold on to me.” He wrapped his arm around her other hip to keep her steady. “Now, watch and see how beautiful you are when you come.”

God, this woman stood before him, giving her heart and body to him. Never had he received such a precious gift. He reverently kissed the tender nub hidden between her folds. Then he licked all the way from her entrance to her clitoris, then did it again. She mewled her pleasure, and he smiled against her.

“Again,” she sighed with pleasure. “Lick me again.”

This woman would be his equal in life and in his bed. He inserted one finger, then another.

She pulled his hair as she cried his name. He could feel the muscles of her core tighten in preparation of her orgasm. He inserted another finger, then gently moved them in an act that would soon be his cock. He circled her nub again and again. He dragged his teeth against her tender flesh.

“Yes,” she hissed. “Again.”

He did as she asked. “Look in the mirror, my darling.”

He tilted his head and saw the minute her gaze latched onto the image, looking back at her. Unable to stand anymore, she closed her eyes as she screamed his name. As she shuddered in his arms, he continued his slow torment of licking and sucking her.

A wave of emotions swept through him at her cries of ecstasy. How could he have ever denied his love for her? From now on, his days would be devoted to pleasing her, pleasuring her, and protecting her with his life. He wanted to build his entire life around this woman.

What a fool he’d been to deny these feelings for her.

She leaned her weight against him as if she couldn’t hold herself upright any longer. Without hesitating, Hugh swept her into his arms and took her to the bed. Holding her tender gaze with his, he looked his fill. He’d never seen a more beautiful sight in the world than his Pippa, satisfied and waiting for him to make her his.

Unable to resist, he took his self in hand and jerked his swollen cock once, then again.

“Let me do that.” Pippa reached for him.

His slowly shook his head with a wicked smile. “We have all night, love.”

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:45 am

Pippa had never seen such an erotic sight in all of her entire twenty-four years, her Hugh tugging on his engorged cock and staring at her body. She did that to him. She excited him the same as he excited her.

“Hugh, come to me.” She held her arms out to him.

He crawled over her with an expression that reminded her of a prowling tiger intent on pure seduction. Desire blazed in his eyes as he held his weight on his elbows.

“You’re mine,” he whispered as he took her in a kiss that curled her toes. She wrapped one leg around his hip. His cock pressed against her tender nub. It felt divine. No, it was better than divine. It was the place where she knew there were no judgments, no disappointments, and no criticism.

This was what she always wanted, to be held and cherished. What made the love tender and sweet was that it was Hugh.

He was insatiable as he kissed her. His tongue tangled with hers, and a low moan echoed in the room. Hugh reached down and put his tip next to her entrance. “Are you ready?” He pressed a kiss to her nose.

She nodded.

“Thank God,” he murmured. “I don’t know how much longer I can stand without being inside you.”

She kissed his mouth. “I can’t wait any longer either.”

“Put me in, love,” he growled.

She hid her head against his neck at the endearment. It was the first time he’d ever called her that.

“Are you turning shy?” He pressed a kiss to her cheek.

“No. You called me ‘love.’”

“Pippa,” he whispered as he cupped her cheeks and stared down at her. “I love you more than anything else in this world.” He searched her gaze. “You know that truth, don’t you?”

“I do.” She pressed a gentle kiss to his lips. “I love you.”

“Let me make you mine now and forever.”

He guided her hand down to his swollen cock. She brought it to her entrance, where he gently nudged it inside.

“More,” she said.

He pushed in deeper.

“More?” he asked. “I can wait for as long as it takes until you’re comfortable.”

“I want all of you.” She wrapped her legs around his trim waist. “Now.”

Never looking from away her, Hugh pushed further until his wide girth was seated inside of her. She’d never felt so full, but she had no qualms about being with Hugh. She loved him and wanted to share everything with him including her body.

And how appropriate that they were making love in Mignon's apartments.

He leaned down and kissed her as if he were worshipping her. The tenderness they shared between them was another thing she'd not forget about tonight.

He swiveled his hips and ground against her. She sucked in a breath. His pubic bone hit her in the perfect spot. Sensations shot through her. It was similar to her body's response to him pleasuring her.

"I'm going to move, and I want you to move with me." He pressed a kiss to her mouth.

Never taking his eyes from hers, he slowly pulled out, then tilted her hips as he pushed back in. His cock hit a spot that sent a wave of sensations through her. She sucked in a breath.

He stopped and studied her. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, do it again," she whispered.

Again, he hit that spot that stole her breath. Her body accepted him, and she lifted her hips to meet him. He repeated the motion, and pure pleasure swept through her.

Hugh started to move faster and braced his weight on his forearms. "Look at us."

Her gaze shifted from his handsome face to the sight of his cock entering her over and over. As if he couldn't control himself, his hips moved faster and faster until they reminded her of pistons. Still holding her, he pulled her closer. His eyes clenched as he fought for control. She could feel another orgasm building inside of her. The earth could fall apart around them, and she wouldn't care. All she wanted was him.

He kissed her, then called her name.

She couldn't answer as her body pulsed with another release. Her muscles contracted around Hugh's cock, and he closed his eyes. His mouth was open as if in agony, but then he roared her name. She could feel his release flooding her. Afterward, he collapsed atop her body with his head nestled into her neck.

"I love you, Pippa Ardeerton."

She had no idea how long they stayed in the position. His weight pressed upon her, but she didn't care. It felt like home, and she never wanted to leave it.

She ran her fingers through his damp hair. "I love you, Hugh Alexander James Calthorpe, the Marquess of Ravenscroft."

He stayed in position but chuckled slightly. He pressed a tender kiss to her neck, then rolled them until she was the one on top of him.

"This is much better," he said, then pressed a kiss to her lips.

She placed her hand over his heart, the strong, steady beat comforting under her hand. "I'm glad we made love here for the first time."

"Why is that?" He asked tenderly as he brushed a lock of hair behind her ear. He cupped her cheek and caressed the skin with his thumb, slowly moving her cheekbone.

"Well, everything started because of this place." She pressed a kiss in the center of his chest. "I wanted to marry in order to have this shop, and you stopped me."

"Do you have any regrets?" His hand stilled as his gaze locked with hers. "Do you

have any regrets about me?”

“Hugh, I love you.” She pressed her lips against his. “I knew that you loved me when you gave me the key to the shop.” She wiped a tear from her eyes. “This is where we consummated our love. This is where I found my family.” She pressed another kiss to his lips. “This place brought you to me.”

He rolled them over again. “I love you with every part of who I am.” He grasped her head with his hands while holding his weight on his elbows. “I can’t believe I was actually asinine enough to believe that I could walk away from you. Will you forgive me?”

She nodded. “I think both of us were too afraid to take a risk on our happiness.” She traced his lips with her finger. “We were both scared. But there was one key difference. You had parents who loved you with all their hearts. I hope I can learn more about that and about you from your mother.”

He smiled. “She would like that. But remember, your brother and sister love you with all their hearts.”

She smiled as the rush of affectionate memories crowded her thoughts. “Indeed. They were my salvation and my strength as I grew up. As an adult, I always knew that no matter what would happen, I’d have their support.” She gazed at him and sighed. “Honor and Trafford will be thrilled we’re marrying. Pelham will be as well.”

He rolled onto his side. “I agree. He’s been through this before with Trafford and your sister. Besides, your brother and I have been friends forever.” His gaze searched hers. “Speaking of forever, will you love me that long?”

“Always and then even more,” she said softly as she bent to kiss him. His tongue flicked against her lips, and she moaned.

“I want you. I have wanted you the first time I saw you. I’ll never stop wanting you.” He wrapped his arms around her and deepened the kiss. Suddenly, he stilled. “Do you hear that?”

Pippa didn’t breathe as footsteps sounded below them. “I do. Someone is here.”

Hugh pressed another kiss against her lips and then stood quickly. “I locked the door. I don’t know who that can be.”

“Do you think someone broke in?” Pippa covered herself with the coverlet.

“I don’t know, love.” Hugh picked up the clothes that lay scattered around the room. He threw her dress and chemise next to her on the bed. “I’ll go see. Get dressed, darling. Lock the door behind me.” Quickly, he pulled on his breeches and buttoned the fall. Then he threw on his shirt.

In seconds, he was making his way down the steps.

Pippa jumped from the bed and slid the bolt on the door. Quickly she threw on her chemise, then donned her gown.

There was no noise from downstairs. She pressed her ear against the door to see what was happening. Her heart raced at the thought that Hugh might be in danger from the intruder.

“Bloody hell,” Hugh called out. “It’s you.”

“It’s me,” a sarcastic but muffled voice called out.

She couldn’t tell who it was, but she relaxed. If Hugh knew the man, then they weren’t in danger.

“When I’m done with you, you’ll rue the day you were ever born,” the stranger threatened. “Now, where is my sister?”

Her head fell against the door with a thud. She couldn’t decide whether to pound or rest it against the wood.

Bloody hell, indeed.

Of all the rotten luck. He had to be here now.

It was Pelham.

Hugh crept down the stairs not making a sound. Whoever was in the shop walked in his direction. As the footsteps came nearer, Hugh squared his shoulders and widened his stance. On many occasions, he’d used such a posture to discourage riffraff from thinking they could rob him when he was alone walking the streets. If that didn’t work, the dressmaker shears he held would discourage the perpetrator.

The steps were louder, and Hugh waited to confront the person. Just then a familiar blond head came into view. “Bloody hell. It’s you.”

“It’s me.” Pelham arched a perfect aristocratic eyebrow. His gaze slid to Hugh’s slippers, up his naked calf, followed his torso, then rested on his face. “No need to dress so formally on my account.”

Hugh exhaled and laid the shears on the small table beside him.

“I wouldn’t have put those down if I were you.” Pelham’s mouth hitched on one side like an angry dog. “When I’m done with you, you’ll rue the day you were born. Now, where is my sister?”

There was no use playing games with his friend. “Upstairs.”

Pelham cursed and pursed his lips. He shook his head, and his body trembled with anger. “Et tu Brute?” He regarded Hugh with a coldness he’d never seen before. “First, it was Trafford who mauled my oldest sister. Now, you with my youngest?”

Hugh held up a hand. “Don’t rush to judgment.”

“Seriously? The way you’re dressed? Do you think I don’t know what happened? Don’t be coy. It’s not becoming,” he growled.

Pelham actually growled. Hugh had never seen him like this except when he’d discovered Trafford in bed with his sister. Hugh would not apologize for loving Pippa, but there was no denying his friend deserved better than to find Hugh in a state of dishabille because he’d made love to his best friend’s sister without the benefit of marriage. “I’m sorry.”

Pelham lifted his palm outward. “Enough. Who needs enemies when I have best friends who defile my sisters behind my back.” He stood in a stance of pure fury. “I’m going to take Pippa home and see that she’s all right. Then”—Pelham pointed at Hugh’s chest—“you and I are going to meet at Hampstead Heath at daybreak. Name your second.” He huffed out a breath. “I’d name Trafford, but I’m certain he’ll take your side.”

“Dane,” a soft voice scolded from behind him.

They both turned to find Pippa with her hair thrown into a messy chignon and her dress gapping in the back. She’d only been able to tie the top fastening.

“You will not fight a duel with your best friend.”

“I don’t have any.” Pelham ran a hand through his hair, grabbing at the ends as if trying to control himself. He took a deep breath and went to Pippa’s side. He took her hands in his and squeezed. “Darling, are you all right?”

“Glorious. Fit as a fiddle,” she answered with a smile.

Finally, she turned her attention to him. “Are you all right, Hugh?”

Pelham recoiled at the tenderness in her voice as she used his Christian name. “I think I’m going to be ill.”

“Dane, that isn’t helping.” Pippa rolled her eyes.

“I’m not here to help. I’m here to rescue.” Her brother took off his coat and placed it around her shoulders. Not letting go of Pippa’s hand, Pelham pulled her toward the shop door. “Ravenscroft, be at my house at the first break of dawn, or there will be hell to pay.”

With a decisive slam of the door, they were gone, leaving Hugh alone. He buried his head in his hands. This was a disaster, and it was all his fault. He shouldn’t have made love with Pippa without marrying her. Hell, he couldn’t marry her unless he courted her properly. She deserved such respect, especially since she’d been so hesitant about marrying in the first place. What had he done except make her life more difficult? Now, she had to face her angry brother.

Who just happened to be his best friend and was livid with him.

Livid was perhaps to tame a word. Enraged was more like it. Guilt coursed through Hugh’s veins. No one was more protective of his sisters than Pelham, and he had every right to call Hugh out for his behavior.

He turned around and headed back upstairs. Quickly, he finished dressing and then locked the door.

As he walked to his carriage, he grimaced slightly. He'd never felt more alone in his life. A full moon shone bright in the sky, but he didn't have a shadow trailing him. Even it had abandoned him.

"My lord?" his coachman called out. "The Duke of Pelham was looking for you. When he saw your coach, he had his carriage stop and asked where you were. Did he find you?"

"He did."

All the while finding more than he bargained for.

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:45 am

Pippa held her head high as Pelham helped her into the carriage.

When the carriage door slammed shut, he took the seat opposite her and knocked on the ceiling, signaling they were ready to return home. Without a word, he opened a hidden compartment and took out a garment. "Put this on. It's part of my domino for masquerades. It'll hide your state of undress."

There was no scorn or derisiveness in his tone. Perhaps they could discuss this like adults. "Thank you." She took the cloak from him. "That's very thoughtful of you."

He nodded but continued to stare out the window, refusing to look at her.

"Dane, I know that you're upset."

Without changing his view, he held out his hand and took hers. He squeezed as if she were the only thing keeping him afloat in a choppy sea. Her tears swelled, and one rogue drop ran down her cheek. He turned to her then tenderly brushed it away just like he'd done when she was a little girl and had scrapped her knee or cut herself trying to pare an apple. He'd always been there for her, and it was devastating to think he was angry or worse, disappointed in her.

"I'm sorry that I caused you pain or anger." She glanced at their clasped hands and thought of all the times he'd been her champion when their parents had been on their worst behavior, sending her back and forth as a weapon between them.

Like a flash of lightning, he was beside her. He opened his arms, and she fell into his embrace. He rocked her gently as the tears fell in rivers down her cheek.

“Don’t cry, darling. I can take anything except your tears.” He leaned back and pulled a handkerchief out of his waistcoat. He dried the tears that ran down her face. “Are you sure you’re all right? He didn’t hurt you, did he?”

“No. He was wonderful.” She smiled slightly. “I don’t want you to be angry at Hugh.”

He stiffened slightly at the name.

“I was the one who...caused this.” She hung her head.

“Darling, don’t.” He tilted her chin until she could look into his eyes. Anger still burned bright, but there was a softness there as well. “He should have honored you and come to see me first.” By then, the carriage had pulled into the circular drive of Ardeerton House. “Everything will be better in the morning. We both simply need a good night’s sleep.” He pulled her close and kissed the top of her head. The carriage door opened, and Pelham exited. “Bloody hell.”

His murmur was loud enough that Pippa could hear it. “What’s wrong?”

He gave her his hand and helped her out of the carriage. Two other vehicles were in the circular driveaway. Every conceivable chandelier was lit in the house. It was brighter than the midday sun.

“We have company.” Pelham wrapped her arm around his and slowly walked her to the door.

“It’s Honoria and Trafford.” Her voice shook, but she squeezed his arm with her hand. “I’m glad they’re here.”

Pelham ran a hand down his face. “Grace is here as well. It’s going to be a long

night.”

Ritson opened the door as soon as they reached it. “Lady Pippa, it’s good to have you home.” He turned to Pelham with a relieved smile. “Your Grace.”

Her brother nodded. “Where are they?”

“In your study, sir,” Ritson answered.

Without hesitating, Pelham escorted her to their guests. The door was open and as soon as they entered, the conversation stopped. Honoria’s eyes widened, and she ran forward and enveloped Pippa in her arms. “I’m so glad you’re home. We were so worried about you.”

“There was no need. Alice knew where I was.” Pippa took a step back and held her sister’s hand. “I now know what you felt when Dane found you with Trafford,” she whispered.

Honoria squeezed her hand. “All will be well.”

Pelham had walked to Grace’s side. They were chatting with their heads close together.

Trafford came to stand beside his wife and Pippa. “He seems to be taking it well, don’t you think?”

Honoria lifted one brow. “You know our brother. He’s like one of those underground geysers that explode without any notice.”

Trafford laughed as he wrapped his arm around his wife’s waist. “You’re right.” He turned to Pippa. “We’re here for support. Anything you need from us, just name it.”

“I’ll name it. It’s very simple,” Pelham growled. Somehow, he’d snuck up on all of them. “How to stop this from turning into a scandal.”

“It’s not a scandal, Dane, if you were the one to find them.” Grace came to stand beside Pippa. She wrapped her arm around Pippa’s shoulder and directed her to one of the many sitting areas in Pelham’s study. “Would you like a brandy?”

“There she goes acting as if she was the duke of the house,” Pelham murmured. “It’s my bloody brandy.”

“Ignore him,” Grace chuckled. “We all do.”

Pippa smiled weakly. “Yes, I’d like one.”

Pelham did the honor of pouring everyone a fingerful and distributed the glasses.

Grace finished hers in one swallow. “I needed that,” she exclaimed softly, then gave Pippa an understanding smile. “I’m sure you do, too.”

By then, Honoria, Trafford, and Pelham had sat down.

Sprawled like a lion regarding the pride he commanded, Pelham relaxed in a club chair. “Pippa, they all know that I went hunting the streets of London for you. I decided to see if you’d gone to Mademoiselle Mignon’s shop to investigate.” He chuckled slightly. “Remember when you left the house in the middle of the night to discover if that vixen had returned with her pups after they’d grown up? You always were curious.” He let out a breath, the weariness was visible on his face.

“How did you know I’d left the house?” She shouldn’t be so surprised. Her brother truly had an uncanny intuition when it came to her or Honoria.

“Seriously?” He shook his head, clearly admonishing her. “Being incognito and escaping Ardeerton House like a spy for the crown doesn’t really work with me. I went to your room to chat about Ravenscroft. When I didn’t find you, I called for Alice. She told me that you left with him in a carriage.” He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his legs, and regarded her. “I went to his house first. His butler said he’d left for the evening. I went to Honor and Trafford’s. He wasn’t there.” He pointed to their sibling and her husband. “That’s why they’re here.”

“We sent word to Grace. We were worried,” Honoria confessed. She looked to Trafford, who pulled her close and pressed a kiss to the crown of her head. He turned to Pelham.

Still holding his wife, Trafford turned to her brother. “Ravenscroft should be here. Shall we send for him?”

“No,” Pippa exclaimed. The tension in the room could already be sliced with a dull knife. It would be a disaster to have Hugh here. He couldn’t come until Pippa had ensured her family that everything was fine.

“Pippa,” Grace said softly. “Why don’t you want him here?”

“She’s concerned that I’ll kill him.” Pelham leaned back in his chair. “She should be. I challenged him to a duel at the dress shop.”

Trafford bent his head, but by the shaking of his shoulders, everyone knew he was laughing.

Pelham arched an aggravating eyebrow. “I told Ravenscroft that he could ask you to be his second. I knew you would take his side anyway.”

“Pelham, I’m laughing because you need to see the humor in this. Doesn’t it remind

you of Honor and me?” Trafford smirked slightly. “Give it up, old man.”

Her brother simply nodded. “He’s coming tomorrow at first light.” He turned to Grace. “How quickly should they marry?”

“Soon.” She smiled slightly. “Everyone has seen them together at ton events. It won’t be a surprise.”

“We should wait.” The words were out of Pippa’s mouth before she could stop them.

Slowly, her brother swiveled his hardened gaze to hers. “For what reason? Do you have doubts about Ravenscroft or marriage? If you think he won’t marry you, he will. I promise.”

“That’s not it.” Even though Hugh hadn’t asked her, she knew that he would. “Well...” For a moment, she struggled with what to say. “You see, I want to do it my way.”

Pelham narrowed his gaze. “What is this about? You were compromised. He has to marry you.”

“But you don’t know Hugh like I know him.” No one moved or said a word. They all simply stared at her.

“I would agree.” Pelham’s voice had dropped an octave. He only ever talked like that when he was beyond agitated. “However, you don’t need to point out the obvious. We’re all aware that you know him. Just like ‘Adam knew Eve and she...conceived.’”

“For the love of heaven, Dane,” Grace scolded. “There’s no need for histrionics.”

Honor shook her head. As she stood beside Pippa, she laced their fingers together in a show of solidarity. Grace joined them and took Pippa's other hand.

Pelham huffed his frustration and looked to the ceiling. "Do you deny that there's a chance of a babe?" He shook his head, then turned to Pippa. The redness in his eyes betrayed the heavy emotion that he felt in that moment. "I never wanted any of my sisters ruined or compromised or left vulnerable." He fisted his hands and slowly released them. It was as if he were trying to rein in his emotions. "I simply wanted you both happy. And protected. My best friends in the world betrayed me and you." He pointed to Honor, then Pippa.

"No, Dane. Hugh liberated my heart from its self-created cage." Pippa came forward and took her brother's hand. "Sometimes love refuses to listen or even acknowledge what a person thinks she wants. It does what it's designed to do. Devastate. Dominate. Then beautifully captivate." She'd never loved her brother more than she did right now. He would always protect her. "It's too powerful to fight. At least, for me."

"And for me," Honor added softly.

"As well as me," Trafford said, then kissed his wife tenderly.

Pippa smiled as she squeezed her brother's hand. "And I wouldn't change a thing that's happened between Hugh and me. So don't blame your best friends. I'm your sister. If you think Hugh betrayed you, then I did as well."

"And I did as well," Honor came forward and took his other hand. "But know that you have nothing to regret. You're the best brother in the world. You've taught us how to be brave. With that courage, we learned what love was and weren't fearful of it."

“We love you,” Pippa stood and kissed his cheek.

Honorina kissed the other one.

He bit his lip and exhaled painfully. “I’m an Ardeerton. Nothing will defeat me,” he murmured his favorite creed for their ears only. When they grinned at his antics, he grabbed both of them into a hug. “And you both are the best sisters in the world.”

“Hear, hear,” Grace called out with tears in her eyes.

Trafford came to his side and patted him on the back. “The best brother-in-law a man can ask for.”

“Thank you, my friend.” Pelham let go of her and Honorina, then turned to Grace. “Governess? I will leave the plans in your capable hands.”

“They can announce the betrothal tomorrow, and we’ll start calling the banns.” She pulled a small journal and pencil out of an attached pocket on her gown. “Unless you want a special license. Or a bishop’s license. A private wedding with honored guests at St. Paul’s would be lovely this time of year,” she offered.

Pelham turned to her. “Thoughts?”

“We’re not to that point yet.” Heat licked Pippa’s cheeks.

“I beg your pardon?” Pelham’s face grew incredulous “What do you mean?”

“I am an Ardeerton. Nothing will defeat me,” she murmured as she peeked at her brother. “It worked for you. I’m hoping it will work for me.”

Dane chuckled, which was her intention.

She took a big breath, hoping to bolster her fortitude to see this through. She had an idea how her brother would react to the news. However, like one of her dress designs, she had a plan as to how to proceed. “Hugh hasn’t asked me to marry him.”

“That won’t be a problem,” Pelham drawled. “If he doesn’t ask for your hand, I’ll simply kill him.”

That’s when utter chaos erupted. Everyone talked at once.

“You can’t do that,” Grace cried. “That’s even a bigger scandal.”

“Dane, for heaven’s sake. This is Hugh and Pippa you’re discussing so recklessly.” Honor shook her head. “This is exactly what you did to Marcus.”

“Everyone, please,” Trafford called out. “He’s an honorable man. When Ravenscroft arrives tomorrow, I assure you he will have a proposal for Pippa, and an apology for Pelham.”

“I’ll handle it,” her brother grumbled.

“I have another idea,” Pippa said. “Just leave it to me.”

Hugh stepped out of his carriage and studied the impressive architecture of Ardeerton House. Today, there was almost a foreboding heaviness that surrounded the great house.

His life-long friend had every right to be angry with him. He’d taken his sister to bed without thought to the consequences. Though, it was the truth that Pippa had been the one to take him to bed, Hugh should have done better by both of them. Well, today would be his first attempt to reconcile the breach that defined their friendship.

As he reached the top of the steps, Ritson swung open the door. "It's early sir, but His Grace is waiting for you."

"Thank you." He gave his hat and cane to a footman who stood beside the butler. "I don't know how long this will take, but I don't imagine I'll be long. I know the way. I'll see myself to his study."

"Beg your pardon, sir. But His Grace asked that I accompany you in the house." Ritson turned sharply on his heel and proceeded down the passageway that lead to Pelham's study.

Hugh let out a breath. He'd been here so many times that Pelham's staff didn't even bat an eye when he appeared and escorted himself to see Pelham. Things must be worse than what he thought if Pelham was forbidding him from walking freely in his home.

He cleared his throat. "Is Lady Pippa available afterward?"

Ritson stopped slowly, then turned to Hugh with a look that could only be construed as a censure. "I'm afraid not, my lord."

Without explaining more, he turned and marched down the hall with Hugh trailing behind like a lost lamb. He exhaled loudly. Why did it feel as if he were being lead to the gallows?

When they reached the familiar door of Pelham's study, Ritson knocked once.

"Enter," Pelham called out.

Ritson opened the door then stood aside to let Hugh inside. He stopped at the scene before him. Trafford sat in front of Pelham's massive desk and Pelham sat behind it

in all his glory. With his blond hair around his shoulders and completely dressed in black, he could have been mistaken for the angel of death or the devil himself.

“Your Grace,” Ritson called out in the most obnoxious booming voice. “The Marquess of Ravenscroft has arrived.”

Trafford stood in welcome, but Pelham still sat and stared at him. Finally, he stood and nodded at his butler. “That’ll be all.”

Each step that Hugh took to meet his friend felt like a mile. He swallowed his discomfort. These were his lifelong friends. Trafford had been in the same place as Hugh stood now.

And Pelham had forgiven him. Surely, he could expect the same forgiveness.

Trafford reached out and placed an arm around his shoulder as he shook his hand. “You’ll be fine. Let him say his piece. Do what he wants, and we can all put this incident behind us.”

Hugh nodded, then turned to the man who had murder in his eyes. “Pelham,” he said in greeting.

Pelham walked around the desk. “It says something that you’re here.”

“Let me start by saying?—”

Pelham didn’t let him finish as his fist collided with Hugh’s stomach with a sickening thud. Instantly, Hugh’s breath was knocked out of him. He bent over in half and steeled himself to will away the pain.

“That’s for defiling my sister.” Pelham didn’t even blink.

“You have every right to dole out such punishment,” Hugh wheezed as he fought for a breath. He couldn’t focus as everything was blurred. For a moment, he thought he’d cast up his accounts. Somehow, he found the fortitude to slowly stand. “But I want you to know?—”

He didn’t see the second fist coming. Instantly, Hugh dropped to his knees as the pain became overwhelming, and he couldn’t support his weight.

“That’s for buying Mademoiselle Mignon’s dress shop out from under me.” He narrowed his eyes as he studied Hugh. “Old man, it doesn’t look like you can take much more. So, I’ll add that the second punch was also for betraying our friendship.”

“That’s magnanimous of you not to punch him again,” Trafford offered.

By then, Hugh was on all fours, gasping for breath as his abdominal muscles had turned to mush. Stars swirled around his peripheral vision, enhancing his dizziness. But he refused to collapse. Pelham could have his due, but Hugh would not leave until he’d had his say. Then, he had to find Pippa.

“That’s enough, don’t you think?” Hugh rasped. His ears rang, and he didn’t know if he said the words aloud or not. “You’ve said your piece loud and clear.”

“Ravenscroft does have a point,” Trafford commented as he stood over Hugh and studied him. “You never hit me over Honoria.”

“That’s because she wouldn’t let me.” Pelham shook his hand up and down. “Bloody hell. I forgot how much that stings. Besides, you would have fought back.”

Trafford nodded. “But I must say your right hook is impressive.”

“Gentleman Jim helped me perfect it. Comes in handy when the clientele at the Jolly

Rooster become too inebriated and start to fight.” Pelham extended his hand to Hugh to help him up from the ground.

Hesitantly, Hugh took it and managed to make it to his feet.

Pelham went around his desk and sat down. He held up a teapot from a tea service that was before him. “Would you like a cup, or would you prefer a brandy?”

“Tea for me,” Trafford called out jovially. “Honor and I are meeting the architect this morning to go over the final drawings for the foundling home.”

Pelham nodded as he poured the tea and slid the cup and saucer to Trafford. “For you?” he asked Hugh as if nothing violent had transpired in the last five minutes.

“Brandy,” he wheezed.

“Excellent choice. I’ll join you,” Pelham said as he poured two glasses. “Raise your glasses, gentlemen.”

As Trafford lifted his cup, Hugh could barely move his arms. His gut still hurt like the devil.

“To our friendship and to the future.” Pelham emptied his glass and set it on the table.

“To friendship and the ties that bind us,” Trafford said, then took a sip of his tea.

“To surviving the next hour,” Hugh muttered. He shook his head to clear some of the fog that still lingered, then emptied the glass.

“Now, I called you here, but Pippa, being Pippa, insisted that I not do anything to undermine her plans.” Pelham leaned back in his chair and regarded Hugh. “What are

your intentions?”

“My intentions are to apologize to you?—”

“You’re forgiven,” Pelham interrupted him. “And Pippa?”

“I need to speak with her first before I can discuss it with you.” Hugh didn’t turn from the duke’s challenging gaze.

“Oh, really,” Pelham drawled. “Don’t you think as her brother I should be made aware of what you two plan to discuss?”

“You weren’t aware of their plans last night when they were at the dress shop,” Trafford added unhelpfully. “It’s probably best that you allow Ravenscroft to have his way in this. I felt the same about Honoria.”

“That’s one way of thinking about this conundrum,” Pelham added, still staring at Hugh.

It was like a macabre play, and they all played a part. The only problem is that Hugh didn’t know what play they were performing.

“Am I missing something? Is that it for the punishment?” He let out a breath.

Pelham ran a hand through his hair, his frustration evident. “I just wished you’d come to me directly before giving her the dress shop without a word to me.”

“I didn’t know you were going to buy it.” Hugh sat on the edge of his seat. “I didn’t want her to have to do anything that she didn’t want to do.”

“Marrying Stanhope?” Pelham asked.

Hugh nodded. “I didn’t want her to marry without knowing how I felt.”

Pelham lifted an eyebrow.

“I love her. I want her for my wife?—”

Pelham lifted his hand to stop Hugh from finishing his thought. He picked up a folded piece of parchment, then handed it to Hugh. “I’ve been instructed to give this to you.”

Trafford was smiling like a fool. There was even a hint of a smile on Pelham’s lips.

“What is this?” Hugh asked as he examined the letter. It was in Pippa’s distinctive handwriting. He turned it over. The wax seal was her personal signet.

“Read it here or in your carriage if you’d care for privacy.” Pelham nodded toward the letter. “But when you have the chance”—he leaned toward Hugh and lowered his voice—“make certain you answer the question correctly.”

Hugh nodded, unsure of what was happening. “What question?”

Pelham shook his head. “We’ll chat later.”

Hugh didn’t wait. He carefully slid a finger under the seal and lifted it from the parchment. Gently, he unfolded the letter.

Dear Lord Ravenscroft,

Please do me the honor of meeting me at Hyde Park at the nine o’clock hour for the express purpose of discussing matrimony. Specifically, matrimony with me. You can find me near the scenic view of the Serpentine, dressed in the same peacock-colored morning gown that I wore when you met me there to inform me that you’d received

my correspondence and had read it.

I still can't fathom that you did that.

Regardless, I am prepared to offer you a handsome settlement for your hand.

Yours,

Lady Pippa Ardeerton.

P.S. Come alone. Whatever your plans, do not bring Trafford or my brother. We don't want to make this a spectacle.

Hugh read the letter again and then read it once more. The little minx had finally written him a letter the same as she'd written to her original five marital candidates. He tilted his head to the ceiling and smiled. But his joy was too great not to laugh. But as soon as he did, he had to wrap his arms around his midsection. His muscles still protested the punishment Pelham had meted out.

"What does it say?" Pelham asked with a smile.

Gingerly, he stood to his full height. With another deep breath, his muscles started to relax. "It seems I have an assignation with your youngest sister. She wants to ask me a question, a very important one, and I don't want to be late."

"Shall we go with you?" Trafford asked.

Hugh shook his head. "Thank you. But this is something I want to do alone." He leaned across Pelham's desk and extended his hand. "Friends?"

The duke nodded as he shook his hand. "Friends."

Hugh was grinning like a fool, and he didn't care. He had a suspicion that this was going to be one of the best days of his life. "Remember those letters she sent to the men she wanted to ask to marry so she could buy the dress shop?"

Pelham nodded as a smile tugged at his lips. "Indeed."

"I finally received one," Hugh said proudly. "She's waiting for me at Hyde Park."

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:45 am

Pippa smoothed her pelisse and the matching gown underneath. It didn't really need it, but she was nervous. Which she expected was perfectly normal since it wasn't every day that you gave your heart to another and asked that person to marry you all the while explaining that you love them more than anyone else in the world.

This day was so much like that fateful day when Hugh stormed across the park with all her letters tucked away. The sun was shining brightly, and it was early enough that there was no one else to gawk at them or think something scandalous was occurring.

She chuckled lightly to herself. Something scandalous had happened last night. She'd treasured last night with Hugh even if her brother had been distraught over the events. However, she had seen Pelham this morning, and he seemed to be in high spirits. He even thought her plan was brilliant.

Now, it was time to see if a certain marquess thought it brilliant as well.

"Oh, my lady," Alice crooned. "Look. I believe it's your handsome marquess who's approaching."

"He's not mine. Yet." Pippa tugged her gloves for a tighter fit. Her heart skipped a beat at the sight of his long legs eating the distance between them. She could tell by the breadth of his shoulders and the keen fit of his breeches that it was Hugh Calthorpe, the Marquess of Ravenscroft, the love of her life. The sun's rays danced in his onyx-colored strands, marking him, making him appear like her very own mythical hero who'd finally made his way home.

If he said yes, then she'd be home as well.

“Keep your fingers crossed for me.”

“No need for luck, my lady.” She pointed to her elbow with a knowing nod. “It’s been bothering me something fierce this morning. Change is coming.”

“I pray you are correct, my dear Alice.” Pippa had to remind herself to take a deep breath as he strolled near. This was no time to be mawkish, meek, or sheepish. She had business to attend to. “My lord,” she said with a smile when he came to her side.

“Lady Pippa.” Without taking his eyes from hers, he called out to Alice. “Good day, Miss Roberts.”

“Oh, my lord,” Alice gushed. “What a fine day it is whenever we see you.”

“I feel the same about you,” he murmured to Pippa.

“Alice, I think you should wait in the carriage,” Pippa instructed her maid. Without any objection, the maid nodded her head and walked back to the entrance of the park.

“What about a chaperone?” Hugh quirked an eyebrow.

“I promise not to compromise you,” Pippa murmured. “At least not as much as I did last night.”

“Pity,” he teased. “I liked last night’s compromise. I rather fancy being ruined.”

“As do I,” she answered. Her gaze met his. His eyes were molten as they regarded her. It reminded her of last night and how he’d taken her. He’d been ravenous for her, and the same could be said for her. “I take it that you saw my brother.”

He winced slightly. “I did, and I think we’ve come to terms with each other. I let him

take a few jabs at me.”

“What?” She cried. “No.” She covered her hand over her mouth to hide her shock. “Are you all right? I thought we were beyond that type of barbaric behavior.”

“Pippa,” Hugh said in his familiar deep rumble that made her melt inside. “Your brother had every right to be angry. I apologized, and we’ve put it behind us. Don’t worry. I may be a little sore, but I think we can repeat last night’s performance if you’d like.” He waggled his eyebrows.

“You, sir, are the devil. And I’m completely enchanted.”

“That’s my aim, my lady.” He bowed his head.

“Good. Now, would you walk with me? I have a proposal for you.”

He offered his arm without hesitating, and she wrapped hers around his and pulled him close.

“Sounds scandalous,” he murmured. “I can’t wait.”

“It is pretty scandalous when a man buys a business for a woman without her knowing it.” She slid him a side-eyed gaze. “Thank you again for buying Mignon’s shop for me.”

“You’re welcome.” He reached into the inside pocket of his waistcoat and pulled out her letter. “I received this today. May I say that my pride has been restored now that you think me an acceptable marriage candidate?”

She lightly tapped his arm with her fan. “You and I both know you weren’t my first choice. But you’ll do now.”

“Just put the knife here, my lady.” Hugh dramatically placed his hand over his heart. “It would be more efficient.”

She shook her head with a laugh. “Luckily for me and you, my requirements have changed for a suitable husband.”

He pulled her into a small grove of weeping willows that hid them from preying eyes. “This sounds serious.”

“Extremely.” Pippa grabbed his lapels and held on tight. “You see, I don’t want a husband.”

He pulled her into his embrace and pressed a kiss to her lips. “You don’t?”

“Too boring,” she conceded. “I want a husband-husband. And I think you’re the perfect candidate for the job.”

Hugh threw back his head and laughed heartedly. If people didn’t know they were hiding behind the trees, they certainly did now. “Finally, you see my worth.”

Pippa turned serious. “You’ve always been a rare treasure to me, Hugh.”

A tender smile replaced his laughter. Hugh cupped her cheek. “I think that’s the loveliest compliment I’ve ever received.”

Pippa wrapped her arms around his neck. “Let me say more lovely things to you every day of our lives. Will you do me the great honor of agreeing to be my husband? I promise I shall love and cherish you forever.”

He cupped both cheeks and stared into her eyes. For the longest time, he didn’t say a word. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. "I could say something cliché such as 'you're my heart and soul,' or perhaps, 'you complete me,' but that's so superficial." She bit her lip. "I've never loved anyone like I love you. If I can't trust my heart, then I haven't been listening or learning what it's been trying to teach me. It's been telling me since we first danced to grab ahold of you tightly and never let you go."

"Pippa," he crooned softly.

She placed her fingers against his lips to keep him from speaking. He gently bit them as his eyes blazed with affection. It was a promise of more passionate lovemaking in their near future.

"Let me say everything first. Otherwise, I'm going to start crying, and I'll forget everything I must share." She blinked away the tears and searched his gaze, willing him to see inside her heart and how ready it was to let him inside. "I know you're frightened of what might happen in the future. So am I. But I want to take that risk, Hugh. I want to take that risk with you. We've been given a precious gift. Let's enjoy every day, hour, minute, and seconds that we have together." This time, she let the tear fall. "Marry me. I promise to love you forever."

He wiped away the tear, then rested his forehead against hers. "After Stanhope came to see me, I was terrified. But my darling aunt and lovely mother taught me not to be. They encouraged me to allow myself to love and cherish you. With you, I can learn not to fear the future because I know that no matter what happens, you will always have my heart. And I will always have yours." He pressed a kiss to her lips but didn't pull away. "The answer is yes, I'll marry you. Now, who shall we tell first? Your family or mine?"

"I don't care. We could invite them to Ardeerton House and tell them together." Pippa bit gently on his lower lip. With a groan of desire that curled her toes, he opened for her. Without hesitating, she deepened the kiss and fell into his arms.

She'd never had a kiss like this one from him. It was filled with light, passion, promises of a brilliant future, family, and happiness. It was everything she could have hoped for and more.

Because it was Hugh.

And he would always love her, just as she would always love him.

"Excellent idea to meet at Ardeerton House." Hugh kissed her again. "Let's send Alice back to Ardeerton House, and Ritson can send for our families. That will give us enough time to stop at your dress shop and do a thorough inventory of each other." He wagged his brows. "Much like we did last night."

"Your aunt is going to be over the moon at the news," Pippa said with a laugh.

"I'm going to be over the moon as soon as I have you alone in the shop and remove that gorgeous gown and pelisse from you." He tugged her toward his carriage. "Let's consummate this marriage before we say I do."

Hugh stood inside the entry of Ardeerton House, ready to escort his fiancée into the family salon where he and Pippa would announce their plans for marriage to their respective families. It sounded as if the party had already started if the shouts of laughter and glee that echoed down the hall were any indication.

But Hugh didn't care a whit for that at the moment. It was the beautiful lady coming down the steps that held him enthralled. This afternoon, he'd thought there was nothing more beautiful in the world than a naked and satiated Pippa tucked under his arm. They'd made love all afternoon, then laid together and talked.

Every word Pippa had uttered was pure poetry. She shared how she'd told Pelham everything she'd experienced with their parents. It had been cathartic for her and her

brother. Hugh smiled. Family was everything, and now, his family included Pippa, Pelham, and the entire Ardeerton clan.

The sight of the vision coming down the staircase toward him was utter perfection. His soon-to-be darling wife wore a pink gown that reminded him of the color of her cheeks when she came in his arms. He'd never tire of that color and definitely would never tire of making love to her.

He stood at the end of the stairs and extended his hand. Gracefully, Pippa placed hers in his. Locking his gaze with hers, he kissed her knuckles, then turned her hand and pressed another kiss along her wrist, discreetly licking her pulse. Her eyes widened, and her breath caught at his bold touch.

"Hugh, I've never been this happy before," she exclaimed softly. "If this is a dream, I never want to wake up."

"It's real." He tugged her gently until he could take her in his arms. "Shall I kiss you to show you how real it is?"

"I'd like that."

As he bent his head to take her in a kiss, footsteps marched down the hallway and into the entry.

"For the love of heaven, man, quit mauling my sister," Pelham called out.

"Your brother has the worse timing," he murmured.

"Or the best, depending upon your perception." Pelham stopped and waved a hand for them to accompany him. As Hugh offered Pippa his arm, Pelham shook his head. "She's mine until she says, 'I do.'"

“Pelham, stop,” Pippa said with laughter in her voice.

He tilted his nose in the air. “Can you blame me for wanting to be protective?”

Hugh laughed and patted his friend on the back. “Not one bit.”

Soon, the three of them walked into the family salon. Naturally, everyone turned their way.

Hugh stopped abruptly when he saw Stanhope with his head bent next to Aunt Edith. Stanhope’s mother and his mother stood by the window.

Without a second thought, he placed his hand on Pippa’s back and stepped closer. Instincts could be powerful forces. He wanted the entire world, including the young earl, to know they were together as a couple. “What’s Stanhope doing here?”

Pelham smiled. “He called on me after you left. I invited him.” Pelham slid him a side-eyed gaze. “Be civil. His mother and yours are becoming close. Besides, he quite tickles your great-aunt. She’ll turn her matchmaking intentions his way.”

“Unless she turns them toward you first,” Pippa murmured.

“Pfft,” Pelham huffed. “I don’t need any help with that.” He turned a brilliant smile to his guests. “Everyone, may I have your attention.” The laughs and jovial conversation drew softer. He nodded his approval. “May I present the happy couple to you? My darling sister and Ravenscroft.”

Suddenly, everyone had gathered around them.

Naturally, Aunt Edith was first in line. “It’s about time, my boy. I thought you were never going to pop the question.”

“He didn’t.” Pippa turned his way with a smile, then she took Aunt Edith’s hand. “It’s scandalous, I know, but I asked Hugh to marry me.”

“Such a clever girl to go after what you want. That shop of yours will be a success in record time. Mark my words,” she said with pride. She turned her beaming smile to Hugh. “You’ll learn a lot from your wife.”

Hugh put his arm around Pippa’s waist and pulled her near. “I’ve already learned a great deal and look forward to more.” He turned to her. “More of everything.”

Pippa smiled his way, and her eyes twinkled with happiness. Hugh wasn’t just saying that. He was a lucky man to have her as his wife. She taught him about love and that you should not hesitate when you want something.

Otherwise, you could lose sight of what’s essential in life and in love, which was everything.

Hugh pushed his thoughts aside as Stanhope stood beside them.

“Congratulations to both of you. I wish you happiness and an overabundance of love in your future.” He leaned near and mockingly acted as if he were whispering, “I do hope you’ll invite me to the wedding. I adore cake.”

Pippa laughed, and Hugh smiled. “Of course, my lord.” Still holding Pippa, Hugh leaned near. “Thank you for pushing me to see what a treasure I almost lost.”

Stanhope nodded gracefully. “Of course, it was my pleasure. But we all know that I never stood a chance.” He pointed at Hugh with a grin. “How could I when you bought Lady Pippa a dress shop?”

“Indeed.” Honoria placed her hand on Hugh’s arm. “What man buys a dress shop for

his fiancée?”

“A man totally and completely in love.” Everything melted away as he stared into Pippa’s eyes. This woman would always own his heart, and he was the richer for it.

Stanhope looked behind him, then turned back to the happy couple. “I think we’ll be seeing a lot more of each other. Our mothers seemed to be relishing their time together.”

“Indeed,” Hugh said as he extended his hand. “To friends and family.”

Stanhope shook his hand, then was called away by Aunt Edith.

Trafford and Honor were arm and arm as they approached the happy couple.

“Congratulations to you both,” Trafford said with a smile.

Honoraria hugged Pippa, then hugged Hugh. “Welcome to the family.”

Hugh bowed. “Thank you, Lady Trafford. And you and Trafford will also have my family to call your own.”

Honoraria took her husband’s hand. “You can never have enough family.”

Trafford leaned near his wife and pressed a kiss to her cheek. “Never.”

By then, Ritson had several footmen bring in glasses of champagne. When everyone had a glass, Pelham stood before the room and called Hugh and Pippa to his side. As soon as they joined him, he raised a glass. “Will everyone join me in wishing the happy couple much love and happiness in their marriage?”

Everyone shouted, “Hear. Hear.”

Pippa looked at Hugh with tears of love and joy in her eyes.

“This is real.” Hugh cupped her cheeks and kissed her lips as the onlookers roared their approval.

After everyone calmed down, Pelham turned in their direction. “When’s the wedding?”

Hugh cleared his throat. “Whenever my darling bride wants?”

“Anytime and anyplace,” she said with a laugh. “Just as long as you’re there.”

“What about now?” Hugh said as he pulled a special license out of his waistcoat pocket. As the crowd roared its approval, he leaned down. “I didn’t mean to surprise you like that. I’m a bit giddy about marrying you, that’s all.”

Pippa kissed his cheek. “Let’s do it. As I’ve said before, it’s a simple marriage between me and my best friend, who happens to be the love of my life. I don’t want either of us to waste a single moment of the rest of our lives.”

THE NEXT MONTH

Ardeerton House

Pippa peeked into the formal salon of Ardeerton House. Everything faded as her focus centered on the most handsome man in the room, her husband...well, her future husband. She grinned as Hugh stood before the vicar and jovially chatted with Marcus, the Earl of Trafford.

“Marcus looks good enough to eat,” Honoria whispered in Pippa’s ear. “Your betrothed is candy for the eyes as well.”

“Indeed,” Pippa answered with a sigh. She already felt married. She and Hugh spent almost every hour of the day together except at night. However, they’d found other ways to be together at night at her dress shop. Though her brother had never said a word about her nighttime rendezvous, Pippa suspected he knew. When she returned early in the morning before the sun rose, her brother waited for her at the servant’s entrance where he insisted she share breakfast with him. He’d always use the excuse that they didn’t have many mornings together and wanted her all to himself.

So, it was no wonder that when Hugh came to call shortly after she arrived home, Pelham would make him wait until after they finished breaking their fast. It was her brother’s way of keeping her close.

Grace came to her side and wrapped an arm around her waist. “You’re a beautiful bride.”

“Ravenscroft won’t be able to take his gaze off you. You’re stunning,” Honoria said as she kissed her cheek. “Are you ready?”

“More than ready,” Pippa confided. She and Hugh had decided to wait a month so Hugh’s mother and great aunt could participate in the wedding plans as they basked in the ton’s twittering about the wedding of the Season.

Grace took a step back when Dane walked to their sides. He nodded once at Grace, then turned to smile at his sisters. “Ready, darling?”

Pippa recognized that look. Her brother’s stoic face was his way of hiding his unease.

“We’ll be over all the time, Dane.” She stood on tiptoe and pressed a kiss to his cheek.

“I’m still losing a sister,” he said glumly.

Honoria took his hand and squeezed. “Look at their wedding as you’re gaining a brother.”

His eyes looked like liquid glass as the day's significance washed over all of them. No longer would Pippa be living under her brother’s roof.

“Shall we?” He extended his arm to Pippa.

Honoria smiled and pressed a kiss to her sister’s cheek. “The next time we speak, you’ll be a married woman.”

“Unless I kidnap her,” Pelham murmured.

Grace frowned. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Don’t tempt me,” he growled softly.

As soon as Honoria and Grace entered the salon, her brother turned in her direction and took both her hands with his. “I’m not sad, Pippa. I’m happy for you.” He gently squeezed her hand. “But I’d be lying if I didn’t tell you I’ll miss you terribly.”

“Dane, I’ll miss you.” Tears flooded her eyes. “I wouldn’t be here today without you and the love you’ve always given me. You’ve been my North Star. No matter how lost I was, you always comforted me. You were my home.” She stole another gaze at Hugh. “Because of you, I learned to love, and now, I’m ready to take my place beside my husband.” She squeezed his arm. “Thank you.”

Dane brushed a tear away from her cheek. “What’s this? No crying on your wedding day.”

“They’re happy tears. We’re expanding our family.” She leaned near and lowered her voice. “You should consider marrying. Grace?—”

“Darling,” he laughed as he tugged her forward. “We can discuss this later.” He motioned toward Hugh. “Your bridegroom is getting anxious.”

“What the devil is Pelham doing with her?” Hugh murmured to Trafford, who stood beside him. “Trying to talk her out of marrying me?”

As the vicar looked on, Trafford laughed. He motioned toward the guests who had taken their seats. “I believe your great-aunt would tackle him before he took three steps.”

Hugh nodded, then grinned as he gazed about the audience. His mother, brother, and Great-aunt Edith sat on the front row. Hugh didn’t miss the smug smile that his aunt wore. She still believed that she was the driving force behind him marrying Pippa. He shook his head. If anything, it was Stanhope who happened to be sitting between

Hugh's great-aunt and Lady Stanhope. Hugh and Pippa had insisted that they come.

Trafford nodded toward Stanhope. "It's good that you invited him."

"We need to get him to the Jolly Rooster sometime," Hugh acknowledged. "I wouldn't mind taking some of that young pup's money."

Just then, the vicar cleared his throat. "My lord, your bride is entering the room."

Hugh's attention turned toward the door, and his heart tripped at the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen. His wife, his betrothed, his Pippa walked toward him with a look of love that made him want to fall to his knees before her. How he ever won her affection was a miracle, one that he would thank the heavens every day for.

She wore a golden silk and gauze gown that turned her into an ethereal being. He'd never seen her look so beautiful and so confident. He couldn't wait to start their life together. When Pelham stood before him and placed Pippa's hand in his, Hugh smiled through his tears, but his gaze never left hers.

"Take care of her," Pelham growled softly. "She's a treasure."

"I will, my friend," Hugh answered. "Every day of my life, I'll do my damndest to prove to her how much I love and cherish her."

The vicar cleared his throat at Hugh's curse. "Shall we, my lord?"

Hugh nodded.

As the vicar droned on and on, Hugh leaned close to Pippa. "I never thought this day would come. Thank you for marrying me."

"Thank you," she answered. The unabashed love in her eyes humbled him.

After their vows and the sharing of their rings, the ceremony finally ended as the vicar announced, “I now pronounce you husband and wife.”

As the cheers rang out, Hugh took his darling Pippa into his arms. For the first time in his life, he felt as if he were whole.

And it was all because of the woman who’d agreed to this simple marriage.

Dane stood next to Honoria, Trafford, and Grace on the Ardeerton House entry steps as they waved goodbye to the retreating carriage containing the newlyweds Pippa and Ravenscroft. He’d never seen Pippa so happy. She practically vibrated with joy.

While he was happy for her and his best friend, this increasing loneliness wouldn’t leave him. Dane rubbed the middle of his chest without realizing what he was doing. An ache had resided there all morning and hadn’t diminished as the day wore on. As he dressed for the wedding, he had wondered if he was suffering from an apoplexy or perhaps angina when his heart had raced and threatened to burst through his chest.

Mayhap it was all in his mind. He hadn’t felt this desolate in ages.

“Dane,” Honoria murmured as she kissed his cheek. “Dine with us this evening. I’ve invited Grace too. Marcus and I want you to join us.”

He nodded. Trafford clapped him on the back. “Congratulations. They make a beautiful couple. I know that Ravenscroft will treat her like a queen.” He pulled Honoria to his side and kissed her temple. “The Ardeerton sisters certainly have taken London by storm, along with two lucky bachelors who won their hands in marriage.”

When Honoria blushed at her husband’s effusive words, Dane found himself smiling. There was no doubt in his mind that his best friends were fortunate in their choice of wives. His sisters were the type of women that any man would be fortunate to call their better half.

“I’ll be over this evening,” Dane murmured as his eldest sister and her husband descended the steps for their carriage. After the coachman stepped into the drive box and took the reins, the carriage lurched into motion. That left only Dane and Grace waiting outside.

“Would you care to come in?” He rocked back slightly on his heels. Whether it was a defensive move or not, he didn’t want to contemplate its meaning. Yet, he found himself anxious for her agreement.

“I shouldn’t,” Grace said as she pointed to the sky. “It looks to be about mid-morning. I should return home and prepare for callers.”

“You mean clients?” Dane didn’t hide his disapproval or disappointment that she wouldn’t join him. Another stab of pain hit his chest.

Grace smiled sheepishly. “Sometimes. And sometimes they’re friends.”

“The art of matrimony is a constant in your life, isn’t it?” He took a step near and inhaled her orange blossom scent. How he’d missed it over the years. To think that he and this woman used to be intimate. For the love of heaven, they almost married. Now, she helped people with near-hopeless causes such as finding a perfect spouse or resurrecting a ruined reputation.

She tilted her head back and laughed softly. The movement revealed her long neck. He still considered the sight to be one of the most erotic things he’d ever seen. A slight smirk tilted the corner of his lips. It was also one of the most erotic things he’d ever tasted as well. The urge to lean and press his lips to the pulse at the bottom of her neck became nigh near impossible to ignore.

He shook his head slightly.

“The art of matrimony and romance are constants in my life.” She leaned near as if

divulging her greatest secrets. “Along with ruined reputations, spoiled adults who think they’re the ton’s favorites, and, of course, simple scandals.”

Once upon a time, she would have shared all her secrets with him. But that was their past, and they had no future with each other.

“Is any scandal simple?” he murmured.

She didn’t deem the question worth an answer as her attention turned to her simple black carriage arriving to convey her home. “Thank you for everything.”

As she descended the steps, Dane fisted a hand to keep himself from racing after her. “Grace?”

She stopped and turned his way.

“Why do you do it? It sounds like a horrid existence.”

She shrugged slightly, then lowered her voice so no one could overhear. “It pays my bills.” She smiled slightly, but there was no humor in her eyes.

One of his footmen helped her into her small carriage. It had to be older than any grand dame that tottered around London. Why didn’t he notice the state of her finances before? Where was the dowry that her father had set aside for her?

With Grace’s beauty, elegance, and demeanor, she should have been married with a gaggle of children surrounding her.

Perhaps her services for the wayward members of the ton weren’t as valuable as he’d been led to believe. Then and there, he made his decision. There was only one way to find out.

He'd call upon her this afternoon and retain her services. Perhaps it was finally time for him to marry.

Who better to find him a dutiful wife than the hellcat who had broken his heart all those years ago?