



# A Suitable New Year's Revenge (Ladies' Wagering Whist Society #42)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Can the Ladies' Wagering Whist Society help a scholarly young lady take a dandy seriously?

Lady Helena Grant is about to become homeless. The moment her father dies—which will be within the month according to the doctor—her home will go to his heir, the Baron Hazelton. He has refused her plea to allow her to stay in the house. Now the only hope this bookish wallflower has is to apply to his son, the handsome Mr. Teviot, and pray that he has some sway over his father.

This would be Pine Teviot's second Christmas away from his family. His father has forbidden him entrance to the family home unless he comes with a fiancée or wife on his arm. But Pine believes in love and hasn't found it yet. When the lovely Lady Helena comes to him with her problem, he sees in her the perfect revenge—his father hates intelligent women. They hope that a fake engagement will both allow Pine to see his family over the holidays and get Helena a home. When his father objects to their marriage, she will agree not to marry Pine in exchange for the right to stay in her home.

What they don't count on is the spark of attraction between them. It will take the delicate hand of the Ladies' Wagering Whist Society to gently encourage those flames to grow.

**Total Pages (Source):** 12

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:50 am*

Helena Grant sat down and picked up her book, a fascinating treatise on the plays of the ancient Greek writer Aristophanes. She carefully found the page where she'd stopped reading and then closed the book. Four long strides and she was across the room, staring out the window.

Nothing had changed in the past three minutes. Lord Colburne's tiger still sat on the bench of the physician's phaeton, trying to stay warm in the chill of the mid-December air. Ten minutes ago, when she'd looked out, the equipage had been gone, but he'd returned again the last time she looked out into the street. She'd asked him in to the warmth of the kitchen, but he'd refused, saying he couldn't leave the horses. At least the boy had warm clothing. She could see the muffler tied securely around his neck and the mittens on his hands from here.

Helena returned to her seat and picked up her book once again. And, once again, as soon as she'd found her place, she simply could not concentrate and put the book down, only to pace back and forth from sofa to window, window to sofa.

What was taking that man so long? How long did it take to listen to an old man's chest? Did it really take—she glanced at the clock—over a quarter of an hour to determine whether a man was about to expire or not?

Well, she thought to herself, reasonably, it should probably take a great deal longer to come to that conclusion. But still... why did the doctor not return to give her his report? She knew her father didn't have either the stamina or the breath to engage the man in conversation.

And then a horrible thought struck her—he wasn't bleeding her dearest Papa, was he?

She'd specifically chosen Lord Colburne as her father's physician because not only was he known to be the best doctor in London with a sterling reputation for specifically treating heart patients, but he did not believe that bleeding a patient was always the answer as so many other doctors proclaimed. In truth, Helena was certain many doctors relied on that method merely to show that they were doing something because they could think of no other treatment.

But bleeding would not help a man whose heart was failing him. It would set him back even further, she was certain of it. She let out an exasperated sigh.

"I'm afraid that sigh is more appropriate than you might have hoped." The man's voice came from just inside the drawing room.

Helena spun around to find Lord Colburne wiping his hands on a handkerchief before stuffing it into his pocket.

She rushed up to him. "How is he? He's become worse, hasn't he?" She clasped her hands together, hoping he would not see the trembling she could feel throughout her body.

"I'm sorry to say that he has. It is not looking good, Miss Lawson. Not good at all. I am so sorry." The young doctor's deep green eyes conveyed sorrow as he looked down at her.

Helena swallowed. "How—how long?" she whispered, as if she said the words any louder they might be true.

"I cannot say for certain." He gave her a small, lopsided little smile. "No one knows when a soul is ready to depart this world for the next."

"But?"

“But, I would say anytime between a few days and a month.”

Helena opened her mouth to say something, but there were no words. And even if there were, they wouldn't have been able to get past the lump in her throat. For a moment, she couldn't breathe.

“I am very sorry. I understand your mother died some time ago. Do you have any other relations you can call upon at this time?” he asked, looking at her with concern.

Helena closed her mouth and shook her head. “No. There is no one. I don't have any aunts or uncles, cousins or grandparents.” She looked up at him, doing her best to keep her tears at bay. “Once my father goes, I shall... I shall be alone in this world.”

“But you have known this was coming, Miss Lawson, as has your father. Are there no provisions for you? Surely, you will have this house to live in. Please excuse me for asking. I'm certain it is none of my affair, but has your father left you money in his will? A dowry? Any sort of—”

“No. He... he has never had very much. Perhaps you were not aware my grandfather bankrupted the family with his gambling and excessive spending. He sold most of the land of the estate. There is very little left. There is very little money.”

“I am sorry,” he said quietly. “Do you know who will inherit the title and what your father does own?”

“Yes.” She looked at him to show that there was still some hope. “Baron Hazelton is a distant cousin. He is the one who will inherit after...” She couldn't say it. She still couldn't say ‘after my father is dead.’ “And I plan on applying for positions as a governess.”

The doctor gave a little chuckle. “Well, you are certain well educated enough. Your

father told me he had published no fewer than eight articles you'd written on the Greek playwrights and their works."

"Aristophanes. He is my favorite. I've studied his work extensively."

"Well, then, I'm sure you won't have any problem finding a position."

She did her best to give him a smile. "If only I liked children," she said softly, nearly to herself. She gave herself a shake. She would not bemoan her opportunities for, indeed, they were all she had at this point. Once Papa was gone... she would be alone in this world.

"I beg yer pardon, Miss, but this was just delivered for you," Joy, their maid of all work, said, coming into the room. She gave Lord Colburne a quick curtsy before handing the letter to Helena.

Taking it, she saw that it was from her father's solicitor and a sigh of relief came out unbidden. "It is from the solicitor. I asked him to write Baron Hazelton on my behalf to ask if I might stay here after my father passes," she explained to the doctor before opening it.

Dear Miss Grant,

I am very sorry to inform you that your request to Baron Hazelton has been denied. He gave no reasons or explanations. Enclosed is the letter for your perusal.

Yours most sincerely,

Elija Fitzsimmons

She shifted to the second page.

Dear Mr. Fitzsimmons,

I have received your request, and the answer is no.

Baron Hazelton

Helena read the words. Then she read them a second time before turning the paper over to see if there was more. There wasn't. That was it.

She looked up at Lord Colburne, who was standing there watching her, waiting to hear what the baron had said. "I... I don't understand this," she admitted to him.

"May I?" He held his hand out for the letter.

She gave it to him and then watched his face as he took in the very few words of Lord Hazelton's letter. He then did precisely the same as she had and turned it over, looking for more.

"No. He said no." She looked up at the doctor to be sure she was understanding this correctly. "No explanation. No... anything."

"What exactly did your solicitor say when he wrote to him?"

"He explained my situation and that his lordship would be inheriting my father's title, this house, and our estate in Oxfordshire. I asked to stay in either—I have no preference. If he needed this house here in London, I would have been happy to move to the estate."

"And he was told that you have no other relatives?"

"Yes. That is how he is inheriting, even though he's only a very, very distant

relation.”

“And he said...” he looked down at the letter again. “He said no.”

Helena closed her eyes. What was she to do? Her father would be dead within the month if not sooner and she would be forced to leave her home with nowhere to go and very little money of her own.

She felt a steadying hand grasp her elbow. “I think you should sit down, Miss Lawson.”

She gave a weak nod and allowed him to lead her back to the sofa. She sat, but he took up the same pacing she had been doing earlier when waiting for him to come from his examination of her father.

“There must be something...” he said, most likely speaking to himself. He paused his steps. “If I knew the man, I would write to him myself, but... I do not. I’m sorry.”

Helena shook her head. “It probably wouldn’t have done any good, anyway. Clearly, he is eager to get his hands on my father’s property.” Her voice sounded odd to her ears. Hollow. Quiet. Empty.

“I would offer you a place in my own home, but my wife is expecting our first child within a few months,” he explained.

“Oh no! I could not! Even if you had been able... my lord, you hardly know me.”

He gave her a little smile. “I have been your father’s physician for the past two years and I believe Lady Colburne has been introduced to you at society parties, has she not?”

“Indeed, I was honored to have met her. Your wife is a very kind and generous lady.”

“I believe she is too, but...” He turned away from her and paced back to the window where he stared out at his phaeton, just as Helena had been doing earlier. After a minute, he returned to her. “I have an idea. It may be for naught, but it’s an idea.”

Pine Teviot settled into the comfortable chair at Powell’s Club for Gentlemen. He’d left the seats closer to the fireplace open for the older men who felt the cold much more than he.

He’d wandered the length of the room when he arrived to see if there was anyone he knew present. As usual, there wasn’t. All of Pine’s friends were home at their country estates for the holidays.

Not Pine. But he would not allow him to wallow in those thoughts. He could do that in his rooms at the boarding house where he lived. No, he was here to divert himself.

He ordered a cup of tea—eleven in the morning was really too early for spirits—and was just looking about for a newspaper to read when Lord Wickford, the owner of the club, sauntered down the room. He paused to greet some other men and then did the same when he got to Pine.

“Mr...” Lord Wickford started, clearly searching for a name.

“Teviot. Pine Teviot.” Pine stood up to shake the man’s hand.

“Ah, yes. You’re Lord Hazelton’s son. Am I correct?”

“Indeed, my lord.”

“I do hope all is well with your father? I don’t believe I’ve seen him for a while.”



“No. The last time he was in Town was for the Parliamentary session last spring and I believe he didn’t even stay very long then.”

Lord Wickford nodded. “And you are not joining him and your family for the holidays?”

Pine shifted his weight. “I’m afraid I’m not welcome until I have a wife on my arm.” Heat rose up in his chest. Not only was the situation embarrassing, but every time he thought of it, he wanted to grind his teeth in anger and frustration.

His lordship winced. “I’ve heard of gentlemen going to some lengths to see their heirs marry, but that’s rather extreme.”

Pine kept his voice quiet and controlled. “I have to admit, it is upsetting. I have younger siblings with whom I’m very close and I haven’t been able to see them in nearly two years.”

“I am so sorry! Two years and a handsome man such as yourself hasn’t found a young lady to marry?”

Pine felt the tightness in his chest ease, and he smiled awkwardly at the compliment. “I’m afraid I’m rather odd, my lord—I’d like to marry for love.”

“That’s not odd at all,” Lord Wickford interrupted. “I did so myself.”

“I know. I was actually one of Lady Wickford’s admirers before you married. If you’ll excuse me for saying so, you are a very lucky man.”

The smile that grew on Wickford’s face was thoroughly genuine. “I have to say, I agree with you completely. I do hope you’re able to find someone as wonderful.”

“Thank you.”

“So, if you’ll be in Town for the holidays, you must be coming to my wife’s New Year’s Eve ball.”

Pine smiled, trying to keep the embarrassment from his face. “I don’t believe I received an invitation.”

“Really? Well, that was certainly an unintentional oversight. I will ensure you receive one.”

Pine bowed. “That is most kind of you, my lord.”

“And will I see you at Lady Ayres’s Christmas party on the 24 ?? ?”

“Er...”

“You will receive an invitation for that as well,” Lord Wickford said quickly.

“Oh, I don’t—”

His lordship held up a hand. “As soon as the ladies of the Wagering Whist Society learn you are seeking a wife, I can assure you they’ll be more than happy to help.”

A true smile found its way to Pine’s face. “Now I worry about what I’m getting myself into.”

Lord Wickford burst out laughing. “I can make no promises, but you never know who they might introduce to you. I don’t think you should dismiss them out of hand.”

“I most certainly would not. In fact, I’m certain I would appreciate any help I can

get.”

Helena shook her hands at her sides. I can do this. They’re just women, after all, she told herself. She then scoffed at her own thought. Just women, yes, but the most powerful women in society, aside from the patronesses of Almack’s. And what she was here to tell them was possibly the most private and embarrassing thing a young lady could reveal. She’d come for help. She’d come because she truly had no other choice.

Dr. Colburne had assured Helena that the ladies truly were kind and thoughtful people—but then, of course, he would think so. He was married to one.

Helena took another deep breath in, gave her hands one last shake, and then entered the Ryder Street Club for Refined Ladies.

The ma?tre d’h?tel smiled at her as she entered.

“Good afternoon, I have an appointment with the Ladies’ Wagering Whist Society. I was told this was where I would find them.” She did her best to keep her voice neutral—neither asking nor apologizing for her intrusion into this club, of which she was not a member.

“You are...?”

“Oh! Miss Helena Lawson. I do beg your pardon. I should have led with that, I suppose.” She smiled apologetically.

She was clearly expected because the man just nodded. “Of course, Miss Lawson. The ladies are in their room—just up the steps, second door on your left.”

“Thank you.”

Helena gathered her fortitude about her shoulders like a favorite shawl and headed up the stairs.

“Come in!” called a voice after Helena gave a knock on the door. It was clear this was the correct room since there was a very nice plaque on the door which said, “Ladies’ Wagering Whist Society.”

Helena opened the door and stepped across the threshold hesitantly.

There were two card tables by the windows overlooking the street and across from them, against the near wall, two sofas and a scattering of comfortable looking chairs centered around a low table in front of the fireplace. The walls were an elegant silk-covered pale blue and the upholstery on the sofas and chairs matched perfectly. The few paintings were of landscapes. and above the fireplace there was a very large mirror reflecting back the light from the windows, making the room very bright and welcoming.

The eight ladies of the Wagering Whist Society were seated around the fire, enjoying some tea.

One of the younger ladies, who was most obviously with child, stood up. “Miss Lawson. I am Diana, Lady Colburne. My husband is Dr. Colburne. I believe we have met before?”

“Yes, my lady, thank you.” Helena didn’t quite know what she was thanking the lady for, but it seemed to be the right thing to say. She also executed her best curtsy to the group at large, well aware that at least one of the ladies was a duchess.

“Let me introduce you to everyone,” Lady Colburne went on. She pointed to the older, blonde and gray-haired woman to her right. “This is Lady Ayres.” To the next woman, who seemed to be only a little younger and with dark blonde hair sprinkled

with gray, “Lady Blakemore.” Next to her was Lady Gorling, then a younger lady, Lady Welles and Lady Sorrell. The older Duchess of Bolton, who had a cute little black and white dog sound asleep on her lap, was next, and finally the stunningly beautiful Lady Wickford.

Helena was certain she would mix up most of their names if she were asked to recite them back.

There was a smattering of “how do you do’s” and “so pleased to meet yous” from the ladies.

“Please, have a seat,” Lady Colburne said, indicating the only empty seat in between two of the younger ladies. “Would you care for some tea?”

“Oh, no, thank you,” Helena said. She would be certain to spill it in her trembling hands if she were to accept.

“Are you certain? It is my own special blend,” Lady Wickford said. Helena remembered that she and her mother-in-law were the owners of the club below.

“Yes, thank you,” Helena said, folding her hands in her lap to make it less obvious how nervous she was.

Lady Colburne sat back down. “My husband said that you were in need of our help, but didn’t tell me any more than that,” the lady said, gently rubbing her hands over her belly. “Would you mind telling us what the problem is?”

Helena gave a little nod as she gathered her thoughts. “My father, who is a patient of Dr Colburne’s, is not doing well. In fact, I was told that it was unlikely that he would see the end of January.”

“Oh, I am so sorry,” one of the older ladies said. There were lots of sad tutting and shaking of heads.

“When he passes, I shall be made homeless,” Helena continued. Her throat threatened to close up again, but she swallowed hard and fought the sensation.

“Will his heir not see to you?” the lady next to Lady Ayres said.

“No. My father’s heir is Lord Hazelton—he’s a very distant cousin. I’ve had my solicitor write to him to ask if I might stay either in the London house—where we’re living right now—or at our small estate near Oxford. But he said no.”

“No?” the lady to Helena’s right asked.

“No.” Helena nodded. She took in a deep breath to keep her emotions at bay. “No explanation, not even an ‘I’m terribly sorry, but no.’ Nothing. Just ‘no.’”

“I am not acquainted with Lord Hazelton,” the younger lady to Helena’s left said, looking around the circle.

“I’m certain I’ve met Lady Hazelton a time or two,” Lady Ayres commented.

“Yes, as have I,” said the lady next to her. “But not for some time. I believe they don’t come to Town very often.”

“He’s Mr. Teviot’s father,” Lady Wickford added.

A number of heads swiveled in her direction. “How do you know that?” someone asked.

“Wickford told me Mr. Teviot was in Town for the holidays and asked me to send

him an invitation to my ball on the thirty-first. Oh, and Lady Ayres, he asked if you might be so kind as to invite him to your Christmas party. He's apparently a very nice fellow."

"Of course, I would be happy to," Lady Ayres said. She then turned back to Helena. "And that might be the answer to your dilemma, Miss Lawson."

"Oh, yes!" said the lady with the dog—the duchess? "What an excellent idea. She could meet him there and ask him to speak to his father for her." She nodded vigorously, sending her drooping cheeks and many chins wiggling.

"Precisely," Lady Ayres agreed.

"Do you think he might?" Helena asked dubiously.

"I'm certain of it," Lady Ayres said.

"Miss Lawson, may I ask a particularly rude question?" the woman who Helena thought was the duchess asked.

"I, er, suppose so," Helena said, hesitantly. She didn't think she could reveal anything more embarrassing than she already had.

"Why is it that you are not married? I beg your pardon, but you look to be older than twenty, and I don't believe I've ever seen you at a party."

Helena dropped her gaze to her hands, but before she could answer, Lady Wickford added, "You're very pretty. Surely if you tried, it couldn't be too difficult to find a husband."

"Thank you, my lady," Helena said, feeling her cheeks heat. "My mother presented

me when I was eighteen, but I grew up in a very... intellectual home, I suppose you could say. I was encouraged to study Greek and Latin and became extremely fond of the Greek playwrights and their work.” She paused to look around at the ladies, who were all listening to her closely. She gave an embarrassed little laugh. “It turns out no gentleman of the ton wants to hear about Aristophanes or Euripides while at a ball or on a drive about the park.”

“Oh dear,” one of the older ladies said.

The younger woman to Helena’s left burst out laughing. She quickly smothered it with her hand. “Do excuse me, but that’s too droll,” she said.

Helena smiled. “It is amusing now, but it was quite the opposite at the time. My mother died two years ago—influenza—and my father’s health declined immediately after. I’ve spent these two years looking after him.”

“Oh, you poor dear,” the duchess said with a shake of her head and her many chins.

Helena gave a little shrug. “I have resigned myself to becoming a governess, but I’m certain it will take some time to find a position, especially since I have no experience.”

“What a difficult situation!” the woman to Helena’s right exclaimed.

“Well, the very least we can do is introduce you to Mr. Teviot,” Lady Ayres said. “As well as all the eligible young men present. There won’t be many because of the time of year, but if you can stay in your home through the season, we will be sure to introduce you to many more.”

“Only, no discussing ancient Greek play writes, hmm?” the lady next to Lady Ayres said.



“Indeed, stick to safe topics like the weather and any society goings on,” the woman next to her agreed.

“I’m afraid I’m just not very good at that sort of thing. I have to admit, I spent most of my time, when I was in Society, hovering near a wall,” Helena said.

“Well, you now have a few months to practice being bolder. Lady Welles and Lady Wickford can teach you all you’ll need to know.” The two younger ladies nodded.

“I would be very happy to do so,” Lady Welles said from Helena’s left.

“Thank you. My most sincere thanks to you all.” Helena looked around at all the ladies. Lord Colburne had been absolutely right—these women were very special.

After Miss Lawson left, Lady Blakemore looked around the room at her friends. “Well?”

“I feel just awful for the poor girl,” the Duchess of Bolton said immediately.

There were lots of nods around the circle.

“I don’t know Lord Hazelton,” Lady Welles said. “Why would he do such a thing as to put a girl out on the street?”

Lady Blakemore frowned. “I have to admit, I don’t know him well, although I’m certain I have met him a few times. Lady Hazelton, Catherine, is an old friend of mine.”

“I know Mr. Teviot. He was one of my suitors soon after the start of my first season,” Lady Wickford said.

“What is your assessment of him?” Lady Sorrell asked.

“He’s handsome, clever, and a very kind man. I would not hesitate to direct a friend his way if she were looking for a husband,” the young lady said.

Lady Ayres chuckled. “Well, considering that we just did, I’d say that’s a very good thing.”

“I have met him once or twice,” Lady Welles said. “I’ll be happy to chaperon their meeting on Christmas eve.”

“Excellent,” Lady Blakemore said, with a little relief. She didn’t know the gentleman at all, but having someone he’s met before will hopefully make him more conducive to hearing Miss Lawson out.

“Thank you, Lydia,” Lady Colburne added.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:50 am*

Pine arrived at Lady Ayres's Christmas party fashionably late. Lord Wickford, much to Pine's surprise, had actually requested he receive an invitation. Considering that he didn't even know Lady Ayres or any of her set, he was extremely grateful.

The receiving line had already dispersed by the time Pine arrived, so he simply meandered through the open rooms of the Ayres's beautifully appointed home.

A few couples were dancing in the drawing room on the first floor and, for those not interested in such activity, a formal receiving room on the ground floor was filled with mostly older ladies and gentlemen talking and enjoying the wine, which was being served.

"Ah, Teviot, so glad you could make it," Lord Wickford said, surprising Pine by slipping from between a group of women.

"My lord." Pine bowed. "Yes, thank you for seeing that I received an invitation." The man brushed aside the comment. "It was simple. I just mentioned you to my wife, and she did the rest."

A footman stopped and offered Pine a glass of wine.

"You must try this. It's delicious. It's warm, spiced wine. Apparently, the recipe came from the queen, herself," Wickford said, replacing his own empty glass on the footman's tray with a full one.

Pine took one as well and then took a hesitant sip. Flavors of cinnamon and cloves bloomed on his tongue, blending beautifully with the sweet red wine. "Oh, I say!

That is magnificent. It's like a Christmas pudding mixed with wine."

"Lady Wickford promised to get the recipe so she can serve it at her ball next week."

Two other younger men joined them. "Talking about the wine?" one of them asked. He was a rather non-descript fellow of average height, with brown hair and brown eyes.

"It seems to be all everyone is speaking about," the other said with a laugh. He, by contrast, was tall, very blond, and very fair.

"Mr. Teviot, do you know Lord Welles and Lord Dr. Colborne?" Wickford asked.

The men all shook hands.

"I've heard of you by your excellent reputation, Lord Colburne," Pine said.

"Thank you," the blond man gave a slight bow.

"Yes, my good friend is known throughout the ton for his excellent medical skills. I am known for having married a diamond of the first water," Lord Welles said with a chuckle.

"That is no mean feat, Welles. Your wife was one of the most sought-after women who made their debut that year," Wickford said.

"And you married the incomparable of her year as well," Pine pointed out.

Wickford looked a little smug. "Yes, I did."

"So, you must both share with me your secrets, for I am desperately searching for a

wife as well,” Pine said, as if he were jesting. Only Wickford knew just how serious he was.

“Ah, well...” Welles began. He was interrupted, however, by a beautiful young woman with deep mahogany-colored ringlets framing her lovely, soft face. She looked like one of the angels depicted in so many religious paintings. It took Pine a moment, but then he realized that she was Miss Lydia Sheffield—or rather, Lady Welles. She’d been Miss Sheffield when Pine had met her first, three years ago. He fondly remembered being among the young men who’d hung on the young lady’s every word.

“Wickford, Gwendolyn has requested you join her upstairs. She would like to dance.”

His lordship widened his odd gold-colored eyes. “And she has not been asked by any of the gentlemen already there?”

“Oh, she has, but she says she would like to dance with you.” She lifted one shoulder, and her expression was a mix of disbelief and amusement.

Wickford sighed dramatically. “Duty calls, gentlemen.” He gave a slight bow and went off in the direction of the stairs.

“I don’t believe we’ve met,” the young woman said, turning to Pine.

“I do beg your pardon, my love,” Welles said, giving his wife a warm smile. “Allow me to present Mr. Pine Teviot. Mr. Teviot, my wife.”

Pine bowed over the lady’s hand.

“I have been keeping an eye out for you, Mr. Teviot,” she said as he straightened.

“Oh?”

“There is a young lady you need to meet.” She tucked her hand around his arm before he could say anything more and led him off.

Lords Welles and Colborne just laughed as he was dragged away.

“Well, he wanted to meet young ladies,” he heard Welles say as he moved off.

“Now, let’s see. I’m certain I saw her not too long ago.” She tapped her lips with a finger as she looked about the room. “Oh, I know where we’ll find her.” She headed toward the far wall.

There were a few small groups of people standing about, chatting. With a heavy sigh, Lady Welles said, “There she is.”

Pine looked in the same direction as she and saw a very pretty young woman with very light brown hair standing against the wall. She was not very tall, which Pine appreciated, being of just average height himself, but she had a lovely figure. Her face was narrow with a square chin, but it was well balanced by her high cheekbones and large, blue eyes.

With Lady Welles leading the way, they approached her.

“Miss Lawson, I thought you said you’d make more of an effort to mingle?” Lady Welles said. The girl started and then gave the lady a guilty look. “I... I tried, but...”

“Well, no matter,” Lady Welles said. “Please allow me to present Mr. Teviot.” She turned to Pine, “Sir, this is Miss Helena Lawson. She has been waiting to speak with you.”

Miss Lawson curtsied as Pine kissed the air above her hand. When she rose, he could see that her cheeks had turned pink.

“I’m sorry? You were waiting for me?” Pine asked, feeling slightly confused.

“Er...” Miss Lawson started.

“Yes,” Lady Welles said. “Why don’t we go someplace a little quieter and more private? She turned and headed toward the door. Miss Lawson gave him an apologetic smile before following.

They were led to Lord Ayres’s library, where there were a few candelabras lit and a welcoming fire already burning in expectation of the room being used, although it was empty at the moment.

Lady Welles closed the door after Pine had entered the room, muffling the noise of the party.

Miss Lawson stood nervously, shaking her hands slightly by her side.

“Go on, this is your opportunity,” Lady Welles told her.

“Do you really think...” the girl said, looking to the lady for guidance. “I mean, we only just met, don’t you think...”

“That we should sit and have tea first? I don’t know that you have the time,” Lady Welles said.

Pine was feeling beyond confused. “I beg your pardon, but would you mind explaining to me what is going on?”

Lady Welles looked to Miss Lawson.

She gave her hands another shake before turning to him. “I... I have a favor I need to ask of you, sir,” she started.

“Perhaps we’d better sit down,” Lady Welles suggested. She took a seat on the sofa by the fire.

Miss Lawson sat next to her, and Pine took a chair next to the sofa, closer to Miss Lawson.

“What may I do for you, Miss Lawson?” Pine asked.

“Well, you see, your father is my father’s heir,” she began.

Pine’s spine stiffened.

“We are very distantly related, but my father’s brother is no longer living, and I never had a brother.”

“And who is your father, if you’ll forgive me for asking?” Pine said.

“No! Of course, He’s Nathan Lawson, Viscount Cumnor,” she said quickly.

Pine didn’t know the man.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if you’ve never heard of him. He’s never taken his seat in Parliament. He’s a scholar of Greek and Latin and has only published under his name, er, not using his title.”

“I see. And my father is his heir?”



“Yes,” she nodded.

“So, what is it you need from me?” Pine asked again.

Miss Lawson lowered her gaze to her hands in her lap. “My father is very ill. According to Dr. Colburne, he’s unlikely to live for a month longer. When he dies, I’ll be left homeless. Bereft. I have a small dowry, which I can draw the interest from, but the principal is to be held until I am married. If I never marry, it will revert back to the estate.”

“Can your father not change his will to give you access to those funds?” Pine asked.

She shook her head. “He won’t. He’s a very stubborn man. He wants me to marry or, if I can’t, he says I’ll make a fine governess.” She gave a sad, little smile and added under her breath, “If only I liked small children.”

Pine shook his head. “I’m very sorry about your situation, but...”

She looked up and speared him with her gaze. “I wrote to your father to ask if I might stay in my home for a little while after my father dies, just until I can find a position. He wrote back with one word—no.”

“If you could speak with him, Mr. Teviot,” Lady Welles said, speaking up. “It would be greatly appreciated.”

Pine looked from one woman to the other, both looking so hopeful, as if one word from him would convince his father to help this poor girl. Little did they know the nature of his relationship with the Baron Hazelton.

Helena didn’t think she could be any more embarrassed. It wasn’t that she was particularly full of hubris, but to have to confide her pitiful situation to this man... It

had been difficult enough speaking with the ladies of the Wagering Whist Society, but then to have to repeat everything and justify herself to a handsome man who looked to be just the sort her mother had warned her about was too much.

Well, to be fair, her mother had warned her of many types of men—the rogues who hadn't a care for anyone but themselves; the gamblers who would lose every farthing he owned; the fortune hunters who would only be interested in her for her dowry—not that it was an enormous sum, but it would certainly line a man's coffers well; and finally, men like Mr. Teviot, the dandies. They were as bad as the rogues, thinking only of themselves and their clothing, and the gamblers, because all their funds went into their wardrobe.

How could she have ever thought a man like Mr. Teviot would deign to help her? And judging by the expression of pity on his face, perhaps mixed with a healthy dose of skepticism, she was certain his answer would be the same as his oh-so-eloquent father—no.

Mr. Teviot shifted uncomfortably in his seat—probably trying to minimize the creasing of his breeches. “I'm certain this is both an obvious question as well as an inappropriate one, but have you considered getting married?”

Helena ground her teeth together, but then had to relax her jaw in order to answer his inane question.

Before she could, however, Lady Welles spoke up. “Miss Lawson lost her mother only two years ago and has been caring for her ill father since then.”

The man's checks paled. “I am so very sorry.”

Helena nodded. Well, as she was already thoroughly embarrassed, why not make it complete? “Aside from that, my parents were both scholars and did not, perhaps,

prepare me very well for my debut into the ton .”

Mr. Teviot cocked his head at that. “Scholars? And do you consider yourself one as well?”

“I do greatly enjoy reading and discussing the ancient Greek play writes. I have, of course, read them in their original Greek, and—” Helena snapped her mouth shut.

She was doing it again. Another few words and the gentleman’s eyes would glaze over as his thoughts turned inward—most likely to what he would wear the following day. Instead of looking bored, however, the oddest series of expressions crossed his face. At first, his lips began to turn up as if he were laughing at her, and then there was the most unusual widening of his eyes, as if he’d just thought of something. He ended by putting his hand across his mouth to hide his jaw dropping open.

Helena was about to turn to Lady Welles to see what she was making of this when Mr. Teviot jumped to his feet and strode to the fireplace. He stood there for a moment, staring into the flames.

“Miss Lawson, you are probably—no, certainty—going to think me mad, but I have just had an idea which could benefit us both.” He turned around to face her, his deep blue eyes now twinkling with excitement.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:50 am*

Helena didn't get a wink of sleep that night. Round and round in her mind went Mr. Teviot's preposterous idea.

When he'd first proposed it, Lady Welles had burst out laughing and clapping her hands. She claimed he was brilliant.

But Helena had reservations. It would be sly and deceitful. On the other hand, she could completely understand why Mr. Teviot wanted to get revenge on his father—to keep a man away from his family was simply cruel. And goodness knew she didn't owe Baron Hazelton any allegiance, not to mention if this plan worked, she would get exactly what she wanted.

But a false engagement? Could she even do that? She had always excelled in the few theatrics she'd participated in as a girl. She had no idea if she was capable of lying to Mr. Teviot's whole family, though. They would need to keep up the ruse for them as well as his father—the fewer people who knew, the less likely it was that someone would let the truth slip.

Helena didn't know if it was simply exhaustion, but the longer she thought about it, the more appealing the idea became. Lady Welles had been so kind as to offer to keep an eye on Helena's father, and she was certain she could get Dr. Colburne to pay him a short visit every day.

It wouldn't be that she was leaving him entirely alone—there was the housekeeper and her father's valet who both already looked after him whenever Helena was unable. And Dr. Colburne would inform her if her father declined to a dangerous point. She could be back here in six hours at the most—less if she rode, but it was

really too cold for that.

By morning, Helena had made up her mind. She would do this. It was an enormous risk, but truly, Lord Hazelton had given her no choice.

She quickly penned a note to Mr. Teviot, telling him she would be ready to leave no later than ten. It didn't take her long to pack a small satchel—it was unlikely that she would be gone for no more than a week.

Her father was awake and sitting up in bed, reading, when she went in to tell him. As she'd been packing, she'd decided she'd follow Mr. Teviot's lead and not divulge the truth to him.

“He-Helena,” her father wheezed.

She came forward and placed a kiss on his leathery cheek. He had aged in these past two years—more than a man should.

“Should you be sitting up like this, Papa?” she asked, fussing a little with his covers.

He gave her a lopsided little smile. “I will while I can.”

She nodded her understanding, taking his hand. “I have some incredible news, Papa, but I don't want you to become overexcited. Can you promise me that you will try not to?”

He gave a wheezing cough that might have been a laugh, but it sent him into a true coughing fit for a moment.

She grabbed the handkerchief that sat on the table next to his bed. “Don't swallow it, spit it out,” she told him as she'd done so many times before.

He spit a clump of mucus into the cloth. “Good,” she soothed, wiping his lips.

“What-what is this news?” he finally asked.

“A gentleman has proposed to me,” she said quickly before she thought too much about it or changed her mind about telling him.

“What?” He tried to sit up further and lean toward her, but she placed her hands on his shoulders, stopping him.

“I met him some time ago, and we have met a few times since. I didn’t want to tell you earlier for fear that you would get your hopes up.”

He frowned at her, drawing his bushy gray eyebrow down.

“I met him again last night at Lady Ayres Christmas party and he asked me then.”

“Why-why has he not come and spoken to me?”

“Because you’ve been so ill, I imagine. Anyway, I have not said yes just yet. He is very close to his family and asked if I might go and meet them. Would you mind very much if I left you for a few days, Papa? Lady Welles and Dr. Colburne both said they’d come and visit every day.”

“But who is he?” Her father’s voice was so rough and quiet Helena could barely hear him.

She knew he would ask this and now was grateful her father had been too ill this past two weeks to take any interest in his correspondence. Helena had gone through it to be sure there wasn’t anything urgent and so had learned who her father’s heir was, but she had not yet told him—nor that she’d corresponded with the man.

“His name is Pine Teviot, and he is the son and heir to Baron Hazelton,” she told her father truthfully.

He continued to frown. “I do not know him,” he admitted. That was not at all surprising. Her father only knew a nobleman if he was also a scholar.

“He is quite well off. The family seat is not too far from London, so should you need me while I’m gone, I can be home within a day.”

He nodded.

“I am taking Lucy, my maid, with me, and Mr. Teviot’s mother, father, two sisters and his younger brother will all be there, so you have no need to worry about me being properly chaperoned,” she told him. He would never have thought of it on his own, but it was best to head it off should he think of it later.

“I shall have my-my solicitor here to draw up marriage settlements for when you both return.” His words were beginning to slur, and Helena could tell he was becoming tired.

“That would be wonderful, Papa, but please don’t overtax yourself.”

He lifted a hand slightly to wave away her concerns. His eyes fluttered closed and his hand dropped back onto the counterpane. His breathing slowed and deepened. Helena just stood for a moment watching him, before turning and leaving.

It was a very long, very awkward journey to Hazelton. They chatted for the first half hour or so—simply the social niceties. Mr. Teviot then closed his eyes and Helena pulled out a book she’d brought along—thank goodness she could read in a moving coach. Her father always became ill if he tried to do so.

They stopped for luncheon and for a change of horses. Mr. Teviot was standing and looking up at the sky when Helena joined him at the coach after making use of the necessary.

She looked up as well. It looked like an ordinary December day to her. The sky was just white with bits of gray in the clouds here and there. "Is there something wrong?" she asked.

"Er, no. I'm just hoping the snow holds off until after we get there," he told her.

"Do you think it will snow?"

"Yes, you see over there? The clouds have more gray. They look like they're just about ready to drop a good amount of snow on us."

"But that's all the way over there," she pointed out.

"And that is the direction we're headed."

"Oh."

"Indeed. Let's be on our way and with any luck, it will hold off."

He handed her into the coach and gave the coachman the signal to go.

A few hours later, just as Helena was beginning to miss her tea, Mr. Teviot leaned forward and began watching out the window.

"It isn't snowing is it?" she asked. She had no idea whether the horses would be able to continue if it was, or if they would be hampered by the snow.



“It’s just beginning. A little flake here and there, but so far nothing to worry about. And we should be there in about an hour,” he said. “Perhaps we should discuss our ruse.”

“Oh, yes. What do you think we should know about each other to make it convincing?” she asked, putting away her book.

He just stared at her for a moment. “I hadn’t even thought of that.”

“What were you thinking of?”

“Well, to be honest? I was thinking of the best way for you to annoy my father, so he refuses to allow me to marry you.” He gave her a sheepish grin.

Helena laughed. “Sadly, I’m rather good at either annoying gentlemen or boring them so completely they never want to lay eyes on me again.”

Mr. Teviot started to laugh, but perhaps realized that would be polite and quickly turned it into a cough. “I’m certain that can’t be true.”

She gave him a sad smile. “Try me.”

His lips quirked. “How about if we just get to know each other better so we can convincingly present ourselves as a couple in love?”

Helena tilted her head a touch. “Love? What an interesting notion. Do you hope to marry for love—when you do eventually marry, I mean?”

“I do. I believe very strongly that love, or at the very least, a strong friendship, is necessary to a happy marriage.” He paused and looked out the window once again. “My parents have provided me with an excellent example of an unhappy

marriage—you will never meet two people less alike. My friends, however, I've seen fall in love and marry. Their marriages are very happy ones."

Helena nodded, thinking about this. "I suppose you're right. A couple, at the very least, should have common interests. My parents were both scholars. They understood the desire of the other to sit quietly with their studies."

"Are you that way? Do you prefer to sit quietly with a book?"

Helena gave a little laugh. "Much to my mother's delight and confusion, I actually enjoyed going to parties and dancing. Sadly, when I did so, I had no idea how to speak to a man about anything other than academics, so I invariably chased them off. I did, however, spend many happy evenings just watching everyone around me."

Mr. Teviot frowned. "But you're an intelligent woman. Couldn't you learn how to make small talk?"

"Oh! I did, certainly. But invariably, we'd run out of things to say, or the gentleman would be speaking to me about something, and it would remind me of a play, so I'd quote it to him."

Mr. Teviot smiled. "Nothing wrong with that. Not really."

"In the original Greek," she added.

"Oh." He laughed. "Yes, well..." He looked up at the ceiling for a moment. "I actually did rather well learning Greek and Latin in school." He shrugged. "I've got a knack for languages. I was never any good at mathematics, though."

"?????? ? ? ? ? ?, ? ? ??? ?' ??? ? ????? ?????, 1 " she quoted.

“Nothing is...” he thought for a moment. “Unhoped?”

She nodded. “‘Nothing is hopeless, we must hope for everything.’ Euripides.”

He shook his head. “I never heard that one, but I think the only play I’ve read of his was Electra.”

She nodded. “His most famous. A wonderful play. There are so many allusions to—”  
She stopped herself, pressing her lips together.

He just smiled. “Miss Lawson, if you speak like that in front of my father, we will have no difficulties whatsoever.”

She gave him a confused smile. “Does your father not like Euripides? Or perhaps he doesn’t like someone starting to say something and then not finishing?”

Mr. Teviot barked out a laugh. “To be honest, I don’t know what he thinks of either. But one thing I am certain of is that he doesn’t believe women are capable of any sort of analytical thought, or really any thought at all beyond what should be served for dinner.”

That sobered Helena a great deal. “I have heard there are men like that. I have never had the mis-” she stopped herself. “You aren’t like that, are you?”

“Good God, no! I learned young how my mother used to hide from my father the fact that she had to correct his calculations of the household accounts. She would submit receipts to him, he would tally them, and then she would correct his mistakes. I think that’s where I get my inability with numbers—from my father,” he said, with a chuckle.

Helena smiled. “Goodness, well, I hope whoever you marry is better than you or else

your steward may rob you blind and you'll never know."

He shook his head with a smile twinkling in his eyes. "You are absolutely correct."

The carriage slowed to make the turn into a long drive.

"Ah, we're here," he said, peering out the window again. He turned back to her with true warmth in his eyes. "Don't worry, Miss Lawson, you are going to do brilliantly. Just be yourself and my father will dislike you immediately."

Pine descended from the coach first. From the moment his feet touched the ground, he was swamped with emotion at being home again.

The place hadn't changed. Then again, it probably hadn't changed in over fifty years since his grandfather had added the wing onto the south side of the building—to match the one built a generation before on the north side. The house was now shaped like a U with the additions jutting out in front of it. It was an unusual arrangement, but it was home.

"Mr. Teviot?" Miss Lawson said, standing in the doorway of the coach waiting for him to either help her down or move out of the way.

"I do beg your pardon," he said quickly, turning around and holding out his hand for her.

She was looking up at the house with wide eyes. "It's very large," she said quietly.

Pine looked at the house and gave a shrug. "It's just home to me."

"How long has it been since you've been here?" she asked.

“Too long—over two years.”

She gave him an understanding smile.

“I do hope you won’t think me too forward, but if we are to come across as a happy couple, perhaps you should call me by my given name. And may I use yours?” he asked.

“Oh, yes! Of course.” She seemed perfectly content with this, so he turned back toward the house.

“Ready?”

She took in a deep breath. “Not in the least. Shall we?”

He gave a little laugh and tucked her gloved hand around his arm. He gave a quick rap on the door and was a little surprised when it was opened immediately by Jones, their butler.

Never one to hide his feelings, despite the fact that butlers were supposed to remain stoic at all times, he greeted Pine with a broad, welcoming smile. “Welcome home, Master Pine.”

Pine entered, giving Jones a friendly pat on his shoulder. “Thank you, Jones. It has been too long.”

“Indeed, it has, sir. The family has just gone in to their Christmas dinner. I shall announce you.”

“Thank you.”

At the mention of dinner, Pine could hear Helena's stomach give a little growl. She put a hand to her abdomen.

"Excuse me!"

Pine just laughed. "I'm rather hungry myself. I'm glad we arrived in time for dinner."

They both shed their coats, handing them to a footman who had materialized from somewhere.

Jones led the way to the dining room. "Mr. Teviot has arrived, my lord."

Pine walked in with Helena just one step behind him. His entire family was sitting around the table covered in plates of ham, roast, vegetables, and all manner of other special Christmas dinner treats.

There was a moment of stunned silence as Pine's family stopped speaking to stare at him. Two breaths later, all but his father were on their feet, hugging him and pulling at his hand.

"Pine! I can't believe it," his mother said, tears glistening in her eyes.

"This is the best Christmas present ever!" Daisy, his youngest sister exclaimed.

"Helena, this is my mother, Lady Hazelton. Daisy and Marigold, as I've told you, are five and three years younger, and Ash is one year my junior."

Helena gave a curtsy to Lady Hazelton and a nod to the others.

His father stood and cleared his throat loudly enough to catch the attention of everyone. They all fell silent. "Well?" he said, glowering at his son and heir.

Pine straightened his back and then gestured to Helena. “Father, may I introduce Miss Helena Lawson—” he waited a beat and then added, “my fiancée?”

His mother let out a sob, but quickly put her hand to her mouth to stifle it.

Lord Hazelton narrowed his eyes. “Miss Lawson? As in Lord Cumnor’s daughter?” he ground out. “Well, aren’t you a tricky little...” he paused, perhaps to modify his language, “piece of work. I deny you the right to stay in my house and then you show up on my son’s arm, claiming to be his fiancée.”

Pine’s brother, Ash, gasped and his mother let out a little squeak.

“It is my house, my lord, while my father still lives,” she said, drawing herself up to her full height. “And one thing has nothing to do with the other. In fact, when I requested my father’s solicitor to write you, I considered asking him to include the fact that Pine and I were close, hoping that might sway you, but then decided against doing so as I didn’t believe that to be proper—and I hadn’t asked Pine if I might tell you of our association.”

Pine’s father turned to him for confirmation of this. Pine was proud of Helena for coming up with that on the spur of the moment, but quickly gave a nod of his head. “In fact, Helena didn’t even tell me of the relationship until our journey here. I was never so embarrassed, Father, and wondered that she didn’t refuse my proposal on that basis alone.”

“Oh, no, Pine,” Helena said, putting her hand on his arm. “I love you too much to allow something like that to come between us.” She gazed up into his eyes so tenderly even he forgot it was all a ruse for a moment.

“And I love you too, my sweet.” He ran his thumb down her soft cheek and returned her gaze, hoping his own was as convincing as hers.

His father just huffed and sat back down. The moment he did so, Pine and Helena, both, were engulfed in a hug from his mother. Tears were running down her face as she looked at them. “I am so happy!”

Pine gave his mother an extra little squeeze. “Then you must stop crying, Mama.”

She sniffed and wiped away her tears. “Yes, yes, of course. Come, come and sit down. Oh, yes, John, thank you,” she added as she noticed the footman laying two more place settings on the table next to where Ash had been sitting.

They all sat down again, and Pine and Helena were immediately bombarded with questions from his sisters: how did they meet? How long have they known each other? How did Pine propose? Had he knelt before her as he did so?

Pine put his hand over Helena’s and gave it a little squeeze before he started weaving tales for his demanding little sisters

Oh, but it was so wonderful to be home!

<sup>1</sup> See Author’s Note for an explanation of this quote.



## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:50 am*

Helena was never so grateful to see anybody when Pine, his father, and brother joined the ladies in the drawing room.

He came straight over to her, for which she gave him a grateful smile.

“How are you doing?” he asked softly so no one else could hear.

“Well enough, considering the circumstances. How about you?”

He gave a chuckle. “I have to admit to feeling a little wrung out after the interrogation I just suffered.”

She winced. “You too?”

“Surely, you can’t be surprised.”

Helena sighed. “No, not really.”

Pine’s gaze floated to the ceiling for a moment, just as it had when she’d first told him of her predicament. Instead of stalking away, though, he reached out his hand to her.

She really had no choice but to take it. When she did, he pulled her to her feet and then drew her toward the door.

“I’m going to show Miss Lawson the gallery,” he said to the room at large.

“Do you really think she wants to see old paintings of our ancestors?” Daisy asked incredulously.

“I bet she does,” Marigold said with a giggle.

“But—ow!” Daisy rubbed her side where her sister had just elbowed her.

Before anyone could say anything more, Pine led Helena out the door and then further down the passage away from the stairs.

At the end, they turned left and entered a long gallery with high ceilings and paintings lining the walls on either side, interspersed with either a bust or a Greek-looking statue. They couldn’t have truly been from Greece, could they?

“Those statues aren’t...” she started to ask.

“Replicas, all of them. My mother commissioned them from a local sculptor,” he said quickly.

Helena gave a little laugh. “That’s what I thought, but you never know.”

“Helena, you said your father was a scholar of ancient Greek plays, didn’t you?”

“No. That’s me. I told you in the coach that I’ve studied the plays of Sophocles, Euripides—”

“Yes, but what about your father?” he interrupted.

“He studies Caesar and the politics of the time. Why?”

Pine scowled. “Because I couldn’t remember if you told me what he studied, but I did

remember about the plays, so that's what I told my father."

"Oh." Helena worried her lower lip as she thought about this. "I told your mother and sisters what he studied, but I didn't go into any detail, so maybe it's all right."

Pine let out a sigh of relief. "Yes, let's hope that it is."

"Do you think your parents will compare stories?"

He gave a little shrug. "I doubt it." His words sounded too much like a question for Helena's comfort.

"What did you say about when we met?" she asked, now more worried than she had been.

"I said we met at Lady Emmerton's garden party last Season."

Now it was Helena's turn to sigh in relief. "I said we met at a party but couldn't remember who the hostess had been."

"Good. That was clever to keep your answer general. I probably should have done the same."

She gave a little shrug and looked up into the hard eyes painted eyes of a man who looked very much like Lord Hazelton. Only the style of his dress marked him as being from an earlier era.

"My great-grandfather," Pine explained.

"Your father bears an uncanny resemblance to him."

Pine nodded. “He’s even named after him—as am I, but it’s one of my middle names.”

She looked at him and then the portrait.

“I take after my mother,” he supplied.

“You certainly don’t look very much like him.”

“I’ve got his nose, I think, and his chin.”

She tilted her head, looking more closely at the painting. “How can you tell? He’s got a beard.” Indeed, the man had a rather odd beard that came to a point an inch or two below his chin. He had a mustache, but his narrow cheeks were shaved clean.

“There’s another painting of him when he was younger, without the beard,” Pine explained. “We really should have spent more time in the coach agreeing on our story. My father is already suspicious. If our accounts don’t match, there’s going to be trouble for us both.”

“Yes.”

They spent the next half-hour wandering slowly up and down the gallery, going over the story of their supposed courtship. They just so happened to be admiring a painting of Pine’s great-great grandmother when Marigold came in.

“Mother would like to show Miss Lawson to her room,” she informed them. “She thinks you’ve had more than enough time alone,” she added with a smirk.

Helena could feel her cheeks heat with embarrassment over what his family must have thought they were doing all this time. She turned back to Pine. “Good night,

then.”

He gave her a warm smile that did something very strange to her insides and she wasn't sure, but her cheeks might have turned an even darker shade of pink. “Good night,” he said softly.

The following day was bright and sunny. There had been snow the previous night, so the lovely blanket on the ground had been renewed and thickened.

Helen found Pine and his brother and sisters at the breakfast table. “Good morning,” she said. “I hope I'm not too late.”

Pine and his brother both stood.

“No, not at all,” Pine said, giving her a warm smile. “We do tend to be early risers when in the country.”

“I usually am as well, but my bed was so warm and comfortable, I found it difficult to get up,” she said, feeling a little embarrassed. “Er, your parents?” she asked, looking around the table, but seeing no evidence of them.

“Our father has already eaten and is at his desk. Mother has a tray in her room most mornings,” Marigold explained.

“Please, help yourself,” Ash said, indicating the sideboard where there was ham, potatoes, and vegetables laid out.

“Thank. I'll just have some toast and tea.” Helena sat down at a place setting and helped herself to a slice of toast from the rack in the center of the table, while a footman poured her tea.

“We were thinking of going out for a walk this morning, if you’d like to join us,” Pine said, before tucking back into the food on his loaded plate.

Ash got up and helped himself to more. “There are some improvements to the lake I was going to show my brother,” he explained, while piling potatoes and meat onto his plate.

“Would you like to come?” Pine asked.

“That sounds lovely, thank you,” Helena nodded.

“It will be wet. There are no direct paths to the lake, so we usually go over the lawn,” Marigold added.

Helena smiled. “It’s a good thing I brought my boots, then.”

“I wish I could go,” Daisy pouted.

“You have your studies,” her sister reminded her.

“I know, but they’re boring,” she huffed.

“What are you studying?” Helena asked.

“History—Henry VIII—French, and water colors,” Daisy said, listing them on her fingers.

“Hmm, I might agree with you about Henry VIII except that he enacted so many changes just so he could get an heir. Some say he loved Ann Boleyn, but honestly, if he did how could he have chopped off her head?”

“Maybe he was forced to?” Daisy asked.

Helena shrugged. “Perhaps. There was certainly a great deal of political maneuvering at that time.”

“And then there was the whole business with the church,” Pine added, giving Helena a warm smile. He’d clearly caught on to what she was doing—trying to make history more fun and exciting for his sister so she wouldn’t feel so bad about being left behind.

Somehow, they all fell into a fascinating discussion of the old king’s reign. By the time Pine and his brother had finished eating, Daisy was ready to face her studies—perhaps not with enthusiasm, but certainly with less dread. And she’d forgotten to be upset that the rest of them would be going out for a walk without her.

After Daisy had gone off to her school room, Pine stood. “Shall we go soon?”

Helena took a last sip of her tea and rose as well. “I’ll just go change into my boots.”

“I’ll do the same. We’ll meet at the door to the garden in a quarter of an hour?” Marigold asked.

“It’s going to take you fifteen minutes to put on a pair of boots?” Ash asked.

“And my coat, hat, gloves...” Marigold said with a scowl for her brother.

Helena laughed. “I do love how you all carry on. It’s clear you’re very close.”

The four Teviots stopped and stared at her for a moment.

“I never had any siblings,” Helena said by way of explanation since they all seemed

nonplussed by her comment. As she said this, she did her best to ignore the odd feeling in the pit of her stomach. Was it jealousy? Loneliness? She didn't know and didn't want to examine it too closely just now.

"You have no brothers or sisters? Never have?" Daisy asked.

Helena nodded, unsure whether her voice would sound normal if she spoke.

"I never really thought about it, but you're right," Ash said.

"We do care for each other greatly," Marigold agreed. "That's why it's been so difficult when Pine didn't come home for so long."

"When Papa refused to allow me to return," Pine corrected her.

She sighed and nodded.

"Go and get yourself ready. We'll meet at the door to the garden," Ash said, bringing them back to their plans.

"Right." Marigold left the room, and Helena followed after, getting a funny look from Pine. As she walked back to her room, she tried to decipher it in her mind. It was rather a look of sad appreciation, she thought. Perhaps he was just pitying her because she'd never had brothers or sisters. Honestly, she'd never realized what she'd missed until she'd watched the Teviots interact with each other. She should be sure to tell him not to feel sorry for her. She may not have had siblings, but she did have a very happy childhood and had been very close to her mother.

"Pine said your father studies Greek plays?" Mr. Teviot asked as they tromped through the snow.



“Well, he studies politics. Actually, it is I who studies the plays,” she explained.

“And what do you do with your studies?” he asked.

“I write articles about what I’ve discovered or posited. My father then publishes them in journals,” Helena said.

“He publishes them for you?” Miss Teviot asked.

“Yes. Because academic articles written by a woman wouldn’t be taken seriously, he has had to publish them under his name.”

“But that’s awful!” Miss Teviot exclaimed. “It must be so infuriating.”

“Well, I’d rather that than not having them published at all,” Helena told her. “I have long ago come to terms with the fact that I will never be known for my own work. I was furious when I first learned of it, but eventually I decided that it was a battle that could only be fought man by man. Perhaps one day men will acknowledge the intellect of women, but clearly that isn’t going to be today.”

“I doubt you could ever convince our father of that,” Miss Teviot said sadly.

“There are some men, unfortunately, who are like that. They feel threatened by an intelligent woman and so simply dismiss all women as incapable.”

“But I do hope opinions are changing.” Miss Teviot said giving Helena a hopeful glance.

“Oh, indeed, they are. So many younger men no longer think women are unable to engage in intellectual pursuits,” Helena told her.

“Pine and I both understand this, despite our father’s beliefs,” Mr. Teviot said.

“But if you’re trying to make a good impression on our father, you might not want to discuss your studies,” Miss Teviot said.

“Oh, I don’t know. I don’t think he would understand a word of what she said if she did. He’d probably just think she was speaking nonsense,” Pine laughed.

Helena stopped as a large, beautiful lake appeared as they crested the rise. “I don’t so much care about your father’s good opinion, I have to admit, so long as I have Pine’s.”

The brother and sister shared a look, and Pine gave her a warm smile as he interlaced his gloved fingers in hers.

She looked up at him and they exchanged smiles. His made her feel rather warm despite the cold air.

As they stood looking out over the lake, Mr. Teviot began to explain all the changes he’d suggested to their father. He went on at great lengths and with more animation than Helena would have expected. As she watched him, she noticed that Pine, too, had become quite excited at his brother’s vision. They got into a rather detailed discussion of pilings and the appropriate wood to use, and all manner of things Helena could barely follow. And amidst it all, Miss Teviot just stood watching her brothers, adding in a suggestion here and there or giving an explanation and generally looking extremely proud of her brother for his cleverness.

Once it was agreed that the plans for the lake were, indeed, magnificent, they all turned to walk back to the house.

“I’ve told you what I study, Mr. Teviot,” Helena said. “What is that you study?”

Pine's brother gave a little laugh. "Please, Miss Lawson, you must call me Ash. As you are soon to become a member of the family, it seems a little silly for you to call me Mr. Teviot."

Helena gave him a hesitant smile as she glanced quickly at Pine. He'd lost his smile but gave the slightest lift of his shoulder as if to say, just go along with it.

"Of course. And you must call me Helena," she said.

Miss Teviot threaded her hand under Helena's arm so that they linked together as they strolled through the snow. "We are all going to be great friends, I can tell. You are, of course, going to call us all by our given names."

That odd feeling in the pit of her stomach that she'd experienced at the breakfast table assailed her again. It was the beginnings of a feeling of belonging and it was wonderful—too wonderful, she told herself. She had to remember that this was all a ruse. It would be much too easy—and too tempting—to forget.

"And to answer your question, Helena," Ash said, completely unaware of the turmoil was running through her. "I am studying the same thing Pine did when he was at university—agriculture."

That surprised her and was a happy diversion from her inner thoughts. "Really? Is that to assist with the running of this estate?"

Both Ash and Pine laughed. "Oh, our father would never allow that," Pine said.

"He doesn't even let his own steward do that, and that's his job!" Ash added.

"But when I inherit the estate, I plan on running things differently, with Ash at my side," Pine said as he slung a negligent hand over his brother's shoulders.

“I was shocked when our father allowed me to make suggestions for the improvement of the lake. But since it’s just for beauty and amusement, I suppose he doesn’t care so much about it. But he runs the rest of the estate with a strong hand,” Ash told her.

“Well, we’ll work together when we’re in charge. I won’t need a steward.” Pine’s hand dropped to his side.

“But you’ll pay me, right?” Ash asked.

“Of course! You’ll probably be one of the best paid land stewards in England.”

Ash laughed. “Well, you don’t have to pay me that much. I will be getting free room and board as well.”

“Unless you decide to move into the steward’s cottage,” Pine agreed.

“Hmm, that’s a thought. I’ll ponder that one.”

“It all sounds wonderful,” Helena said. “And very clever of you, Pine, to share the responsibility of running the estate with someone you love and trust.”

Pine just nodded, clearly feeling a little embarrassed. It was sweet.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:50 am*

After they all trudged back to the house, they dispersed to change into dry clothes. A little while later, Pine joined his mother in the drawing room where she was working on some embroidery.

“Good morning, Mama,” he said, giving her a little buss on her cheek.

“Good afternoon, my dearest,” she gently corrected him.

He pulled out his watch from his pocket. “Goodness! I didn’t realize it was past one.”

“What have you been up to that made you forget the time?” she asked.

“Ash, Marigold, Helena, and I went to the lake to see and hear about the improvements. What of you? Have you had a relaxing morning?”

“No,” she chuckled. “Silly boy, it’s the day after Christmas. I was up and out early delivering baskets to the tenants and a few others in town.”

“Oh, I completely forgot! Of course. Everyone is well—” he broke off what he was saying as there was a light tap on the door followed by the hesitant entrance of Helena.

Pine jumped to his feet.

“Am I disturbing you?” she asked.

“No, my dear, not at all. Please do come in. I was just telling Pine about my

excursion to visit all the tenants this morning.”

“Oh, yes. My mother would always do the same if we were in the country at Christmas. If we weren’t there, she made sure our housekeeper, Mrs. Ferrier, would take care of it.”

“Did you not always spend the holiday in the countryside?” Lady Hazelton asked.

“No. My father didn’t like leaving our house in London. It was where all of his books were,” Helena told them.

“And you? Did you miss not going?” the lady asked.

“I’m afraid I didn’t really for much the same reason,” Helena admitted a little sheepishly. She looked adorable peering through her dark lashes.

“Somehow, I don’t think you’ve told me very much about your research. What is it that you do precisely?” Pine asked.

“Oh, you’ve asked, I just don’t think I’ve answered you for fear of boring you dreadfully,” she said with a broad smile.

“Wise girl,” Lady Hazelton approved.

“I’m afraid I learned that lesson the hard way, scaring off all potential suitors,” Helena admitted.

“But not Pine?” the lady asked suspiciously.

“He was kind enough to suggest a different top of discussion,” Helena said clearly making that up on the spot.

His mother just laughed and nodded. “He can be very diplomatic and charming when he wants to be.” She turned and smiled lovingly at her son.

“Yes, well, now I find myself rather intrigued,” Pine said. Oddly enough, he admitted to himself, he was. What was it that so fascinated this beautiful girl that she could barely speak of nothing else—even at parties.

“Are you certain you want to know?” she asked.

“Absolutely,” he confirmed

An hour later Pine wasn’t certain he understood all that Helena had told him. She began by broadly outlining her studies and he’d been able to follow that, but then she seemed to forget herself as she got deeper into the subject. Pine stopped trying to understand and instead merely enjoyed watching her. Her blue eyes sparkled with excitement, and she became so animated, speaking somehow with her entire body. She would lean forward or back, gesture and shape the air with her hands as she explained her theories.

She was, in short, magnificent.

Dinner that night started out as a jolly affair with Pine sharing stories of the beau monde with Marigold, who would be making her come-out next spring.

When there was a lull in the conversation, Lord Hazelton broke it by turning to his youngest daughter. “Daisy, what did you study today?” he asked, giving her a paternal smile.

“I worked on my watercolors and had a lesson in deportment,” she told her father.

Helena noticed she didn’t mention her history lesson.

“Good. Very important lessons, I’m sure. And what of your pianoforte? Did you practice today?” he asked.

She scrunched up her nose. “I wonder if I should try a different instrument, Papa. I’m really not good on the pianoforte.”

“A harp is a very expensive instrument to buy and there aren’t any others which are appropriate for a young lady,” he told her.

“Miss Pemberton plays the violin,” Pine said. “Went to a musicale and heard her last season.”

His father frowned at him. “It’s not an instrument for a young lady,” Lord Hazelton reiterated. “And what of you, Marigold?” He turned his attention to his elder daughter.

“Pine, Ash, Miss Lawson, and I went for a walk down to the lake so Ash could show Pine all that is being done to improve it.”

“Ah, yes. Great plans are going forward,” his lordship said with pride.

In a sad way, Helena was not surprised that he made no mention of the fact that the plans were Ash’s ideas. He seemed like the sort of man who would take credit for the work of others.

He turned to Helena. “I don’t suppose Cumnor has such a fine lake, eh?”

Helena smiled. “We have no lake at all. We do, however, have an amphitheater built in the way of those of ancient Greece.”

Lord Hazelton’s beneficent smile disappeared.



“My mother designed it with my help, since I’m much more familiar with the Greek theatre. It couldn’t simply be a semicircle cut into the ground, you see. There also needs to be space for—

“It sounds like a ridiculous thing to build on an estate,” he said, cutting her off. “Probably destroyed a perfectly good field that could have been used for planting grain.”

“Actually, the field where it was built was completely useless, it was so filled with boulders. Under the top lay of soil was pure rock. We hired—”

“A waste of money, then. Goodness gracious, I’m going to have my hands full putting that estate to rights once your father is dead. When did you say the doctor expects him to—”

“My lord!” Lady Hazelton exclaimed. “Please be a little sensitive to the girl’s position. This is her father you are speaking of, and her home!”

“Bah, I just want to know if it will be before the spring planting so that I may—”

“Father!” Pine remonstrated. Lord Hazelton looked around the table at his family. It made Helena feel only slightly better to see that each and every one of them had the same expression of horror on their faces.

“Very well,” he relented.

Helena had never felt hatred in her heart, but it most certainly budding now. This man was even worse than Pine had told her. She was certain to enjoy annoying him. And why not start now, she thought with a little giggle.

She cleared her throat and then asked, “My lord, you don’t happen to have a copy of

Antigone in your library, do you?"

He stared at her blankly for a moment and then with sudden understanding he opened his mouth to say something, but then closed it again only to glare at her. "And what would you want with a copy of an old play?"

"I wanted to show it to Marigold. We were discussing my studies this afternoon while walking to the Lake and I thought she might enjoy reading that one. It's quite one of my favorites." She deliberately gave him her sweetest smile.

"Your—don't be ridiculous, young women don't have studies. Or certainly none more than art, music, and embroidery," he snapped.

She tilted her head at him. "But I do. And while I did study sketching, I learned nothing of either music or embroidery."

"Pine, I don't understand how, among all the young ladies of the ton, you could have found the one who knows nothing of being a proper lady," he said turning to his son.

"That is unfair, Father," Marigold remonstrated. "Just because she doesn't know how to play the pianoforte doesn't make Helena any less of a lady."

"Young ladies should know art, music, and embroidery," her father reiterated.

"And household management," Lady Hazelton added.

He nodded. "And household management," he agreed.

"Which involves mathematics, management, economy," Ash said. He turned to his mother. "Anything else that I forgot?"

She just smiled indulgently at her son but didn't say anything.

"You have all gone mad. Women do not have the capability to engage in higher reasoning. They can barely learn a foreign tongue," Lord Hazelton said, now sharing his anger with everyone around the table.

"Seul un cochon ignorant pourrait penser ça," Helena said. "Eine andere Sprache nicht zu sprechen ist Geistesverschwendung. I could go on in ancient Greek or Latin, but as they are no longer actually spoken languages—aside from the Latin spoke in church—I'll spare you."

Daisy slapped a hand over her mouth to hide her giggles. Ash turned away from his father, but she could see his shoulders shaking with laughter and Pine outright laughed.

Lord Hazelton bolted to his feet, threw his napkin onto the table, and stalked out the door.

"Oh, dear," Lady Hazelton whispered. "That may not have been the cleverest thing to do, my girl."

"Probably not..." Ash started.

"But it was funny," Daisy finished for him.

"But Mother is right," Marigold said, turning toward Helena. She had lost her smile and was now looking very serious. "I know you don't care a great deal about what he thinks of you, but you should at least respect your future father-in-law."

"She's right," Ash agreed. "You're going to have to maintain good relations with him for, probably, a good long time. Making him angry like that isn't going to make your

life easy once you and Pine are married.”

Helena dropped her gaze to her plate. If only they knew that this was the whole point of her being here. She didn't feel bad at all for showing Lord Hazelton how wrong he was in his opinion of women's intelligence, but it did hurt to deceive the rest of Pine's family. They were truly sweet and wonderful people. She hated lying to them.

Under the table, Pine placed a comforting hand on her leg. It sent heat shooting throughout her body, but most of all to her face where she was certain she had turned quite pink. She lifted her gaze to his.

“It's all right, Helena,” he said softly. She was sure he was trying to support her, tell her that she was doing the right thing, what they had agreed she should do.

She gave a nod and even a little smile. “Thank you,” she whispered back. “It helps knowing you're with me.”

“I am most certainly with you—in every way.”

Oh dear, that heat just got hotter and now there were tingles on her arms. What was happening to her?

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:50 am*

Pine was off kilter. As he stared out at the falling snow, he realized he had no idea what was happening to him.

The conservatory was cold. Since his mother didn't actually keep plants that needed to be kept warm, they didn't bother lighting the fire. With the large glass windows, it was definitely the coldest room in the house. But it was also Pine's favorite.

It was here that he'd always come to think. It was quiet here. And he rather liked the cold. It cleared his head—and goodness knew he most certainly needed a clear head now.

So much had happened in the last few days—he'd met Helena, come home, and spent time with his family, and he was well on his way to being despised by his father, either that or thought to be a complete fool.

He could hardly believe he'd only known Helena for such a short time. He felt as if they'd been together forever. He knew her, and he was pretty sure she knew him.

But there was more than that. He liked her. He respected her. He—

“Oh, here you are,” a woman's voice came from the doorway—

Pine spun around and found Helena smiling at him as she came forward.

He returned her smile. “I was just thinking about you,” he admitted.

“Oh?” She cocked her head.

He gave a slightly embarrassed laugh and wondered if he was about to make a fool of himself. He pressed forward anyway—maybe he was a fool. “I was just thinking that we’ve only known each other less than a week, and yet I feel as if I’ve known you my entire life. Is that ridiculous?”

Her eyes softened as she gazed up at him. She shook her head. “It’s not ridiculous at all. I feel exactly the same way.”

He reached out and took her hand. “I feel...” He shook his head, certain he shouldn’t be saying this. “Ever since we left London, I’ve been happy. Yes...” He held up a hand to stop her from saying whatever it was she’d opened her mouth to say. “Yes, part of it is being with my family, who I’ve missed terribly. But just being with them has never made me feel this way. It’s you. You make me happy.”

Her eyes began to shine—either with unshed tears or her own emotions. He didn’t know which. “You make me feel the same way. My father is practically on his deathbed. I should be distraught—and I am extremely upset at my impending loss—but... you are an island of safety and joy in the stormy sea of my life. Thank you for that. For making me feel safe—even if it is only for a little while.”

Does it have to only be for a little while, a voice asked inside his head. He dared not say it out loud, though. No, all he wanted to do now was to hold this beautiful, strong, incredible woman in his arms and kiss her. And so he did.

He pulled her close and bent his head to press his lips against hers. But it wasn’t enough. He rained little kisses all across her lips before running his tongue along the seam, begging for entry. She parted her lips, hesitantly, and he deepened the kiss, tasting her sweetness. And sweet she was, even more so than he’d imagined she would be.

His arms pulled her closer, pressing her lovely softness against him. She felt so good,

so right.

“What the—” Lord Hazelton’s voice came from the doorway.

Pine and Helena jumped apart.

“Unacceptable,” his father growled before turning and stomping away. They could hear him calling for Pine’s mother as he went.

“Oh, dear,” Helena whispered.

“Have no fear. He already thinks we’re engaged,” Pine said with a little laugh. Before his mother could show up to chaperon them, he quickly gave her another kiss.

He’d meant for it to be little more than a peck, but she’d opened her mouth to him again and he could not help but accept the invitation.

“Now, now,” Lady Hazelton interrupted them. “There will be plenty of time for that after the wedding.”

Helena’s hands flew to her face. Her cheeks had turned a vibrant pink.

“Come now, Miss Lawson, why don’t you and I go have a chat about the wedding breakfast,” his mother said, taking Helena’s hand and drawing her away. “We’ll leave Pine to enjoy the freezing cold of this room on his own,” she added with a laugh. “I’ve never understood how he could enjoy...” her voice drifted off as she led Helena down the hall and away from him.

Helena hadn’t been able to do anything but give him a wide-eyed look as she was pulled from the room. He thought there might have been a hint of a smile there too, if he wasn’t mistaken.

After the wedding, his mother had said. But there wouldn't actually be a wedding, unless.... Pine wondered if he might be able to convince Helena to make the engagement real. He wondered if she felt as strongly for him as he was beginning to feel for her. Was it love, though?

Yes. Yes, he was beginning to think that it was. He'd certainly never had such an immediate connection with anyone before. She teased his mind with her intelligence and teased him in other ways with her beauty. He knew for certain that, if he could convince her to marry him, they would never run out of things to talk about. She would be a friend as well as his wife. Truly, who could ask for more? And the love... well, that was quickly becoming a reality as well. He could only hope she felt the same.

Two days later, Helena was thinking of how relieved she'd been the previous evening when Lord Hazelton had taken his dinner in his study. She was so embarrassed at being caught kissing Pine—not once, but twice!

She sat down at her dressing table and unwound her night braid before brushing out her hair.

One might have thought that after Lord Hazelton had caught them, they would have been intelligent enough to not simply go back to what they'd been doing, knowing full well that his mother was on her way.

Helena could feel her face heat even now as she simply thought about it.

But it had been nice. No, it had been bone-meltingly wonderful, if she were completely honest. It had warmed her to know that Pine felt the same way she did with regard to how well they knew each other.

She would have scoffed and rolled her eyes two weeks ago if anyone had told her



such a thing was possible. But now... now Helena knew she was getting herself into serious trouble because it was one thing to claim knowledge of another and something else completely to love them.

Oh, my God. Did she just think the word love? She lowered her hairbrush.

How ridiculous. She couldn't love Pine. But... doubts inched into that lost thought. Could she love him? Was it possible to fall in love with someone that quickly?

She put down her brush and began to gather her hair into a simple bun on the top of her head.

Helena had no idea. She was certain, though, that love had not been on Pine's mind. Oh, certainly he'd kissed her, but that was because he liked her, perhaps even found her attractive. It most certainly had nothing to do—

A knock sounded on Helena's door. She quickly slipped her last hairpin into place, then got up to answer it.

A maid stood there. She gave a little curtsy. "Good morning, Miss Lawson. His lordship has requested that you join him in his study."

Helena just stared at the girl for a moment, her mind caught between wanting to go blank and not understand the girl's words and screaming silently. She stood back and shook out her hands at her side. It relieved the tension within her some; not nearly enough.

"Now?" she heard herself ask in the most ordinary voice.

"Yes, Miss." The girl bobbed another curtsy.

Helena took in a shuddering breath. Well, this was why she was here. This was what she and Pine had hoped would happen.

Yes, absolutely. They had planned on this. She knew what she had to do. She gave a resolute nod, but paused to debate whether she should take a moment to plan out what she was going to say or whether she should just go and see what happened.

Despite being the sort who always planned ahead, Helena rather felt that if she didn't go to see Lord Hazelton right away, she might lose the nerve to do so entirely.

“Very well.”

The maid looked relieved, turned, and led the way down to his lordship's study. Helena had been about to go for breakfast, but now she was grateful he'd called her before she'd had a chance to eat. She might have lost whatever she'd eaten otherwise. With an empty stomach, she had no fear of embarrassing herself in that way.

Helena stood outside Lord Hazelton's door for a moment and shook out her hands. With a deep breath, she knocked. He bade her enter, and Helena went into his lordship's very masculine and business-like study.

“Ah, Miss Lawson. I am glad to see that you are prompt,” he said from where he stood by the fireplace.

She gave him a little curtsy but didn't say anything.

“Please, have a seat.” He indicated the sofa nearby.

Helena sat, crossed her feet at the ankle, and clasped her hands in her lap.

His lordship turned back to the fire and said nothing. He seemed to be gathering his

thoughts, so Helena waited.

After about a minute, he turned back to her and rested his elbow on the mantle.

“Normally I would write to your father to arrange such matters, but I understand he is not in good health. I suppose I shall have to assume that you are capable of reasonable thought? I can only request that you attempt to set aside your feminine emotions for the moment.”

Helena bristled but held her tongue.

He narrowed his eyes at her. “I want you to break off this engagement with my son.”

Pine had been right! Helena knew she shouldn’t be surprised. She hadn’t actually doubted him, and yet there had been a small piece of her that had thought—well, the point was moot now. Now, she had no choice but to carry out the plan.

With a lift of her chin—and a sharp, painful constricting of her heart—she said, “Allow me to live either in my father’s London house or at Cumnor after he dies, and I shall do so.”

The man slapped his hand down on the mantle. “I knew it! This has all been a ruse, a trick to get me to allow you to continue to live in my house.”

“My house at the moment,” she countered. “And no, it has not been a ruse. I love Pine,” she started, but then had to wait a moment for the lump in her throat to subside. “If I married him, I would not have to worry about being homeless after my father is no longer with us. If I do as you ask and set aside the man I would like to spend the rest of my life with, then the very least you could do is give me some place to live until I can find a position or someplace else to live.”

Helena was shocked at the truth of her words. A week ago, she had done this as a ruse. This whole charade had been solely so she would not be thrown out of her home. But now... now that she knew Pine... now that she had kissed him... she wanted nothing more than for him to make their engagement real.

She was probably a fool, and if Lord Hazelton called her bluff, she would probably be in a great deal of trouble because she knew Pine had entered into this merely to get his revenge for his father's cruelty. He didn't love her. She supposed he liked her well-enough but doubted very much that his feelings extended as far as matrimony. He didn't love her, and he certainly didn't want to marry her.

Lord Hazelton stared at her for a moment. Finally, he said, "You are an excellent actress, Miss Lawson. I almost believed you for a moment. But that, and most likely everything else you had told me, is a lie. Ancient Greek studies indeed," he added under his breath. "Ridiculous!"

Helena lowered her gaze to hide the tears that were now threatening.

"You shall break off this sham of an engagement and you shall receive nothing from me. Not a thing. There is no marriage contract and I owe you nothing." He strode over to his desk and seated himself. "I expect you out of my London house the day after you bury your father. You may go now."

"I swear by Athena he should throw himself to the crows," she muttered under her breath as she neared the door.

"What was that?" he snapped.

"Nothing, you wouldn't understand the reference. It is from Aristophanes."

He sighed. "Really, Miss Lawson, why must you persist—"

“I said you should throw yourself to the crows,” she repeated.

“To the... crows? And what is that supposed to mean?” He was looking satisfyingly confused.

“In ancient Greece, burial was sacred and extremely important. By saying you should throw yourself to the crows implies that your dead body would get no burial but would be left as food for the birds. That is all that you deserve!” She fled out of the room before her anger turned to tears.

Helena paused just outside of Lord Hazelton’s study. Allowing the wall to support her, she took several deep breaths to calm herself. She probably shouldn’t have cursed at him. Oh, but it had felt good to have to explain it.

That thought eased the tightness in her chest and nearly put a smile to her lips. It disappeared quickly enough as the full impact of what had just occurred dropped on her like a block of marble. Lord Hazelton had, in fact, called her bluff. He hadn’t fallen for their ruse, not for one minute.

She was going to be out on the street with very little to her name after her father died. She had nothing and no one.

“Miss?” a footman interrupted her thoughts. She looked toward him.

“Are you all right, Miss? Might...” He seemed to recall himself, straightened, and said, “Mr. Teviot is up in the drawing room with her ladyship.”

Pine. Yes. She had to tell Pine. He would probably be devastated. He might actually have to marry her now. No. She couldn’t force him into something that would destroy all of his dreams. He wanted to marry for love. She couldn’t take that away from him. He would hate her their entire life together.

“Thank you,” she said to the footman. She had to go up and tell him what happened, and she needed to reassure him that she wouldn’t hold him to this sham engagement. One of them deserved to be happy.

Slowly, she climbed the stair. After a brief knock on the door, she let herself into the drawing room. Pine was sitting on the settee with his mother. They looked so comfortable together.

As she walked in, Pine stood. He looked at her with concern. “I heard my father called you into his study. Is everything all right? What did he say?”

Helena sat on the chair facing him and Lady Hazelton. She shook her head. “It was precisely how you thought it would be,” she told him as he lowered himself back down. “He asked what I wanted in exchange for calling off the engagement.”

Lady Hazelton gasped, but otherwise said nothing.

“And you told him you wanted to stay in your house at least through next season?” Pine asked.

Helena nodded. “I don’t know that I specified how long, but I told him I wanted to stay at least until I found a position.”

Pine nodded.

“And he slammed his hand down and said he knew it. He knew our engagement was just a trick. He told me that he would give me nothing and I would need to be out of the house the day after my father’s funeral.” A tear fell onto hands clasped in her lap. “I tried to argue with him, to tell him...” She couldn’t say it. It was too embarrassing. She couldn’t admit to Pine that she’d fallen in love with him. He might feel beholden to her or guilty. He might want to do the “right” thing and then forever hate her

afterward.

“He didn’t believe me. He accused me of lying to him about you, about my studies, everything,” she told him.

“Helena, I am so very sorry,” Pine said, leaning forward. There was such a look of sadness in his deep green eyes.

She shook her head and quickly wiped away the tears. Of course he was upset. He was probably thinking that he might very well be stuck with her now. She wouldn’t do that to him. She loved him too much.

She pulled herself together. “I, I will manage.” Before she could say anything more, he gave a little huff.

“He thought you were lying about your studies. I said you could tell him anything about ancient Greece and he wouldn’t know if you were making it up or not. I was right.”

Helena frowned. “What does that mean? Do you not believe I study ancient Greek theatre? My God, you’re just like him!” Helena’s anger started boiling inside of her. “You are just like your father. Just like so many horrid men who don’t think a woman has a mind capable of... of anything! Well, that’s just fine, Mr. Teviot. This was a sham engagement, and now that your father has seen through it, I will not hold you to it. This empty-headed woman doesn’t need you. I don’t need any man. I shall manage well enough on my own.”

“You don’t... You won’t hold me...” He didn’t seem capable of putting his words together he was so shocked. He slowly rose to his feet.

“No. I would never enter into a distasteful marriage. You are free to seek out your

ideal wife,” she said.

“Fine!” he snapped and strode from the room.

“Oh, dear,” Lady Hazelton said quietly after a moment of silence.

Helena stared at the door for a few breaths while her anger cooled. She couldn’t believe that man. She’d thought he was different. He’d said he was different.

“Miss Lawson, Helena, if I may?” Lady Hazelton said. “You do know what you just did, do you not?”

“Do you know—” No. Helena would not be rude to this woman who had only been kind to her. “He said I was lying! Just like his father.”

“No, my dear, he did not. He said that was what his father would say. You misconstrued his words.”

Helena frowned. Had she?

“But, my dear, come here and sit by me.” Lady Hazelton patted the setée where Pine had just been sitting.

Helena got up and moved next to the lady. Pine’s mother reached out and took Helene’s hands in her own. “Now, tell me everything.”

Helena did. She told Lady Hazelton every that had happened since Lord Colburne told her that her father was going to die through to her arrival at Hazelton Hall. She told her about Lord Hazelton’s denial of her request, of her circumstances, and Pine’s idea to get revenge on his father.



The lady looked visibly shaken after Helena finished and then did the oddest thing—she pulled Helena into a hug. Helena had to blink rapidly for a minute as she rested her chin on Lady Hazelton’s shoulder. Her own mother—even though Helena knew she was loved—had not been a demonstrative woman. But this, this hug from Lady Hazelton... it did something. It touched something deep inside Helena.

“You poor child. How absolutely horrid.” The lady pulled back and handed Helena her handkerchief which had magically appeared from somewhere. “I wish I knew what has been going through his lordship’s mind, why he denied your request. He... well, he tends to not think so much of others, I’m afraid. If I had known... well, to be honest, I don’t know if I could have persuaded him to act differently, but I could have tried. Sometimes... sometimes I can get through to him and convince him to do the right thing.”

Helena finished wiping her nose and lowered her eyes. “Thank you.”

“But there is one thing which you haven’t told me.”

Helena looked up again.

“You have said nothing of how you feel. Would marrying Pine truly be so distasteful to you?”

Helena jerked backward. “What? No! It is not I who would think so, but Pine. I, I know he wants to marry for love—he told me so. I believe if he were forced into marriage with me he would resent it for the rest of our lives. I don’t want that. I want him to be happy.”

“And what makes you believe he wouldn’t be happy?” She cocked her head while waiting for Helena’s answer.

“He doesn’t love me!”

Lady Hazelton lifted her eyebrows but didn’t say anything. Finally, she asked, “And you? How do you feel?”

Helena swallowed hard against the tightness in her chest. She so wanted to shake her hands out but knew it would look odd. “About Pine?”

The lady nodded, looking very serious, but also curious.

Helena had to blink a few times. “I love him,” she admitted on a whisper.

“I had a suspicion that was the case.”

“Do you... do you know—”

“I believe you need to ask him. It is not my place to say anything. And just so you know, should he ask me about your feelings for him, I shall tell him the exact same thing—that he needs to speak with you.”

Helena managed to give her a tremulous smile. “Thank you, my lady.”

“Ladies,” Lady Blakemore said upon entering the Ladies’ Wagering Whist Society room at the Ryder Street Club, “I have just received a missive from Lady Hazelton.” She stopped and looked around the room. Nearly everyone was there. Only Lady Colburne was missing, but then, she was always late.

“Oh, does she send word of Miss Lawson and Mr. Teviot?” the duchess asked.

“Yes. As to be expected, they have fallen deeply in love with one another and then made a mess of the whole thing,” Lady Blakemore said. She took a seat at one of the

card tables where the other ladies were seated, ready to begin their weekly game of whist.

“Oh, dear,” Lady Welles sighed.

“What has happened?” Lady Gorling asked.

“It seems that a wrong word from Mr. Teviot led to a misunderstanding on Miss Lawson’s part—she thinks he doesn’t believe her to be the scholar she is. And then she surmised that marriage to her would be unwanted by Mr. Teviot, only she told him this in such a way that he believes she does not want to marry him.” Lady Blakemore folded the letter after one last glance at it to ensure she didn’t miss anything else of significance.

A number of women shook their heads sadly.

“Miss Lawson should be back in a day or two,” Lady Colburne told them. “Her father has taken a turn for the worse. Colburne sent a messenger up to inform her to return with haste.”

“I am so sorry!” Lady Sorrell said.

Lady Colburne just nodded.

“But maybe that’s a good thing,” Lady Ayres said. “It will give them both a little cooling off time and, hopefully, make them realize how much they do love each other.”

“It is true, but then we’ll need to get the two of them back together again,” the duchess pointed out.

“Lady Wickford, would you mind very much inviting the Hazelton’s to your ball? Perhaps they can come down bringing Mr. Teviot with them,” Lady Blakemore suggested.

“Of course!” Lady Wickford said. “I’ll send a groom with an invitation right away. It will take him a little while to get there, and time is of the essence.” She stood and pulled the bell cord in the corner.

“Well done, my lady,” Lady Welles said. “That is neat and easy. Now we just have to get the two of them into a room together to discover their mistakes and declare themselves.”

“That may be easier said than done, but I’m sure we’ll think of something,” Lady Gorling said.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:50 am*

Helena couldn't bear to face any of the Teviots that evening. She sent her apologies and requested a tray in her room. It arrived soon after, but she could barely swallow a morsel. She was trying to force herself to eat when there was a rather firm knock on her door. Both fearing and hoping it was Pine to speak with her about that morning, she smoothed down her hair before opening the door. Oddly, a footman was standing there.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Lawson, but this just arrived for you. I was told it was urgent." He held out a small square of paper.

Helena took it with trembling fingers. "Thank you."

She stared at the note for a moment after she had closed the door. The handwriting wasn't familiar, but that didn't tell her anything. She didn't know Pine's handwriting. With a huge breath in she opened it.

Miss Lawson,

Please come quickly. Your father is declining rapidly.

In sympathy,

Colburne

With a sob, which she did her best to contain, she ran down to the dining room, where she was certain the family would be.

At a glance, she noticed that both Pine and Lord Hazelton were missing.

“I... I beg your—” she started, barely able to get the words out.

Lady Hazelton stood. “It’s your father, isn’t it?”

Helena could only nod.

“John informed us of the messenger’s arrival. The man will stay the night and escort you back to London tomorrow.”

“But—”

“It’s too dark to set out now,” Ash said gently.

“I will lend you my coach,” Lady Hazelton continued.

“But can a coach get through, Mama? It’s been snowing quite a bit,” Marigold pointed out.

“I can ride,” Helena said, “if you’ve a horse I can borrow.”

Her ladyship didn’t look happy with this, but eventually nodded. “Of course.”

Helena nodded. “Thank you, my lady. I will leave at first light.” Helena gave her a small curtsy and then went up to her room to pack and wait for the sun to rise. She certainly wasn’t going to get a moment of sleep that night.

Helena was grateful to be on horseback the following morning. Marigold had been right, a coach would have had trouble traversing the snow-covered smaller roads. The mount she had been lent, however, was able to manage, if not with great speed, at

least as quickly as was safe.

She reached just after four as the late December sky was beginning to darken. She found Lady Colburne in the drawing room stitching. The lady started to rise at Helena's entrance, but it was easy to see that she was having some difficulty due to her pregnancy.

"No, my lady, don't get up," Helena said quickly.

She sat back with some relief, giving Helena an apologetic smile. "I'm glad you made it so quickly. Get changed. My husband is with him."

Helena nodded and briefly considered going straight in to see her father. But her riding habit was soaked from the snow and slush kicked up by the horse's hooves. She was filthy and cold.

She didn't think she had ever changed her gown and washed so quickly. Ten minutes later, she was quietly entering her father's bedchamber.

Dr. Colburne was sitting in a chair by her father's bed holding his wrist—most likely feeling her papa's pulse. He looked up, nodded to her, and gently placed Papa's hand on his stomach.

"You made excellent time, Miss Lawson." He spoke barely above a whisper.

She nodded. "I rode and only stopped briefly for a change of horses." She looked toward the bed. "How is he?"

"Not well, I'm afraid. I'll leave you to speak with him." He slipped out of the room before she could even offer her thanks.

She looked briefly at the chair Dr. Colburne had been sitting in, then sat on the edge of the bed instead. She took the hand resting on his stomach and held it up to her cheek. “Oh, Papa,” she breathed.

His eyes fluttered open. “Helena? Is that you?” he croaked, sounding out of breath.

“Yes, Papa. I’m here.” She held his hand to her body as his eyes closed again.

“Helena,” he breathed. His face relaxed, and she paused, holding her breath while listening for his. Thank God it was still there. Shallow and rasping, but there.

She breathed again.

For a few minutes she did nothing but listen to his slow and steady breathing, watching his chest rise and fall.

She was certain he was asleep.

With a sigh, she dropped her chin to her chest and finally allowed her tears to slip slowly down her cheeks.

“Oh, Papa. I think I made a mess of things. I fell in love with a man who doesn’t love me in return. I lashed out at him and said some awful things I shouldn’t have, but I was hurt and angry. What am I going to do?”

“Love him,” her father said quietly, making Helena startle. She hadn’t realized he’d actually been listening.

She swallowed hard. “But he doesn’t love me.”

Her father’s eyes opened, and he looked up at her, “He will. When he truly knows



you, he will love you.” His lips quirked up into a little smile for just a moment and then his eyes closed again. “I love you,” he whispered.

Helena caught a sob but could do nothing about her tears. “I love you too, Papa.”

“She’s what?” Pine couldn’t believe what his mother had just told him.

“A messenger came last night regarding her father,” Lady Hazelton explained. “She left first thing this morning. I gave her Starlight to ride.”

“She rode? All the way to London?” Pine dropped down onto the chair across from his mother in the drawing room.

“She and Marigold didn’t think a coach would have been able to get through considering all the snow we’ve been having.” She paused and then added, “She took a groom as well as the messenger. I expect we’ll see the groom back in a day or two with the horse.”

“I don’t care about the horse,” Pine said, waving her words away as if they were a fly.

“Then what is bothering you?” she asked, feigning ignorance.

“You know very well. She, she didn’t even say good bye.”

“She did to me, and even spoke a word of thanks to your father for allowing her to stay.”

“Then why didn’t she—”

“Pine, my love, you walked—no—stormed out of here yesterday. I’m not entirely surprised she didn’t seek you out.”

“Well, she made me angry,” he said defending himself. “She said I was just like Father! And that marriage to me would be distasteful! Of course I stormed out.”

His mother tilted her head in acquiescence. “Both terrible misunderstandings. She thought you were agreeing with your father regarding her studies and actually thought it was you who would find marriage distasteful.”

“Me? But I love her! Why—”

“Have you told her this?” his mother asked, cutting him off.

“Well, no, but...”

She smiled at him sadly. “Then how can you believe she knows this? I doubt very much she can read your mind.”

He was not going to acknowledge such a ridiculous statement. He may not have told her in so many words, but he’d kissed her. Surely she would realize... He hated it when his mother was right. “She still should have at least said goodbye.” And with that he stormed from the room once more.

It was too early in the day to drink, so instead he snapped at everybody who dared come within ten feet of him. He sent both of his sisters scowling away, refused to say a word to his father, and Ash got an earful when he attempted to coax Pine into a game of chess.

Pine was still in a foul mood the following evening when he joined his family for dinner. None of his siblings nor his father looked happy to see him.

“Oh, you’re still here?” Ash asked as Pine took his seat at the table.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Pine nearly growled.

“I’d hoped you’d left,” Ash answered as soup was placed before them along with a warm, crusty bread.

“We haven’t seen you all day,” Marigold elaborated. “It’s been really nice.” Her voice was innocent and sweet. It took Pine a second to hear the insult.

He narrowed his eyes at his sister.

“Yes, Pine, where have you been all day,” his mother asked. She, at least, had a small smile for him as she looked to him for an answer.

“I’ve been out riding,” he said. “And then I went to the Hare and Hound for lunch. True to their name, they served rabbit. Unfortunately, it was tough and rather tasteless.”

“Mrs. Winderling has never been a very good cook,” Marigold said.

“Never eat there if I can help it,” their father agreed.

“You are all just spoiled by Cook’s excellent food,” Lady Hazelton said, before spooning up the last of her soup.

A platter of roast beef with beautifully browned potatoes was placed on the table as John removed their soup bowls. A few bowls of various vegetables joined them, and everyone reached to help themselves. The footman refilled Pine’s wine glass for which he was grateful. He contemplated drinking himself into oblivion that evening. Sadly, he’d never been one to over-imbibe. It was clearly a failing of his. He supposed it wasn’t too late to rectify it.

He was pulled from his musings by his mother who was saying something—the beginning of which he’d completely missed.

“... should arrive by dinnertime.”

“Why?” Ash asked.

“Why what?” Pine looked toward his mother to see what he’d missed.

“While you were glowering at your wine, Mama said she is going to London tomorrow,” Daisy told him helpfully.

“Oh, yes, why?” Pine asked, giving his brother a brief nod.

“Not just I, my dear,” Lady Hazelton told Daisy. “Your father and, I hope, Pine will be going as well. We have been invited to Lady Wickford’s New Year’s Eve ball.”

Pine’s father opened his mouth to say something, but Pine cut him off before he could utter a word. “How do you know Lady Wickford? You haven’t been in town for the past two years.”

She smiled at him as she finished chewing.

“Actually, I don’t. I am, however, friends with Lady Blakemore and Lady Ayres, and they both recommended Lady Wickford invite us. I received the invitation only a few days ago with a lovely little note apologizing for its tardiness,” Lady Hazelton answered.

“I am not going!” Lord Hazelton objected.

“Yes, you are. Considering your behavior as of late, you will most certainly attend,

and you will do so with a smile on your face, my lord.”

“My behavior? You speak to me as if I were a child,” he protested loudly.

Pine’s mother just looked at him but said nothing.

“May I go, Mama?” Marigold asked after a minute.

“No, my love, you have not been presented yet. You will attend a great many parties in the spring, but not this one. Ash will be here to keep you company,” she told her eldest daughter.

“I will?” Pine’s brother said around a mouthful of food.

“Yes, you will. And please don’t speak with food in your mouth. Honestly, you should know better by now.”

Ash chewed, scowled at their mother, but said nothing.

“So, you and Father are going?” Pine clarified.

She nodded. “You were included on the invitation. I thought you might want to join us.”

Pine didn’t even need a minute to consider it. Helena was in London. He rather doubted she would be attending a party with her father on his deathbed, but perhaps he could pay her a call. “Of course, I would be very happy to go.” Just the thought of seeing Helena again lifted a weight off his chest.

He shared a smile with his mother, marveling at how he’d been so lucky to have such a clever parent.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:50 am*

Pine prowled around the drawing room of his parents' London home. He wasn't entirely certain why he didn't just return to his own rooms—only that it was quiet and lonely there.

"I am ready," his mother said, entering the room. She'd changed from her traveling gown to one more appropriate for Town and was now pulling on her gloves.

"You are ready for what, Mama?" he asked.

She stopped and looked at him in surprise. "To pay a visit to Miss Lawson, what else? Shall we go? I ordered the town coach before I went up to change. It should be waiting outside."

Pine could feel his heart pounding in his chest. She wanted him to visit with Helena? But what was he to say to her? She'd hurt him—but only because of misunderstandings. He knew he needed to explain things to her, but... He needed to tell her that he loved her, but... Pine swallowed hard. "It is too late to visit, Mother. It's nearly six."

"I'm certain Miss Lawson will forgive us, especially when she hears that we are merely there to inquire about her father." She turned and headed out the door. "Come along."

"Mama! I... I can't," Pine called after her. His heartbeat doubled.

She paused in the door. "Of course you can, my love. You're going to have to face her sooner or later. I'm not suggesting you have a deep discussion just now, but it

would be too rude not to visit now that we're in town." With that, she finally left the room.

Pine had no choice but to follow her. How had he not realized before now how infuriating his mother could be?

A quarter of an hour later, they were being shown into a slightly shabby but very comfortable sitting room. The yellow striped settee had dulled to a burnished gold, and the yellow and red floral carpet looked well-worn in spots.

Helena, herself, stood out among the faded colors of the room. She was a brilliant star in a dark sky. Her pale-blue gown brought out the blue of her eyes and the lovely blonde highlights in her hair. Pine was struck by her easy beauty, feeling as if it had been weeks since he'd seen her rather than days.

She stood and curtsied to them as they entered the room. "My lady, what a lovely surprise. I hadn't realized you were coming to Town."

"It was a rather last-minute decision," Pine's mother admitted. "After you left, I remembered we'd been invited to Lady Wickford's ball, and I thought it would be such a lovely diversion."

"Are Ash and Marigold with you?" she asked, looking toward the door as if they would suddenly appear. Since they didn't, she gestured for Lady Hazelton and Pine to seat themselves.

"No. Marigold hasn't been presented yet, so I asked Ash to stay and keep his sisters' company. Lord Hazelton came with us but needed to see to some business this evening, unfortunately."

Pine nearly laughed. His father's business was to reacquaint himself with Powell's

Club for Gentlemen and the very fine rum to be found there in particular.

“Of course,” Helena said.

Pine wasn’t certain, but he thought she might deliberately be ignoring him.

“Tell us how your dear father is doing,” Lady Hazelton asked, leaning forward.

Helena gave the first smile he had seen on her lips since they’d arrived. “I am very pleased to say that he has rallied somewhat. Dr. Colburne insists it is my presence which bolstered him, but whatever it is, he is doing better.”

“Oh, I am so very glad to hear that. How wonderful,” Lady Hazelton said. She then put a hand to her cheek and said, “I wonder if I might go and pay my respects? We met quite a few years ago, and it would be lovely to renew our acquaintance.”

Helena frowned. “I don’t know if that would be a good idea, my lady. He has rallied, as I said, but he is far from well.”

“Oh, I am certain I won’t tire him, I promise. I’ll stay only for a minute or so.” She rose and Helena followed suit. “No need to show me the way. The footman or a maid can do so,” she said, breezing out the door.

Helena chased after her. “We have only the maid, I’m afraid.”

“That’s fine.”

Pine stood and saw that his mother had stopped the maid who’d greeted them at the door. She looked to be bringing some broth to his lordship.

“Would you please show me the way to Lord Cumnor?” Lady Hazelton asked.



The girl looked to her mistress. Pine couldn't see Helena's expression since her back was to him, but he saw a brief rise and fall of her shoulders.

"You stay here and keep Pine company. I'll be back momentarily," his mother said, and then followed the maid up the stairs.

Helena returned to the drawing room, looking a little bewildered.

"She always manages to get what she wants. No one is entirely sure how she does it," he said.

Helena gave a little smile. "So I see."

"Don't worry. I'm sure she won't overtax him. She's very good with patients," he added just to reassure her.

Helena nodded and resumed her seat.

They sat in awkward silence for a few minutes, then Helena asked, "How was your journey to Town?"

"Slow but fine. I think the weather warmed a bit since you came down. The roads were merely slushy but not impassable."

She nodded. "The more traveled roads were as well when I rode down."

He nodded, and they lapsed into silence again. Helena looked toward the door, probably wondering when his mother would return.

"Are you going to Lady Wickford's ball?" he asked.

Her eyes snapped back to him. “I don’t believe so. I don’t know that it would be appropriate.”

“That what would be appropriate, my dear?” Lady Hazelton asked as she breezed back into the room.

“Oh! Er, going to the ball,” Helena explained. She was grateful the lady had done as she’d promised and only just visited for a very short time.

“I’m certain there could be no harm in it. In fact, I just mentioned to your father that I hoped you would be able to attend, and he agreed it would be a good thing.”

“He did?” Helena asked skeptically.

“I’m not certain it would be appropriate for you to dance, perhaps, but you should certainly attend.”

After seeing Pine and Lady Hazelton out, Helena went up to check on her father.

He was slowly sipping at his broth, which Mary had put into a cup to make it easier for him.

“He’s not wanting much,” Mary said as Helena joined her at her father’s bedside.

“Not hungry,” her father mumbled, not even opening his eyes.

Mary held the cup to his lips again. “Another sip, my lord.” She held a napkin to his chin to catch the drips.

After she took the cup from his lips, he opened his eyes and looked at Helena. “Lady Hazel...” His voice trailed off as if it were too much effort to speak.

Helena nodded. “She insisted on seeing you. I’m terribly sorry, Papa. I didn’t know how to stop her.”

He gave a little shake of his head. “I like her,” he said, his voice raspy.

“You do?”

He gave a little smile. “I remember... met her in my youth.” He paused to catch his breath. “A beauty. Full of life and...” He took another breath. “Vigor. Felt... felt sorry for...” Another pause. “Whoever married her.” He gave a little chuckle. “Smart, though.”

Helena couldn’t help but laugh. “She is very smart, and very determined, I believe.”

He nodded, pushing away the cup Mary was trying to encourage him to drink from. “Said you should go...” He began coughing. Mary put the napkin to his lips, and he spit into it. “To the ball,” he finished after a moment.

“I don’t think so, Papa, I—”

“Go!” he said more forcefully than she had thought him capable of.

Before she could respond, he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

Dear Sirs,

It has come to my attention that the work pertaining to the plays of Sophocles—Antigone and Electra—published by Lord Cumnor were not actually his work at all. The rigorous study and remarkable conclusions drawn from it were, in fact, the work of Lord Cumnor’s daughter, Miss Helena Lawson. I am ashamed and appalled that the excellent work of this young lady had to be hidden behind the name

of a man in order to be taken seriously. Our country has been blessed by a good number of lady scientists and brilliant thinkers. It is a travesty in this modern age to still believe the fairer sex does not have the mental acuity for such thought-provoking work.

Because of this bias, one of the great intellectuals and scholars of ancient Greek theatre will lose her voice upon the sad occurrence of her father's passing. Do you truly wish to silence this voice and those of many other female intellectuals because of outdated prejudice?

It is my sincere hope that you do not. I encourage you to reprint Miss Lawson's work under her own name and thereby encourage other women to publish their own work as well, no longer feeling the need to hide behind false male names or male members of their families.

We are most sincerely,

Lord Hazelton and Mr. Pine Teviot, under consultation from Lord Cumnor

This is a copy of a letter sent to the esteemed institution of sciences, the Royal Society of London, by the above-mentioned gentlemen.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:50 am*

Helena nearly dropped her teacup. She quickly put it back onto its saucer and shoved aside her breakfast to read the letter again.

Yes. There it was and in the London Times of all places—only the most read newspaper in the entire country! How... Who... Well, it certainly couldn't have been Lord Hazelton who'd had any hand in this. And yet... he had allowed his name to be mentioned. And in consultation with Lord Cumnor ? Did her father know of this?

Helena jumped to her feet and went up to her father's bedchamber.

He was awake and sipping from a teacup with the aid of the maid. Upon seeing Helena, he pushed the cup aside. "Helena." His voice was as breathless and raspy as ever. Helena had hoped he might continue to recover some since she'd been home, but he didn't seem to be doing so. On the other hand, he hadn't become any worse either.

Helena marched over to the bed and showed her father the newspaper. "Did you have a hand in this?" she demanded.

He squinted at the paper. "I... I cannot read it."

"It is a letter from Lord Hazelton—although, I highly doubt that—and Mr. Pine Teviot in—and I quote— consultation from Lord Cumnor ."

"Ah! They printed it. Good." The last word was barely vocalized. He took in a wheezing breath.

“You knew about this?” she asked, astounded.

Her father’s lips quirked up into a little smile, and his eyes twinkled with mischief.

“But.. but how?”

“Colburne assisted,” he said, keeping his words to a minimum.

Helena dropped her hands to her sides, stunned. “Dr. Colburne?”

“Lord Dr. Colburne,” her father corrected her.

“He knows Pine?”

Her father raised his eyebrows.

“Er, Mr. Teviot, I mean,” Helena quickly corrected herself. It was too late, of course.

Her fathers lips twitched. “And now Hazelton, I believe.”

“I cannot believe Lord Hazelton has anything to do with this,” she argued. “He is the most insufferable man! He told me—to my face—that he thought I was lying about my studies! Can you believe it?”

Her father just closed his eyes.

“I don’t know why, but Lord Hazelton is... is mean. Thoughtless. Careless with his words as well,” she told him.

Lord Cumnor’s eyes opened once again. This time he looked concerned.

“He told me that the moment you died he was going to take over Cumnor and said he was probably going to have a time of it making the estate profitable—as if you hadn’t been caring for it all these years!”

Her father let out a breath from between pursed lips.

“He practically told me that he couldn’t wait until you were gone so he could get to work on it,” she admitted.

Her father looked up at her. “He doesn’t like us much.”

“He doesn’t! I don’t know why.”

“After I learned... it was he who would inherit... I couldn’t remember why his name was... familiar,” her father said slowly. “Then, I remembered the quarrel. My grandfather... and his. Cousins. Hated each other.”

“Really? Why?”

He shook his head slightly. “Something to do with money. Always does.”

Helena sat at the edge of his bed. The maid had left soon after Helena had come in, but she’d left his teacup on the table next to his bed. Helena now picked it up and put it to her father’s lips. “Drink.”

He did so obediently. “Sick... of broth,” he said after she’d wiped his chin.

Helena looked into the teacup. She’d thought it was tea, but he was right. It was beef broth. “I suppose you need the nutrients. You aren’t eating anything else.”

Her father just sighed. “Not hungry.”

“Would you like some tea?”

He looked up at her with pleading eyes. She just laughed and went downstairs to fix him a pot of real tea, sweetened with plenty of sugar just as he liked it.

That evening, even as she dressed, Helena had second thoughts about going to this ball. If it hadn't been for her father's most emphatic insistence, she wouldn't be doing so.

Was he beginning to worry about what would happen to her after he died? Perhaps between speaking with Dr. Colburne and Lady Hazelton, he finally was, although it was hard to believe it. Helena clearly loved her father, but he was like most other men of his age and status—completely self-centered.

He'd left Helena's upbringing entirely to her mother while he worked on his studies. He'd rarely even joined them at dinner when he was deep into his work. And he'd never, not once, inquired about her state of matrimony—or lack thereof.

Perhaps these past few weeks of lying in his bed without even the strength to read had given him time to think and, perhaps, realize that Helena needed a husband or else some way of supporting herself after he was gone.

The problem was that Pine would be at the ball. It was the reason he and his parents had come all the way to Town—or so Lady Hazelton had said.

Helena and Pine's last meeting had been so awkward. They didn't know what to say to one another. And the time before that, well.... Helena sighed. Words had been said that perhaps shouldn't have. There'd been misunderstandings on both sides.

She picked up the newspaper, folded to the letter Pine had published. She still couldn't believe he'd written such a thing—and that he got his father to allow his



name to be associated with it.

Just looking at it warmed her heart. It shoved aside all her fears and worries. It gave her hope that she might, in fact, have a future with Pine.

Knowing her father was asleep, and with one last look at herself in the mirror, she decided that it would have to do. Her gown was two years old, and she didn't have the knack—nor the maid—to do anything fancy with her hair. She'd done her best. Taking her spark of hope and her shawl, she headed out for the short walk to Lady Wickford's home, just a few streets away. Lord Colburne had suggested she come closer to ten or even ten-thirty, saying that it was unlikely that many would show before then. She hadn't been to a society ball for so long that she could hardly remember what time people arrived, so she took his advice.

"Oh my, don't you look lovely and with such a healthy glow to your cheeks," Lady Wickford said as she greeted Helena.

Helena laughed and put a hand to her cold cheek. "It's the cold, I'm afraid. I didn't see the point in taking a carriage to go such a short distance."

"Well, it makes you look beautiful. But please, don't let us keep you, go right in," Lord Wickford said.

Helena gave another quick curtsy and did as they suggested.

She was surprised the room was so crowded, and it made her wonder how many others had come just for this party. She wandered among the other guests but didn't know very many since she had never been very much a part of society. Still, people were polite and nodded their greeting as she passed.

She caught sight of Lord and Lady Hazelton speaking with one of the ladies of the

Wagering Whist Society but didn't see Pine—until she looked toward the dance floor.

There he was skipping and turning with the most brilliant smile on his face. He positively glowed. Helena didn't know the young lady he was dancing with, but as they turned about together in the center of their circle, she said something that made him laugh out loud. He responded in kind, and as the two other couples retreated to their opposite sides of the circle, they were still giggling and sharing a look as if they couldn't bear to take their eyes from each other.

Helena shook out her hands even as a weight settled over her chest. Was it her imagination or had the room just become colder?

No, she must still be feeling the cold from her walk.

Much to her relief, the dance ended. Pine bowed gallantly to his partner who gave him a very pretty curtsy. He then took her hand and led her back to an older lady who had to be her mother. He said a few words to her and then turned away and headed to another part of the room opposite to where Helena was standing.

She realized with a start that she had simply been staring at him for five minutes or more. That would not do. She turned and immediately bumped into Lady Welles.

"Oh, I do beg your pardon, my lady," Helena said immediately.

The young woman laughed. "I was just coming to greet you."

"Of course," Helena curtsied properly. "Good evening, Lady Welles."

"Good evening." The lady's smile hadn't left her face. She was absolutely stunning in a deep-pink gown with Belgian lace falling elegantly from the high waist. The color

brought out the pink of her cheeks and the green of her eyes. Her hair was adorned with small, pink silk roses nestled among the complicated twists of her coiffure. Her beauty made Helena all the more aware of her own old dress and simple hair style.

“Please, tell me how Lord Cumnor is doing. Colburne mentioned that he seemed to be a bit better since your return.”

“He is, thankfully. Thank you for asking,” Helena said.

“Of course. We have all been concerned,” the lady said, but Helena’s attention was caught by Pine, who was leading another young lady out to dance.

She was vaguely aware that her companion had asked her something. With difficulty, she pulled her gaze away and returned her attention to Lady Welles. “I’m sorry. I missed what you said.”

The lady waved it away and pointed with her chin to the dance floor. “Nothing important. She is very pretty, the young lady dancing with Mr. Teviot.”

“Yes,” Helena agreed, turning back to watch.

“I hear she’s quite an heiress.”

“Really?”

“Some were even calling her the diamond of last Season, although Miss Fitzherbert might have protested that—such a sweet and demure girl.”

Helena had no idea who Lady Welles was talking about. All she knew was that the young lady Pine was dancing with was looking up at him as if he were the one causing the world to turn.

“Oh my, they do look smitten, don’t they?”

Helena shifted her gaze from the girl to Pine. He wasn’t looking bright with joy as he had during the previous dance, but had a hungrier, more serious look in his face. The weight on Helena’s chest grew heavier, and the air was so cold she was practically shivering. Oddly, she was also having trouble breathing.

She didn’t think things could get any worse, and then the young lady dancing with Pine tripped. He immediately grabbed her around her waist to keep her from toppling to the floor. As he set her back on her feet, she looked up at him. Helena couldn’t see the girl’s expression as her back was to her, but Pine was facing her. He looked concerned and... reluctant? Probably reluctant to let her go. In fact, he seemed to pull her even closer to himself before finally removing his hands.

Helena couldn’t take it. She couldn’t watch the man she loved with another woman. She couldn’t breathe. She needed some air, some space.

With a brief “Excuse me,” she practically ran toward the glass doors that led out into the garden.

Pine was practically certain Miss Fitzherbert had tripped into his arms on purpose. She had pulled him almost indecently close before she’d allowed him to release her, then gave him the sultriest look. He didn’t want such looks from this girl. He wanted them from—

“Helena?” The word shot from his mouth. He hadn’t known she was there. If he had, he most certainly wouldn’t have been dancing, no matter how much Lady Blakemore had practically insisted he ask so many girls to dance. He hadn’t been able to escape, and good manners dictated he did as she suggested—the girls in question were standing right in front of him, looking so hopeful.

But Helena was here. And she had been nearly running for the garden. With a gasp, he realized that she must have seen him catch Miss Fitzherbert and taken it the wrong way.

Without a word to the girl, he left the dance and chased after Helena. He had already done so much wrong; he would not allow her to think any worse of him than she already did.

He found her standing in the freezing cold, her arms wrapped around herself as she stood, shivering, and staring up at the sky.

He shrugged out of his coat and approached her.

“There are a million stars up there, but not one of them is as beautiful as you,” he said, putting his coat around her shoulders.

She started and turned so fast, he didn’t have a chance to back away to a polite distance... and then he found that he couldn’t. He could feel the heat of her breath, smell her lovely floral scent. It took all of his self-control not to kiss her right there. But he knew they could be seen by anyone within the ballroom who happened to look outside.

“Pine!” she whispered.

He smiled at her and reluctantly took a small step back.

“Did you...” She turned and looked into the ballroom, where people were still dancing and talking as if the world hadn’t just stopped. She frowned at him. “You were dancing.”

“I was forced by Lady Blakemore to ask some girls to dance,” he said with a small

nod.

“Forced?”

He lifted one side of his lips. “She insisted on introducing me and then arranged it, so I had no choice but to ask them to dance. I didn’t want to. I wanted to wait and see if you would come. But then... it got late, so I thought perhaps you’d decided not to.”

“Lord Colburne told me that no one showed up until ten or later,” she told him.

He started to laugh.

“What’s so funny?” she asked.

“The Ladies’ Wagering Whist Society. This is all their handiwork. They’re known for this sort of thing,” he told her.

She frowned. “Making people jealous?”

That wiped the smile from his face. “Were you? Jealous?”

She looked down at the slate below their feet. “I... I was.”

He reached out and put a finger under her chin, lifting it so that she was forced to look at him. “It’s wonderful that you were jealous.”

“It is?”

“It means you care.”

“Of course I care! I...” She stopped.

“You what?”

She shook her head, clearly deciding not to continue with what she was about to say. When she raised her eyes to his once more, she said, “I saw the letter. In the paper. I can’t believe you got your father to add his name to it.”

He smiled again. “You would not believe how insistent my mother can be.”

She gave a little laugh. “Actually, I think I might.”

“But I meant it. Every word in that letter. I think you should be able to publish under your own name. I hope you never feel you need to stop your studies just because you cannot publish your findings.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“You are an incredible woman, Helena Lawson. I am in awe of how intelligent, beautiful, and kind you are.”

She shook her head to deny his words, but he placed his hand on her cheek.

“It’s true. I am so sorry, Helena. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt you! I never thought marriage to you would be distasteful. Please, believe me, Pine. I thought... I thought you might, and I didn’t want you to feel trapped.”

“I’m not. I’m right where I want to be and with whom I want to be.” He looked deeply into her lovely, expressive eyes. “Helena, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife? Of being engaged to me with no pretense involved?”

A smile grew on her face. “I love you, Pine, and I would be delighted to make our engagement real.”

He gave a little laugh of joy. “I love you too.” He bent down and kissed her—and the world exploded. Fireworks shot up into the sky, and everyone in the ballroom was shouting and laughing and toasting each other with glasses of champagne. Someone started singing Auld Lang Syne and soon everyone had joined in.

“What?” Pine whispered, looking up.

Helena just laughed. “Happy New Year, Pine.”

“Oh!” He laughed. “Happy New Year.”



*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:50 am*

Despite wanting nothing more than to stand on the terrace and kiss Helena, he was getting rather cold—especially since Helena was wearing his coat.

“Shall we join in the celebration?” he asked.

She gave a nod, and they went in, but not before Helena quickly gave him back his coat. She helped him shrug back into it, as it was a precise fit across his shoulders.

“Should we tell you parents?” she asked as he grabbed two glasses of champagne from a passing footman’s tray and handed one to her.

“I would like to.” He gave a nod.

She tucked her hand into the crook of his arm, and they set off to find Lord and Lady Hazelton amid the crush of people quickly getting drunk and having, perhaps, too much of a good time.

They finally found them speaking with Lord and Lady Blakemore. Pine’s mother was laughing at something, and his father was looking slightly bored.

“Happy New Year,” Pine said as they joined them.

“Happy New Year, my love,” his mother said, giving him a bright smile. It looked as if she might have drunk a little too much of the wine. “Oh, and you found Helena. My dear, so good to see you. Happy New Year.”

Helena gave a little curtsy. “Happy New Year,” she said. “My lord, my lady.” She

gave another curtsy to the Blakemores.

“Helena, do you know Lord and Lady Blakemore?” Lady Hazelton asked.

“We’ve met,” Lady Blakemore said. “But I don’t believe you’ve been introduced to my husband.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, my lord,” Helena said, giving yet another curtsy.

His lordship bowed to her. “Lady Hazelton was telling us about what a lovely stay you had at Hazelton Hall this past week.”

“Oh, indeed. It was wonderful,” Helena agreed. She then turned to Pine with an expectant smile.

Pine took that as his cue. “Actually, Mother, my lords and lady, we have an announcement to make.”

His mother’s eyes widened in anticipation.

“I have asked Helena to marry me,” he told them.

“In truth this time?” his father asked skeptically.

Pine laughed, refusing to allow his father to bring his mood down. “In truth.”

“Oh, how wonderful!” Lady Blakemore said with enthusiasm.

“Congratulations,” her husband said. “That is wonderful news.”

“Your father will be so very happy,” Lady Hazelton said to Helena.

“I do believe he will,” she agreed.

“I would like to have the wedding quickly,” Pine said, thinking of her father. But then added, “I don’t know how long I could wait for the joy of being with Helena every day.”

The two married couples laughed. “You will have the rest of your life, son,” Lord Blakemore said. He gave his wife a loving smile. “But it never becomes any less wonderful.”

“Oh, you!” Lady Blakemore said with a little giggle.

It rather surprised Pine, as he’d never thought of her as the giggling type. She was always a rather stern and upright lady. But in the presence of her husband and his obvious love for her, she softened like butter left out in the sun.

“I was thinking of going out to the Doctor’s Commons tomorrow to see if I can’t get a special license,” Pine told them.

“You’ll need permission from the archbishop,” his father pointed out.

“I’ve got connections,” Lord Blakemore said. He turned to Pine. “Stop by my home first thing tomorrow morning, and we’ll get it done.”

“Thank you, my lord!” Pine was incredibly grateful. He also suspected the gentleman knew the true reason why it was so important that they marry quickly.

“And bring your mother when you come, Mr. Teviot,” Lady Blakemore added in. “We have a lot of planning to do in very little time.”

“Oh, please, don’t go to a lot of trouble,” Helena said quickly. “I’m certain that a very

small, simple affair would be best.”

“For the marriage ceremony, yes. But we should celebrate with a scrumptious breakfast afterward,” Lady Hazelton said. She and Lady Blakemore shared some sort of look that showed that both of their minds were working on the problem and coming up with all sorts of plans.

“Well, then, it sounds as if we’ve all got our work planned,” Pine said.

“I would like to help with the breakfast, my lady,” Helena said.

“Of course! You must! You will join us as well. Ten o’clock at my home. Oh, I must spread the word to the other ladies. Do excuse me,” Lady Blakemore said. She rushed off.

“By ‘other ladies’ does she mean the ladies of the Wagering Whist Society?” Pine asked, beginning to feel a little in awe.

“I’m certain she does,” his mother said.

“Well, in that case, this is going to be a very special wedding, indeed.” Pine shared a look of surprise and perhaps trepidation with Helena. She smiled and shook her head as if she couldn’t believe her luck. He certainly couldn’t.

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:50 am*

It had been a dream, Helena was certain of it. It had to have been.

Helena climbed out of bed the following morning feeling rather off-balance. Could it have been real? Was she truly going to marry Pine? The thought sent tingles of happiness from her chest straight down to her toes.

She wondered as she dressed whether she should tell her father. She decided not to—just in case it had been a dream or was simply too wonderful to come true. She couldn't destroy his hopes if it didn't come to pass.

It was just half-past nine, and Helena was attempting to coax her father into having just a little more broth when she heard the knocker on the front door. It was soon followed by the muffled sound of women's voices.

Lord Cumnor had already fallen back asleep when she turned back toward her father. Who knew being harangued to eat for half an hour by your daughter could be so exhausting? With a little smile at her silly thoughts, Helena went down to see who had come.

She found Lady Hazelton, Lady Blakemore, and Lady Welles all standing in the drawing room speaking softly amongst themselves.

"Good morning, my ladies," Helena said to get their attention.

"Oh, Miss Lawson. Good morning," Lady Blakemore said.

Lady Hazelton turned around and beamed at her.

"Congratulations," Lady Welles said, coming over and taking her hand. "I can't tell you how happy I am that this has all worked out."

Helena gave an embarrassed little laugh. "Well, this certainly wasn't at all what I had expected when I paid that call on the Ladies' Wagering Whist Society. I had merely hoped one of you might know of someone willing to take on an overeducated governess." Helena gave a little laugh.

Lady Welles and Lady Blakemore both chuckled appreciatively.

"You clearly don't know the Wagering Whist Society very well," Lady Welles said. "But we don't have a great deal of time to stand here chatting, Miss Lawson. We must be on our way. We'll wait while you get your hat and coat."

Helena was confused. "Are we going to Lady Blakemore's to plan the wedding breakfast?"

"We shall, but first we have an appointment with my modiste. I've already sent round a note, so she'll be expecting us," Lady Welles told her.

"Your modiste?" Helena asked.

"We are assuming you don't have anything appropriate to wear tomorrow? Are we wrong?" Lady Hazelton asked.

"To... oh! To the wedding?" Helena asked, feeling like a fool. "I haven't even given a thought as to what I might wear," she admitted.

"Which is why you have us. Now do hurry or we'll be late," Lady Welles said, guiding Helena to the drawing-room door.

Two hours later, Helena had the most beautiful pale-blue velvet gown, and Lady Pemberton's daughter was going to have to wait an extra few days for the gown she'd ordered. Helena felt terrible, but the modiste waved away her concerns.

"She won't give a thought to it. I'll tell her we had to wait for the ship from Brussels to arrive with the lace. That it was delayed due to weather."

Helena gave a little laugh and thanked the woman once again. They all, then, piled into Lady Blakemore's coach to return to the lady's home. There, they met the other members of the Wagering Whist Society who were already beginning their planning.

Pine couldn't have been more grateful to Lord Blakemore. He'd written a note that had allowed Pine in to see the archbishop's representative immediately. Upon hearing why Pine needed the special license, he was so kind as to give it to him right away. It now lay tucked securely in his pocket. The vicar at St. George's had also been accommodating. Apparently, Helena was a regular attendee, and the man knew her and her father's circumstance.

Now all Pine needed was to speak with Lord Cumnor. He hoped the gentleman was up for a visit.

Pine entered the gentleman's bedchamber to find a gray-haired man peering up at him from beneath thick gray eyebrows. It was clear the gentleman had been tall and broad-shouldered, but his body had now wasted away, nearly to skin and bones. His blue eyes—nearly the exact color of Helena's—were piercing. Although the man's body was failing him, his mind was still sharp as ever.

"Well," the man wheezed. "Wondered when... you'd show up."

Pine hid his smile as he bowed. "I do beg your pardon for my tardiness, my lord."

The man nodded and then looked pointedly at the chair next to his bed. "Sit."

"My father sends his regards," Pine lied.

A smile twitched on his lordship's lips. "Doubt that. Can't... can't wait... till I'm dead... according to Helena," he said slowly, inhaling every few words.

Pine didn't quite know what to say to that. He couldn't contradict Helena and would be lying if he did. He decided to change the subject.

"The reason I am here, my lord, as I'm certain you know, is to ask for your permission—" A knock on the door interrupted Pine.

"My lord, Mr. Fitzsimmons is here as you requested," the butler said before showing a tall, slender man into the room.

"Good timing," Lord Cumnor said. He struggled to sit up higher on his pillows. Pine immediately jumped up to assist him.

His lordship nodded his thanks. "Fitzsimmons, this is Mr... Teviot. My... daughter's fiancé."

Pine turned a surprised look on to Lord Cumnor who waved it away with a hand. "My solicitor," he said, finishing the introduction. "Figured you'd be... here either today... or tomorrow," he told Pine. "Wanted to be prepared."

Mr. Fitzsimmons came forward and tried to hand some papers to Lord Cumnor. He indicated Pine, and the man handed them to him instead.

"Er, the marriage settlement you requested, my lord." Mr. Fitzsimmons said.



"Can't read easily. You look them over... Teviot. Tell me... what you think."

Pine accepted the papers and read through them, his eyes widening the more he read. When he got to the end, he looked up. "That is more than generous, my lord."

Lord Cumnor nodded. "Your father is... rich enough. He doesn't... need more money. He'll also get... all the property. Helena is a treasure. Treat her well. With that, the two... of you should... be able to live comfortably."

"Indeed, sir," Pine agreed. He couldn't help but wonder whether the figures were accurate, however, considering the state of the drawing room and the lack of servants in the house. From what he could see, there was only the aging butler and a maid.

"You are thinking too hard," his lordship said.

"What? Er, no. I beg your pardon," Pine said,

"Wondering if I really have that much?" his lordship asked with a twitch of his lips. "Don't let appearances fool you."

Pine widened his eyes, astounded that the man knew exactly what he'd been thinking.

"Much of that... is from Lady Cumnor's marriage... portion, which was... invested well," his lordship explained. "It was kept aside... for Helena, not... that we ever told her... or anyone else, for that matter. We... have always lived... off whatever... the estate brought in. Not much, as you can see." He gave a slight lift of one shoulder. "It was enough."

"Barely," Pine said under his breath.

"I will sign that... and then you take... it to your father."

Pine sat up straighter. "I have attained my majority, my lord. I can sign for myself."

"I'm sure you can. But... your father should... know. If he has... done any research into... my finances—and I'm certain he has—he... should be aware that... you are getting the bulk... of it. It's not... that I don't want... him to have it... It's that you will need it more—at least... until you inherit. But... as you see, when you do..., whatever remains will... go into a trust... for your children. Please... make sure there's... something there," he said, eyeing Pine.

"Oh, there will be, sir, I promise."

"Good." The man sighed and seemed to shrivel a bit. "Give me... a pen. I shall sign. Then... you both... will leave me... to rest."

Pine was relieved to see his father at dinner that evening. He hadn't been home when Pine had returned, and he did need to speak with him. Lord Cumnor had specifically told Pine to let his father know about the marriage settlement. Pine only hoped his father wouldn't be too angry Helena's father was giving so much of what would have been Lord Hazelton's inheritance to Pine.

His siblings were expected that evening, but for now, it was just him and his parents.

As they sat down to dinner, he debated whether he should speak of it now or after dinner, privately in his lordship's study. One look at the determined way his father cut into his meat and Pine decided this was a conversation best done in the company of his mother. She somehow had a calming effect on her husband and even a bit of control—not that either of them would admit as much.

"I met with—" Pine started.

"I would like to—" his father said at exactly the same time.

They both stopped.

"Pine, listen to what your father wants to say, and then you can give us your news," his mother said, breaking the silence.

"Of course." Pine looked to his father.

The man nodded but didn't say anything right away. He seemed to be assembling the words in his mind. He looked at his wife, who gave him an encouraging nod.

With a sigh, Lord Hazelton said, "I have decided to give you Cumnor's townhouse as a wedding gift."

Pine's mouth nearly dropped open, and his brows rose. His father was silent, clearly expecting Pine to say something. "Er, that is very generous, Father," he started.

The man nodded, either in agreement or because Pine had said the right thing. "But you don't have to," Pine continued.

"Yes, he does," his mother said. "It is the right thing to do." She gave a pointed look at her husband.

He sighed and nodded. "I don't need it. We have this house, which is much bigger and—" Lady Hazelton cleared her throat.

"Er, and your mother has decorated it just the way she likes it," his father continued, not looking at his wife.

Pine caught her lips twitch with a small smile, but she controlled it.

"Thank you, Father, but—"

"Just say thank you and leave it at that," his mother advised.

Pine knew that with the dowry he would be getting, he and Helena would be able to buy their own house in London. On the other hand, this was a grand gesture on his father's part, and he would be the worst sort of cad to throw it back in his face. Also, Pine was certain Helena would be happiest if she would be allowed to stay in her own home.

So, Pine nodded. "Thank you, Father. That is very kind, and I know it will make Helena very happy."

His father just gave a little humph and went back to eating his dinner.

"What was it you were going to tell us, Pine?" Lady Hazelton asked.

"Oh, er, I went to see Lord Cumnor after I got the license," he told them. In a flash, he decided to keep the information he shared to a bare minimum. "We discussed the marriage contract, and his solicitor even joined us."

"Really?" His father's attention was caught once again.

Pine gave a little smile as he remembered the interview. "The gentleman had anticipated everything," Pine told them. "He already knew I wanted to marry Helena."

"Well, I suppose she'd told him of your proposal," his father commented.

"No, she said she hadn't. She'd thought it all a dream and was waiting to see what happened before raising her father's hopes. At least, that's what she told me and the ladies this morning," Lady Hazelton said.

Pine gave a little laugh. "She thought it a dream?"

"What did he say about the settlement? Do you need my help negotiating the contract?" his father asked, keeping the conversation on track.

"Oh, no," Pine said. "Er, I agreed with everything he suggested."

His father lowered his eyebrows. "It sounds like he's a bit of a miser—at least from your mother's description of his household—two servants and a shabby, threadbare drawing room?"

Pine gave a little shrug. "He told me they've only been living off the income from his estate. He said that he never touched the dowry Lady Cumnor brought to the marriage, so it was that which he would be passing on to me."

"Lady Cumnor's dowry?" Lord Hazelton asked, frowning. "I don't recall who her family was. Is it enough?"

"Yes," Pine said. "Most definitely enough. And I agreed to move it into a trust for my children when I inherit Hazelton."

His father nodded. "That sounds perfectly reasonable. You won't need much more than I give you, especially with the house."

"So, everything is signed?" his mother asked.

"Signed and in the hands of the solicitor," Pine told her.

"Excellent." She smiled. "Then all is in readiness for the day after tomorrow."

The day after tomorrow. Pine resisted the urge to gulp. This all happened so fast.

Then Helena's face came to his mind.

The day couldn't come soon enough.

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:50 am*

Everything began very early the morning of the wedding. Helena was woken by the maid informing her that her bath was nearly ready—Helena and her father had begun bathing in the housekeeper's rooms by the kitchen a year earlier when they decided they no longer needed such a large staff.

It was an odd feeling knowing this was her wedding day. She felt so completely unprepared. And yet, she knew in her heart this was right. She wanted to marry Pine. She couldn't imagine not being with him. And best of all, her father was happy.

When she reached her room after her bath, she found a large box on her bed. Goodness, when the modiste said she'd deliver the dress first thing this morning, she had meant it! It was only half-past eight.

Helena lifted the lid off the box.

The ice-blue velvet overgown with long, tight sleeves and capped shoulders lay folded inside. It wasn't quite what she remembered, however. The day before, the gown she'd tried on had been very plain and simple, but now there were beautiful vines and flowers embroidered along the neckline in silver thread. The same pattern ran along the length of either sleeve. It was the loveliest thing she had ever seen.

She pulled it out and found the under-dress of white Brussels lace and a fine cotton shift, nicer than any she'd ever owned.

She looked back at the gown and ran her fingers slowly over the silver stitching. She couldn't believe the work the modiste must have put into this—and in just a little over a day!

There was a knock on her bedroom door. She called out for the person to enter, assuming it was the maid, but a new voice startled her into spinning around.

“Good morning, miss. I am Matthews, Lady Wells’s lady’s maid. She sent me over to assist you in your dressing this morning.”

“Oh, er, thank you.” She remembered the lady making some offhanded comment about her lady’s maid while they were at the modiste’s, but Helena hadn’t paid too much attention as she’d been busy getting pinned just then.

“Don’t thank me, miss, thank my mistress,” the woman said with a smile.

Helena gave her a smile and a nod.

“I see you’ve bathed. This is good. And is this your gown?” The woman came over to stand next to Helena and looked down at the dress on the bed.

“Yes. Isn’t it lovely?”

“Indeed, miss.” She picked it up and shook it out. “Happily, velvet doesn’t crease like silk. We won’t need to do anything more than allow this hang for a few minutes, and it will be ready for you to wear.” She walked over to Helena’s wardrobe and hung the dress inside. “Now, that is taken care of. Let’s get you into your underthings, and I’ll do your hair.”

The woman took over everything. Helena wasn’t at all used to having someone wait on her. It was odd, but it did make her feel very pampered.

Matthews took over half an hour of pulling, twisting, and pinning before she was satisfied with what she’d created with Helena’s hair.

“It’s exquisite,” Helena breathed when the woman showed her what she’d done.



“Oh, but we’re not quite done yet.” She turned to a small jewelry box Helena hadn’t even noticed and took out a handful of diamond-topped pins. These were carefully placed into Helena’s hair, so she sparkled every time she moved her head.

"Those are beautiful," Helena commented. "Do they belong to Lady Wells?"

"No, miss. The butler handed this box to me when I came in. I believe it’s from your father." She looked back into the box and pulled out a beautiful diamond necklace. It consisted of small clusters of diamonds accented by deep-blue enamel work around each one.

Helena gasped. Vaguely, she remembered her mother wearing this necklace, and it brought tears to her eyes.

"Now, now, miss, don't you go and start cryin' on us. You don't want your eyes all red and puffy."

Helena sniffed and shook her head, doing her best to control her emotions. She turned her back to the maid, so the necklace could be clasped around her neck. A pair of matching ear bobs were produced and slipped into place.

Very carefully, the maid finished dressing Helena first in the under-dress of fine lace, and then the velvet gown which parted in the middle to allow the under-dress to be seen.

Looking in her mirror at the miraculously changed woman staring back at her, Helena felt and looked like a princess.

All sorts of noises were coming from downstairs by the time Helena was dressed and ready to go down.

There were, of course, the sounds of people's voices. Even though the wedding

breakfast was to be held at the Hazelton's home, there were still going to be a number of people at the ceremony to be held here, so Helena's father could attend. At first they'd thought to hold it in his very bedchamber, but they decided that would be awkward. The drawing room would have to do.

Just keeping the number of people in attendance to a minimum still meant there would be eleven people there: Pine, naturally, the vicar, Lord and Lady Hazelton, Lord and Lady Colburne, and Lady Welles—or Lydia, as she had insisted on being called—who would stand up with Helena. Ash would be there to stand with Pine, and because they couldn't have him come and not his sisters, Marigold and Daisy would be there as well. Along with Helena and her father, that was going to be a much larger wedding than Helena had originally thought. She supposed now that it would have been unreasonable to think it could have been just her, Pine, the vicar, and one witness—her father. But somehow that's how Helena had originally envisioned it in her mind. The sound of someone knocking on her door recalled Helena to the moment. Matthews answered it, and Lydia came in.

"Oh my," she said softly.

Helena gave a little shake of her head, also in disbelief. "Matthews has performed miracles."

"She most certainly has. She has brought out the beauty in you. I'm certain it was always there, but—"

"The dress and the hair," Helena agreed. "Two such simple things."

Lydia smiled. "Not simple at all. But you do look stunning."

"Thank you. I may look stunning, but I'm feeling more than a little stunned."

That caused Lydia to giggle. "I think everyone feels that on their wedding day. And

speaking of which, we are ready for you downstairs."

"Everyone is here?" Helena asked, shaking out her hands by her sides.

Lydia nodded. "And your father has been brought down. They're just waiting for you."

"Oh goodness," Helena said, not really meaning to.

Lydia came forward and took her shaking hands. "It's going to be fine. In fact, it's going to be wonderful."

Helena took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She gave a nod. "Yes. Yes, it will."

"Ready?"

Helena gave a nod, and they went downstairs to join the others.

Pine was standing by the fireplace, looking incredibly handsome in his morning suit. It was a deep blue, and his waistcoat was maroon with dark-blue embroidery. Speaking to him were the vicar and Ash, who was also dressed in his finery—a black suit with a gray waistcoat.

Her father was sitting nearby in his red brocade dressing gown, a blanket across his lap. He smiled as she came into the room.

Helena felt very self-conscious as the room fell silent. She swallowed. "Good morning."

"Good morning," she heard from a chorus of voices.

And then Pine was by her side. Or perhaps she was beside his, because she suddenly

found herself in front of the vicar as well. Ash had moved behind his brother.

"You look so handsome," she said to Pine, unable to keep her heart from her words.

He blushed a little. "And here I am, standing speechless at your beauty."

Helena could feel her cheeks heat a little as well.

"Shall we begin?" the vicar asked.

The ceremony was done before Helena took another breath—or so it seemed. And she was simply standing there staring at Pine, happier than she'd ever been in her life.

"Helena, my dear girl," she heard her father say.

She turned and dropped to her knees, so she could give him a hug. "Oh, Papa."

He gently patted her back. He was either chuckling or having trouble breathing—or perhaps both. He was certainly smiling when she pulled back to look at him.

Pine came to stand by them, so she got to her feet.

"You have made... me very happy, Daughter. And you—"He looked toward Pine.

"I will take excellent care of her, sir. You will be able to see to that as we'll all be living here together in this house."

Cumnor nodded. "Living," he said under his breath before closing his eyes. He looked exhausted.

She turned, and it was as if everyone in the room had been waiting for that signal.

She and Pine were quickly surrounded by pats, hugs, and cries of congratulations. Champagne was brought out, and the couple toasted.

To her surprise, Helena noticed Lord Hazelton pull up a chair next to her father. She moved closer to hear their conversation.

"Still remembering... that old feud, Hazelton?" her father was asking.

His lordship gave a little shrug. "It's the only thing I ever heard about you and your family."

Lord Cumnor nodded. "Only spoken of... in bitterness, I imagine. And... here we are, now... with our families united."

"Thanks to the fact that your daughter and my son both wanted to get their revenge on me," Hazelton said with a shake of his head.

"There have been worse... things that... have brought people... together. The Greeks—" he started, but Lord Hazelton just held up a hand.

"I get enough of that from your daughter."

Helena's father laughed but became serious again after a moment. "I'm sorry I won't be around to see all the improvements you'll make to Cumnor."

Hazelton widened his eyes at that and sat back a little.

"Helena told me... you have great... plans you are... eager to get started with."

Lord Hazelton had the grace to look embarrassed. "Go ahead," Cumnor said, "Get started. It makes... no difference to me. It will... be yours soon enough."

"Thank you, Cumnor. You're a good man. I'm sorry we didn't meet earlier."

Helena's father reached out, and the men shook hands.

Lord Colburne came over. "I think it's time for you to retire. What do you think, my lord?"

Helena's father just nodded.

With shocking ease, the doctor lifted him in his arms and carried him back up to his room.

"What do you say, shall we go continue the celebration at our home?" Lord Hazelton said, getting to his feet.

"My Lord, I am sorry," Helena began.

He stopped her words as he had her father's. "I'm actually glad you tried to trick me. I should not have denied your request. On the other hand, if I hadn't, my son would not now be married."

"We seem to have all achieved what we wanted," Pine said, joining them. "I married for love, and Helena will continue living in her home."

Helena looked up and smiled. "This is, indeed, a wonderful way to start the year."

Pine leaned down and said quietly in her ear, "And we both got our revenge, my sweet wallflower."