



# A Villain for a Duke (Dukes for Christmas Fairytale #5)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** One mistake cost her everything, including love

Lady Astrid made one reckless mistake at a house party and became a pariah. Instead of cowering under society's censure, she embraces her inner villain. Why not flirt with scandal? Especially if scandal is her handsome-and-fun-to-tease first indiscretion.

Never had Michael's sins haunted him so relentlessly. When Astrid becomes the target for a matchmaking maven, the cold, uptight Duke of Tinsder has to double his efforts to avoid the wanton woman. Which should be easy, so long as he doesn't accidentally walk into her room late one night...

Can Michael keep his feet on the straight and narrow? Or will the heart's pull between opposites recapture their true love?

**Total Pages (Source):** 10

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 9:44 am*

Two years ago...

SOME PEOPLE DESERVE THEIR reputation. They work hard for it and have earned the labels attributed to them. It's something to be proud of, regardless of whether said reputation leads to notoriety or infamy.

Others befall their reputations. Usually with utter devastation.

Then there are those who find a label attached to them and decide to live up to it. No matter the cost.

Without worry for her own reputation, Lady Astrid alighted the carriage boasting the Regium ducal emblem. She fluffed her skirts and took a few steps toward the manor. The place was familiar and inviting, and she had always enjoyed the house parties thrown here.

Her brother stood a few feet away and stretched his arms while his dark hair blew softly in the breeze.

"I didn't think we would make it here so quickly."

"It's a dubious season to travel in, but we got lucky."

"That we did." She watched as he began making his way toward the house, but stopped when he realized she wasn't following him.

She planned to stroll the grounds before the other guests of the house party arrived.

The travel hadn't been arduous, so she didn't really need to rest up before dinner. What she needed was to stretch her legs and enjoy the crisp fall air.

"Astrid, don't you want to rest?" Isaac asked.

"No, I've been sitting for long enough."

"You are a bit of a restless soul, aren't you? Like a bucking horse. Pent up energy but with no particular direction in which to channel it, I'd say."

"I like to move around." She restated archly.

Shuffling sounds caused her to turn her head to the footman unloading her luggage. She thanked him and swiveled back to Isaac. "There will be time to rest later this evening."

Isaac's half smile was contagious. "This is the Countess of Erewyn. You do know Bethany's mother, don't you?"

Astrid chuckled. "You're right. She always throws quite a lively party, doesn't she?"

"I'm sure there will be dancing tonight, even though it's the first night."

"True."

"Remind me. How many dresses did you pack?"

"Enough," she swatted his arm.

He laughed. "That's the perfect answer, but what I'm seeing is telling me that you packed two trunks too many."

“You have no idea what we women suffer for fashion.”

“Suffer? I thought you liked that kind of stuff?”

She shrugged. “At times it’s nice. But it can be burdensome to always convey the perfect image.”

“You’re telling me. I’m a duke.”

“Well, then we suffer together!” She took his arm in hers. “But we can conquer anything together.”

He just laughed again. “The question I would have for that scenario is which one of us would be leading the charge.”

“Me, of course,” she said as if it brooked no argument.

“That’s what I thought.” He patted her hand. “It’s going to be a long evening. Entertaining. But long. Why don’t you get some rest now?”

She looked longingly at the open fields. “You’re right. All the same, I’d like to get some fresh air.”

“Astrid!” A high-pitched voice called out. “You’re here!” Bethany picked up her skirts and ran over to embrace her friend. “You’re early.”

“The roads were clear, so we made good time.”

“That’s wonderful. When the butler told me you were here, I almost didn’t believe him. Sadly, I have to help mother with a few last minute plans, otherwise I would keep you company.”

“Of course,” Astrid smiled, “help your mother. I had hoped to take a quick stroll.”

“In that case, be sure to check out the new rose garden mother started. It’s incredible. Just walk around the right side of the manor and you can’t miss it.”

“That sounds delightful.”

“I guess I’ll make do with something,” Isaac feigned dejection.

“You can join my cousin. He’s shooting out back.”

“Perfect.” Isaac nodded and left the women.

“It’s so good to have you here, Astrid. It’s been too long. I wish we could—”

“Please, go do what you need to do. We shall have an entire week together.”

With a quick embrace, she turned back and made her way inside.

And Astrid took off to wander around Altwan Manor in search of the rose garden Bethany had pointed out.

Once she rounded the side of the house, she caught sight of her destination.

Even from yards away she could see the vibrant hues of reds and pinks.

Knowing that, she imagined the rich fragrance that was sure to greet her soon.

From the large windows, many a guest must enjoy the view on a rainy day.

Just before she was able to reach the garden, two little voices rang out.

“I caught you!” a young girl, about five years old, shouted in glee.

“No, you didn’t. I didn’t feel anything,” the older boy retorted. He looked to be a few years older than her.

“Yes, I did. I touched your shirt.”

“Doesn’t count.”

“Does too.”

Astrid had an older brother and knew exactly where this could lead. “Hello, you two. Could you show me where the rose garden is?”

The boy scowled at her, but the little girl raced up and grabbed her hand.

“I can show you.” She had the most beautiful smile with two front teeth too large for her mouth still.

“Why do you want to go to the garden when there’s so much else to do?” the girl asked curiously.

“I love admiring the flowers and their scent. But...” she waited until the boy was paying her his full attention, “if you two know of something more fun...”

He scoffed. “I know all the fun things to do here. I live here.”

“You must be Charles.” His light brown hair matched two of his sisters. Even though it had been a while since she’d seen them, based on age, she could guess which of the siblings he was.

His eyes widened in surprise, as she proceeded to explain. “I’m friends with your sister, Bethany. You probably don’t remember me.”

“And I’m Isabelle,” the girl shouted, tugging on her hand. Astrid looked down at the youngest in the family.

“Why yes, of course you are.” She squeezed the girl’s clammy hand. “Perhaps you two can show me your favorite place to play.”

Charles’ eyes lit up. “Follow me,” he bellowed as he took off down the green grass. All children should be as carefree and happy as these two were, Astrid mused. Then he was shouting more things as he went, but her attention was drawn downward to Isabelle.

“Come on. Let’s go. He won’t slow down for us.” Isabelle’s solemn face spoke from experience, as this was likely a daily encounter. Astrid recalled many memories of herself chasing after Isaac at their childhood home. She was lucky to have him.

“I know what that’s like. I have an older brother too.”

“You do?”

“Yes. And he’s one of my best friends.”

As the two skipped down the green, Isabelle scrunched up her face. “Charles is not my best friend.”

“Why do you say that?”

“He gets mad at me all the time.”

Astrid threw her head back in laughter. “That’s exactly what an older brother is supposed to do. I think you’re right on track for him to be your best friend.”

Isabelle yanked on Astrid’s arm, pulling her to a stop.

“Do you really think he likes me?”

“No.” She picked up the girl and swung around. “He’s your brother. He doesn’t just like you, he loves you, silly.”

Isabelle’s squeal warmed her heart. This was much better than resting in her guest bedchamber alone.



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 9:44 am*

THE DUKE OF TINSDER'S carriage had rolled up to the manor significantly earlier than he expected.

He was prompt. Always early. But this was a bit too early.

He almost felt uncomfortable. But Michael was a duke, he wouldn't permit himself to convey any discomfort.

For he was also extremely intentional with his actions. To the point of being punctilious.

Michael tugged on his greatcoat, straightening the lines. He took a brief moment to admire the topiary and the giant fountain his carriage had rounded moments earlier. Then he sauntered up the front steps.

When the butler greeted him at the door, Michael insisted on making no fuss.

"I'm quite early, please convey my apologies to Lady Erewyn."

The butler bowed. "Of course, Your Grace."

"We have your room ready for you—"

"No need. I'll see myself to the library for now. I'm too early to make any demands on you or the countess."

"Certainly, Your Grace."

Michael walked the faintly familiar manor until he found the room he was looking for.

He had visited a few times in the past, and remembered the large library, in particular, for the surfeit of philosophy tomes it housed.

When he entered, he felt at home by the pleasant smell of books.

He was surprised that he remembered the giant window which was conducive to corralling loose contemplations.

The unmoving landscape was the ideal backdrop.

It imposed no distractions while he stood at the helm of his mind and steered through his stormy thoughts.

Contending with philosophical theories was much like trying to hold water in one's hand. But the compulsion to navigate those waters and cling to what he could still remained urgent within him.

So Michael sat in the library reading Discourse on the Method by Descartes.

Nonobservantly, he was staring out the large window as he mulled over the phrase, *je pense donc je suis*.

Metaphysics, in particular, always made Michael introspective.

And the French philosopher, Ren Descartes was a leading theorist, even almost a hundred and fifty years later.

That phrase would surely endure through time.

I think, therefore I am.

Michael explored the phrase for what felt like the hundredth time. How could a person go through the motions of doubt if they did not exist? What was existence? What was reality? He must be real enough...if he was able to doubt that he was real...

It felt circular.

What was real? That he was a duke. That he had to marry if he wanted his lineage to continue.

That finding a wife was a curse. Every woman wanted him.

That was not a vain thought. It was objective.

He was a wealthy, young, handsome duke with all his teeth, and in his right mind.

All of the time. He was not impulsive. He was in complete control of his thoughts and actions.

With great intention, he focused his thinking to adhere to logic.

A dash of color splashed onto the painting before him, caught his attention. Only it wasn't a painting. It was the window. And beyond the window was a woman.

He sat upright. She was real.

He stood and put his hand on the windowpane.

She was real. She was laughing with her head thrown back, a few loose blonde

tresses flowing in the wind like a ribbon.

Holding her hand was a little girl he knew to be the daughter to the countess.

The girl was looking up in admiration. Then the woman stopped and scooped the girl up.

She spun around, holding the girl out in her arms. The two of them laughed, and then they ended the twirl in an embrace.

That woman and her joy was real. And she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Thoughts stilled as time passed. As she moved across the canvas in radiant joy. As she moved out of sight, he found himself wanting to follow her movements more.

Her beauty startled him. But it wasn't just physical. There was something about her...the image of her being so carefree. She exuded kindness. Authenticity. Down to earth, yet...angelic.

She didn't look the kind to be burdened by metaphysics and the nature of reality.

Those questions and their ilk were Michael's cross to bear.

He couldn't shake them. He needed answers.

And when he couldn't resolve a question, which, in philosophy was often the case, he was plagued by the pursuit of them.

Ever searching. Reading on until something finally clicked, and he could breathe.

The world made sense again. It could be organized. It wasn't pure chaos.

Not like he knew the chaos this house party might be.

Well, not chaos. That might be too harsh.

It would be lively. More lively than Michael preferred.

But sometimes a duke had to show up to certain events.

Be at certain places. Be seen with certain people.

Eventually he did need a wife. It wouldn't help his case if he acted the recluse he was inclined to be.

He wanted to see more of her. Catch sight of her delight again. Perhaps because it vaguely reminded him of a time he had known such joy. That was not a thought he wished to explore.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 9:44 am*

AFTER THE CRISP AFTERNOON spent outside, Astrid felt refreshed for the evening's activities. Dinner had been lovely, and now music was playing for some of the couples to take a turn on the dance floor.

"You were right, Isaac. Dancing on our first night." Astrid nudged her brother in the ribs. "So who are you going to ask to dance?"

Isaac shrugged. As his eyes tracked the dancers, they stopped on one couple. The woman had her back to them, but her hair was raven black. Astrid could sense Isaac's body still, as if he were holding his breath but trying to appear as though he weren't.

When the couple turned and revealed the woman, Isaac exhaled.

"No one here of particular interest for me."

"I'm not surprised," Astrid said somewhat smugly. She didn't elaborate on that point—the point being that she knew who her brother was in love with and was denying himself—because the most handsome man she had ever met was approaching her.

His eyes were glints of coal. Dark. With the potential to combust. And his dark hair was swept back in a humble manner.

But there was nothing humble about how his frame filled out his jacket and trousers.

The man cut the finest figure she could ever imagine trailing her fingers along.

Her body's reaction was spontaneous and almost unmanageable.

When his gaze met hers, she squeezed her legs together, in a futile attempt to retain the heat leaking out of her.

"Isaac," the man greeted her brother, but she felt the tone of his voice hum around her. If it vibrated long enough, it would quite possibly burrow into her bones.

"Michael," Isaac's eyes continued to scan the room, "are you up for some piquet?"

Michael lightly cleared his throat. "I've come to ask for an introduction. I believe this lady is your sister?"

The heat was everywhere now. Between her legs. Running down behind her knees. Her chest. God, that felt heavy. And her face. Surely, it was flushed. She couldn't remember the last time she had experienced such a physiological reaction to someone.

Fleetingly, Isaac's eyes had widened at the request, but then a small smile crept onto his face. "Didn't take you for much of a dancer, Michael."

"Didn't take you for much of a busybody. Isaac." He said her brother's name an octave lower than the rest. At the sound, her nipples poked into the fabric of her bodice.

"Michael, may I introduce my little sister, Lady Astrid? Astrid, the Duke of Tinsder."

Unnecessarily, he emphasized my little sister . Irritated at the excessive protectiveness, Astrid lifted her hand for a light kiss.

"May I have this dance?"

“Yes.” She hadn’t meant to answer breathlessly, but there was no way around it. Her hand in his was doing indelible rearrangements inside of her, and her vocal chords were among the most rattled and displaced.

The man was stone. But hot stone. Like rocks made from lava.

Intense. She couldn’t look away from his eyes.

With each spin, each step in the waltz, there was only him.

And only her. In his arms, she felt like the only woman in the world.

With her hand in his, she felt as though she could follow him anywhere.

And the possessive touch on her back...she shivered.

That touch would be all too easy to crave.

She wasn’t the kind to believe in love at first sight, but who was she to argue with herself if she was currently experiencing it?

They were moving to the music, but to their own beat. Their heartbeats. Intertwined. Surely, even fate herself was surprised at the magnetism pulling her soul to his.

This, without saying a word.

And then the waltz was over.

Not a word. Not a smile. Just a touch. His hands on her body. His eyes claiming her.

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## THE DANCE SETTLED IT.

It was everything in Michael not to propose to Astrid on the spot. Never in a million years would Michael have expected himself to lose his mind and his heart to a woman so quickly, but as in philosophical pursuits, one did not fight the click.

He had hardly spoken to Astrid, but he already knew.

He had seen everything he needed to when he had observed her surreptitiously.

A person in private was who they were in public.

Since he had witnessed her semi-private state, he trusted his intuition.

Where that intuition had come from, he had no logical explanation.

He had never seen its kind before. But it was here, and it was loud. Commanding.

But he was not impulsive, so he would give it at least a full twenty-four hours before acting on anything. So long as he could manage the tremble in his knees around her. He could wait. They were at a house party after all. No one was going anywhere anytime soon.

As Michael watched men lead Astrid onto the dance floor, he had unfamiliar pangs of jealousy stab his heart. Hard enough that his hands balled into fists at his side, ready for a defensive maneuver if needed. Or perhaps, aggressive.

So he could only sigh in relief when the dancing finished.

It was late and most of the guests were heading upstairs.

Surprisingly, Isaac was in their numbers but Astrid was not.

Did the man not have a care for his sister's wellbeing?

Or had he made arrangements for someone to be her chaperone?

Or...did the brother have lax rules when at a house party?

Michael loathed the thought. Siblings ought to stay together.

It was his duty to protect his sister. Michael winced as an old, painful memory dredged itself up from the mire.

The memory itself was old, but it was often revisited.

In fact, it probably paid Michael a visit a few times daily, sometimes more.

This was not the time to give it the attention it deserved. Astrid was alone.

He studied the guests still milling about. A dozen or more had stayed. This was usually Michael's cue to leave, but he wasn't going anywhere tonight until he knew Astrid was safe in her bed. Especially with her neckline as low as it was.

If nothing else, he would read his book and observe.

It wouldn't be completely out of character. He had brought a copy of David Humes' *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* and left it on the mantelpiece just in case he needed it.

It was an odd piece to bring to an evening of dancing and visiting, but well, he was Michael. It was expected.

The guests were standing around, unsure of what activity to engage in, but not wanting to go to bed yet.

“How about a game?” one man piped up.

“Hot cockles!” a second voice chimed in, clearly three sheets to the wind.

Michael did not feel like giving or receiving any lashes in front of these people, as light as they usually were.

“Wink Murder?” he suggested. It was an innocent game. No spankings involved. But the men groaned.

“Snapdragon?” And then the voices were clamoring to be heard.

None of the games suggested were harbingers of good.

“Shall we play Blind Man’s Bluff?” Bethany chirped.

Several heads nodded in amusement. Mostly the men darting glances between Astrid and Bethany.

Bethany lifted her finger to the air, “A variation actually.” She stole a glance at Astrid.

“This version is called Echoes in the Dark. We shall all be blindfolded except one person. That person has to make sounds for the rest of us to follow. Each person has to touch the person who is not blindfolded. Once the last person touches her, the game is over.” Bethany paused to tap her chin playfully.

“Any volunteers? Astrid?” There was no delay between the two questions.

If Astrid was the one everyone had to touch, Michael was definitely not going anywhere. If he stuck around, at least he could ensure the shenanigans were devoid of anything scandalous.

After the blindfolds were distributed, Michael fastidiously took note of Astrid's position in the room. He caught her eye, and she smiled at him. He almost smiled back, but he wasn't the type.

The lights were extinguished and the game was on. Michael was already taking a few strides toward her, hoping that she wasn't moving.

He could sense he was close to a body, so with little certainty, he raised his hand to touch her. Instead, he tripped over something and fell into her.

"Ooomph!" the sound jetted out of him.

"Shh!" Astrid's silky voice brushed against his ear. Her finger was on his lips. She was pressing herself against him, but her body was wriggling.

"What are you doing?" he whispered as quietly as he could, desperate to understand her jerky movements. Though it helped mask his voice that some of the buffoons were crooning her name.

"Creating a diversion." Her lips left his ear. Until that point in time, he never knew an ear could hold a grudge.

He felt her body turn, and then it must have been her arm swinging, because he heard a crash on the other side of the room.

"Did you just throw something?"

“I needed to divert their attention.”

“What did you throw?”

“Just an old book I happened to see on the mantelpiece?”

“You threw Humes—”

And then for the only plausible reason he could think of—that is, she wanted to shut him up—her lips were on his.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 9:44 am*

I T WAS DARK. HE was so close. And he was a powerful, handsome man. Having hardly spoken to him she already felt consumed by him. His presence. His command. Her body took action all on its own.

That was what Astrid was telling herself as her lips pressed into his.

She hadn't thought it through, though. The idea had probably been to silence the madman who was giving away their location.

All her efforts to lead them away from where she originally stood were being overridden.

But if the idea was that kissing meant no talking, how long did she want the no talking thing to continue for? Because it was continuing...

She had never before kissed a man beyond a peck on the cheek, yet here she was, initiating it. And eager for more.

If the waltz had knitted her soul to his, this kiss was sewing her body to him.

His hands tightened around her ribs as his tongue ran along the seam of her mouth. It was an invitation to open, and she RSVPed immediately.

His tongue was in her mouth. A burning passion swept through her. Her nipples were little pebbles now, grinding against his chest.

But they were in the middle of a game. Although it was dark, surely someone was

cheating and could potentially see what was going on when they walked close enough.

With a quiet groan, she pushed back.

He still had his blindfold on. She stared as his mouth hung open and ragged breaths escaped him.

“Later,” she whispered. He nodded as a slow smile took over his face, and she was dazzled by more flutters in her stomach and a tingle that ran up her arm.

This was the first time she had seen him smile, and she was addicted to it.

Even with a blindfold covering his eyes and the two of them in a darkened room, she could see how his smile lit up his face.

She had an uncanny sense that his smile could light up her life if she let it.

She reached up and slid the blindfold from his eyes. Her fingers streaking through his soft, satiny tresses. His eyes flapped shut with her movements.

“We must continue,” she said.

His eyelids flew open.

“The game.”

He looked around, as if in remembrance of where they were.

“Let’s get this over with then,” he agreed gruffly.

The two of them made little effort to dodge the rest of the blindfolded guests, and the

game was nearing its end.

One man was left. Everyone could see him now, but he still had on his blindfold.

The whole group of them were making sounds to call him over, but the man was plastered.

He was tripping over every little speck of dust to float in the air.

He was on his hands and knees, crawling over to them in laughter.

As he approached he tugged on Astrid's dress.

She felt the bodice shift downward and glanced at her chest to ensure her ladies were still in place.

Michael grabbed the man by the arm. With a growl, he said, "All right. You've touched her now. Game's over. In fact, call it a night."

A few groans were heard, but mostly by the men hoping for a second round of the game.

"To bed for everyone." The authority in his voice sent a shiver down her spine. She couldn't wait until she kissed him again and he used his authority over her. But he would have to be the one to make that move.

She smiled to herself.

"Everyone out," Michael was now directing all the guests to leave the room. As if they were a herd of sheep, everyone began to squeeze through the doors. Michael stood sentry at the doorframe and Astrid hung back. She was just about to leave the



room when she noticed a loose thread on her bodice.

There were innocuous moments in life that held the power to completely alter one's path.

Shatter a reputation. It could be subtle or it could be dramatic.

This was both. And if, if perchance, Astrid had known the catastrophic outcome of such a tiny gesture, she wouldn't have done it.

But there was no way of having such forethought.

So she did what any reasonable person might do, she reached down and tugged on the loose thread to remove it from her dress.

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"NIPPLE!" THE DRUNK CAD shouted. Michael wanted to strangle him.

His hands were balled into fists and he bit back the overwhelming urge to punch a hole in his face.

Or the wall beside him. His anger was tiny bits of burning ember prickling all over his entire body.

His overall temperature had risen to that of a volcano about to erupt.

Did the man have no honor? He was drunk, obviously, but was there no filter at all?

The first clue should have been him being the last one to touch Astrid.

The second clue should have been him crawling on the ground for the final move of the game.

The third clue, plain and simple, was the man's obnoxious face.

The face that Michael was glaring at in hopes it might explode.

Everyone was out in the corridor, or so Michael thought. At the last second, the bumbling idiot who had moments earlier been crawling on the floor, decided to turn around and bump into Astrid. The abrupt collision led to chaos.

"Nipple!" the addlepated idiot screamed again. He needed to shut the hell up lest he wake the rest of the house. The idiot was leaning heavily against the doorframe for support and leering at Astrid's turgid nipple.

Michael stole a look at Astrid, but instead of seeing her face, his eyes dipped south and he saw her wild honey colored nipple.

He was a monster for wanting to ravish her in front of everyone.

What that nipple did to his cock...he was throbbing.

The ache for her was overpowering. It rendered him senseless.

He could still feel her lips on his. Kissing her blindfolded in a room full of people had been the single more erotic moment of his life.

Her body wriggling against his, adjusting herself, was nearly his undoing.

Thankfully the drunk idiot finally did something useful. He laughed. No, it was a guffaw. A vile, vociferous, vulgar guffaw. Michael had never consciously loathed a

person before, but he felt as close to it as he'd ever been. But the hideous guffaw brought his attention back to the gathered crowd.

A handful of the lingering guests, mere feet away, popped their heads back in through the doorway.

And Astrid was bright red.

What the hell was Michael doing just standing there? Frustrated at the delay of his reaction, he tugged her into him, to shield her from their curious stares.

“You two!” The drunk man wagged his finger at them.

“I should have known something was going on. Weren't you the first to find her in the game?”

I wonder how hard she made that. Or should I say you?

” Another awful guffaw. “What a little seductress.” He opened his arms out wide, palms up, and in mocking cried out, “God, when's it my turn? ”

Seductress? The word struck a chord in him. As if it snapped him out of a dream. As if the water he had been temporarily holding flowed through his hands.

It was not unusual for women to try and trap a duke. He had been wildly impulsive. Reckless. The last time he had acted recklessly had fatal results. Inwardly, he chastised himself for past and present mistakes.

How had Michael not seen that? She had volunteered to be the Echo in the dark. She had kissed him. And now this?

What the devil was she thinking to make a move on him right then? Yes, they had kissed. And there probably would have been more at a later time. After he proposed. But now...everything had changed. Now he saw her for what she was. A temptress.

Guests were gawking. Astrid was trying to stuff her breast back into her dress. And Michael...he was aghast. There were no other words for it.

It was beyond improper for her to make such a move.

In front of people. So close to people who could actually see what was happening.

There were no blindfolds now. His impression of her had been all wrong.

She was not a down to earth, sweet woman.

She was a flirt. A wanton woman. A woman not suitable to be his duchess.

Yet, she was a woman with no brother to protect her, so at this moment, he was the only gentleman willing, and sober enough, to keep her from further harm.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 9:44 am*

A STRID HAD NEVER BEEN so embarrassed before. Her nipple was on display. She was horrified. The worst part was that it felt as though time had slowed down and all of her thoughts and movements were lagging.

If only that drunk idiot hadn't called attention to it, perhaps no one would have noticed. Instead, multiple pairs of eyes had firsthand knowledge of the distinct amber color of her areola.

If Michael had been the only witness, she might have recovered quickly enough for him to not even notice.

She could have turned away and set her dress to rights.

But in the chaotic string of events between pulling the thread, the drunken announcement, and the heads popping in, she had nowhere to turn without an audience.

Her body rounded to the place that felt most safe. Michael.

It was his eyes that were on her body. His gaze taking in the sight of her nipple. The chill in the air doubled with the intense desire she saw in his eyes drew her nipple taut, and she knew he caught sight of her aroused state before she tucked herself back in her dress.

With mortification, she finally found her voice. About to say something to the curious crowd, Michael stepped up. He pulled her close to his chest so that her back was facing the onlookers. His arm was latched around her. Safety.

“There’s nothing to see here. Go to bed. Now.” His ducal tone held the authoritative sway to move the mass of people back into the corridor and off to their rooms. What few grumbles she heard were lost on her ears. They didn’t matter. Only Michael’s opinion of her was of any consequence.

And he was protecting her. She had only known him for such a short time, yet she knew her intuition about him was right. He was a good man. Humble. Stable. Honorable. Responsible. Protective. And...passionate. At that thought, she noticed again the burning sensation on her lips from their kiss.

It felt right to be tucked against his chest knowing he would take care of her. She could trust him.

“Thank you,” she said shyly, with her chin tucked against his body.

“Let’s go.” She couldn’t read the tone of his voice as he gently turned her around and led her out of the room.

She knew to be quiet while they walked together.

It wouldn’t do to be caught alone with him at night.

One scandal was enough. She could only hope the gossip wouldn’t be too vicious.

It had merely been a wardrobe malfunction.

But who had seen that? Who had really seen the whole event from its innocent start to its scandalous end?

Had Michael witnessed all of it? His reaction indicated that he didn’t place blame on her.

Though, if she really thought back on it, it wasn't all that reassuring. It was commanding...but was it kind?

“Michael—” she started to explain what happened, forgetting where they were.

He hushed her softly, looking straight ahead.

It only took a minute more for them to reach her chambers, and she knew she needed to explain herself to him.

She wanted his good opinion of her. She couldn't bear it if he lost faith in her.

Which was crazy to think. It had only been hours, but so much had happened.

The dance. The kiss. The...wardrobe incident.

Everything had happened so quickly, but sometimes love was like that, wasn't it?

Love? Was that what had happened to her?

Being caught up in another world in a dance with him. Being transported by passion in his embrace. And finally, experiencing his power and protectiveness. She could envision him proposing. He was an honorable man. He would do right by her.

A betrothal? Her head swam at the thought.

When they reached the door to her chambers, she slowly turned the handle and motioned for him to follow her.

Giddiness bubbled up inside of her. It was a nervous tension building within, like when she would wait to see what mark she had received on a test that she had studied

for with diligence.

And wasn't it true that she had been studying her whole life how to be a lady and secure a husband?

Wasn't that the social structure she had been trained for?

Hadn't her family and governesses worked hard to rein her in?

Tame her? Her, a bucking, wild horse. Pent up with dreams for herself and doing good for the world around her, especially children.

And now all of her training was going to be worth it.

Isaac could stop worrying about her, and she could start living the life she wanted to live.

After she had a husband, doors would open for her.

Doors of passion inside her heart. But also doors of freedom to the outside world. No more chaperones. No more taming.

She looked up at him with a foolish grin, feeling only a little bit sheepish that he might be able to read her thoughts.

"Michael?" She asked it as a second invitation because maybe he had missed the first one. She wanted to talk about this kiss. Or just kiss again. She wanted to talk to him. Or just be near him. It had been a perfectly chaotic day, and she didn't want it to end here.

"I cannot be seen in your chambers, Lady Astrid."



And then she noticed the rigidity of his spine. And the darkness in his eyes was no longer desire, but...contempt.

Nothing could kill affection quicker than contempt.

Jarred, she pulled her hand to her throat. His eyes followed her movement, lingered on her lips, and flicked back up to her gaze.

“I was wrong,” he said. Then he turned and left. Too aghast to speak, she leaned against the wall and watched as he walked away. His room was next to hers, so he didn’t go far.

Thinking perhaps he might turn around and cast her another glance, she watched his every move. His body paused in front of his door, his hand resting on the door handle. Surely he would look back now. He didn’t.

And then he was gone.

I was wrong. I was wrong. I was wrong.

The words rang like a bell in her head. Wrong about what? About his actions? His choice? And if he was wrong, why wasn’t he apologizing? Did he feel guilty? That he should have done more. Said more. Knocked out the drunken idiot. Called him out. What was he wrong about?

Or had he meant something else? That he was wrong about her? Astrid shuddered as her mind absorbed the truth.

He was ashamed of her. He wasn’t protecting her as much as he was shielding himself from gossip.

The quicker he could get them out of that situation, the better.

He intended to distance himself from her, not draw as close as socially possible.

Marriage. Ha! What a fool she had been. She thought she could trust her intuition. What an absolute disaster.

Had she really thought that love could bloom in blazing passion and honorable intentions?

Love was not like that. Love at first sight was not real. True love didn't exist like that. Astrid's heart crumpled.

If the gossip got out, it could destroy her. But who knew for how long. She might not be shunned from society, but she would be its new pariah.

On the outskirts of society, her actions would be fodder for gossip, regardless of what she did now. If she acted with propriety, they would say she was just covering up. If she acted with even the barest hint of impropriety, they would call her wanton.

No matter what she did, the gossip would forever be painted in light of the incident.

So Astrid made a decision.

Buck society. Buck society and all the people in it. She would live for herself.

Never had she been so wrong about a person.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 9:44 am*

Present Day

LADY ASTRID. NEVER HAD he been so wrong about a person.

Michael couldn't believe the cards fate was dealing him.

It was Christmas. It was supposed to be a nice relaxing house party with the dowager duchess of Whitewood hosting.

If he had known that she was going to be here, he might have sent a different RSVP.

But here he was, day one of what was supposed to be a calm house party, on a walk with all the houseguests.

There was no snow glistening on the ground.

Everything was an unusual green shade for this time of year.

And brown. Copious amounts of brown littered his view.

It was still nice to breathe the fresh air and be out in nature.

But as he breathed the crisp air, he could feel the matchmaking tentacles of Mavis, the Maven.

Yes, even he had heard the rumors. He couldn't remember the source, though it had probably come from his sister, Hali. She would know. The Maven was now her

mother-in-law, and may have played a part in Hali and Giles' match.

It was a pity that Hali was on an extended honeymoon with her husband, but if anyone deserved it, she did.

In a roundabout way, Michael himself had a hand in his sister's recent marriage.

He had sent the note to Giles requesting that he watch out for Hali in his absence.

He couldn't, however, say he had expected the circuitous route they took to get together.

And when Hali started to share with him the details, he had to stop her.

There were some things he didn't want to know about his innocent little sister.

Even though he couldn't be there to protect her himself, he was responsible for her. And it was a responsibility he wouldn't botch. He had failed one sibling before, with fatal results. He wouldn't fail again.

Agitation crawled across his skin. He disdained thoughts on his failures, especially that one.

He held his more recent failure in contempt as well.

He glanced over at the woman he once thought to be a perfect angel.

Astrid. His heart leaped at the sight of her.

She was too beautiful to be so wanton, alas, wasn't that the truth?

A person could only have so many favorable qualities.

Astrid was laughing at something. That oversized mouth of hers was beckoning to him. He loathed how drawn he was to her.

So when the dowager duchess beckoned him, he was not in his usual degree of aloofness. He was far, far colder. But in the worst way, much, much hotter.

“Duke, be a dear and walk with Astrid. She’s far too often in the company of her brother.”

Far too often in the company of her brother? If that were true, the incident and its ensuing failure wouldn’t have happened. She hadn’t intended it, but the dowager’s words stirred a bubbling cauldron of angst in him.

And though he tried to remain calm, he couldn’t hide the bite in his words. “I think she would be less inclined to her impulses were she to spend more time under his care.”

“Duke,” Mavis chided with a cluck of her tongue.

The other guests avoided his eyes. He knew it was beyond the pale to say such a thing in public, and when he met Astrid’s saucy smirk, he was grounded in pity.

He didn’t want her pity. He just wanted her absence.

So he eluded the Maven’s matchmaking madness by securing a walking partner for himself.

He was going to do everything in his power to stay far away from Astrid.

He had done a fairly good job of avoiding the vixen for the last couple of years.

There had been a couple of occasions where he had sat beside her at a dinner, danced close to her at a ball.

There had even been one occasion where he couldn't excuse himself from flipping her music sheets while she played the pianoforte.

But no matter how intoxicating her verbena scent was, no matter how deep her ocean blue eyes were, and no matter how sultry her curves fit her dress of choice, he abstained.

Because that's all she was. A siren. He was only too fortunate to have learned of her seductive ways before he had made a complete ass of himself by proposing.

Imagine that he had once thought her guileless. She was a troublemaker. As if his thoughts had been read by Isaac, he heard her brother's voice. With a wide grin on his face, and one arm around his sister, he asked, "You want her?"

"She's all yours," Michael responded with as little venom as he could muster. No one knew of his contempt toward her. He had managed to keep that on lockdown. There was no use in stirring up rumors, as her reputation had already suffered enough since that event.

The troublemaker. That's what she was though, and she had brought it upon herself. Even now, she grabbed her brother's hat and ran off into the woods.

Childish.

Michael watched as three adults, one by one, ran into the woods.

Astrid. Isaac. Hope. A twinge plucked at his heart.

Uninterested in what that meant, he turned his attention to something the dowager duchess was discussing.

He overheard something about the orphanage's needs, but he couldn't make out what she said.

Not being one to eavesdrop, he didn't try too hard to decipher its meaning. The Ashbournes did an admirable job running the orphanage and protecting those children. Perhaps he would ask later and make a donation to their worthy cause.

For now, he would enjoy the snowless, talkless, Astrid-less walk.

Much to his disappointment, he only enjoyed those -less es for a few brief hours.

He managed to avoid Astrid all evening. Her and her devil red gown with another low neckline, revealing far too much.

Didn't Isaac have a care for his sister?

Not that Michael was the paragon for sibling care.

That neckline though...every time he caught her laughing with her head thrown back, he was sure a nipple was about to pop out.

The tightening in his gut increased all evening until finally he could bid his hostess goodnight.

Needing to have Astrid firmly out of sight, he was finally on his way to bed.

With his head down he climbed the stairs and marched to his room.

The pesky memory of that kiss with her in the dark had nearly been eradicated from his mind, (well, his daydreams not his nightly one), but being in such close quarters with her was making it hard to breathe. He was stifled. And stiff.

With a hardening cock, he flung open his door.

And who should be there, but Astrid.

She was standing in the middle of the room, her hands running down her nightrail. Pulling the nearly transparent fabric tight against her curves. Her breasts. Her hips. Her bottom. His lips instantly remembered the feel of her, and his hands were restless as his sides.

“What are you doing here?” He didn’t give her time to answer. As he closed the door, he asked, “Haven’t you done enough already?”

“Excuse me?”

It was too little and far too late, but the adrenaline coursing through him was taking logic for a ride. “We had our moment. It was a mistake.”

She glared at him.

He might have thought she would cover up. Act ashamed for coming to his room at this hour to seduce him. Again. But no, she rolled her shoulders back and stalked toward him.

“It was most certainly a mistake. Perhaps the most significant of my life. I don’t see it affecting you too greatly though.”



He scoffed. She couldn't know how the erroneously innocent memory plagued him.

She didn't know that his lips had yearned for a taste of her every day for months following that first kiss.

There was no possible way for her to understand how long it had taken him to extract her from his woolgathering thoughts.

And it was inconceivable that she could even have an inkling as to how many times he had woken up hard as granite after a torturous night of dreams about her.

But he wouldn't say any of that. Now that he knew who she was, a wanton woman, he was not interested.

"It has cost me, though admittedly not the way it has cost you." He almost felt the sadness he detected in her eyes, but then he remembered that it was her actions that had triggered the scandal. "You only did this to yourself, Astrid," he muttered.

"You are not the judge of me, Michael. You don't get to enforce punishment on me for my actions."

They were so close together, he was breathing her air. He was agitated with her. And at the intense tightening in his gut. And the swelling between his thighs. He wanted her. Desperately.

Impulse took over his body, boxing logic out of it. "Maybe I should be."

"What?"

"Maybe I should be. You have been a bad girl, Astrid." His hand gripped her waist. Her supple curves. He wanted to sink his teeth into her.

“I—I—”

“Just answer one question. How bad have you been?” The temperature in his body was hot enough to boil an egg. His heart was hammering his chest. She was wanton. Eager for the physical. The sensual. And he could show her so much more.

He almost choked on the words he had been desperate to ask her, “Do you need me to spank you?”

He watched the flush creep up her neck. He was wild.

Out of his mind. At first he thought it had been rage.

But now he could feel the sexual frustration.

His body wanted her, even though he couldn’t have her.

But she had come to his room wanting something, so he would give her something she would never forget. Unless she said no.

A breathless, “Yes,” crossed her lips.

Without a second thought, he pulled her close and sunk into the chair. He laid her across his lap. His arousal now hard as steel. Whipping up her nightrail, he shuddered when he saw her creamy bottom shining up at him.

Gently, he placed his hand on her cheek and rubbed a few circles. Then, SMACK.

She let out a small cry. “Michael!”

His hand covered the redness and smoothed it out while she moaned.

“Have you learned your lesson, Astrid?”

“No.”

Shock swept through him and he could feel his sack tightening.

“This is for your behavior tonight.”

SMACK!

Before he could rub his hand over the sting, she bolted up and grabbed him by the shirt. Her lips were on his, and his hands were caressing her under her nightrail.

She moaned his name and he devoured her mouth. He shouldn't be doing this. She was wicked. Wanton. Wayward.

Everything he resented in a woman. He had been led astray in his youth by beauty. Had his heart broken and never wanted to have anything to do with a seductress again. He wanted an innocent, guileless woman. That's what he wanted to want. So how could he also so desperately want Astrid?

But her tongue in his mouth was filling a need he didn't know he had. Her.

His cock was straining against the fabric, yearning to be inside of her. He had to stop this madness. He was not impulsive.

With all his willpower, he pushed her back.

“I think you've learned your lesson, Astrid.” And so did I. He learned that he couldn't be near her without losing himself. He stood up and took a step away from her lest he reach for her and not stop this time. “This can't happen again.”

“Really Michael. I’m not sure you can stay away from me.”

“Me? I have the discipline to stay away. This is your fault. You did this.”

Fire lit in her eyes. Dancing across her irises. If there had been flowers there before, they had been singed to ashes. Now there was only a raging inferno.

“I did this?” She closed the space between them, and poked her finger into his chest.

“I did this? To myself?” She belted a short unamused laugh.

“Two years ago I certainly made a mistake.” She poked him in the chest. “ I have lived with the consequences. Not you.” Poke.

“But that does not excuse your behavior this evening.” Poke.

“What behavior?” Anticipating rancor toward her answer, he clenched his jaw.

“For starters, what the deuce are you doing in my room?”

Michael’s eyes flitted about the room. Wait. This wasn’t his bedchamber? Her hairbrush lay in front of the mirror. Her books were strewn about the nightstand.

What in God’s name had he done?

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 9:44 am*

A ND THAT'S WHEN MICHAEL did what so many men are notorious for but he had never once in his life considered doing. He left her without a word.

His body turned to the door. His mouth clamped shut. And his feet bolted out of there. He didn't stop until he had entered his room and locked his bedroom door. He looked around. Yes, this was his room. He double checked the lock. Yes, it was locked.

But who needed the lock? She hadn't been the one initiating wickedness. He had...he leaned against the door and sunk to the ground. Draping crossed hands over bent knees, he banged his head against his forearms.

And of course, besides his conscience, what should plague him now but philosophy.

Aristotle said that virtue was the golden mean between two vices, one to excess and one of deficiency.

Given the excesses of legalism and recklessness and their deficient counterparts of corruption and cowardice, Michael was all over the map.

Excessive in his recklessness and deficiently corrupt.

There was no golden mean of integrity and love to be found in him.

His mind was an absolute mess. He had been in her room? How was that possible?

He had swatted her bottom, soothed her. Mauled her with his mouth. He was an

animal. There was no excuse. Hadn't he learned the consequences of acting impulsively? His poor brother. Michael wasn't even supposed to be the duke.

His eyes burned in remorse. He was a better man than this. He needed to act like it.

The tornado of emotions that had swept through him left him exhausted. He ambled over to his bed and crawled in. Fully clothed.

He closed his eyes and willed away the guilt.

The reprieve was instantaneous. For now.

The next morning was abuzz with women flitting about and carriages being readied for a trip to the village. It was Hope's idea that everyone needed more Christmas spirit.

His only saving grace was that he hadn't shared a carriage with Astrid. Had he have known that was to be his only beacon of salvation in the day, he might have been inclined to pack a flask. Or two.

When everyone alighted the carriages, he couldn't help but smirk.

Hope was correct in thinking that this small trip could imbue more holiday spirit.

The shops were decorated with holly and mistletoe, and the scent of cinnamon was in the air.

Being the attentive hostess that she was, Hope pointed out a few places for various individuals in the group.

It was considerate of her to indicate the bookshop to him. Surely he would pop in

there.

At the moment though, he was preoccupied with Astrid. She was standing in front of a trinket store peering in the window. She was alone. Where was her brother?

Michael clenched his fists. The woman exuded raw sensuality. Looking at the sway of her hips, and the swish of her skirts. He could feel the smooth touch of her skin beneath all the layers. So many layers.

A coy smirk tugged the corner of her lips. She was coquettish, wasn't she? Like she knew something no one else did. She definitely had her secrets. He knew that much.

He was about to go looking for her brother and give him a piece of his mind when he caught a handsome fellow approaching Astrid.

Michael's fists froze.

The man must have made a joke, probably some ridiculous pun that any monkey brain could come up with.

Astrid threw her head back and laughed. That glorious sound flooded Michael's senses.

She wasn't supposed to be laughing with another man.

Especially not that man. He was...well, he was overdressed to be frequenting a village.

And who was he here with anyway? A man didn't visit a village alone for Christmas shopping. Where were the women in his life?

Michael watched in horror as Astrid's hand descended on the man's forearm. He hoped the wool was itchy on her fingers.

This was enough. He had to stop that vulgar disregard for propriety. Astrid looked up at him and winked.

The man turned his head and caught sight of Michael.

Midstride in Astrid's direction, Michael watched as the man pulled up his collar and quickly disappeared. Just before Michael reached Astrid's side, Mavis darted out from behind him and took Astrid's hand in hers.

Michael stood directly behind the dowager as she said, "Astrid, I just wanted to thank you again for your generous donation to the orphanage. You met a rather urgent need. Your magnanimity is unparalleled. You are always so open-handed with your pin money and liberal with your time."

Michael watched as Astrid flushed under the compliment. She lowered her voice, but he thought he heard her say, "You and your family are the real heroes. I just do what I can."

Mavis patted her hand. "Some heroes wear masks, my dear, but it doesn't make them any less a hero."

"Thank you," Astrid said.

"Now, who was that fine looking gentleman? Oh, Michael, I didn't see you there."

Astrid demured, "I have no idea. He didn't give me his name. I—"

"What were you two talking about?" Michael demanded in a harsh tone.



She glared at him. “Not that it’s any of your business...but he mentioned an excellent apothecary shop just down the road. He thought that the women in our group might appreciate it.”

Michael grunted. He wanted to press for more details. For example, what was so funny that she had to laugh loud enough to rival the church bells?

But he withheld his interrogation. Mostly because the dowager duchess jumped in.

“Astrid, you must stop by the shop and pick up a tincture for me. See what they have for megrims, please. I must find another footman to help load some packages into the carriages.”

“Of course—”

“Michael, do be a dear and go with her, please.”

“It would be my pleasure.” Michael ground out.

They walked to the apothecary in a strained stillness, but when they entered the store, they both abandoned the silent stand off.

“The gentleman stated that the rose oil sold here was particularly well made,” Astrid said.

“I’ll just bet he did.” What was the man doing advising Astrid to buy an oil used to heighten romance?

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. The man looked like a rat.”

“Michael, you didn’t even see his face.”

“I could tell.”

“How?”

“He stunk.” He hadn’t meant it as a joke, but Astrid laughed all the same.

That’s the way it was supposed to be. She was supposed to be laughing at his non-jokes.

Her laugh was supposed to coat his soul in warmth and...

something like goodness. He waited for her touch.

His forearm aching for her delicate fingers to grace his coat.

He even lifted his arm a touch, oblivious to how foolish he might look standing with his arm propped up in the open space.

His heart pounded as he watched her fingers fall into place.

Magic. It was magic. She was pure magic.

And that’s when Michael knew his heart was in trouble.

If only the chaos had ended there, perhaps he might have enough time to collect his thoughts and regain control of his actions.

But then the wanton seductress bought the rose oil. Right in front of him. All while bearing a coy smile. She purchased a megrim tincture for The Maven, and then they

were off to join the group. He could only hope. But Astrid had other plans.

First, she waved Hope down and told her about the apothecary. “I really think you might enjoy the products in there, Hope.” Showing off her rose oil, Michael looked away pretending not to be giving his full attention to the words dripping off her lips.

That rose oil...it could be used...alone.

God, he couldn't stop the blood from boiling in his skin. She may be wanton, but did she have to corrupt everyone around her as well?

But was she acting corruptly? The smile on her face lit a flame in his heart. And the appreciation from Hope was genuine. And Mavis had mentioned that Astrid was generous in her donations to the orphanage.

Who was this beguiling woman?

Pockets of heat were exploding all over Michael's body. He felt like a geyser. Ready to blow.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 9:44 am*

A STRID COULD FEEL THE heat radiating off of Michael, and the sadistic side of her wanted to see him suffer a little more.

She didn't know how she knew it, but without a doubt she knew that the rigid man was berating himself for his actions last night.

Her bottom had stung in pleasure, and a new wave of giddiness rolled through her in remembrance.

He was uptight in public. But in private... she fanned her face.

"Are you all right Astrid?" his deep baritone embraced her heart.

"Perfectly fine, thank you."

She couldn't be the only one affected, so just before they were about to return to the group, she made a decision she knew he couldn't refuse.

She needed more time with him. He was baffling.

One minute he desired her, the next he was holding her at arm's length.

She needed him to make up his mind. And more importantly, she needed to make up her own mind about him.

He was devilishly handsome. Her body hadn't ceased to make that observation.

“I just need to grab something from the bookstore.”

With a grumble, he followed her into the store.

“I’ll take this time to look for a few books myself.” She could practically hear him grinding his teeth as he said the few words.

He was mad at himself, that much she knew. But why that ire had turned its hostile face toward her, she wasn’t quite sure. He was grumpy no matter what she did. Or didn’t do.

When she left him alone, he glared at her from across the street. When they visited the apothecary, he fumed the entire time. And now...he was practically a simmering volcano.

Well, let the man be for now. He was already off to search the philosophy texts. She thought she heard him mutter something about Hume and Kantian ethics. The names meant next to nothing to her.

Instead, Astrid was just pursuing some books in one of the less frequented corners when she saw a book on the top shelf. It stood out for its deep pink color. Very few books were pink. Blue. Red. Brown. But pink...it looked delicious. As delicious as a book could look.

If only she could reach up and just nick it with her fingers, surely it would fall right into her hands—

A warmth encased her. His arm—Michael’s arm—was crawling up her limbs, bracketing her.

“That will fall on your head,” the murmur blew into her ear and seeped into her brain.

Melting something. Probably reason.

His solid body was close behind her. Too close. She could feel his chest against her back. His chin in her hair. And his...hardness at the top of her bum.

She shivered. "Michael." One hoarse word.

"Astrid," he whispered, "what are you doing to me?"

"Me?" Gradually, she arched back into him. "What are you doing?"

His groan caused her nipples to tingle. "I could be doing so much more."

A whimper escaped her lips.

"Sh. Someone might hear you."

The book they had been reaching for was now tucked against her chest, pressed there by Michael's strong hand. His other hand was on her hip, migrating north, up her ribcage. His thumb brushed the underside of her breast.

"Please." What was she even asking him? For more? In a public place?

"Please, what?" The warmth of his breath was excruciating. He felt right. Protective. Attentive. But what did he really think of her? He had shown interest and then gone cold. And now, he was anything but cold. He was a natural hot springs, and all she wanted was to bathe in him.

"End this torture. What do you want from me?" she demanded.

He whirled her around, his lips an inch away from hers, his body pressing her into the

shelf behind her.

Desire ridden eyes beheld her, while a tremble in his arms vibrated through her.

“I-I don’t know.” He dropped his forehead against hers and took a couple of deep inhalations.

Her heart was sawing through her, unaware of whether it was building or destroying something.

Yet a glance at his face revealed nothing.

Perfectly stoic, he was. She didn’t understand how he could so quickly turn his emotions off, like snuffing out a candle, whereas as she had a conflagration of inner organs to manage.

With that snuff of a candle, he led her to the counter and paid for the pink book along with a few of his resting atop it.

Neither of them noticed the curious look from the bookstore owner as he processed the payment.

Just as they were passing through the doorway and Astrid felt the burning imprint of Michael’s hand on her back, the shopkeeper called out, “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

Together they looked back at the sound. The man was pointing to something hanging in the doorframe.

Mistletoe.

Of course there would be mistletoe.

She looked up at Michael and caught sight of his knitted brows, thinking he would wave off the prompt from the store owner.

Knowing he couldn't give her even a small kiss, she couldn't hide the hurt. Hadn't he mauled her the night before? She was a strong woman, but for some reason, this public (though small) rebuff, hurt deep.

Casting her head down, she moved to leave the store.

"Astrid," he exhaled roughly and his hand cupped her jaw, "I want you, damn it."

And then he placed the gentlest of kisses on her lips.

It was as though he returned to the man she had once thought he was. In a word: kind. She was spellbound by his passion, his intense emotional drive. But she needed his kindness.

The two left the bookstore with her hand tucked under his arm. That kiss, that small tender kiss, had shifted something into place. That kiss told her that he could still be soft with her. The thoughts hardly had a moment to settle into place before they approached the group.

"Michael, thank God you're here." The dowager was racing toward them, panic flared in her eyes.

"What's going on?"

"Hope is gone."



“What?” Astrid’s body froze.

“She’s missing. Isaac chased after her. I-I—”

“Don’t worry about anything.” Michael braced her with his hands. “Everything is going to be fine.” His authoritative tone and steely gaze had Mavis and Astrid transfixed.

“Listen to me, you need to go back to the house. I’ll find out what’s going on.” Then he barked out orders to the footmen present and had the guests packed up in the carriages to return home.

He spoke with such aplomb, no one questioned his instructions. He knew exactly what to do. He could be trusted.

Nothing terrified Astrid more.

She had hope that by the time they reached Snowick Abbey that some tranquility would have been restored. Surely Hope had only wandered off or taken a short ride with a friend. Alas, the frenzy only persisted upon arrival.

Mavis was a wreck, understandably so. Michael told her to go to her room and wait.

Servants were attending to her. A long bath, a meal, and tea were part of the instructions Astrid had overheard.

Michael had also taken care of the day’s activities by telling guests they were still welcome to take a stroll on the grounds and that meals would be served in the rooms out of respect for Hope’s absence.

It was the right decision. It would have been foolish to expect the guests to sit and

converse under such duress.

Never had anyone she known been subject to such a crisis before, yet Michael had commandeered the party with the expertise of a weathered sea captain.

But when the dinner meal came, Astrid felt sick to her stomach.

Her brother was gone, and she prayed that he would find Hope. Her desire for comfort was consuming her. Before her courage could desert her, she snuck down the hallway to Michael's room. A quick knock, a faster call to enter, and she was inside.

"Astrid?"

She pressed her palms against the closed door. She should have been expecting him in dishabille, but the sight of him in only a shirt (and open at that) and trousers was shocking to her system. But she wouldn't flinch in front of him.

She didn't waste any time in asking for what she needed. "Do you think Hope is all right?"

"Yes," he said without hesitation.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Isaac is in love with her. He won't let any harm come to her."

"He might not be able to find her. How can you be so sure?"

"I just know." It came out sounding harsh, and Astrid wanted to recoil, so vulnerable in the moment.

“He’s not perfect. He might not be able to—” she broke off, not wanting to speak the awful words. “No one’s perfect.”

Michael scoffed, but she didn’t know why. She had to ask him. “What? I suppose you think you’re perfect?”

“Far from it.”

Astrid stepped into the room. She sensed he was harboring something, but how could she make him divulge his secret.

It was probably something silly, like taking the last scone at tea.

The man was as virtuous as a monk. Her fragile state opted for a mocking tone.

“What has the great Duke of Tinsder done that’s so awful? ”

He leveled a withering stare her way, and there was no chance for her to prepare for the words he spoke. “I killed my brother and stole his inheritance.”

And that confession did make her wince. Never in a million years had she expected such a gruesome confession from the man who always held himself together. The rigid, principled man. The stoic saint. The mannered monk. “What?”

When he didn’t answer, she spoke again. “There’s no reason for me to believe that you could have possibly done that.”

“I may as well have. I knew that we were supposed to stick together. Hali, Jeremy, and I.” Michael sank into a chair and she cautiously joined him in an adjacent seat.

“What happened?”

She watched as his head fell to his hands.

“Stay together. That was the only rule when we went out. But,” he rubbed his hand over his forehead, “one day, we didn’t.

We had all been swimming and boating on the lake.

When it started to rain, I wanted to go in and eat, and Jeremy wanted to stay and swim.

I told him...I told him we should go in.” Michael’s voice broke.

“But he was insistent. He laughed at the rain. Neither of us expected the lightning. I never saw him alive again.”

“I’m sorry, Michael.”

“I learned my lesson.” He rubbed his hands over his thighs.

“What lesson was that?”

“To always do the right thing.”

“What was the right thing?”

“I should have been with him. I should have stayed. Or dragged him home.”

Astrid knelt before him and put a hand over his, still resting on his thigh. “It wasn’t your fault.”

Head down he muttered, “I know—”

“Michael.” She interrupted whatever casual agreeance he was making. “Look at me. It wasn’t your fault. You can’t control other people’s actions. He made a choice. If you had stayed you would have died in the water with him.”

“You don’t know that. I could have pulled him out.”

“Or died trying.” She gripped his hand. “It wasn’t your fault. He made a poor choice. He didn’t listen to your advice. Grieve the loss, but don’t bear misplaced guilt.”

“So what should I have learned from this? People should always listen to me?” He mocked her.

“No. I think the only lesson you can learn from this is that accidents happen. It’s terrible. You did the best you knew how to at the time.”

When he finally looked up at her, his eyes were moist. She pushed herself up on her knees and moved in between his thighs. Never had she expected to come to his room looking for comfort, only to be the one to provide it to him.

Gingerly, she placed her hand on his chest, and ran it up along his neck to caress his jaw. Then she bestowed a soft kiss on his lips. It was an exchange of tenderness.

And it was imprinted on her heart.

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 9:44 am*

MICHAEL HESITATED TO END the kiss. His body clearly ached for her.

But suddenly it was more than physical. It was his heart.

He had never relied on someone to comfort him physically.

He wasn't entirely sure how it had even happened.

One minute she was in his thoughts. The next she was in his room.

Then he was pouring out his heart to her, with very little prompting, and then she ended up soothing an emotional wound that he thought he had already healed.

As her lips brushed over his, her words floated in his mind.

It wasn't your fault. He had known that intellectually, but somehow hearing it from her, he now felt it viscerally.

For so long he had been making amends for one mistake.

Trying to live the most upright life that he could.

Trying not to give in to his impulses. But now he could breathe.

That first deep breath was such an audible sigh of relief that Astrid pulled back.

"Are you all right?"

“Yes. I know you didn’t come in here for this. But...thank you. I’ve been living with the guilt of one mistake for a long time. The guilt hasn’t magically disappeared, but I needed to hear those words that you spoke.”

“I know what a single mistake can do to a person.” He watched as she sat back on her feet, knees bent.

He supposed that now was as good a time as any to discuss what happened that night at the house party. He didn’t even need to prompt her to speak.

“The mistake of my life. It was just a loose thread. I never would have guessed it could have such a dire outcome.”

Michael felt his brows pull together. What was she talking about? What loose thread? Was she referencing a different event?

“After that ridiculous game, Echoes in the Dark, we were just about to leave, and I noticed that loose thread. It was almost a compulsion to pull it. And maybe everything would have been fine if that drunken buffoon hadn’t bumped into me and then proceeded to announce my...dishabille...to everyone.”

“Wait. What are you talking about? What loose thread?”

She pointed to her bosom. “It was around here. I just tugged it and the bodice fell down.”

“What? You mean you weren’t...” he stalled. He couldn’t actually say it, could he? He couldn’t say, you weren’t trying to seduce me?

But he didn’t have to. He saw the indignation catch fire in her eyes. And...was that disappointment?

She spoke slowly, as if he were a child. “You thought I intended to show you my breast right then and there?”

“I-I don’t know,” he stammered. “We kissed. I thought you wanted more.”

She jumped to her feet. “Yes, Michael. We kissed. It was divine. And yes, I wanted more. But not like that. I’m a lady.”

“I’m sorry.” Too dumbfounded to speak, he just stared.

“Is that why you didn’t speak to me again?”

“I was going to speak with you the next day, but you left so early the next morning. I thought you were...embarrassed.”

“I was embarrassed.”

He rubbed his forehead again. This was a bloody disaster. How was he always so wrong about this woman?

“I don’t know what to say, Astrid.”

“How about that you’re sorry.”

“Well, yes. I am sorry. I’m an ass. I should have spoken to you about everything.”

“You should have asked me. It could have been so simple.”

“You’re right,” he said in defeat. “I was just so disillusioned. I thought you were...perfect. And then...that happened.”



“I’m not perfect, Michael. Do you want to know how imperfect I am? I make mistakes all the time. I spread false rumors about a good man, and I was the one who” —her voice caught on a sob— “told Hope to visit the apothecary. And now someone took her.”

Michael stood and took Astrid in his arms. “Shhh...no, you’re not perfect. I’m seeing that now. And I’m seeing that it doesn’t matter. No one’s perfect. I don’t know about those rumors and why you did that—”

“Because he jilted me. I wanted to ruin him like the gossip that loomed around me and tainted me in society’s eyes.”

“Well, that doesn’t sound great.” He didn’t want to heap any more guilt onto her, but he couldn’t very well condone her actions.

“It was awful. I was awful. Vindictive. Reckless. But that’s not me. I don’t want to be that person anymore.”

“Have you apologized?”

“I’ve been meaning to, but I just wasn’t brave enough. And now Hope is gone.”

“Hope?”

“I wanted to apologize to her first because it was her brother.”

“I see.” Michael didn’t really fully see, but that seemed to be besides the point. Astrid was having a breakdown...and a breakthrough. Those seemed to coincide with women, he noticed. “I’m sure she’ll forgive you.”

“If I ever see her again.”

“You will.”

“And when I do, I’ll beg her to forgive me for leading her to her kidnapping.”

“Well now, just as you told me, that one is clearly not your fault.” Michael was feeling pretty good about himself for at least being able to reassure her about that mislabeled misdemeanor.

“You must think I’m a terrible person,” Astrid said, head pressed into his chest.

“No.” He stepped back so he could peer into her eyes.

“I think...I think I’m finally seeing the full you.

You are a bundle of energy, wrapped tightly but with pieces hanging out.

You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.

The first time I caught sight of you, you were laughing.

Radiating joy. I shall never forget the image of you.

And then you began to surprise me each time we were together.

The dance. The kiss. And being here with you again.

I was vexed that we should be pushed together.

But I can only blame myself. I was the one who showed up in your room. ”

He brushed a loose, tear-stained tendril from her cheek and tucked it behind her ear.

“You are not perfect, but you’re perfect for me.

You are full of life and joy. You are willing to laugh.

Make mistakes. Learn from them. You are seeking out your own happiness, and I believe you do good in the world.

You are a good person, who has made mistakes but wants to make them right, Astrid.  
”

She looked up at him and wiped her cheeks. “This is me. Just as I am.” He could see the nakedness, the vulnerability in her eyes as she admitted, “Sometimes good people do bad things.”

“Yes, we do. But have we learned from our mistakes? Are we trying to be better people? The best that we know how to be?”

She nodded.

And he knew, again, this time with absolute certainty, that this woman would be his wife.

This time, he was confident because he knew her more fully. She wasn’t an angel on a pedestal whereupon making the first mistake he turned her out. She was a living, breathing, learning, growing, loving human being.

That’s all he could ask for in a wife. In his duchess. For his heart.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 9:44 am*

ASTRID HAD GONE TO Michael's room seeking his strength, and she had found some of her own. It had been hidden. But somehow she had found it. She had hidden behind villainy. Anticipating pain behind every event, she had taken the offensive and played aggressively. Hurt or be hurt. Put up a strong front or appear weak. Well, she chose to be strong and hurt others before they could cause her any more pain. The world was a frustrating place for a woman. She had felt confined. Restricted.

After the nipple incident, she had decided to take life into her own hands. She had thought that being strong meant showing no weaknesses.

In Michael's arms, she learned the truth. People were a mess. They could be both strong and weak. Impulsive and constrained. Sensual and good.

Without a doubt, she knew she was in love with Michael. She had known from the first dance. His first smile. Their first kiss. It had been awful to experience his coldness toward her, but now that she knew him better, she could understand why he held himself to such a high standard of moral rectitude. She had left. Giving them no time to discuss the incident. And then, as with so many troubles in life, time passed and no one made the first move.

Astrid watched as Michael lowered himself to one knee. "Astrid, you asked me what I want from you. And I can tell you now. I want you to be my wife. Be the delight of my life. I love you, will you marry me?"

A few tears trickled down her face. "We lost so much time together, I won't lose another second. Yes, I will be your wife."

She leaned in to kiss him and he pulled her down on his knee. “You’ll be mine?” He murmured as he dotted her neck with kisses.

“Yes, I’ll be yours. And you’ll be mine.” She chuckled.

“Only yours. My God, woman. I must have you.”

“Yes.”

And then he stood, this powerful, yet tender, man. “Get on the bed, Astrid.”

She scurried over.

With a heavy lidded stare, he intoned, “We know you can be a bad girl, but now let’s see if you can be a good girl.”

A tremor shook through Astrid. This man. He was everything. Power. Intensity. Authority. And she wanted to surrender control to him.

“Tell me what to do, Michael.”

“You know what to do.”

She shook her head. “I’ve never...”

A bewildered look flickered in his eyes.

“You’re my only...experience.”

At her confession, he was at her side, astonished. “But you—”

“The rumors gave me the freedom I desired to act how I wanted. I only flirted. I

never did anything. I was waiting for the right man.”

His soft kisses stopped her from speaking anymore.

“I have so much to show you, but tonight will be special,” Michael said between kisses.

“Because it’s with you, it’s already special. Take me how you want me, Michael.”

“I want you every way.”

His fingers were on her nightrail. He gripped it and then tore it down the front.

She gasped and he dropped to his knees.

“God above, you are divine. You truly are an angel.” With a gentle push, he encouraged her to step back and rest her bottom on the bed. Then he took one of her legs and rested it over his shoulder. “I can’t wait to taste you, my love.”

“Michael, I—”

But then his tongue was on her core and she couldn’t breathe. With gentle strokes, he licked her seam. His moan reverberated up her spine and then back down to her toes. He flicked her bud over and over again.

“Yes,” she cried breathlessly. “Just...like...that.”

And then his lips were like a seal on her and he sucked on her until her hands gripped his hair. She was pulling his head closer and pushing her hips into him. Giving in to him. Surrendering to his ministrations.

As he sucked on her, his hand reached up and massaged her breast. The tension was

mounting. She wanted nothing more than to pour herself out to him. He pinched her nipple and she screamed his name. The shock waves ratcheted through her as she emptied herself. Yet her body felt heavy after the release. Sated, but weighted. With a big grin he lifted her up and laid her on the bed.

“I want to feel you.” It was a statement, but he asked it as a question.

“Yes. I want you.”

In a trice, he unbuttoned his flap. Her eyes took in his large cock. A dewy bead rested at its tip.

She moaned at the need to have him inside of her. “Yes, Michael.”

He pressed his tip in between her slit and she trembled at the tenderness.

“This might hurt a bit, but the pain won’t last, my love.”

She nodded and closed her eyes to rest her head back.

“Look at me, Astrid. I want you to see me.”

She watched as his face tightened. She could feel his restraint as he slid into her. The cords in his neck were taut.

Her face must have changed at the slight pinch she felt as he delved into her. Exploring.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes. I want you, please.”

A slow rock turned the slight pain into an immense pleasure, and she mewled her appreciation.

“I love your sounds, Astrid.”

She hummed in response.

He rocked back again and pumped back into her. This time with more vigor.

“Yes,” her eyes rolled to the back of her head. She hadn’t expected to have another orgasm with him.

“I want to feel you clench around me, Astrid. And I want to fill you up inside.”

Her limbs were already weak from her first experience, but she wanted him close. She tried to raise up on her elbows when he gently pushed her back down with his mouth.

As his lips explored her body, she kissed his neck, licking and nipping.

One of his hands was on her breast, squeezing it and positioning it for him to suck on her. He looked up at her. “I’ve had so many dreams about you and this nipple, Astrid. I’ve needed to do this for a very long time.”

“Always,” she panted. “You can always do this.”

“Mmm...yes, I think that’s a very good idea.”

There was a coiling in her stomach. All the flutters had banded together in one ever-tightening knot and now they were about to spring loose.

He plunged into her again, and she could feel him everywhere. He was everything she



needed. “Yes.”

She could feel him swelling inside of her.

“Yes!” she shouted.

“Come for me, Astrid.” He managed between breaths. “We’ll come together.”

And then she shattered. Her world had been torn apart and now it was set right. This was the man she loved.

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CHRISTMAS EVE MORNING WAS a blur. It was likely a whirlwind for everyone, but it was especially blurry for Astrid.

Not only had Hope and Isaac returned, but all seven of Hope’s brothers (and each of their wives) had returned home just in time for Christmas Eve. It was a flurry of drama and activity with everyone checking in on Hope.

Astrid finally made time to make her confession to Hope, and she had been forgiven. Astrid had also made a point to tell Hope how much Isaac needed her, so as to erase any doubt Hope might have. It took all day for everyone to visit with Hope, and no one was quite sure what was going on until the couple came down hand in hand for Christmas Eve dinner.

It was a beautiful feeling Astrid had while taking a pre-dinner drink with her beau on her arm. Her brother had Hope, and she had love.

And just when Astrid thought she couldn’t be any happier, Michael clinked his glass and cleared his throat. It was time to share their joy with some of their closest friends. “I have an announcement to make.”