



An Arranged Betrothal with a Beast (Marriages Under Conditions #6)

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Category: Historical

Description: Trapped in her family's debts, Abigail must make a difficult decision, to marry the infamous Beast of Crestwood. A terrifying figure to many members of society, someone a young lady would be afraid to love. Can she trust him?

Miss Abigail Townsend, a graceful and compassionate viscount's daughter, is faced with a daunting prospect: a marriage to the feared Beast of Crestwood Hall. Compelled by her family's precarious financial circumstances, she concedes to the arrangement, steeling herself for a grim future. Yet, upon her arrival at Crestwood Hall, she uncovers a man who starkly deviates from the frightful tales she's been told. Hidden beneath his stern facade and dark history, she discovers a man of nobility, kindness, and deep-rooted loneliness.

Arthur Atwood, the Earl of Crestwood, endures a life overshadowed by his fearsome reputation, as intimidating as the scars that blemish his visage. Condemned to a reclusive existence within the stern walls of Crestwood Hall, his solitary life is disrupted by the sudden presence of Abigail, a woman radiating gentle charm. Brought together by an agreement of necessity, Arthur becomes intrigued by Abigail's courage and warmth, finding unexpected comfort in her presence. Her compassion progressively thaws the ice surrounding his heart, nurturing an undeniable attraction. As they share more moments, their relationship transforms from cool acceptance to mutual admiration, gradually blossoming into a tender love.

However, their journey towards love is fraught with danger. A long-standing enemy from Arthur's past, fueled by deep-seated animosity, embarks on a crusade to dismantle their union by circulating malicious gossip through society's scandal pages. Will the developing bond between Arthur and Abigail withstand this tempest of slanderous murmurs, or will the malign intentions of their concealed adversary prevail?

An Arranged Betrothal with a Beast is a historical romance novel you will love. Full of twists and turns, no cheating, no cliffhangers, and a happily ever after.

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Arthur rolled his eyes. "I care not, Mother. The ton may call me whatever they wish."

His mother shook her head and clicked her tongue, striding from one side of the room to the other. "This is not to be borne, Crestwood! How can you bear to be called such a thing as that."

Lifting one shoulder, Arthur gazed into the flames as the fire licked the sides of the fireplace, the crackling of the firewood beneath the only response he offered his mother. Society could call him what they wished, he did not care. The ton which once thought him the most wonderful, the most handsome and most eligible of gentlemen had now turned their backs upon him.

"This came from Lady Clara, I am sure of it."

At the mention of the lady he had once been betrothed to, Arthur jerked as cold anger ran through him. "No doubt it has. After all, she is one of the few who saw me when I returned home though she was quick to reject me thereafter."

His mother sighed heavily and shook her head. "Whatever are we to do? You are meant to be making your way to London this Season and – "

"I shall be doing no such thing!" Half rising out of his chair, Arthur narrowed his eyes at his mother. "Whatever makes you think that I will set even one foot in London? After the war, I have been more than contented residing here and this is the only place I intend to be. I can give you my word on that."

"And what of Isabella?"

Arthur's retort was kept back as the name of his sister on his mother's lips silenced him. Thus far, he had not given much thought to the requirements of his sister given that he had spent the last two years recovering from his time at war and from the broken engagement. Now, however, he realized there was a slight difficulty there. His sister was of marriageable age, which meant she was now due to make her come out. That would require a trip to London.

"You can take her." With a sniff, he let his gaze return to the fire rather than look into his mother's face. "There is no requirement for me to attend."

"Aside from your duty, as her elder brother and as the Earl of Crestwood!" There was no anger in his mother's voice but rather a quietness which made Arthur's jaw clench. She was speaking the truth, he knew, but all the same, he did not want to hear a word of it. "You are quite correct that I could take Isabella to London to make her debut but you know as well as I that it would not be right. You are the one who ought to be with her, as well as myself. Since your father passed away, that duty passed to you. Besides which, do you really believe that with your removal from society, with your hiding away, the ton will not ask her a great many questions about you? Their focus and their interest will be solely upon you and your absence rather than upon your sister and her eligibility."

"If I am present, Mother, their attention will be solely upon me." Shaking his head, Arthur threw his mother a glance as she came to sit down beside him. "There is no good in this idea. You should take Isabella to London. Leave me here."

"Oh, Arthur."

It was unusual enough for his mother to call him by his first name and Arthur's heart twisted as she sat down next to him, starting when she took his hand in hers.

"Must you always remain in fear?"

The quiet words whispered around his heart and Arthur scowled, looking back into the flames of the fire rather than into his mother's face. She did not and could not know what his life was at present, could not imagine the many memories which flung themselves through his thoughts whenever he had even a moment of peace, robbing him of it almost at once. The war had been brutal and terrible and yet, his mind would not release him from it. The explosion which had knocked him to the ground, placed him in the infirmary and torn one side of his face and body with agony was repeated in his mind almost every day. He had believed that Crestwood hall, his home and his fortress, might protect him, might help him to recover but it had done nothing of the sort. Instead, it had become his prison.

Should I return to London?

"You cannot spend the rest of your days here in Crestwood Hall," his mother said softly as though she knew precisely what he was thinking. "It will do you no good."

"Please, Mother." Arthur rubbed one hand over his eyes, his fingers running across the scars which ran across his cheek. Thankfully, there had been no injury to his eyes, nothing which had taken his sight from him – though that did also mean he could see his own reflection quite clearly. How often had he winced when he had looked in the mirror? How often had he jerked his head away, hiding the sight from himself?

Could you imagine what the ton would think of you ?

"You are also the Earl."

Arthur frowned, looking back at his mother. "I am aware of my title, Mother."

"Then you are also aware, I am sure, that you are required to produce the heir," she said, all the more gently. "It is something which is expected."

The tension that gripped Arthur's jaw tightened to such a degree, it required him several moments to loosen his muscles sufficiently in order to articulate his words. "That is not one of my priorities at the moment. I must recover."

"No, Crestwood."

A little surprised at the sharp, quick response from his mother, Arthur looked across at her, seeing her shake her head.

"You have no need to recover any more than you have done already," his mother continued, firmly. "The injuries to your face and to your body have long healed." Holding up one hand, palm out towards him as he began to speak, her clear blue eyes drove back into his. "I am not saying that I understand the pain and the torment with your own mind, Crestwood, but I am stating, quite clearly, that staying here in this house with only myself and your sister for company will do you no good. Thinking of Lady Clara and what she did to you will continually burn in your heart. Linger here will only permit the shadows to wrap around your shoulders all the more. It will encourage the darkness to cling to you all the more tightly. Trust me, my dear son. I care about you and I care also about Isabella and you both deserve a happy future."

"I am sure I can be perfectly contented here in Crestwood Hall." Hearing the slight waver in his voice, Arthur cleared his throat, angry at his own lack of control. "I can be happy."

"Can you?" With a slightly narrowed look, his mother squeezed his hand, only for Arthur to pull it away. "Can you truly be happy being known as the Beast of Crestwood Hall? Can you be contented with the ton believing that you are nothing but a brute? That the war has changed you so greatly, you can no longer find any happiness within society?"

Arthur closed his eyes and let out a long breath. What his mother was saying made

sense and yet, he did not want to accept it. Not even for a moment. This was his security and even though he hated the whispering darkness, the lingering shadows, he could not think of a future where he stepped back into society. That would mean revealing his face to them all, to show them the red scars which still laced his cheeks, and brought an ugliness to his once handsome features. They would see a gentleman cowed and broken by the vileness of war, rejected by his betrothed and now burdened by all he had endured. He was no longer the happy, carefree, contented gentleman who had once been a part of society. Instead, he barely recognized himself.

“Please, Crestwood.” Leaning forward, his mother set one hand over his though Arthur had to fight against himself not to withdraw it. “At the very least, tell me you will consider it.”

“I will.” The response came quickly and Arthur caught the look of relief which spread across his mother’s face. Whether he had said it because he genuinely would do so or if it had come merely because of his desire to have his mother drop the conversation at hand, Arthur did not know but all the same, he felt a great deal of relief when Lady Crestwood rose to her feet.

“Thank you, my son.” Reaching out, his mother settled her hand against his cheek – the one which bore all the scars – and Arthur instinctively jerked away. His mother, her gaze soft, bent low and looked into his eyes, keeping her hand firmly where it was. “There is nothing wrong with these scars, Crestwood,” she said, softly. “You have borne a great deal of pain, carried an impossibly heavy burden and have yet endured. These marks are only an outward mark of the weight you continue to carry, I know, but they are not something to be ashamed of. Hold your head high, my son, for you have done more than many a gentleman might and have prevailed through it all.”

With a smile, she rose and walked away, leaving Arthur to look back into the fire and letting the silence begin to curl around him again. Despite his desire to forget all that

his mother had said, it would not leave him and even though he had no wish to think on making his way to London, the idea settled so heavily upon his mind, he could not think of anything else.

Was it time for the Beast of Crestwood to return to society?

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“I think it is a marvelous idea!”

Arthur rolled his eyes. “You do not have to show so much enthusiasm, my friend. And Isabella does not require so much encouragement!”

“I already think it is a wonderful idea,” his sister retorted, throwing Arthur a slightly narrowed look which then blossomed into a smile. “You know very well that I am eager to go to London.”

“You must make your debut,” Captain Harrington murmured, to which Isabella nodded though Arthur did not miss the way her gaze lingered on the Captain’s for a short while. “It is the requirement of every young lady.”

Arthur silently wondered whether he could suggest that Isabella marry Captain Harrington only to shake his head to himself. After all, Captain Harrington was an excellent fellow, having fought alongside Arthur himself, and they had retained a good friendship in the years thereafter but, at the same time, Arthur knew it would not be fair of him to make that idea known. After all, his sister deserved the opportunity to go to London to make her debut, just as every other young lady of the ton did. He could not deny her that simply for his own benefit.

“I am aware you have very little desire to go to London, brother.”

Arthur lifted his eyes to Isabella’s. “That is not something worth considering, my dear. You are my responsibility and your debut is clearly important to you.”

“It is.” A flash of excitement flew into Isabella’s eyes. “I do so very much want to see

London and to be a part of the balls and soirees that are enjoyed there! I think it would be a most enjoyable experience.”

Arthur nodded slowly, feeling his own sense of dread begin to curl up within him as he looked into his sister’s eyes and saw the anticipation in her expression. He felt nothing but the opposite. “I am sure that for you, it will be quite wonderful.”

“Whereas for you, it will be nothing but a burden.” Isabella’s expression softened. “I know what society calls you and I am sorry for it.”

Noting the way that Captain Harrington’s eyes roved from Isabella back towards him, Arthur let out a huff of breath. “I choose to ignore such things.”

“Why?” Lord Harrington asked, looking to Isabella again. “What is being said?”

Scowling, Arthur flung one hand up towards his scarred face. “It is said that I am the Beast of Crestwood Hall,” he stated, as matter of factly as he could. “I once made my way through society without a care in the world, whereas now I have retreated and hidden myself away. No doubt someone has either seen my face as it is now or has listened to Lady Clara and decided that yes, this is what I should now be known as.”

“Though it is quite ridiculous, is it not?” Isabella asked, tossing her head so that her light brown curls bounced. “I have never heard anything so foolish. My brother is no beast!”

“I would quite agree.” With a frown pulling at his eyebrows, Captain Harrington nodded in Arthur’s direction. “I do hope you will not permit these rumours to stand? After all, such nonsense ought to be treated as such! You should certainly return to London and prove to them all that you are no beast! After all, it is not as though the war has changed your character.”

Lines ripped across Arthur's forehead. "Has it not?"

Silence grew between the three of them but much to Arthur's surprise, there came a small smile to the Captain's face, one that spoke of sympathy and understanding.

"Certainly, it has changed us as men and for you, it also has changed your appearance but that does not mean that the kindness you showed me, the consideration to your fellow soldiers and your sense of responsibility and duty has altered. Indeed, I think those qualities remain within you. To my mind, Lady Clara failed to see that, failed to give even a moment of consideration to it. She looked only on the outward appearance and thought solely of herself. There is no shame in bearing the scars you do. Verily, it is the shame of Lady Clara, as well as society at large, that their disdain for you lingers."

The heavy frown on Arthur's forehead began to fade as he looked back at his friend, considering. The Captain and he had shared many an adventure and dark times and while he valued his friendship a great deal, there were still things he had not told him about. He had not spoken of his dark memories, of his fear of returning to London and what might be said of him there.

Perhaps I should.

"I do not want to place any burden on your shoulders, brother." With a smile in his direction, Isabella rose to her feet, walked across the room and, opening a drawer, took out a set of cards. "Now, shall we play some whist?"

"A capital idea!"

Again, Arthur noticed, Isabella's smile lingered – as did her gaze – on the Captain's face though he himself could not tell what the Captain thought of Isabella's company. They had grown to know one another very well over the last two years for the

Captain lived nearby and had, initially, visited to make certain Arthur's recovery was continuing but, thereafter, had come as both a friend of Arthur's and a friend of the family. Arthur was not certain what the man felt as regards Isabella for the Captain had never once spoken of any affection for her, but might there be something there? Something that he himself had never before seen?

Though he bears no title, said a small voice within him. He is not a suitable match for Isabella in that regard.

A scowl pulled at his features as he discarded that thought almost at once. The truth was, he had no consideration when it came to titles and the like. The war had taught him that there was no such thing as rank or status, not when it came to fighting. He had been just one of the many men on the battlefield and it had not mattered in the least that he was an Earl. Would he truly push someone such as the Captain aside, taking him out of his considerations simply because he bore no title? After everything they had endured together, Arthur knew he would do no such thing. After all, the Captain had proven his character time and again and it was that which Arthur considered to be of the greatest importance.

Though again, I cannot forbid Isabella to go to London and experience society for herself, simply because I believe the Captain and she might make an excellent match, he thought to himself, rubbing one hand over his chin. Mayhap, in going to London, she will realise just how exceptional a gentleman Captain Harrington is.

"Brother?"

Arthur looked up, seeing his sister lifting an eyebrow in his direction, a smile dancing across her face. "Yes?"

"Do you wish to play whist with us?"

Nodding, Arthur pushed himself out of his chair and made his way across the room. “Yes, I do. And, Isabella?” Waiting until his sister’s blue eyes looked up at him, Arthur took in a deep breath and forced a smile. “I have determined that we shall go to London this Season.”

The words were spoken. The decision was made. Isabella’s reaction was one of sheer delight, practically throwing herself upon him as she let out a squeal of excitement and though Arthur tried to smile, he was certain his enthusiasm was obvious in its absence.

“You will join us also, Captain Harrington?” he asked, seeing his friend’s eyebrows lift in surprise. “You would be very welcome.”

“I shall think on it,” came the reply, as Arthur nodded quietly. “Thank you, Crestwood. I am certain that whether I am present or not, you will have an excellent Season.”

Arthur grimaced and saw his friend smile rather ruefully. Both gentlemen knew precisely what was waiting for Arthur the moment he set foot back into society but he had already made his decision and he would not turn from it.

The Beast of Crestwood Hall would return to London – and all of society would whisper about it.

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“Might I ask you something, my friend?”

Arthur looked up before returning his gaze to the billiards table. “If this is an attempt to distract me from this game of billiards, then I am afraid you will find yourself failing entirely.”

Captain Harrington chuckled and leaned against the side of the table. “It is not, though it is a good suggestion for the next time I wish to win at billiards!”

Snorting, Arthur took his shot and, satisfied, stepped back. “Then what is it?”

“Might I ask what your thoughts are – if you have any – on your own present circumstances?”

Frowning, Arthur tilted his head a little. “What do you mean by my circumstances?”

“Your circumstances,” the Captain repeated. “Now that you have agreed to go to London, might you be thinking of your own present unmarried state?”

A coldness immediately shot through Arthur and he scowled. “No, indeed I have not. In fact, it is near enough the last thing I have thought of!”

“Is that so?” Sounding entirely unconvinced, the Captain took his turn and then, with a chuckle, grinned broadly at Arthur. “I believe I have scored a carom.”

“I believe you have.” With a roll of his eyes and a bolt of laughter along with it, Arthur did not pick up his cue to take his turn but rather thought to continue on the conversation with his friend. “Why should you think to ask me about my own state? Have you been speaking with my mother – or, mayhap I should ask if she has been speaking with you ?”

The Captain’s grin slowly faded. “No, neither such thing has happened. The truth is, I merely wondered if you, as the Earl of Crestwood, might consider finding yourself a bride since you will be in London and since such a thing is required for a gentleman of your standing.”

Arthur shook his head. “I do not think so. I have no desire for a bride, not at this

moment, certainly. Not after Lady Clara's rejection of me."

"But would it not be wise?" The Captain frowned as Arthur shook his head. "It is taking a great deal of effort for you to make your way to London, I can see that as much as anyone. Why would you not, then, want to use the opportunity to find a bride for yourself as well as supporting Isabella in her debut? "

A little frustrated, Arthur flung one hand up towards his face. "Have you seen my face of late?" he asked, his tone laced with sarcasm. "It is not as though the ladies of London society will be eager for my company! Lady Clara has certainly warned them enough about my appearance for them to already be terrified of me!"

Captain Harrington hesitated but his gaze remained steady. "I understand that and I am very aware that I do not understand all that society requires of one but at the same measure, I do know that there is a degree to which certain things can be arranged? Is that not the situation here? Surely there would be someone who might be willing to enter into that sort of marriage?"

The quick, harsh reply which jumped to Arthur's lips was held back by sheer force of will and though Arthur was loathe to admit it, his friend did have a fair point in what he had expressed.

"I do not mean to question you or cause you any distress."

"I understand that." Arthur managed to smile though it did not linger long. "I suppose I must wonder who, if anyone, would agree to a connection with someone who has the appearance of a beast and who wishes only to retreat back into the confines of their house rather than remain in London."

"You are not a beast and nor do you have the appearance of one," the Captain replied, firmly. "You bear the scars of war, that is all."

Arthur's smile diminished quickly. "I highly doubt that those in the ton would think so."

"Mayhap," the Captain agreed, quietly. "But it would be a good thought to find a young lady, if you could, would it not?"

Sighing, Arthur spread his arms wide. "Mayhap, I do not know. I will think on it, at least."

The Captain nodded and they returned to their game of billiards, though Arthur's thoughts did not sit heavily on the game as they had done before. Instead, he found himself frustrated and confused, thinking on about their upcoming visit to London and silently wondering if what Captain Harrington had suggested would be the right thing for him to do.

And if it was, what sort of young lady would be willing to marry someone such as he?

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“And so we are in London.”

“We are.” Abigail offered her mother a smile though Lady Townsend did not return it. A little concerned, Abigail shared a glance with her younger sister Charlotte, though her sister and she quickly returned their attention to their embroidery rather than speaking any further with their mother. Though Abigail would dearly have liked to ask what it was that brought her mother to such a silence, she chose to keep those questions back rather than offer them to her. If Lady Townsend wished to speak of her present thoughts, then she would do.

Though I am a little troubled by what I overheard on my way to the drawing room. Biting her lip, Abigail kept her eyes cast down to the needle and thread in her hand rather than looking elsewhere, recalling the quiet conversation she had caught when walking through the hallway. Her father had been saying something about his debts and her mother had sounded very concerned, though Abigail had hurried her steps so as not to overhear more. It was not her place and, besides which, should there be anything of importance, she was certain her mother or father would speak to her of it themselves, in their own good time.

All the same, she was rather worried about what these financial difficulties – whatever they were – would mean for Charlotte and for herself. This was Charlotte’s debut year while she was still waiting to find herself a suitable suitor, though she did not think that Charlotte would have any difficulty in finding herself a match. She was the prettier out of the two of them, with long, dark hair and vivid green eyes, a smooth complexion and rosebud lips. Abigail, on the other hand, had only dull brown hair, eyes which only sparkled when she was in the very best of moods and skin which was much too inclined to flush red at even the smallest embarrassment.

Perhaps that was one of the reasons she had not yet managed to secure a husband, though it also, no doubt, came from the fact that her dowry was a good deal smaller than the other ladies in London.

“Your debut ball went very well last evening, Charlotte.” Lady Townsend sat down and putting her hands in her lap, clasping them together, smiled at Charlotte though she did not look once towards Abigail. “I have had five lots of flowers delivered this morning! I have no doubt you will attract many a gentleman caller.”

“That is wonderful,” Abigail remarked, truly pleased for her sister. “I hope one of them will prove worthy of you!”

Lady Townsend smiled at this as Charlotte blushed, though Abigail only looked back to her embroidery, recalling how few she had received after her debut ball. She was quiet and rather retiring, whereas Charlotte was a good deal more amiable, able to speak to anyone who greeted her without so much as a hint of a blush in her cheeks. There were times that Abigail envied her, envied the confidence which she could pull around herself whilst she, by comparison, struggled to think of what to say in any given conversation.

“My lady?”

Abigail looked up as the butler came in, handing a note to Lady Townsend before asking if there was anything else she required. With a wave of her hand, Lady Townsend dismissed the butler before opening her letter, sinking down into the chair opposite Abigail as she read it. Abigail continued on with her embroidery, only for her eyes to flare in surprise as her mother let out a loud exclamation.

“What is it, Mama?” Charlotte asked, before Abigail could ask the same. “Is there something wrong?”

“The Beast of Crestwood Hall has returned to London!”

“The Beast of Crestwood Hall?” Abigail repeated, sharing a puzzled look with her sister. “Who is that?”

Lady Townsend’s eyes roved over the letter in her hand one more time before she finally answered, giving Abigail a long look before she spoke as though she was thinking something that Abigail could not quite yet understand.

“The Earl of Crestwood,” she began to explain, “is a gentleman who has been absent from society for the last few Seasons. Do you remember him, Abigail? He was tall, with broad shoulders and a very fine appearance. He was very distinguished and with a good deal of wealth also! Many a young lady wished to push herself towards him though none succeeded save for one. But that engagement came to a swift end!”

“And why is that?”

Lady Townsend set the letter down in her lap. “Because the gentleman decided to go to war. It was foolish of him, given that he bore the title and had a responsibility not only to that but also to his family, but he was evidently quite determined! Thus, he went to war and though he returned to England, he did not come back to London. The engagement came to an end once Lord Crestwood had returned.”

Abigail looked again to her sister, though Charlotte showed no understanding in her expression whatsoever.

“Why did it come to an end?”

“Because Lady Clara stated that he was so disfigured, so altered, that she could not bring herself to marry him!”

A hand squeezed Abigail's heart, though whether it was from sadness, sympathy or fear, she could not tell. "Is that why he has not returned to society, Mama? "

"Yes, because he is naught but a beast now!" Lady Townsend exclaimed, throwing up one hand. "From what Lady Clara told society, his face has been quite ravaged by the dangers that come with war and his spirit, it is said, was quite broken. Instead of coming back to London, he has lived the last two years within Crestwood Hall, seeing no-one save for his mother and sister. He has never shown an interest in returning to society and even those near to his estate have not been invited in. You must understand, Abigail, that there are those who know a good deal more than I and they have said that he is a gentleman so unlike his former self that he is barely recognisable."

Abigail searched her mind to try and recall whether or not she had been introduced to the Earl of Crestwood during her very first Season but she could not immediately recall him. After all, there had been a good many introductions over the Seasons and none had brought her any sort of happiness as regarded making a match for herself. Lady Clara, however, she did recall and that memory made her frown.

"From what I remember, Lady Clara was not the most... considerate of young ladies."

Lady Townsend shot her a quick look but then, after opening her mouth to perhaps disagree with Abigail wholeheartedly, sighed and let her shoulders drop. "No, she is not," she admitted, quietly, "though do not let anyone outside this room know I have said such a thing! If you recall, Lady Clara is the daughter to the Earl of Templeton and thus, a very prestigious young lady and very wealthy also. It would not be wise to let any of the ton know of our true thoughts as regards her."

"I doubt we will be in the same sphere, Mama," Abigail replied, reassuring her. "Lady Clara is somewhat aloof and does not involve herself with the daughters of

Viscounts.” Especially not poor ones.

“That does sound like a great pity for the Beast of Crestwood Hall – I mean, the Earl of Crestwood.” Charlotte, now looking a little embarrassed, dropped her gaze to her embroidery. “To not only have been injured in the war but also to have had his betrothed break their engagement.”

“I am sure it was very painful,” Lady Townsend agreed, softly. “Though now he has come back to London and mayhap will be eager to seek out a bride for himself.”

“Though what young lady would wish to marry such a fellow?” Charlotte asked, as the very same question lodged itself in Abigail’s mind. “After all, it does not sound as though he is particularly amiable, if he has spent the last few years at home. And indeed, though I do not say it is his fault or that he ought to be blamed for such injuries, it seems to me as though the young lady who consents to marry him will have to accept that there will always be a gossip, whispers and the like whenever he sets foot into society. The ton will always speak of his appearance and even his family, should he have any, will be known by who their father is.”

Abigail’s stomach twisted as she considered this, feeling herself sympathetic for the gentleman. “That is a great pity but I believe that you are quite right, Charlotte.”

“Indeed.”

The strange, softness of her mother’s voice had Abigail looking back at her with concern but her mother did not return her gaze. Instead, she nodded to herself and looked away from Abigail for a few minutes, leaving both Abigail and Charlotte to wonder what it was their mother was considering. Again, neither of them dared question it but there was certainly something that Lady Townsend was considering, given the way she paid very little heed to the conversation which had passed between them for the last few minutes.

“I have something.”

Without warning, Lady Townsend rose from her chair and hurried up towards the door.

“Mama?” Abigail asked, half rising out of her chair. “Whatever is the matter?”

Lady Townsend shook her head. “Nothing, nothing at all,” she replied, turning to smile at them both though her gaze quickly slid away from Abigail. “I must speak with your father at once.”

Abigail blinked then looked to Charlotte who, in turn, frowned and then shrugged her shoulders before returning to her embroidery. There was something unsettling in the way their mother had hurried away so quickly when they had been talking about Lord Crestwood and his prospects as regarded marriage. What was it her mother was thinking? And why had she had to speak to their father with such urgency? Swallowing hard, Abigail tried to rid herself of the knot in her stomach but it would not untwist. With a sigh, she picked up her embroidery again and tried to concentrate on what she was doing but the threads only tangled themselves together.

Frowning, Abigail sat back and let her embroidery fall to her lap. Whatever it was, her mother would soon make it plain, Abigail was sure. She only had to wait.

“Good evening, Miss Townsend.”

Abigail smiled and dropped into a curtsy, under the watchful eye of her mother. “Good evening, Lady Chesterton.”

The lady laughed and then, the moment Abigail rose, grasped her arm and fell into

step with her, pulling her away from Lady Townsend without so much as a glance towards her. “We have finished our formalities, have we not? Now we can simply be contented in each other’s company. I am so very glad to see you again!”

“And I you,” Abigail replied, happy now to see her friend again. “It has been so many months since we last saw each other! Tell me how you are. Is your marriage all you had hoped for?”

“It is.” There was a warm glow in Lady Chesterton’s voice and Abigail tried to quieten the whisper of envy which immediately grew in her heart. “It is more than I had imagined could be, in fact! Lord Chesterton is the most wonderful gentleman and he loves me dearly.”

Abigail smiled. “As you love him,” she said softly, as her friend nodded. “I am very happy for you.”

“I thank you. Though I am quite determined that this Season, given that I am now here as a married lady and do not require a chaperone, to give you as much of my attention as I can so that you might also find yourself a husband.”

There came a protest to Abigail’s lips but she did not speak it. “You are very kind, Harriet. However, I fear that might be rather difficult given that I have spent the last few Seasons attempting to do the very same and have found no gentleman to so much as glance in my direction.”

Lady Chesterton clicked her tongue and gave Abigail a somewhat sharp look. “You must not give up hope! You know as well as I that your father has not been the most considerate of gentlemen, has he? He has not done all he could to aid you in your search, though your mother has been most diligent.”

Abigail let out a slow breath and chose not to ignore her friend’s remarks but rather

Speak as honestly as she could. After all, Lady Chesterton had become a dear friend of hers over the last few years and saw things just as they stood. What reason would there be to hide the truth from her?

“My mother’s attentions will be focused on Charlotte,” she said, plainly. “I believe that my mother and father have both given up on me. Charlotte has made her debut and has already received more interest from the gentlemen of London than I have ever managed. She had three gentlemen callers yesterday afternoon and I myself had none.”

“That does not mean that you are somehow inadequate,” Lady Chesterton told her, firmly. “Do not let yourself think such a thing. You are different from your sister in so many ways but you do not lack in beauty. Your quiet spirit, your kind heart – it all is your beauty, Abigail. And all it requires is a specific gentleman to see that.”

Silently wondering which gentleman that might be, Abigail offered her friend a small smile and then looked away as they wandered through the ballroom. Much to her surprise, a quietness began to grow as they continued their steps, until all that could be heard was the music of the orchestra and a few quiet murmurings.

“Whatever is the matter?” Keeping her own tone low, Abigail looked around only for Lady Chesterton to grasp her arm tightly.

“Look.”

Abigail turned her head back around again, only to spy a gentleman walking in through the crowd, a young lady on his arm. The young lady looking straight ahead, her eyes a little wide and the smile on her face a little lackluster. There was clearly a tension there, an uncertainty which came from the sheer number of eyes placed upon her. Abigail’s attention was then drawn to an older lady who walked a little behind the first gentleman and lady, though she was walking arm in arm with a gentleman

dressed in regimentals.

Was that who the guests were staring at?

“I do not understand,” she murmured, as Lady Chesterton put one hand to her heart.
“What is the matter?”

“It is the Beast of Crestwood Hall,” came the whispered reply. “Do you not see him?
I had heard that he was to be coming back to London but I did not believe it!”

A little surprised, Abigail looked back at the first gentleman, only for him to turn his head and, entirely unexpectedly, looking back at her directly. Her breath stopped, her face heating from the embarrassment of being caught staring. She could not look away, taking him in, seeing the red lines which twisted up one side of his face, marring his cheek and licking close to his eyebrow. Dark hair swung across his forehead, touching the very top of his scars as though to hide them from view and piercing blue eyes were filled with nothing but ice.

Abigail turned her head away.

“He does look a little like a beast, does he not?” Lady Chesterton whispered, as Abigail moved away directly, turning her back on the gentleman and bringing Lady Chesterton with her. “He was practically snarling!”

“He was scowling, that is all.” Having no desire to encourage the whispers about the gentleman, Abigail kept her gaze set straight ahead rather than looking back at him.
“I do not think he looks like a beast at all.”

Lady Chesterton looked over her shoulder only to then gasp and come to a complete stop, dragging Abigail back with her. “Your father is speaking with him!”

“My father?” Unable to help herself, Abigail turned her head and saw that Lady Chesterton was quite right. Her father, the Viscount Townsend, was busy in deep conversation with the Earl of Crestwood, though the Earl of Crestwood had not stopped scowling as yet. Her heart clattered with a sudden fear and she turned her head away again, squeezing her eyes closed as fright crept into every part of her being.

“What do you think he is doing?” Lady Chesterton asked, as Abigail opened her eyes. “He seems to be very eager to be acquainted with him. He is the first person who has gone to the Earl of Crestwood so as to be introduced. Perhaps he feels the same as you do and has a lot more sympathy for the gentleman than I do.”

“I do not think it is that,” Abigail replied, softly, her voice trembling a little. “I have a great and terrible fear that my father is about to try and build a connection between the Earl of Crestwood and our family.”

Lady Chesterton turned and grasped both of Abigail’s hands, looking back into her face with wide eyes. “What can you mean?”

Abigail closed her eyes again as tears began to prick them. “I am unwed,” she said, so quietly that she could barely hear herself speak over the orchestra and the growing conversation of the crowd around her. “My father does not want me to be a spinster, I am sure. So what better idea might he have than to push me in the direction of the Earl of Crestwood?”

Lady Chesterton’s eyes widened and her mouth opened and then closed again, as if she were trying to find some way to refute the idea but could not. Abigail swallowed hard and blinked furiously, only for her friend to shake her head.

“I am sure such a thing will not happen,” she said, firmly. “It is only a thought and even if it were to take place, it would require an agreement from the Earl of

Crestwood. He is clearly here with his sister rather than for himself. I am sure you need not worry.”

The confidence in her voice did nothing to reassure Abigail and try as she might, she could not shake the fear from within herself for what else might her father be doing in seeking out the Earl of Crestwood so urgently?

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:15 am

“I thought the ball went very well indeed.”

Arthur grimaced. “I am sure you did, Mother.”

“You did not have too many people staring at you, did you?”

Looking at her for a long moment, Arthur waited until his mother had the decency to blush before he answered. “I had almost everyone staring at me, as you well know,” he said, quietly. “But at least Isabella had a good many gentlemen seeking out her company. I think she danced every dance save for the waltz.”

Lady Crestwood smiled, clearly satisfied with the progress her daughter had made. “Yes, she did. It was wonderful to see.”

Arthur chose to say nothing further, picking up his brandy and wandering to the window of the drawing room. Last evening had been a success in terms of Isabella’s introduction to society, having already been introduced to the King. What he had not been too pleased about, however, was the sheer number of gentlemen and ladies who had simply stared at him and thereafter, whispered about him behind their hands. He had felt the heaviness of their gaze and had hated the intensity of their attention upon him. It had done nothing other than mortify him all the more, to remind him that his scars were ever present and, for the ton, something worthy of gossip.

And there had been that very strange conversation with the Viscount Townsend who had come up to speak with him almost the moment he had arrived in the ballroom. The gentleman had been urgent in his desire to introduce his family to Arthur and though he had done so at a later hour of the ballroom, Arthur had not understood the

gentleman's reasons for doing so – unless it was that he simply wanted to be able to spread a little more gossip than others in the ton.

“There were many eligible ladies present last evening.”

Arthur stiffened, turning his head to glance at his mother before returning his attention to the window. “I have no interest in engaging myself to anyone, Mother.” His jaw tightened. “Besides, Lady Clara was present last evening.”

“Was she?”

The shock in his mother's voice had Arthur wincing. He had felt the very same overwhelming surprise when he had first set eyes on her and, in truth, had felt his breath stolen away from him. Instead of feeling nothing, as he had hoped, there had been dark and heavy anger which had settled low in his stomach and had then sent a heat through each of his limbs. She had looked at him, yes, but had quickly turned her head away as though she had no interest in his presence whatsoever .

“She did not greet you?”

“No, Mother, she did not.” His voice a little quieter now, Arthur kept his gaze fixed to the window and the view outside rather than look at her. “There was no connection between us. None whatsoever.”

“I am sorry for that.” Lady Crestwood came towards him and put one hand on his arm, though Arthur jerked back, having no desire for her comfort. “Come now, my son. Do not allow her presence or her disregard to affect you.”

Arthur closed his eyes, blowing out a long breath. “I cannot help but be affected when the lady I was betrothed to ignores me entirely.”

There came a short silence where Lady Crestwood sighed, her shoulders rounding. “That behaviour reflects poorly on Lady Clara rather than on you,” she said softly, though Arthur struggled to accept those words to be true. “Now, I must go to see Isabella and rouse her from her bed! It is much too late for her to still be resting and there will be gentlemen callers very soon, I am sure!”

With a nod, Arthur waited as her footsteps led her across the room, hearing the door open and then close behind her. Once he was alone, he dropped his head forward with a groan, his shoulders rounding and his forehead pressed lightly against the glass pane of the window. This was worse than he had ever imagined it. To be under so much scrutiny was difficult indeed and to have Lady Clara ignore him had made things all the more difficult. Quite what he had expected from her, Arthur was uncertain but it certainly had not been for her to pretend he was not even present!

A scratch came to the door and Arthur turned, calling for the servant to enter. The butler came in at once, a calling card on a tray and, a little surprised, Arthur took it. It was a little earlier for calls and Isabella was not even dressed as yet!

Except it was not someone for Isabella. It was Viscount Townsend, come to call on him.

“He is here now?”

“Yes, my lord.” The butler gestured to the door. “What shall I say to him?”

A little intrigued as to why the gentleman would be calling on him so early, Arthur nodded to himself, turning the card over in his hand. “Tell him he may join me here.”

“At once, my lord. Shall I send for some refreshments?”

“Yes.”

Turning back to the window, Arthur took in a long, slow breath, a little surprised at how unsettled he felt. It was not the first time someone would call on him, he was certain, but there was something about this seeming so urgent that made him a little uneasy. Was the gentleman coming so he might have a closer look at Arthur's face? Did he want to spread as many whispers though London as he could? Was he eager to feed his own reputation as a gossip monger here in town?

All of his questions were stolen away as the door opened again and the butler announced Viscount Townsend. Taking in a deep breath, Arthur steadied himself and turned around, just to see Lord Townsend dropping into a bow.

"Forgive the early call, Lord Crestwood," the man said, before Arthur had a chance even to greet him. "I have something of great urgency I wished to discuss with you and given that your name runs all through London at present, I thought it best to come and speak with you just as soon as I was able."

"Indeed." Arthur gestured for the fellow to sit down though he himself chose to remain standing. He had no interest in talking with this gentleman, he decided, given that whatever they spoke of would soon become gossip for the ton to chew upon. "What is it that you wish to speak of?"

Lord Townsend blinked and began to stammer, perhaps a little taken aback by Arthur's forwardness but Arthur merely held the man's gaze and waited. He was not about to fall into banal conversation before Lord Townsend finally spoke of whatever it was he had come here for. It was best for it all to be dealt with first.

"I – I come to you with a proposal."

Arthur lifted his eyebrows. "A proposal?"

"Yes, an agreement, if you will," Lord Townsend continued, quickly. "Let me be

blunt, Lord Crestwood. I... I am a gentleman with debts.”

A heavy frown immediately pulled at Arthur’s forehead. “I do not know why that is any concern of mine.”

“Because, I thought you might be able to solve a difficulty of mine while I solve a difficulty of yours.”

A little confused now, Arthur lifted his chin, notched it up and sniffed, barely aware of the maid who scurried in with the tray of refreshments to set between them. “Given that we are barely acquainted, I do not think there is anything that I require from you, good sir.”

“That is not true, however!” Lord Townsend pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed it against his forehead, his round face a little flushed. “My wife spoke with your mother last evening and she made it very clear that you were in London to seek a bride for yourself. My daughter is – ”

Fire burned in Arthur’s chest. “My mother has no business saying anything of the sort! I have no intention of finding a bride this Season. ”

“Oh.” Lord Townsend looked a little nonplussed, looking down at his hands for some moments before, taking a breath, getting to his feet and looking back at Arthur directly – and with more courage than Arthur had anticipated.

“You require a bride, however,” the man said, firmly. “It is clear that you will require an heir given that you bear the title and I understand that responsibility, truly, I do.”

“I hardly think – ”

“I have a daughter,” the Viscount continued, before Arthur could finish his sentence.

“She is of marriageable age and yet I have not been able to secure her a husband these last few Seasons. It is not because there is anything wrong as regards her character for indeed, she is quiet and soft spoken and very gentle indeed – but I believe it is these qualities which have held her back from some in society. Gentlemen find her too quiet, find her dull and banal when, I can assure you, she is quite the opposite!”

Arthur could barely believe what he was hearing. Here was this gentleman, hardly known to him, offering up his daughter as Arthur’s bride when they were not even properly acquainted. “I think you are a little presumptuous, Lord Townsend.”

The gentleman did not deny it. Rather, he spread his arms out wide and then let them fall to his sides. “I will not pretend that I want the best for my daughter and her marrying a gentleman of high title and good standing is the very best.”

“Though she would, no doubt, be the cause of many whispers and have to bear a great deal of gossip,” Arthur reminded him, though the gentleman only shrugged. “You would have no difficulty with that?” Wait a moment. Am I beginning to consider this idea as viable?

“I would not. As I have said, I want what is best for my daughter and given that her other alternative is to become a spinster, I think becoming your bride would be a good deal better for her.”

Arthur narrowed his eyes. “And in exchange, you wish for me to do what, exactly?”

Lord Townsend looked away. “As I said,” he replied, his voice a little quieter now, “I am a gentleman with many debts.”

“Debts you wish me to remove from you the moment I marry your daughter.”

When Lord Townsend did not answer but continued to look away, Arthur scowled darkly, his brows furrowing. “And might I ask if your daughter is aware of this? If she knows what you intend for her?”

“She knows nothing,” came the reply. “But she will do as she is told. After all, it is not as though she has any other choice. ”

Arthur closed his eyes. There was so much he felt, so much he wanted to say and yet the words stuck in his throat as he shook his head.

“You do not think it is a good suggestion.”

“I do not.” Arthur opened his eyes and looked back at Lord Townsend. “In fact, I – ”

“Isabella is... oh! Forgive me, I did not know we had company!”

Gritting his teeth in frustration for he had just now been about to rid himself of Lord Townsend’s company, Arthur was forced then to make the introductions. “Mother, might I present the Viscount Townsend. Viscount Townsend, my mother, Lady Crestwood.”

“How pleasant to see that my son has company,” Lady Crestwood smiled, though Arthur’s gut twisted at the way Lord Townsend grinned back in return. “What is it that you have come to speak with him about, might I ask?”

Arthur had expected Lord Townsend to pause and to hold back the truth but, much to his surprise, the gentleman simply spoke the truth without even a flicker of hesitation.

“I thought to come and propose an agreement between your son and myself, Lady Crestwood. I have debts which I am struggling to clear and your son requires a wife. I have a daughter who is the kindest of creatures and though quiet, would be an

excellent bride for your son. I was hoping that we might make an arrangement whereby he would marry my daughter in – ”

“In exchange for his paying of your debts.” There was a slight hardness to Lady Crestwood’s tone and Arthur looked at her a little surprised, wondering if his mother was a little irritated with Lord Townsend’s forward manner or if she found the whole idea unsettling. “Well, that is certainly something for Lord Crestwood to consider.”

Arthur’s eyes flew to his mother’s and Lady Crestwood offered him a small smile, though there was still a flicker of what he took to be concern in her eyes.

“I thank you, consideration is all that I ask for.” Lord Townsend bowed low, relief in his voice. “You are very good to even listen to me, Lord Crestwood. I thank you for that and I shall take my leave of you now.”

“Oh, but when is the meeting to take place?”

Arthur frowned at his mother’s question, a little irritated now given that he had just been about to have Lord Townsend removed from his company. “What meeting, Mother?”

“Between you and Lord Townsend’s daughter,” she said, as Arthur’s eyebrows lifted high. “After all, you cannot make a decision unless you have met the young lady, can you? ”

Arthur did not know what to say. He had not expected his mother to even consider the prospect of such an agreement and yet here she was, telling him that it seemed, to her mind at least, to be a good idea to pursue!

“Oh yes, that would be a wise thing to do, would it not?” Lord Townsend practically beamed at Lady Crestwood and Arthur’s stomach dropped, a bitter taste in his mouth.

“Shall we say at the ball tomorrow evening? You will be in attendance, I assume? Lord and Lady Lavington’s ball?”

Clearing his throat, Arthur threw a desperate look to his mother but she was already nodding, clearly more than contented with the idea. “Yes, I suppose I shall be,” he agreed, a little heavily. “I had every intention of being present, at least.”

“Wonderful! Then I shall make sure to introduce Abigail to you there. Good day, Lady Crestwood, Lord Crestwood. I am truly delighted at the prospect of a connection between our two families.

I am sure you are. Scowling, Arthur ran one hand over his face as he turned away, hearing the door open for Lord Townsend to exit the room. No doubt the gentleman was simply relieved at the idea that his debts would be paid and he would rid himself of an unwanted daughter all at the same time! Though that would require Arthur to agree to it all and at this juncture, he was not certain he would do so.

“Well, that was certainly an interesting conversation!” With a broad smile, his mother came towards him, tilting her head a little. “You do not look pleased, however.”

“That is because I am not pleased!” Arthur exclaimed, his brows furrowing. “How could I be so? After all, having to marry a young lady so that her father can be free from debts is hardly a pleasant circumstance.”

Lady Crestwood lifted her shoulders and then let them fall. “But all the same, it is a wise suggestion,” she said, quietly. “If the lady is not disagreeable then why would you throw aside the idea without so much as a single thought? You are required to marry and to produce the heir and your choice of brides may be a little more... limited than they were in the past.”

Arthur’s stomach roiled and he turned away.

“I do not say such things to hurt you but only to be honest.” The gentleness of his mother’s voice did a little to quieten Arthur’s upset but all the same, the truth of her words tore at his heart. “Will you at least be introduced to the lady? If she is pleasing then mayhap it would be wise to think on the suggestion a little more. You have a great deal of wealth and though it seems to be more of a barter than a true arrangement, it would still bring you both a sense of contentment. You would not have to worry any longer about finding a bride and Lord Townsend would be free of his burden.”

“And what if he is a gambler, Mother?” Rounding on her, Arthur threw up his hands though his mother did not so much as blink. “What if he has accumulated debts due to his own foolishness and selfishness?”

Lady Crestwood took a step closer, put a hand on his arm and looked up into his eyes. “That is all for you to ascertain, Crestwood,” she said, firmly. “I leave that entirely with you, knowing that you will make the right decision... about all of this.”

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:16 am

Abigail blinked, her heart pounding furiously. “I beg your pardon, Father? You wish me to meet Lord Crestwood?”

“Otherwise known as the Beast of Crestwood Hall?” Charlotte asked, her eyes wide as Lord Townsend merely nodded.

“Yes, that is what I expect from you this evening. You are to be on your very best behaviour, you are to speak to him calmly and clearly and without any unwillingness. Do you understand?”

The fears which had been growing in Abigail’s mind as regarded her father’s desire to wed her to Lord Crestwood grew to such a large amount that she could barely breathe, putting one hand to her heart as she fought to find some sort of composure.

“Lord Crestwood is an excellent gentleman in terms of his standing and his title,” her father continued, walking about the room and gesturing to her as though she ought to be grateful for such consideration. “He has more than an abundance of wealth, a large estate and though his mother and sister reside with him, I presume his mother will remove to the Dower House should he marry and his sister will, likewise, seek out a husband for herself.”

Abigail shared a look with Charlotte but her sister merely shrugged, seemingly entirely unaware as to why their father would be informing her of such things.

Mayhap I am overthinking this.

Looking back into her father’s eyes, Abigail waited for that thought to bring her a

little comfort, but it did not. Instead, there was a heaviness to her father's gaze that, to her mind, confirmed what his intentions were for her.

"That is the carriage, my lord."

Lord Townsend nodded to the servant and then returned this gaze to Abigail. "You will do as I have asked you, Abigail. Do you understand?"

"I do, Father." Swallowing hard, Abigail fought back the tears which began to prick in her eyes as she followed him to the door of the drawing room. Was this what her future was to be, then? She was not to be permitted to find her own match, then. She was to be told what she was to do, who she was to stand up with and, should things go as she expected, who she was to take as her husband also. A great and terrible fear knotted itself around her heart. She did not know anything about Lord Crestwood but if his character was as dark as his expression had been, then what sort of husband would he be to her?

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"As I promised, Lord Crestwood."

Abigail trembled but she lifted her chin and looked straight into Lord Crestwood's eyes.

The gentleman did not look back at her.

"This is your eldest daughter, then?" he asked, his voice low and rough. "The one you cannot find a husband for."

Flames shot heat into Abigail's face and her hands curled into tight fists as she fought to keep herself steady rather than drop her head and look away. Instead, she looked

back at Lord Crestwood steadily, waiting for him to return her gaze but still, he would not look at her. Her breathing grew a little quicker, her heart pounding as she waited for her father to speak, wondering if he would confirm what the Earl had said or if he would come to her defense.

He did the former.

“Yes, this is my daughter Miss Abigail Townsend, the one who is as yet unwed,” he said, with a heavy sigh. “It has been rather difficult these last few Seasons for there is no reason for disinterest and yet the gentlemen of London seem to be entirely disinclined towards her! Yes, she is quiet and at times, much too shy but such qualities ought to be delighted in rather than ignored. After all, which gentleman wishes for a bride who talks too much? Would it not be better to have a bride who keeps quiet and who only expresses her thoughts when she is asked for them?”

Abigail closed her eyes and dropped her head, releasing her hands as tears burned in her eyes. It was not that she was quiet and did not wish to share her opinions, she wanted to cry, but that her father was so entirely disinterested in what she had to say and in what he thought of her that she had learned not to say a single word unless he asked her specifically. Yes, she would admit to being a quieter soul than her sister but that was not a trait she felt the need to apologise for or to alter.

Perhaps she had been wrong in that.

“Abigail, this is the Earl of Crestwood, as I am sure you already know.”

Hearing her father’s less than formal introductions, Abigail dropped into a curtsy but chose to say nothing, doing as both her father and Lord Crestwood might have expected by remaining silent.

“She is fair to look at, at least.”

At this, Abigail narrowed her gaze as her head shot up and she gazed back into Lord Crestwood's scarred face. Unable to keep her response back, she drew herself up and spoke directly, though in a quieter voice than usual. "I should think, Lord Crestwood, that you would understand that the outward appearance is not what matters. It is the character of a person which is of the greatest importance."

The flash in Lord Crestwood's eyes made Abigail wobble a little in her determination but she managed to focus it back upon him without too much trouble though her breathing still came a good deal more quickly than before. She had spoken of appearance and though she had not meant anything cruel by it but all the same, from the red in his cheeks, he appeared to be a little upset by her remarks.

"I do not think –"

"My daughter does not mean any insult, Lord Crestwood." Speaking quickly, Lord Townsend stepped closer to her and then grasped her arm with his hand, gripping it a little too tightly so that she winced. "She is a little nervous, that is all."

"Even if I were not anxious, I would not think it right for a gentleman to mention my appearance in such a manner," Abigail replied, a little breathlessly now given the look of fury on her father's face. "I am worth more than how I look, Lord Crestwood. I am certain you would agree, given that you have a younger sister."

Lord Crestwood's jaw tightened. "I suppose that I do," he said eventually, as her father's grip on her wrist slowly began to loosen. "I did not mean to insult you in any way, Miss Townsend."

"You did not," Abigail replied, pulling her arm away from her father now. "My father is correct to state that I am a quiet sort for I will have no disagreement with that. However, that does not mean that I do not have my own considerations and opinions, Lord Crestwood, nor that I cannot come to my own defence if I feel it is required."

For the first time, their eyes met and held and Abigail did not so much as blink, wanting him to see that she was not afraid of him and would not turn her eyes away. Yes, one side of his face was marred by scars and there was a heavy darkness in his gaze which she felt practically burning into her heart but that did not mean that she found him repulsive. Rather, Abigail found, there was a certain level of intrigue which, despite herself, she could not seem to remove. What had happened to him to damage his face in such a way? Yes, she knew he had been at war but what specifically had occurred? Was the darkness in his eyes from pain, from fear or from a mixture of emotions? She could not imagine the strength which he had within himself for to come to London, fully aware that everyone would be staring at him, looking at him and whispering about him must surely take a great deal of courage.

Hearing a murmur of voices, Abigail turned, breaking her connection with the Earl just to see a young lady coming to stand next to the Earl, only then for her eyebrows to lift in surprise as the Earl of Crestwood stepped back in evident shock, his eyes rounding and his face paling a little.

“Crestwood,” boomed a gentleman, the one who had only just deposited the Earl’s sister beside him. “It has been far too long. How good it is to see you in London again!”

“I have recently been acquainted with Lord Drover, brother,” said the young lady, her eyes going to Abigail. “Oh, but we have interrupted a conversation between yourself and someone else. My sincere apologies.”

The Earl of Crestwood did not so much as glance in Abigail’s direction. Instead, his gaze remained fixed to the gentleman standing next to his sister, the one known as Lord Drover who Abigail herself did not know. “What are you doing here, Drover?”

The gentleman threw his head back and laughed as though what the Earl had said was of the greatest mirth. “Why, Lord Crestwood, I am dancing!” he exclaimed, though

the Earl did not smile. “What else do you think one ought to do at a ball?”

“And you must introduce us, brother,” the young lady said, now smiling at Abigail who responded in kind, noting how the blue eyes of the young lady matched her elder brother’s. “I have enjoyed making new acquaintances and I –”

“Come with me at once.”

Abigail blinked in surprise as the Earl, rather than doing what his sister had asked, took her by the elbow and turned her around to walk away from the small, assembled group. Turning her attention to Lord Drover, she watched him for a few moments, seeing how his gaze lingered on Lord Crestwood but also how his lips quirked into a smile. A smile she did not like.

“I am most disappointed with you!”

The hissed words in her ear took Abigail a moment to recognize and, turning her head, she looked up at her father who had gone a shade of red she had not often seen in his face before. “I have done nothing wrong. I spoke well.”

“You should have stayed silent!” he exclaimed, throwing up his hands despite the fact there were other guests around them. “You are meant to be presenting yourself to the Earl of Crestwood as a suitable match, as someone he might wish to even consider when it comes to matrimony! Why would you say such a thing as that to him?”

“I spoke as I thought best,” Abigail replied, aware of the heat behind her eyes but refusing to let a single tear fall. “And I do not think I spoke out of turn. Besides which, Father, you have never once informed me that I was being presented to the Earl of Crestwood with the intention of being considered as a bride for him.” Lifting her chin a little, she waited until her father’s eyes met hers, only to see him frown .

“I thought that much would have been more than apparent.” Speaking a little stiffly, the color began to fade from his face. “You can understand why, I am sure. After all, it would save me a great deal of difficulty for to have a daughter as a spinster is a little... irritating.”

Abigail said nothing, turning away from her father and walking blindly across the ballroom in a vague attempt to find her mother and her sister but mostly to remove herself from her father. How could he speak to her in such a way? How could he think of her as an irritant rather than his own, beloved daughter? As much as she hated it, as much as she despised the thought of being used in such a way – offered on a platter to the Earl of Crestwood – would it be any worse than being presented to society and to all who knew their family as nothing more than a spinster? Someone worth only what she could offer through caring for other family members or seeking out employment for themselves? With a long breath, Abigail blinked furiously and, much to her relief, saw none other than Lady Chesterton standing to the back of the ballroom, entirely alone. Seeing Abigail, she smiled a welcome, though the smile soon faded when she took in Abigail’s expression. Going to her friend, Abigail threw her arms around her and, after a moment or two, began to cry.

“Goodness, whatever is the matter?” Lady Chesterton exclaimed, as Abigail sobbed. “Whatever it is, I am certain I will be able to help you.”

“I do not think so,” Abigail whispered, standing up and taking the handkerchief Lady Chesterton offered, pressing it to her eyes. “It seems that, should Lord Crestwood agree, I am to find myself engaged to him.” Her sobs came again and though she tried to swallow them back, they continued to come.

“Good gracious!” Lady Chesterton drew Abigail close again and Abigail could only stand there, her words lodged behind her sobs. “There must be something that can be done.”

Abigail shook her head miserably. “There is not,” she whispered, hoarsely. “My father has made it clear that the match will take place so long as Lord Crestwood is willing to choose me. Whether he will or not is another matter but I have no choice in this whatsoever!”

Lady Chesterton grasped Abigail’s hands and looked back at her steadily. “Mayhap he will not choose you,” she said, softly. “Mayhap you are afraid for nothing.”

“And if he does?” Abigail asked, quietly. “Then what shall I do?”

Lady Chesterton could not come up with an answer and as Abigail searched her friend’s expression, her own heart began to sink. The truth was, there could be no alternative, nothing that would keep her back from what her father intended.

She would have no choice but to marry the Beast of Crestwood Hall.

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“What do you think you were doing, talking to Lord Drover?” Arthur threw his hands up as he continued to parade up and down the drawing room as soon as they got home. “Lord Drover is not the sort of gentleman any young lady ought to be introduced to and certainly not you .”

His sister sat quietly in her chair, her hands folded in lap as she continued to watch him. His mother also sat beside her daughter though her expression told Arthur that she, at the very least, knew what he was talking about.

“I do not know what it is I have done wrong,” Isabella said, quietly. “All that took place was that I was introduced to a few new acquaintances and one was the Earl of Drover. You have never once spoken of him, never once remarked that I was required to stay away from him. Now, however, you rail at me as though somehow, I knew what I was doing wrong and did so deliberately!”

“It was also my fault, Crestwood,” came his mother’s quiet voice. “I forgot entirely about Lord Drover even though he is cousin to Lady Clara.”

Arthur scowled at the very name and continued his pacing, absent mindedly running one hand down over his cheek. Lord Drover had once been a friend and indeed, had been the one who had introduced Arthur to Lady Clara, given that they were second cousins. In the months which had followed, however, Lord Drover had become something of an enemy, choosing to spout lies and foolishness about Arthur whenever he wished to and some of that had, unfortunately, become gossip. In his previous Seasons, before he had left for war, Lord Drover had told the ton that Arthur was a gentleman without fortune, that he had lost all in gambling dens and the like – and Arthur had been forced to defend himself. Lord Drover had been proven

incorrect, of course, and he had then apologized for saying anything like that but had laughingly said he had been in his cups at the time and could not be held responsible for what he said. Because of his charm, his easy smiles and good natured remarks, the ton had quite forgiven him, believing what he had said about being much too drunk to make sense and thus, all had been forgotten.

Except, it had happened again. Arthur had heard Lord Drover whisper to another gentleman about Arthur's proclivities for a certain gambling den where ladies of the night might be found in number – and he had lost his temper in a dreadful way. He called out Lord Drover, had demanded swords the following morning so he might regain his honor and Lord Drover had done the honorable thing and had accepted, though he had begun by making as many excuses as he could for why he had spoken so. Arthur had believed none of them, of course, and thus, the swords at dawn had been accepted.

Lord Drover had not been as good as his word, however, and had not come to the field the following morning. In fact, it had been whispered thereafter that he had left London altogether and Arthur had not known the truth of what had happened to him. To see him here now, back in London, made his stomach twist so painfully, it sent red hot heat right through every part of him. The last thing he wanted was to see Lord Drover anywhere near his sister.

“Lord Drover is a decent gentleman, surely?” Still clearly confused, Isabella looked first to Arthur and then to their mother. “I do not think society would have accepted him if he was not.”

“That is not how society works,” her mother told her, before Arthur could speak. “There is a disparity there. Lord Drover had a foolish tongue and, for whatever reason, a dislike of your brother. He spoke gossip about him, gossip that was entirely false and when he was called out, when he ought to have drawn swords against your brother, he fled. That was before your brother went to war, of course, but all the

same, it was grievous indeed.”

“But society should have thrown him from themselves, then.”

Arthur shook his head. “Society is a little less severe on the gentlemen who call themselves rogues,” he reminded her, quietly. “Lord Drover can be charming – as you yourself experienced – and he made a good many excuses as to why he did what he did and for whatever reason, the ton accepted it without question. That does not mean that they were contented with what he had said and what he had done, simply that they were not about to throw him from their company because of it.”

Isabella frowned. “That makes very little sense.”

“I quite agree,” Lady Crestwood sighed, shaking her head. “But society is a fickle creature and we must often bend to its will – though not in every regard, of course. One thing I will not stand for is for your brother to be demeaned merely because of how he appears.”

“And that is a very kind and generous thing, Mother,” Arthur replied, quickly, “though you need not come to my defence. I will always have people looking at me, people gazing at me as though I am some sort of creature. Your consideration ought to be for Isabella, given that she lacks some knowledge of others in the ton who might cause her some difficulty.”

“Such as Lord Drover.” With a nod, Arthur’s mother looked again to Isabella. “You must not go near Lord Drover again, do you understand? He is a gentleman set on making a great many difficulties for your brother, though he has never explained his reasons as to why he attempts to do so.”

Isabella ran one hand over her chin, clearly thinking about what had been said. “Did Lady Clara ever believe what he said of you?”

Arthur shook his head. “No, she did not.”

“I see.” Isabella frowned. “If he is determined to do you harm, brother, then what possible purpose might he have for being kind and generous to me? Why speak to me at all? Why ask me to dance?”

Arthur grimaced. “I do not know, Isabella, but what I am aware of is that Lord Dover is not a gentleman you ought to even think of considering. No doubt he will have had his reasons for asking you to dance and I am entirely disinterested in all of them.” With a slight lift of his chin, he looked to Isabella, his expression firm. “You are not even to speak with him. Do you understand me?”

Much to his surprise, Isabella’s chin tilted up in response and rather than looking at all upset or cowed, her eyes sparked with determination. “You need not speak to me as though I have deliberately done such a thing,” she replied with temerity. “You may ask me not to speak with him and I will, of course, agree given what I have learned about his behaviour towards you. To demand it, however, is not required and not fair.”

“Isabella, please.” Reaching across, Lady Crestwood took her daughter’s hand and squeezed her fingers lightly. “Just do as your brother asks. This Season is difficult enough already.” Slowly, her gaze drew itself back to Arthur. “Though I did see Lord Townsend speak with you, however.”

Arthur grimaced, his fingers curling up into a fist as tension ran through him. “Yes, Mother, you did.”

“And were you introduced?”

Glancing to Isabella, who was watching the exchange with wide eyes that held clear confusion, Arthur sighed inwardly and then shrugged his shoulders. “Yes, I was

introduced to his daughter, Miss Abigail Townsend.” Ignoring the way his sister’s eyes rounded all the more, Arthur continued on. “She is not unpleasant as regards her appearance though she was a little more forthright than I had expected, given what her father said of her character.”

“That is good.”

Blinking, Arthur let a frown pull at his eyebrows. “Why would her forthright manner be pleasing?”

“Because I do not like it when I hear that young ladies have very little to say for themselves,” came the reply. “Young ladies ought to be able and willing to speak a little of what they think and feel rather than keeping entirely silent.” Evidently seeing Arthur’s frown, she smiled briefly. “You may not think that such a thing is agreeable but I can assure you, it is.”

Arthur took in a breath, set his shoulders and turned his head away. “I have not yet decided, Mother, before you ask.”

“Decided what?”

Fully intending not to speak directly to Isabella about what Lord Townsend had asked of him, Arthur opened his mouth to tell her that it was not her business, only for his mother to speak before him.

“Lord Townsend has debts. He wishes your brother to pay off such debts and, in return, he will marry Lord Townsend’s daughter, Miss Abigail Townsend. It is a wise suggestion, of course, because your brother might struggle to find a young lady to marry – not because there is anything wrong with him but rather because the ton are much too foolish in their opinions.” With a sniff, Lady Crestwood looked away but not before Arthur had caught the hint of tears in her eyes. Was she truly that upset on

his behalf? His own heart softened for a moment but he drew strength into himself, pushing away all thought of emotion. He had to try his utmost not to care in the least bit what society thought of him. It was the only way he could survive the Season intact.

Clearing his throat, he lifted one shoulder and then let it fall. "It is only something I am considering."

Isabella's expression was inscrutable. He could not tell what she was thinking nor what she made of this new information. Arthur told himself that it did not matter in the least what she thought but all the same, when a flickering frown graced her forehead, Arthur caught his own forehead furrowing.

"What does Miss Townsend think of this arrangement?"

Arthur hesitated, finding himself entirely uncertain and therefore unsure as to how best he ought to answer. "I – I do not think it matters, Isabella. The lady will do as she is directed by her father."

Isabella's eyebrows lifted. "Goodness. I did not think you as unfeeling as that, Crestwood. Would you be willing to make that sort of arrangement for me? Would you be contented to set me into matrimony with a gentleman I did not know or care for without even thinking of my own feelings?"

With a cough, Arthur fought to find an answer, only for there to come a knock at the door. "Come in."

The butler stepped in, glanced to where Isabella and Lady Crestwood stood and then came directly towards Arthur, a calling card in his hand. "My lord."

Arthur took it, only for his chest to tighten, his eyes flaring wide as he stared at the

card, barely able to take in who it was who had come to call .

“Crestwood?” His mother’s voice cut through his surprise, making Arthur jerk his head up. “What is it?”

“My lord?” the butler murmured, not quite catching his eye. “What should I say?”

Swallowing hard, Arthur gave a brief nod to the butler and then, without a word, offered the calling card to his mother.

“Lady Clara?”

“Hush, if you please,” Arthur murmured, finding himself walking across the drawing room to where the mirror hung on the wall, looking at his reflection. One glance at his scarred face had him turning away sharply, a ball of anger and confusion settling in his chest. Whatever was Lady Clara and her mother doing here? And why had he agreed that they could come in? Surely, after everything Lady Clara had done, he ought to be refusing to see her?

“Lady Clara is coming?” Isabella asked, her voice full of shock as Arthur nodded grimly, turning back from the mirror and standing directly in front of the fireplace, clasping his hands behind his back. “Why?”

“I suppose we shall find out,” Arthur replied, gesturing for her to rise to her feet. His own heart betrayed him, however, pounding furiously as the door opened and Lady Templeton, followed by Lady Clara walked into the room.

“Good afternoon.” Lady Templeton’s smile was a little fixed, her eyes darting from one person to another rather than lingering on any face. “Thank you for permitting us to call upon you all.”

Arthur bowed and then forced himself to look at Lady Clara. It was the first time he had been in company with her since she had ended their engagement though, to his eyes, she was just as beautiful as ever. A gentle glow in her cheeks, dark lashes framing clear blue eyes and golden curls that shone like the sun – she had retained all of her beauty, certainly, though he could not say the same about her character. That was quite ruined in his eyes.

“Good afternoon, Lady Clara,” he said, before she could speak. “Might I ask why you have come to call on me?”

The question was direct and Lady Clara’s eyes flared wide, as did her mother’s. The two looked at one another though Arthur said nothing more, waiting for her to answer him rather than fill the silence with any sort of explanation.

“I – I wanted to make certain that there was no difficulty between us.” Lady Clara’s voice was soft, her words hesitant but Arthur felt no sympathy. She was the one who had caused this impasse, this brokenness between them. He had no reason to feel any sort of awkwardness, though it was there, nonetheless. “I had heard you returned to London and I thought it best to call so we might speak briefly. ”

Arthur lifted his chin. “I have no intention of having any sort of connection between you and me, Lady Clara,” he said, still speaking as plainly as he could despite the fact that Lady Templeton gasped at his boldness. “I shall leave you to visit with my mother and sister but, given that this shall be the extent of our conversation throughout the rest of the Season, I think I shall take my leave.”

Without looking at anyone and hoping his mother would not be irritated by his decision to quit the room, Arthur walked directly towards the door, only for Lady Clara to put out one hand and catch his arm. Frustration burned hot and he turned sharp eyes to hers, only to see tears brimming there.

“I am sorry, Crestwood.”

It was barely loud enough for him to hear, a quiet whisper spoken with a breathlessness that spoke of pain and regret. But Arthur said nothing, pulling his arm free from hers and walking directly to the door so he might escape just as quickly as he could.

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“Come in.” Clearing his throat, Abigail’s father lifted his chin as she walked into the room, seeing her mother sitting in a chair by the fireplace in her father’s study. “Now, what I should like from you is for you to listen to me without question or discussion. There is much that must be said and I want to make myself very clear.”

Abigail looked back at him without saying a word of either agreement or disagreement. If this was to be a meeting where her future was decided, then she would speak as freely as she wished so she might ascertain exactly what was going to happen – and make it plain how she felt about it all.

Sitting down and ignoring a sharp look from her father, Abigail folded her hands in her lap and tried to breathe slowly and carefully so that her heart might slow its rapid pace. Her father did not sit, however, as she had expected but instead began to walk up and down in front of her, his hands behind his back.

“Abigail,” he began, not even looking in her direction as he spoke. “There has come about an opportunity which I should like you to give yourself to completely.”

“You wish to engage me to the Earl of Crestwood,” Abigail replied, interrupting her father before he could finish. “Yes, you made that very plain when I was at the ball and presented to him without the full awareness of what that connection was supposed to be.”

At this, her father stopped pacing and turned to face her, his jaw tight. Taking in a deep breath, he let it out again slowly and then shrugged. “Yes, I will agree with you that I should have spoken to you about Lord Crestwood and my intention for you before you met. However, that is not of any great importance, I think. Not when the

matter is close to fulfillment.”

Abigail swallowed thickly, her tongue suddenly feeling a little too big for her mouth. “You – you mean to say – ”

“Nothing has been decided as yet.” Lady Townsend spoke up for what was the first time and when Abigail looked to her, she saw how white her mother’s face had gone and how tightly she had clasped her hands. Could it be that Lady Townsend was not as pleased with this arrangement as Abigail’s father?

“No?” Abigail looked from her mother back to her father. “What is wrong? Does Lord Crestwood have no desire to wed?”

Clearing his throat gruffly, Lord Townsend began to pace again. “There is more to this situation than you might understand, Abigail. ”

“I understand that you are afraid I might become a spinster and that, if I do, I will continue to be a burden to you.” Speaking more sharply than she had meant to, Abigail drew in a long, shuddering breath and closed her eyes. “You have not managed to secure me a husband as yet. That is a difficulty.”

“Yes, it is.” The cold, calm manner with which her father spoke made Abigail’s heart ache and another glance towards her mother told her that she had dropped her head. “Your mother made the suggestion that I might approach Lord Crestwood to consider the possibility of a match between the two of you.”

Abigail’s stomach twisted. “Mother?” A memory of how her mother had hurried out of the room when the Beast of Crestwood Hall had been brought into discussion ran straight through her like a knife piercing her heart. “You thought that I should marry the Beast of Crestwood Hall?” Her voice was thin and rasping, tears burning in her eyes. “I thought it was father’s idea.”

Lord Townsend clicked his tongue, drawing Abigail's attention back towards himself. "Your mother and I discussed it all, Abigail. As I have said, there is more to this situation than you can understand. I... we have accumulated a great many debts."

A coldness grasped at Abigail's heart.

"I made some investments which have sunk... literally." Lord Townsend ran one hand over his thinning hair, shaking his head as he did so. "Thus, those I owed money to I had to repay from my own coffers and... needless to say, I have been in severe difficulty for some months."

"This is a way for you to salvage our family's reputation and save your sister's good standing in society." Lady Townsend turned to look at Abigail, her eyes piercing. "Should the gentleman agree, then your marriage to Lord Crestwood will mean that your father's debts will be taken care of."

Tears lodged behind Abigail's eyes. "Mother, can you truly think that marriage to a gentleman known as the Beast of Crestwood Hall would make me at all contented?"

Her mother spread out her hands. "It is not your contentment alone I must think of," she said, quietly though her gaze remained steady. "I must also consider your sister and the difficulties that we are in at present. If Lord Crestwood agrees to this, then he will pay off your father's debts and in exchange for that kindness, you will marry him and be his wife. You will bear him the heir he requires to continue the title and do your duty as the Countess of Crestwood. That cannot be too terrifying a prospect, I am sure, given that your only other alternative is to be nothing more than a spinster!"

Abigail's thoughts were so many and so frequent, she could not find a single word to say in response. Having initially been uncertain over her mother's part in all of this, she was now broken hearted to learn that Lady Townsend had been the one to think of the idea in the first place. Her father had taken the suggestion on board and had

approached Lord Crestwood without so much as thinking of speaking with her first. The decision was, she realized, already made and all that was required now was Lord Crestwood's consent. Her own consideration on the matter was not required in the least.

"You are in a great deal of debt," she repeated, her breath hitching as her father nodded. "You state that they are all solely because of your own investments failing. Is that true?"

Lord Townsend looked away. "I may have made some poor decisions," he answered, shrugging, "but I have learned from such things. I will not do such a thing again once these debts are clear."

Abigail closed her eyes and tried to take in a full breath but the sobs lodging in her chest would not permit her to do so. The burden her mother and father had placed upon her shoulders was so broad and so heavy, she could not escape it, not even if she tried. Her sister's face grew like a vision in her mind and she let out a broken sob, knowing that if she were to refuse, if she were to disagree entirely and not go forward with this marriage, Charlotte would be the one to suffer. Her mother was quite right in that regard and though she hated to admit it, Abigail knew she would do anything to help protect and aid her sister. These circumstances were because of her father's actions and though she would not know the full extent of it, the heaviness of the consequences had settled solely upon her. She was the one to solve her father's difficulties, she would be the one to have his debts removed from him – and all by giving her future to a gentleman known as the Beast of Crestwood Hall.

Fear lodged in her throat and she squeezed her eyes closed all the harder, afraid that a scream might escape from it should she even open her mouth.

"It is a little surprising, I grant you, but I think it a more than suitable match." Her father's matter-of-fact manner made Abigail's heart ache all the more and she

dropped her head forward, unable to find a single word of response. “It has not been agreed as yet, of course, but we are to join Lord Crestwood and his family for dinner this evening.”

Abigail looked up quickly. “This evening?” she repeated, her voice croaky. “This very evening?”

“Yes.” Her father steadied his gaze. “There is no reason for this not to be moved on as quickly as possible. If Lord Crestwood chooses you as his bride – which I hope he shall – then that is a truly excellent thing. We shall all be very pleased. ”

Before she could think as to what she was doing, Abigail found herself on her feet, her hands shaking as she pointed one finger out towards her father. “No, Father, you shall be very pleased, as shall Mama, because this benefits you enormously. You will be free from debt, your name will be kept in good standing and none shall know of your difficulties. I, however, will be pushed into a marriage where my thoughts and my feelings have never once been considered! You will all be sitting very happily and very contentedly in your house and Charlotte, no doubt, will have been given time and opportunity to make her own choice as regards her suitor whereas I will be wed to a gentleman so dark in spirits and so disinclined towards society that the ton call him nothing more than a beast!” Her hands dropped to her side and turning to her mother, Abigail shook her head, her vision so blurred by tears she could barely take in her mother’s shocked expression. “I never thought that you would be so unfeeling, Mother. I did not think that you were the one who would have suggested such a thing as this. I thought that you would be considerate of my feelings in that regard.” She shook her head, tears falling to her cheeks. “I did not imagine that you would be as callous as to push me into this match without even thinking to speak with me first. Can you imagine how I feel at this moment, knowing that I am to be used as payment for father’s debts?”

“Abigail, please,” her father began but Abigail shook her head, tears dripping off her

chin. Without another word, she made her way to the door and, pulling it open, hurried out into the hallway, suddenly desperate for the solace that came with being alone.

“Ah, Lord Townsend.”

Abigail’s head twisted around as the sound of quick footsteps in the hallway greeted them. Her whole body trembled as she took in Lord Crestwood, his tall, imposing figure bringing a shadow to her heart as he approached.

“Lady Townsend, Miss Townsend and Miss Townsend, good evening.” Lord Crestwood bowed and Abigail curtsied, though she did not bring her eyes to his. “Lord Townsend, mayhap we ought to make our way to the study directly. There is much I need to discuss.”

Her heart threw itself against her chest and Abigail caught her breath, looking up sharply just in time to see her father nodding. Without a word to any of them, Lord Townsend made his way back with Lord Crestwood and the two gentlemen departed, leaving the three ladies to stand alone .

“What are they discussing?” Charlotte asked, her eyes a little wide as she looked to Abigail. “Is it... something serious?”

“Mother and father have decided that I should marry Lord Crestwood.” Speaking a little dully, Abigail looked into her sister’s face and chose to keep back the truth about their father’s debts. Charlotte did not need to know such things. She was already confused enough, having tried earlier in the day to comfort Abigail but without knowing what the trouble truly was. “That is why we are here. The arrangements must be made before the engagement can be made known.”

Charlotte's hand flew to her mouth, her eyes huge. There was nothing but shock there and not even the smallest hint of happiness.

"It is for the best."

Abigail looked back at her mother, only for Lady Townsend to drop her gaze, her face a good deal paler than Abigail had seen it before.

"At least, I believe it is for the best," she continued, in a small voice. "There is nothing to be done now, Abigail. Come. The butler is waiting to show us to the others."

Before Abigail could move, however, her sister grasped her arm, her eyes still huge. "You are going to marry the Beast of Crestwood Hall?"

There came a kick to her stomach as Abigail nodded, her throat constricting as her sister's eyes filled with tears.

"You do not have to marry someone such as he," Charlotte whispered, coming closer to Abigail. "There must be other gentlemen who –"

"It has all been arranged," Abigail told her, as Lady Townsend began to walk away. "There is nothing I can do. From the way Lord Crestwood came to fetch our father, I feel quite certain that my engagement to Lord Crestwood will be formalized by the week's end."

Charlotte caught her breath but Abigail turned and followed after her mother, her shoulders and her heart heavy. There was no escaping it now. All she could do was accept her future such as it was and pray that she would find even the smallest hint of happiness in it all.

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“So.” Arthur waved one hand over the papers in front of him. “These are all of your debts.” He eyed Lord Townsend carefully as the man looked at each and every piece of paper, picking them up and scrutinizing them before, finally, nodding. There was not even the smallest hint of embarrassment in the man’s face, however, and that gave Arthur cause for concern. After all, a great many of these debts were more than a little mortifying given that they came about from gambling and the like but Lord Townsend appeared to be quite contented that Arthur should have found them out.

“You do not show a great propensity for careful management of your money,” Arthur said, plainly, as Lord Townsend frowned. “These debts come from a man who has chosen to sit at the gambling table, chosen to make foolish investments and taken very little care in such things. I do not know why I should be willing to help you in this.”

“Oh, but I am not a fool!” Lord Townsend exclaimed, his head lifting as his eyes sharpened. “I will admit that I have made mistakes but I have learned from them! I will not do such things again, I assure you.”

Arthur hesitated. Lord Townsend was a gentleman of great boldness given that he had approached him in this first place with this idea and Arthur remained a little uncertain that he could trust the gentleman’s word.

But what cause have I to be concerned about such things? I am to gain a wife. Paying Lord Townsend’s debts means that his coffers are once again his own responsibility and nothing to do with me.

“I presume that your daughter has no dowry?”

Lord Townsend's eyes flared as a flush rose in his cheeks. "I beg your pardon, Lord Crestwood, but I am a gentleman of honour even with such debts! Of course my daughters have their dowries! I have never taken a single penny from either of them in that regard."

Arthur tilted his head, seeing the flash in Lord Townsend's eyes and deciding that in this, at least, he believed him. "Very good. Though I shall ask a favour of you – no, it shall not be a request but rather written into whatever contract we sign together."

Lord Townsend frowned. "What do you require of me aside from my eldest daughter's hand in marriage?"

"I require your eldest daughter's dowry be added to your younger daughter's dowry," Arthur stated, firmly. "I have no need for Miss Townsend's dowry and, given that I am paying all of your debts, to demand such a thing seems foolish. Therefore, I will insist that your younger daughter's dowry be increased. That should be more than a little helpful when it comes to her securing her own match, as I am certain she shall very soon."

"Because her elder sister is married to an Earl and her dowry substantial," Lord Townsend said slowly, as Arthur nodded. "Very well. I agree to that."

"Good." With a slow nod, Arthur looked down at the debts again and, despite the questions, the concern and the worries in his heart, began to find himself contented with the idea of matrimony. He did not know the lady very well at all and indeed, had only met her on one occasion but the situation was to his liking. "Then I shall instruct my solicitors to bring us a formal contract within a fortnight. My engagement to your daughter can be made known to the ton before then, of course, but I shall do nothing as regards matrimony until the contract is completed and signed. Do I make myself clear?"

The light in Lord Townsend's eyes and the smile on his face left Arthur in no doubt as to how the gentleman felt about the arrangement. "Capital!" Sticking his hand out, he made to shake Arthur's hand only for something to hold Arthur back.

"I must ask," he found himself saying, having had no intention of expressing any concern whatsoever, "what your daughter thinks of this arrangement. Is she agreeable?"

"Of course she is agreeable!" Lord Townsend exclaimed, grabbing Arthur's hand and pumping it up and down. "She is delighted, in fact! She has struggled to catch the attention of any gentlemen of note simply because of her quiet nature but now, her struggles do not have to last any longer. That is an excellent thing, I assure you."

"Indeed." Arthur frowned, his own heart quailing a little as he looked into the gentleman's eyes and found himself wondering if all of that was true. What did it matter, however, if she was not particularly enamoured with the idea? After all, he was simply to be her husband in name only – for after what he had endured with Lady Clara, he was certainly not about to let his heart become affected in any way. This was a formal arrangement, he told himself as Lord Townsend released his hand. Almost a business arrangement between two gentlemen rather than anything involving emotion. That was the best way for him to think of it and surely, he told himself, it would be better for Miss Townsend to marry than to remain a spinster with an impoverished father!

"Come then, let us make our way to the dining room. The dinner gong will sound at any moment."

Lord Townsend nodded eagerly. "They can be the first to hear this happy news! "

"No." Arthur frowned and shook his head, just as Lord Townsend's eyebrows lifted. "No, we are not going to speak of this to anyone as yet. Not until I have had

opportunity to speak alone with Miss Townsend.”

That had Lord Townsend’s smile tumbling to the floor. “You wish to speak with Abigail?” he asked, as Arthur nodded. “Alone?”

“Yes, alone,” Arthur stated, firmly. “There are some things I wish to make quite clear and some things I want to hear her opinion on. However, given that you have said just how eager and contented she is for this match, I should like to hear that from her lips also.”

“Oh, but there is no need!” the gentleman protested, just as Arthur began to make his way out of the room. “I can assure you that it is so. Given her quiet nature, I should think that – ”

“I shall speak with her.” Arthur threw those words over his shoulder before marching down the hallway towards the dining room, his brow furrowing as he walked. One thing was for certain; he did not trust Lord Townsend and certainly would not take his word for granted. Recalling what his mother and sister had said as regarded Miss Townsend, Arthur silently resolved that if Miss Townsend had no true desire to wed him, if she had every instinct to push herself back from him, that he would not move forward with their engagement. Even though the situation suited him, he was not the sort of gentleman who would force a situation upon anyone.

It would all depend on her.

“Might I speak with you for a few minutes, Miss Townsend?” Arthur forced a smile as Miss Townsend’s eyes flared wide, praying that she was not truly as afraid as the whiteness of her face suggested. “It is important.”

Miss Townsend glanced to her father who, of course, nodded and thus, her eyes met his as she murmured her agreement.

“Just to the parlour,” Arthur told her, walking out of the room and fully expecting her to follow him. “I will return you to the drawing room thereafter.”

“Might I ask what you wish to speak with me about?” Miss Townsend’s voice quavered and, as Arthur pushed the door open to the parlor and held it open – for it would be wise not to close it – he caught the way her eyes roved around the room.

Clearly, Miss Townsend was a little afraid.

“You have been appraised of all that your father and I have discussed, I understand.” Arthur waited until Miss Townsend nodded before he continued, though her eyes no longer went to his face but rather lingered near the floor instead. “I spoke with your father earlier this evening and an agreement has been reached. ”

Miss Townsend caught her breath, her eyes rounding as she looked back at him. Silence crept between them for some minutes until, eventually, she spoke.

“Then, we are engaged?”

“We shall be,” he confirmed, “though I should like to know of your thoughts on the matter first, Miss Townsend.

Her eyebrows lifted. “My thoughts?”

Her voice was a little stronger now and Arthur nodded. “Yes, Miss Townsend. Your father has assured me that you are eager and excited about our engagement but I cannot tell if such a thing is the truth. Therefore, I should like to know your opinion.” Letting his gaze rove around the room, he caught sight of his reflection and grimaced. “After all, I am aware that the only reason I am agreeing to this is simply because of my scars. The ton are more interested in considering me as a Beast rather than having any interest in pushing their daughters to me.” Looking back at her, he lifted an

eyebrow. “What do you think of it all, Miss Townsend?”

She licked her lips and dropped her head. “I – I do not think you a beast, if that is what you are asking me.”

“That is not really an answer,” Arthur replied, aware that his voice sounded like a low growl rather than being pleasant and calm. “What do you think of our potential engagement? Are you truly desirous of such a thing?” When she did not answer him, Arthur let out a hiss of breath and began to pace up and down the room. “Let me make things quite clear, Miss Townsend. I go into this marriage with the sole intention of not allowing any sort of emotion or affection into my heart or into our connection.”

Miss Townsend began to blink rapidly but Arthur continued on regardless.

“My mother and sister will reside with us for a time but once I am wed and if we both desire it, Lady Crestwood can make her home in the Dower House, though you may not wish for that to occur since you will require some company.”

“You – you do not intend to spend much time with me, then?”

Arthur shook his head. “I have no expectation that anything in my life will change after we are wed, Miss Townsend. Save only for the fact that the bedchamber adjoining mine will be occupied.”

Silence grew yet again and Arthur turned to look at Miss Townsend again, clasping his hands behind his back as he watched her. Miss Townsend looked as though she might break down into sobs but he did not permit any pang of regret or sympathy to enter into his heart. It was good for him to be quite clear on his expectations so that Miss Townsend knew precisely what it was she was entering into .

“I must ask you again, Miss Townsend, in knowing all of this, in being aware of what your future will be with me, whether you desire to move forward into engagement.”

Miss Townsend closed her eyes and to Arthur’s surprise, a tear dripped to her cheek. Despite his resolve to keep all emotion from his heart, he was suddenly pulled in towards her, finding his hand going to hers – though he pulled back almost at once, his own breath hitching as he realized what he had done.

“I do not want you to be pushed into this marriage,” he said, coughing a little gruffly so as to cover his own embarrassment. “I will not agree to it unless you are contented.”

“I have no other choice.” Her voice breaking, Miss Townsend opened her eyes and looked at him, tears only just being kept back. “Yes, Lord Crestwood, I will marry you.”

Arthur’s frown pulled his brows low. “You do have a choice, Miss Townsend. I am offering you one.”

She shook her head. “Please, do not let anything prevent us from moving to engagement, Lord Crestwood,” she said, her voice breathy and trembling with emotion. “I do not refuse this. I do not step back from it or seek a way to be free of it. I have said that I will marry you and thus, I shall.”

Watching her, Arthur found himself wanting to protest, wanting to ask what it was that was so upsetting for her but finding his tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth. Confused by his own emotions, by his own uncertainty, Arthur merely nodded and, walking to the door, opened it and held it for her. Miss Townsend walked through it quickly, making her way back to the drawing room without his guidance and as he watched her, Arthur’s frown continued to grow. Was he doing the right thing in forcing this engagement upon Miss Townsend? Should he step back from it? Or

should he do as she asked and continue on with their engagement, despite her tears?

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:16 am

Abigail's heart leapt as she caught sight of Lady Chesterton and, ignoring the restraining hand of her mother on her arm, rushed across the room and slipped her arm through her friend's. "How glad I am to see you here this evening."

"As I am you. I have been concerned for you." Lady Chesterton searched Abigail's face, her face a little pale. "What has happened as regards your father and Lord Crestwood?"

With a small sigh, Abigail shook her head. "I am engaged."

"What do you mean, you are engaged?" Lady Chesterton turned and grasped both of Abigail's hands in her own. "You are engaged to Lord Crestwood?"

"A little more quietly, if you will," Abigail begged, pulling her hand away from Lady Chesterton's so they might walk arm in arm again. "Yes, I am engaged to Lord Crestwood."

Lady Chesterton shuddered. "To the Beast of Crestwood Hall."

Abigail closed her eyes briefly and let out a slow breath. "Yes. Though I do very much hope he is not as dark tempered as he seems. Do you know that he spoke with me not two days ago and stated that I was not to expect any sort of tenderness from him? That he views this as nothing more than a transactional relationship?"

"I see." The concern that blossomed in Lady Chesterton's eyes made Abigail's heart squeeze, though some of the pain and sadness she carried within it began to fade. "But you are still to marry him?"

Abigail nodded. “Do you know that he asked me such a thing himself?”

Lady Chesterton frowned. “What do you mean?”

“He said he would not continue on with our engagement if I did not wish it,” Abigail said, still a little surprised that Lord Crestwood had been considerate enough to do such a thing. “I do admit to being a little surprised that he thought to speak to me about it all. I thought him akin to my father, making decision without once considering me.”

“That is good,” Lady Chesterton agreed, quietly, “though did you not tell him the truth? I would have thought that, had you done so, you would not now find yourself engaged.”

The heaviness in Abigail’s heart grew as she sighed and shook her head. “I had no choice, Harriet,” she admitted, as the ball began in earnest, with the first dance bringing both gentlemen and ladies to the center of the room. “My father is in debt and it seems now that this engagement is only coming about so that my father can be free of that burden.” Seeing her friend’s confusion, Abigail gave her a small, wry smile. “Lord Crestwood will pay my father’s debts and in exchange, I will be given as his wife, expected to produce both the heir and the spare.”

“But that is truly dreadful!” Lady Chesterton exclaimed, though Abigail could not help but agree with her. “You are not merely an object to be bartered and sold! How could your father suggest such a thing?”

“Evidently, it was my mother,” Abigail answered, softly. “But I have not told Charlotte the truth so please, do not say a word to her.”

Lady Chesterton’s eyes rounded in understanding. “That is why you have agreed to this, is it not? So that Charlotte can be spared from the embarrassment of having a

father heavily laden with debts?”

“It is so that she can have a successful Season that will lead to a happy match,” Abigail conceded. “However, I do recognise that my future is a little better being married than remaining as a spinster. At least there is the hope of having children. And his mother and sister are very pleasing.”

Lady Chesterton sighed and pressed Abigail’s hand again. “I would have much preferred you to have found a gentleman who considered you to be the most wonderful, most beautiful, most brilliant of creatures for that, my dear friend, is what you are.”

Abigail smiled. “Thank you, my friend. I do very much value our friendship and the support you offer me. It is my only joy at the present moment!”

“I can hardly believe that!” Lady Chesterton exclaimed, only for a lady to step directly into their path, forcing them both to come to a sudden stop. Abigail looked back into the face of an older lady who she did not recognize, though Lady Chesterton seemed to, given the way she inclined her head.

“Good evening. How nice to see you this evening.”

The lady did not look to Lady Chesterton, however, but turned her attention solely to Abigail who looked back into two narrowed eyes and cheeks which burned red.

“Are you Miss Abigail Townsend?”

“I am.” A little confused, Abigail darted a glance to Harriet, who quickly obliged.

“Miss Abigail Townsend, might I introduce Lady Templeton?”

“Good evening.” With a smile, Abigail dropped into a curtsy, still confused as to why the lady had not only walked into their path but had also practically gritted out those words towards her. “I am always glad to make a new acquaintance.”

“You are engaged to the Earl of Crestwood?” Lady Templeton’s face had flushed all the hotter, her eyes narrowing as though Abigail had done some great evil .

“Yes,” Abigail answered, speaking carefully for fear that the lady would grow angrier with her still though she still could not understand the reason for her wrath. “This news has only just been announced which may be – ”

“My daughter, Lady Clara, was engaged to him.”

Abigail blinked, a little confused as to what the lady meant.

“There was every intention of them returning together, as they had done before,” Lady Templeton continued, her voice a harsh whisper as she shook one finger in Abigail’s face. “And yet you have usurped her! You have taken her place without so much as a single consideration as to what she was expecting to gain from Lord Crestwood. How can you do such a thing?”

Looking helplessly to Lady Chesterton, Abigail turned her attention to the furious lady in front of her. “Lady Templeton, I am afraid that I have very little idea as to what you mean. Lord Crestwood has not spoken of your daughter and – ”

“Well he wouldn’t, would he, since the ending of their engagement came about so abruptly! Clara was a little overwhelmed by his injuries, that was all. I am sure that any gentleman, any lady could understand that! They were to return together to their engagement, however, and you have put yourself in the way of that.”

“Mother!”

An exclamation caught not only Abigail's attention but the attention of many others near them. Lady Templeton turned, only for a young lady to move forward and grasp her arm.

"What have you been saying to Miss Townsend?" she hissed, her face white as she looked to Abigail. "Miss Townsend, I must apologise. My mother is simply desperate for me to wed and is quite determined that I should return to what I have already chosen to give up." Dropping into a curtsy, she offered a smile which, Abigail noticed, wobbled violently. "My hearty congratulations."

"I thank you," Abigail murmured, still heartily confused by what had taken place. The young lady began to pull her mother away but Lady Templeton refused to be led. Wrenching her arm from her daughter's grip, she came close to Abigail again, though this time, her voice was barely louder than a whisper.

"If you have any decency within you, if you have even the smallest hint of consideration and sympathy, then you will step away from Lord Crestwood and permit my daughter to take her place by his side. I can only hope you have a kind heart, Miss Townsend."

With that, she stepped away, keeping her head high as she marched across the floor away from them. Abigail watched, her heart aching as Lady Chesterton slipped her arm through hers and then walked in the opposite direction, taking Abigail with her.

"Everyone is looking so do keep a smile fixed in place until we can reach the corner of the ballroom," Lady Chesterton murmured, as Abigail's heart began to sink lower and lower. "Did you know about Lady Templeton's intentions as regarded her daughter's return to the Earl of Crestwood?"

Hearing the lack of surprise in Lady Chesterton's voice, Abigail looked at her quickly. "No I did not. Did you?"

Her friend nodded and drew her to sit down at a table in a quieter corner of the room. One or two ladies turned to look at them both but Abigail merely smiled at them and then waited until they turned their heads away and left her to converse with Lady Chesterton in peace.

“Yes, I did.” Lady Chesterton shook her head and sighed. “I mayhap ought to have shared this with you but I did not for I did not think it was particularly important. It was only whispered about between a few young ladies of late and I perchance overheard one of the conversations. Lady Templeton appears to want her daughter to return to her engagement and Lady Clara was, from what I understood, amenable to the idea – although now I believe that last part to be false.”

“It certainly did appear as though Lady Templeton was not pleased by Lady Clara’s decision.”

“And Lady Clara was not pleased by her mother’s interruptions,” Abigail added, with Lady Chesterton nodding her agreement. “I do wonder if Lord Crestwood knows of this.”

Lady Chesterton hesitated. “I suspect that he might. I do know there was a visit from Lady Templeton and Lady Clara to his residence lately.

“I see.” Abigail let out a small sigh. “I would have preferred to hear about this from him rather than being caught in the middle of the ballroom by a visibly angry lady.”

“Then you should tell him that.”

Abigail frowned, her heart beginning to settle now that the moment had passed. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that you should tell Lord Crestwood what you have just told me,” her friend

explained. “There is nothing wrong with stating that very same thing to him as you have said to me. Husband and wife need to be able to share everything with each other and if Lady Templeton has suggested this to him then it is only fair for him to inform you of it.”

Abigail smiled ruefully. “We have not had much opportunity for conversation,” she murmured, looking back out at the crowd. “There is a contract to be signed very soon and he has already informed me that our marriage is nothing more than a business arrangement and that, to his mind, very little will change in his life.” Her shoulders lifted and then fell, a slight heaviness about her eyes. “There is not to be any intimacy between us in that regard, Harriet. I do not think he will be at all interested in what I have to say.”

“Tell him nonetheless,” her friend insisted. “You must get to know Lord Crestwood, even if it is only a little better than you know him at present. And that begins by being entirely honest.”

Abigail considered this, aware of the knot in her stomach as she thought of what it would be like to talk directly and honestly to Lord Crestwood. Already, she could picture the way his gaze would drift from hers, how his mouth would pull tight as she spoke of her upset and how his jaw might set with frustration over her insistence on speaking with him. It was to be expected, she told herself, given that he did not think much of taking her as his bride but would that stop her from doing so?

“I do wish he might have let himself be open to even the smallest affection,” she found herself saying, her heart pulling low with all the weight which now stacked upon it. “Even a friendship would suit me very well but the Earl does not appear to be at all inclined towards pursuing that with me.”

“Then he is a fool.”

Abigail jumped violently, her head twisting around as a gentleman, his hands clasped behind his back and his back itself a little stooped grinned at her.

“Forgive me for eavesdropping,” he said, standing up tall now, his thick brown hair bouncing gently as he pushed it to one side of his head, his dark eyes gleaming. “I am acquainted with Lord Crestwood and was a dear friend of his for some time. I came in the hope of greeting you, Miss Townsend, and congratulating you on your engagement.” Bowing low, he put one hand to his heart. “Though I shall say nothing of what I accidentally overheard, I assure you.”

“I – I thank you.” A little uncertain as to what she ought to do or say, Abigail made to rise from her chair only for the gentleman to gesture for her to remain where she was.

“Please, do not trouble yourself. I shall say nothing more other than to pray blessing upon your marriage, whenever it should come.” Inclining his head, he made to turn away, only for Abigail to call out after him.

“Your name, good sir? You did not give it and I should be glad to know who I am to thank for such kind words.”

The gentleman smiled but Abigail found herself shivering lightly, for it was not a pleasant smile. Rather, it was the smile of a gentleman who had something more behind such kind words and Abigail did not like to see it .

“Earl Drover,” he answered, rising from his bow. “It is my pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Townsend.” With a nod to Lady Chesterton – no doubt someone he was already acquainted with, Lord Drover turned his attention back to Abigail, his smile lingering still. “Might I wish you both a very pleasant evening.”

With that, he walked away and though Lady Chesterton smiled and cooed over Lord Chesterton’s manners and kindness, Abigail kept her thoughts to herself. There was

something about him which troubled her, something about that greeting that said there was more to his intentions than he had shown.

And Abigail remained entirely wary of him.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:16 am

“Lord and Lady Townsend are here.

Arthur looked up at his butler. “And is Miss Townsend with them also?”

“Yes, my lord. I have them sitting in the drawing room. Your own mother and sister are present also. Captain Harrington has come to call and I have asked him to join the others, though if you wished him to depart then - ”

With a shake of his head, Arthur rose from his chair. “I will join them all momentarily.”

Waiting until the butler had left, Arthur walked to the other side of the room and looked in the mirror at himself, already despising the reflected image he saw there. The harsh lines of his scars running across one side of his face looked even more jagged than usual in the brilliant morning sunshine and Arthur turned away quickly, unable to bear even another moment of looking at himself. With a deep breath, he closed his eyes and drew in a steadiness to himself. Yes, he was going to speak with Lady Townsend and Miss Townsend as regarded the upcoming marriage but there was no need to feel any such nervousness or the like. After all, the difficulty was over for him. He did not need to find himself a bride, did not have to worry about what young lady might look past his scars and consider him as her future husband. That was no longer something he had to even consider ! The news of their engagement had already run through the ton and given that the contract was now due to be signed, there was nothing else for them to do other than to begin to consider the wedding.

“Miss Townsend will be my wife,” he told himself aloud, walking to the door. “I do not need to care what she will think of my scars. She has already accepted me and

thus, all will be well.”

Striding out into the hallway, he marched towards the drawing room only to pause at the sound of laughter echoing out towards him. A frown knotting his forehead as he pushed the door open, all the more surprised to see his own sister and Miss Townsend sitting together, their heads close as they talked excitedly, while Lady Townsend and his own mother laughed aloud at something as yet unknown. Captain Harrington was sitting by the window, seemingly preoccupied with his own thoughts and Lord Townsend was pouring himself a brandy from Arthur’s own carafe and as Arthur came a little further into the room, smiled and then proceeded to pour a second glass.

Arthur gritted his teeth. Lord Townsend had not even thought to ask whether or not he might help himself to this brandy but instead had chosen to do so without even a second thought and the laughter was a little grating. This was meant to be a serious moment, a sober endeavour where they would formally sign their contract and the marriage would then be brought into view. It was not the time for all things jovial.

“Good afternoon.” Looking around the room, he waited until the noise and the laughter had come to a close before clearing his throat, lifting his chin and looking directly at Lord Townsend. “Shall we proceed?”

“I have poured you a glass so we might celebrate this moment!” With a grin, Lord Townsend held him the glass and Arthur took it without a word though he did not smile. “Do you have the contract?”

Arthur nodded and walking across the room, pulled at the bell. It was a signal for the footman to enter with both the contract and the ink and quills and, within a few minutes, that very thing was brought in on a gleaming silver tray. A silence fell across the room and for the first time, Arthur looked to where his betrothed sat.

Miss Townsend did not appear to be particularly happy. She was not smiling, she was

not looking up expectantly but rather there seemed to be a frown attempting to pull at her forehead though, no doubt, she was fighting to hide it. Her lip caught between her teeth and Arthur's brow furrowed. She had assured him that this was what she wanted, what she had agreed to but all the same, he could tell from her expression that she was not overly pleased. A streak of worry ran across his heart but he dashed it away quickly, pulling his gaze from Miss Townsend and making his way across the room to where Lord Townsend had already sat down with the contract in his hand.

"I think you will find everything is in hand," he said, choosing not to look at Miss Townsend as he spoke. "The engagement will stand from the signing of this contract and your debts will be signed off the day after my marriage to your daughter."

"After?" Lord Townsend looked up sharply. "Why afterwards?"

"Because I want to make certain that I will gain what I expect to gain," Arthur replied, firmly. "I am a gentleman of my word and unfortunately, I am not certain I can say the same for you."

There came a few gasps at this from the ladies in the room but Arthur merely lifted an eyebrow just as Lord Townsend harrumphed and looked back at the contract.

"You cannot say such things!" Lady Townsend's exclamation forced him to look around. "My husband can be trusted!"

"I do not think so," Arthur replied, firmly, even though Lady Townsend's face went sheet white at his boldness. "A gentleman who has lost a good deal of his fortune through playing cards and making foolish choices in his gambling habits is not a gentleman that I can trust. Therefore, the wedding comes first and the debts paid off thereafter. "

There now came a few moments of silence, only for it to be broken by Lady

Townsend.

“You – you told me that this was solely about your failed investments!” she cried, half rising out of her chair. “That the boats sank to the bottom of the sea floor and took your money with it.”

“Which is true,!” Lord Townsend protested, immediately. “I did not think to explain other, unnecessary debts to you, my dear, for fear that it would upset you all the more.”

Waving a hand before Lady Townsend could explode into whatever it was she clearly wanted to say next to her husband, Arthur brought them both to a stop. “If you are satisfied with the contract, Lord Townsend, then might we sign it? I would rather that there was no delay.”

“I – I need another few moments.”

For the first time since he had walked into the room, Arthur looked back at Captain Harrington, wondering if his friend had, as yet, looked away from the window to take note of the proceedings. He had done, Arthur saw, though he was shooting a rather dark look back at Arthur. Could it be that he was simply fatigued? Or had he hoped to call upon Arthur when no-one else was present... or when Isabella herself might be his only company?” Arthur let his gaze go to his sister as though somehow, she might be taking note of his thoughts but she was busy whispering something to Miss Townsend. The young lady did not look in the least bit more contented or joyous and Arthur frowned, only to look again at Lord Townsend as he came to the end of the contract.

“Everything seems to be in order,” Lord Townsend remarked, his hand reaching for the quill. “Very soon, we shall have the wedding between yourself and my daughter, Miss Abigail Townsend, and all shall be quite well.”

Without so much as a look to Miss Townsend, Arthur noted, Lord Townsend dipped the quill in the ink and then signed the contract. His eyes caught how her shoulders dropped and how she lowered her head, though not a single word of complaint came from her lips. His gut twisted, concern threading through his veins as he looked back at her a little more steadily, ignoring Lord Townsend's triumphant exclamation as he completed his signing.

"Miss Townsend, might you join us?"

The lady's head lifted and she looked back into his eyes without flinching, surprise in her green eyes. "My lord?"

"Might you join me for a moment?" he asked again, going across the room towards her and holding out one hand. "If you would?"

Her hand reaching for his was a little tentative and when he grasped it, he felt how she trembled. It did not come from fear, he hoped, but he was glad, at least, that she walked with him across the room without hesitation.

"I want to ask you whether or not you are in agreement with this," he said, keeping his voice as quiet as he could so as not to be overheard by everyone in the room. "This involves you and your opinion should be sought."

Her eyes flared but before she could speak, her father rose and set one hand on her shoulder. "Of course she agrees! What other choice does she have?"

Miss Townsend's cheeks flooded with color and her eyes closed.

"Lord Townsend, if you please." His voice firm, Arthur realized that he was still holding Miss Townsend's hand and, with that realization, he squeezed her fingers gently, hoping for a response. Opening her eyes, Miss Townsend offered him a small

smile, and then nodded.

“Yes, of course. I consent.”

“I told you,” Lord Townsend boomed, ignoring the way his daughter winced. “Now, let us proceed, Lord Crestwood.”

Arthur bent his head forward and looked straight into Miss Townsend’s eyes. A hint of vanilla rose to assail his senses and he caught his breath, his heart kicking hard in his chest. “You recall and understand all I spoke with you about before?” he asked, as she nodded. “Then are you still quite contented for all of this to take place?” Knowing that she would be entering a marriage where he could not and would not offer her any sort of affection, Arthur held her gaze steadily, ignoring the sudden thundering of his heart until, finally, she nodded.

“I agree to it all,” she whispered, though there came a glistening into her eyes that concerned Arthur greatly. “There is nothing I do not consent to.”

Despite the way his heart turned over, despite the way his stomach clenched and his concern grew to furious heights, Arthur nodded, released her hand and went to sign the contract. Miss Townsend made her way back to sit by Isabella and Arthur dipped his quill into the ink and, without giving himself time to think, scratched his name onto the bottom of the contract.

It was done. He was engaged to Miss Townsend and in a little over a month, would find himself a married man.

The room erupted in cheers and Arthur turned, making his way directly across the room so he might pick up his brandy. Throwing it back, he swallowed it in one gulp, letting fire erupt in his chest and chase away all the emotions which threatened to overwhelm him. Ever since the war, he had done an excellent job of pushing down

everything he felt, of hiding what his true emotions were. It was easier to live a life without them, where he was staid and severe rather than letting his emotions affect him.

Captain Harrington came to join him. "My congratulations."

Arthur managed a wry smile. "I am uncertain as to whether you are truly pleased for me or if you are somewhat concerned."

"Might I not be both?" Captain Harrington's gaze travelled across the room rather than looking back at Arthur. "To my mind, a marriage ought not to be a business transaction. Rather it ought to be solemnly deliberated, with the hearts, minds and affections of those involved truly and carefully considered."

With a curt nod acknowledging, at least, that his friend had his own perspective on such thing, Arthur too looked across the room and saw how Isabella smiled, though her gaze was not on him. Rather, she was smiling at Captain Harrington.

"You do not have any difficulties such as I, however," he grunted, as the Captain's attention snapped back to him. "Your face is not marred nor marked as mine is."

"That means nothing, as you know I have said to you many a time," came the reply. "A man's appearance does not have any bearing on his character. Character is what is important, my friend. I do hope you will treat Miss Townsend with all the respect, affection and consideration she deserves."

Arthur drew himself up. "I will be entirely respectful."

"Ah, but will you be affectionate? Will you be considerate?" The Captain tilted his head. "She will be married to a gentleman she barely knows, settled into a new estate and a new home and without her own sister by her side. Your mother and sister will,

no doubt, make her feel very welcome but what about when they depart? No doubt your sister will marry soon and your mother will take the Dower House. You cannot truly think that Miss Townsend – who will soon be Lady Crestwood – will be contented with sitting in your manor house without company and affection?”

A vision of Miss Townsend sitting alone, tears on her cheeks, rose in Arthur’s mind but he dismissed it quickly enough. “She may well have had a child by then.”

The Captain immediately scoffed at this, shaking his head as though Arthur was a child who needed to be guided away from his foolish considerations. “Do not think that a child will make up for the lack of affection from her husband!” he exclaimed, setting one hand on Arthur’s shoulder. “Permit yourself to be free with your affections and you might find yourself all the happier, my friend.”

Before Arthur could say anything in response, before he could find a few words to throw back at him, Captain Harrington moved away from him directly and walked towards both Miss Townsend and Isabella. He greeted them both and then took Miss Townsend’s hand in his, bowing over it and clearly offering her his congratulations.

A heat passed right through Arthur and he looked away, a little surprised at the response such a thing had brought him.

“It will be a beautiful wedding!” he heard Isabella say as he poured himself a second brandy. “There will be a good deal to prepare! You know that I should be glad to help with anything that you might wish to task me with, Abigail. After all, we are to be sisters!”

“Oh yes, there must be ribbons and bouquets everywhere, with perhaps – ”

“I think a quiet, simple affair would be in order, do you not think?”

Arthur looked around the room as he spoke, having interrupted his own mother as she had joined in with Isabella's fervency.

"We do not require anything auspicious, certainly," he continued, having no desire for the ton's interest to be on him all the more. "A quiet wedding ceremony, with only a handful of guests will suffice."

From the expression on both Isabella and his mother's face, Arthur quickly realized that his thoughts on the matter were not welcome. Isabella was frowning, her arms folded across her chest and his mother had closed her eyes as though she were embarrassed by him.

"Why should you not want to celebrate your marriage to Miss Townsend by a grand wedding?" Captain Harrington was the first to speak, though his tone remained easy rather than forceful or angry. "It is a very pleasant occasion, is it not? A joyous one, in fact!"

Arthur shrugged, now a little nonplussed given the strong reaction he had received from his own kin. His eyes went to Miss Townsend who, he saw, had sunk back down into her chair rather than remain standing with Captain Harrington and Isabella. "It is not something I would enjoy," he answered, a flush creeping up his neck. "A grand affair is not required."

"And what of what your bride would enjoy?" His mother's sharp, demanding tone had the heat in Arthur's chest rising up all the more quickly. "The day of your wedding does involve two persons, Crestwood and only one of them is you."

"Please, do not worry!" Lord Townsend threw up his hands and chuckled, his face wreathed in smiles – and why should he not be, Arthur considered, given that all of his debts were about to be removed from him? "My daughter will be more than contented with a quiet marriage, with only direct family present."

Lady Townsend lifted her chin. “I hardly think that – ”

“This does not concern you, however,” her husband interrupted, his smile becoming a little fixed now as the air grew thick with tension. “It is just as the Earl of Crestwood wants.”

A sudden, overwhelming shame burned right through Arthur’s chest and he closed his eyes, realizing just how distinctly selfish he had been. In stating that a banal wedding was all that was required, he had not given a single moment’s consideration to Miss Townsend. Captain Harrington had spoken up against him, as had his mother and yet Lord Townsend was the only one who had agreed with Arthur. Miss Townsend was sitting quietly, clearly expecting the decision to be made for her and without her contribution.

Was that the sort of gentleman he wished to be? The sort of husband he wanted to become? The sort who ignored his wife in all things, who never once thought of her happiness or sought out her thoughts on any subject? With a sigh, Arthur lifted his head and looked directly at Miss Townsend. Though he hated the idea of having a large wedding filled with guests, he would give himself up to it if that was what Miss Townsend desired.

“Miss Townsend.”

Waiting until she lifted her head and looked at him, he offered her a small if not rather tight smile. “Might I ask what it is that you desire?”

The way her eyes rounded made his heart lift. Clearly, she had not expected him to think of her in this way, had not expected him to ask her about her thoughts and now that he was doing so, she was clearly surprised.

“My daughter will – ”

“Lord Townsend, if you please.” Drawing himself up, Arthur threw out one hand, silencing Lord Townsend as he spoke. “What is it that you are thinking of, Miss Townsend? What sort of wedding do you desire?”

She swallowed hard and then rose to her feet, her cheeks coloring a little. “I should like to be surrounded by my friends, my family and our neighbours,” she said, her voice a little shaky though her gaze was steady. “We will have it at my father’s estate, I presume, and though it is a time of celebration, it is also a time for me to say farewell to all that I have known and loved since the very day I was born.” Her chin wobbled but she took in a deep breath and continued. “I should be glad to have your thoughts, Lady Isabella, and yours also, Lady Crestwood, when it comes to decorations and the like. I know my own mother will be delighted to be of assistance also.”

Arthur realized, in that one moment, that his wedding was not even just about himself and his bride, as his mother had said. It was about two families coming together even in this, in planning the day and all that would come with it. The light in Isabella’s eyes, the hopeful smile on his mother’s face and the way Lady Townsend blinked her glassy eyes told him that he could not refuse.

“Then I shall leave it all to you,” he said, inclining his head. “I shall do as I am instructed and shall be contented in everything.”

There came a squeal of delight from Isabella and his mother and Lady Townsend both thanked him profusely. But Arthur could only look to his betrothed, seeking out her response to what he had said – and her soft, quiet smile brought a thrill to his heart that he had never experienced before.

It both terrified and delighted him in equal measure.

Abigail? Might I speak with you?”

Looking up from her embroidery, Abigail quickly set it aside as her mother came into the drawing room. “Yes, of course.”

The moment she sat down, Abigail could see that her mother was upset about something though she refrained from asking any questions. Whatever troubled her mother, Abigail was more than inclined to simply permit her to speak of it when she chose to. Given all that had taken place of late, Abigail had her own thoughts, her own considerations weighing heavily on her and at this present moment, she had no desire to listen to more.

Besides which, she had to admit to a great deal of hurt and some bitterness within her own heart directed solely towards her mother. After all, Lady Townsend had been the one who had suggested the match with Lord Crestwood in the first place and Abigail was yet to conquer the shock and surprise which had come with that revelation.

“I – I must confess something to you.” With a shuddering breath, Lady Townsend reached for Abigail’s hand, only to then release it just as quickly. “I should not have suggested to your father that you marry Lord Crestwood.”

Abigail blinked in surprise but again, chose not to say anything, feeling the weight of her mother’s presence and believing that there was yet more for her to say.

“It was a thought which came to me unexpectedly but in truth, I did believe that it would be for the best. It would give you a husband and a future but I did not think for even a moment that it would be your father’s intention to exchange you for a payment

of his debts.” Again, she reached for Abigail’s hand and this time, she took it in her own and squeezed her fingers gently. “I am truly sorry.”

Letting out a long sigh, Abigail looked across to her mother and saw the pain flickering in her eyes. “I am sad that you did not think to discuss this with me first, Mama. Why would you not make the suggestion to me first rather than go directly to my father?”

Her mother squeezed her eyes closed and a single tear dropped to her cheek. “Because I thought it right, she said, in a soft voice. “I thought it best to discuss it with my husband first before we spoke to you. I truly did not believe for even a moment that your father would make all of these arrangements without so much as a word to you! And when I learned about the contract and the debts I... well, I have never felt so much regret in all my life. I have now forced your hand, forced you into a matrimony with a gentleman who is nothing but darkness and selfishness!”

“I do not think that Lord Crestwood is as bad as all that, Mama.” Speaking truthfully, Abigail offered her mother a small smile, sensing a small healing taking place between them. “I will not pretend that he is inclined to think solely about himself – ”

“As we both saw when there came a discussion about the wedding and how grand it ought to be.”

“Precisely, though did he not speak to me kindly thereafter?” Abigail’s smile grew as her mother nodded slowly. “And did he not give me whatever it was I wished and, in doing so, made both you, his own mother and sister very contented? I think that shows that he can be kind and considerate, though perhaps it simply requires a change in his way of thinking which, at times, can take some duration to become a quality by which one can be defined.”

Lady Townsend nodded though she looked down at her hands, her shoulders

rounding.

“And I am glad that you and father shall be free of debts, and for Charlotte’s sake also,” Abigail continued, softly. “That is a good thing.”

“It is.” Lady Townsend looked back at Abigail, her eyes still glistening with tears. “Your sister does not know of the debts as yet.”

“No, she does not and I would prefer she did not know. She is already concerned enough for me and I am more than contented for her to see that I am marrying Lord Crestwood simply because I desire it.”

“You have a very generous and considerate spirit, my dear.” Pulling out a handkerchief, Lady Townsend dabbed at her eyes. “I am delighted to see it though I do not think I deserve to have such a good hearted daughter after what I have done.”

Abigail squeezed her mother’s hand. “It is quite all right, Mama.” Taking a breath, she smiled and set her shoulders. “What must be done now is we must think solely of the wedding and what is to be done as regards the preparation of it! And there must be a trousseau, yes?” As she spoke, a knot came into her stomach and she tried her best not to feel any sense of nervousness but it flooded her, nonetheless. The thought of being married, of being bride to Lord Crestwood was still an anxiety that she could not quite remove from herself. He was still very much a stranger to her, still unknown and still rather mysterious in many ways, though the kindness and consideration he had shown of late – though it had come with some encouragement from the Captain and his mother – had gladdened her heart. She had begun to fear that she might be marrying the very ilk of gentleman that was similar to her father but Lord Crestwood’s character certainly appeared to be somewhat different and that was a great relief .

A scratch at the door had her mother calling for the servant to enter and within a few

minutes, the butler had come in and bowed to them both.

“Lord Crestwood has come to see his betrothed, my lady.”

Abigail rose to her feet at once for both her mother and her father had already stated to the staff that Lord Crestwood was to be shown in without delay whenever he should appear. She was not truly prepared for his arrival, however, and felt herself a little embarrassed given her rather dull morning dress and her hair pulled into a simple chignon.

Not that such a thing should matter to Lord Crestwood, she reminded herself, feeling a little foolish that she should be concerned about what the Earl of Crestwood should think of her appearance.

“Good afternoon.” The Earl bowed low as he stood before them, then sat down as they resumed their seats. “I have come to invite you all to Crestwood Hall.”

Abigail’s eyebrows lifted. “To Crestwood Hall, my lord?”

“Yes, to my estate,” he declared, as though it was quite usual for such a thing to occur. “A house party, I think. It will give us all an opportunity to know one another a little better.”

“How wonderful!” The enthusiasm in her mother’s voice was not entirely unexpected though Abigail herself remained a little subdued. “When is this to take place?”

“In a fortnight,” came the reply. “I know it is in the middle of the Season but we shall return thereafter, of course. And the wedding itself is still to be planned but mayhap some four weeks after our return, we might wed?”

Abigail swallowed. That gave her around six weeks to prepare. “Yes,” she managed

to say, a little throatily. “That seems perfectly adequate.”

“Capital.” Lord Crestwood rose to his feet without having any sort of inclination to linger and speak with her a little longer. “The banns are already being arranged at this moment, so all is as it ought to be.”

“What of Lady Clara?”

It was the most foolish thing to say and the most inopportune moment to speak of it but all the same, the words were said and Abigail could not take it back. Why had she thought to say such a thing now? The meeting with Lady Templeton some days ago had almost faded from her memory but evidently, her desire for him to linger and to show even the smallest enthusiasm for her company had outweighed her good sense.

Lord Crestwood sank back into his chair. “Might I ask what you mean?”

His tone had dropped and there was a dark expression on his face, his jaw tight .

“Lady Templeton accosted me at the very same ball where our engagement was announced,” Abigail replied, choosing to continue with the conversation rather than brush it aside. After all, had not her friend encouraged her to be honest with her future husband? “She stated that there was the intention of reinstating the connection between yourself and Lady Clara.”

A slight curl to Lord Crestwood’s lip had Abigail’s heart lurching. “Lady Clara means nothing to me, Miss Townsend, though she is the reason that I shall never again permit my heart to be affected. I say so bluntly and boldly for it is as I have said to you before so it comes as no surprise. If there was to be any reinstating of our connection, I would not have agreed to this engagement then, would I?”

The way he spoke had Abigail dropping her head, embarrassment burning up into her

face.

“Though,” Lord Crestwood continued, his tone suddenly gentling, “I am sorry that Lady Templeton spoke to you in such a way. That must have been rather difficult.”

Abigail looked up at him again, relieved now to see that his expression had softened. “It was, rather.”

“Then I do apologise for that. Lady Templeton and Lady Clara did come to speak with both myself and my mother a little prior to the ball though I myself did not linger in conversation. I can assure you, Miss Townsend, that I have no intention of having even a familiarity with Lady Clara and there shall certainly be no connection between us again. I am engaged to you and that is what I want. I certainly do not want to return to Lady Clara’s side, not after her injuries to me which were so very grievous.”

Abigail’s heart tugged and, much to her surprise, her mother rose and quietly excused herself, though she left the door ajar and promised to return within a few minutes. It was most unusual and unexpected for Lady Townsend to do such a thing though, when Abigail looked back to Lord Crestwood, his expression had not changed in the least.

“I do not think... ” Pausing for a moment, Abigail drew in her strength and spoke as honestly as she could. “I know why Lady Clara ended your engagement and I am sorry for it. I cannot imagine the suffering you must have endured.”

Lord Crestwood looked away. “It was almost too difficult to be borne, at times.”

Realizing that they were beginning to have the very beginnings of a prolonged and rather more intimate conversation than they had ever had before, Abigail continued on, her heart beating a little more quickly than before. “Is that why you did not come

back to town? Why you remained at your estate? ”

Slowly, his gaze came back towards her. “Would you wish to come back to London when you look as I do?”

Abigail tilted her head and did not pull her gaze away, did not let the twinge of warmth in her cheeks dissuade her from speaking honestly. “I cannot imagine, Lord Crestwood. Though you have the courage to do so now.”

“And still everyone stares,” he muttered, pushing one hand through his hair. “And you are to be shouldered with that burden very soon, Miss Townsend.” The mirthless smile on his face filled her heart with sadness and all of a sudden, she was filled with the great desire to hurry across the room towards him and take his hand in hers.

Instead, she remained where she was. “It is no burden,” she said, quietly. “Those who stare do so because they have no sensible thought in their heads nor compassion within their hearts. To my mind, it is not how someone appears which is of any consideration but rather their heart. Their character can be the most beautiful in all of the world even though they may not be the most beautiful in appearance.”

Lord Crestwood smiled and for the first time, light came into his eyes and changed his entire expression.

“You would do well in Captain Harrington’s company, Miss Townsend. He says the same thing.”

“Then we must be right,” she quipped, only for Lord Crestwood to laugh out loud.

Abigail’s breath caught. It was the very first time she had seen him laugh and if his smile had illuminated his features, his laugh altered them completely. There came a brightness into his blue eyes that reminded her of the sky on a clear day, his eyebrows

lifted and his whole demeanor seemed to change. He was no longer sitting stiffly in the chair but rather he appeared much more relaxed with his shoulders rounding a little. Her own smile grew and she looked back into his eyes, noticing how little she cared about the scars on his cheek.

Lord Crestwood could be an entirely different gentleman from the one he portrayed, she was sure of it. He only had to permit himself to be so.

“Will the Captain be joining us for the house party?”

Lord Crestwood nodded, the smile still lingering on his face. “I do not think my sister would be contented without his presence, Miss Townsend.”

Abigail nodded though she did not say a word in response to this. She had noticed the interest between the two and had wondered at it for Lady Isabella had come to London for the Season, had she not? And in addition, Captain Harrington – for all that he was a worthy gentleman – was a good deal less in title than Lady Isabella and Abigail had expected the Earl of Crestwood to balk at even a hint of a match being made between them. Given what he had just said now, she was no longer sure.

“I may invite one or two other acquaintances but I am not certain as yet,” the Earl continued. “It might be pleasing for us to have only family so we might get to know each other a little better.”

“I met one of your acquaintances recently,” Abigail remembered aloud. “Lord Drover, I think his name was? He was very pleased to make my acquaintance and indeed, offered me sincere congratulations.”

In an instant, the easy manner which had run through the Earl’s demeanor changed. He sat bolt upright, his gaze sharpened and his shoulders straightened. “Lord Drover spoke to you?”

Abigail nodded slowly, a little perturbed now that she had upset him so greatly. “Forgive me, I did not know – ”

“Lord Drover is a sly, cunning gentleman who will do anything he can to injure me.”

Surprise filled her. “Is that so? Why?”

“I have never known,” came the response. “But you must give me your word you will stay away from him.”

There was no desire within her to disagree or to argue. “Of course.”

“What did he say to you?” Lord Crestwood pushed himself closer to the edge of the chair but his voice did not appear to be filled with anger but rather concern. “Was there anything untoward?”

“No, not in the least.” Recalling how she had been embarrassed that he had overheard her speaking of Lord Crestwood, fire light her cheeks. “I was speaking of our impending marriage with my friend, Lady Chesterton. Lord Drover joined in the conversation and then apologised for eavesdropping.”

“As well he might,” the gentleman muttered, shaking his head. “No doubt the man did such a thing purposefully. He will want to glean whatever he can from you in the hopes of using it against me.”

Abigail bit her lip then closed her eyes. “I did not say anything untoward,” she said, quickly. “He assured me he would not repeat what I had said solely to my friend, stated he was an acquaintance of yours and that you had been friends for some time. From what I remember, he offered congratulations and very little else. The conversation came to a swift end.”

Lord Crestwood closed his eyes and nodded, only to rise to his feet abruptly. Abigail did so also, thinking now that he intended to take his leave, only for Lord Crestwood to walk across the room, grasp both of her hands in his and look down into her face.

“Please, do not speak again to Lord Drover. If he should come near you, then walk in the opposite direction. If he should talk to you, ignore him or again, walk away. I cannot tell you how much I need you to do this. Lord Drover caused me a great deal of pain and I will not have him do the same to you.”

The way his fingers tightened around hers sent Abigail’s heart into a flurry of both astonishment and a strange sense of happiness. It was not that she did not take his warning seriously but rather that his concern was so evident, it filled her heart with a joy which, as yet, she could not quite understand. She could not take her gaze from his face, looking up and seeing the clouds which held fast to the blue in his eyes. Not once did she let her gaze pull to his scars, not once did she have any desire so much as to glance there. All she cared about was the softness of care and concern in his eyes – care and concern which was held only for her.

“I promise you, I shall do all that you ask.”

Lord Crestwood let out a slow breath, his shoulders dropping. “You do not think to question me about it?”

“Why should I?” she asked, quietly. “You have asked me to trust you and I shall. After all, you are to be my husband and if I cannot trust your word, then where should I be?”

A hint of a smile brushed against Lord Crestwood’s mouth. He released one of her hands but kept the other in his, still letting his gaze hold fast to hers. To her utter astonishment, he lifted her other hand to his lips and, as she watched, pressed a light kiss to the back of her hand.

Flames tore a path up her arm and towards her heart.

“Thank you, Abigail.”

His eyes melded to hers for another few moments and then, without warning, he turned and walked from the room, leaving her standing entirely alone.

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“Good evening, Lord Drover.” Arthur drew himself up to his full height as his one-time friend turned to see him, though he noted how the man started in obvious surprise upon seeing him at the ball they were both attending that night. “I hear that you have been greeting my new bride to be.” He tilted his head. “As well as my sister.”

“And why should I not?” Lord Drover’s eyes gleamed, his surprise fading to vehemence. “There is nothing wrong with a gentleman greeting a lady.”

“You know very well that it is no mere lady that you greet,” Arthur replied, harshly. “Stay away from both Lady Isabella and Miss Townsend.”

Lord Drover shrugged. “I have no difficulty in doing as you ask.”

Arthur, making to move away given that their conversation was now over, paused for a moment. “You have never informed me as to why you changed towards me with such severity,” he said, as Lord Drover’s brows knotted. “We were good friends were we not? Why then did you alter? Why did you attempt to spread such gossip about me?”

There came a tightening around Lord Drover’s lips. “I do not know what it is you are speaking of.”

“Yes, you do.” Growing frustrated, Arthur made to turn away. “Though if you are not even going to admit it openly then I see little point in continuing our conversation.”

“Oh, Lord Drover, Lord Crestwood!”

Arthur's frustration grew to even greater heights as none other than Lady Templeton came near to them both. "How very good to see you both conversing again! It gives me the greatest pleasure to see it."

"We are not conversing," he said, stiffly. "I was just taking my leave, in fact."

"Oh." Lady Templeton's eyebrows lifted. "Is there any particular reason that you do not desire to speak with my cousin's son?"

Arthur looked back into Lady Templeton's wide eyed, rather cold expression and understood precisely what it was she was trying to do. "Merely that I have no wish to."

"Mother, have you heard about Lord Crestwood's house party? I... oh, do excuse me."

A long breath escaped from Arthur as none other than Lady Clara staggered back from where she had swung into her mother, her face turning a color of pink as she realized exactly who it was Lady Templeton had been speaking with. This was the worst possible situation he could find himself in, stuck in conversation with both Lord Drover and Lady Templeton, with now Lady Clara come to join them. Surely Lady Templeton and Lady Clara already knew that he had no inclination to speak with them given the last time she had come to call upon him? So why was she lingering next to him now?

"You are having a house party?"

Arthur cleared his throat. "Yes, to celebrate my engagement." Seeing one or two others from the ton come to join them, extending the small group, Arthur quickly realized that his chances of escaping the conversation were now entirely taken away from him. His frustration bloomed to anger, though he kept his expression and his

voice tightly under control. “It is only a small gathering and only for a few short days.”

“I do hope you are to have a ball.” Lord Drover lifted one eyebrow and tipped his head as though he was thinking. “Your estate is not too far away from London so mayhap – ”

“And so many of us have not visited your estate these last few years,” Lady Templeton put in, though Arthur noticed how she slipped her arm through her daughter’s as she spoke, clearly interested in pushing Lady Clara back into his field of view. “I am certain that your estate is not the prison that so many of society believe it now to be.”

A cold hand gripped Arthur’s heart. “I beg your pardon?”

“Oh, did you not know?” Lady Templeton’s innocent tone did not fool Arthur for a moment, though there were others in the group who quickly averted their eyes, perhaps all too aware of what it was Lady Templeton was saying. “You were given the most unfortunate name and many thought your estate had become a prison for you, holding you captive in your darkness and discontent.”

The cold, unconcerned manner with which she spoke sent Arthur’s already heated blood into a burning fury. He had no understanding as to why Lady Templeton spoke as she did other than to injure him but that injury was quick and severe and he did not like it in the least.

“I hardly think that Crestwood Hall is a prison.”

A quiet yet mirthful voice caught Arthur’s attention before he could even think about what to say to Lady Templeton.

“If it were, I should be rather afraid going to visit it but instead, I find myself very excited indeed to be visiting.”

A hand slipped through Arthur’s arm just as Miss Townsend stepped beside him, her eyes going to his for a moment and a small smile on her face. Arthur was well able to see the shards of anger flickering in her green eyes, however, and understood that she felt just he did – though why she felt such defensiveness, he could not fully understand. After all, she had only just become engaged to him and had not yet even visited Crestwood Hall, so why was she so irritated?

“That is to be my home,” Miss Townsend continued sweetly, answering his silent questions in her response. “I am to be the Mistress of Crestwood Hall.” Smiling brightly though the hand on his arm tightened considerably, she looked around the group. “I should not like it to hold onto the supposed dark reputation it has, just as I am glad to see that the whispers about my betrothed have already taken flight! Crestwood Hall is no prison, just as Lord Crestwood is no beast!”

“Of course he is not and I know that my daughter is deeply sorry for her part in that.” Lady Templeton nudged Lady Clara who quickly dropped her head, her face flushing hot as she murmured a quiet apology. “I am sure that you can understand why a young woman might have been overwhelmed – but it does not mean that she thinks of you in such a way now.”

Arthur cleared his throat, aware of the many members of the ton who were now listening to this conversation, no doubt enthralled by what they heard. They would have heard all that Lady Clara would have said of him when their engagement had ended and this would only add fodder for their gossiping tongues. “I do not think this needs to be spoken of again, Lady Templeton.”

“Then allow us to make amends in another way or at least, show us that there is a healing between our families.” Speaking a little louder, no doubt so that the audience

around them might grow a little more, Lady Templeton put one hand to her heart as if in entreaty. “There must be some way to soften the pain and difficulty which lingers between us. My daughter has apologised and has apologised sincerely.”

“I am well aware of that,” Arthur replied, firmly, “but I choose my acquaintances with great care now, Lady Templeton. It is not that I do not accept Lady Clara’s apology but more than – ”

“Might we attend your house party? Or the ball?”

Arthur blinked furiously, beginning to stutter. Did Lady Templeton know no bounds when it came to her bold way of speaking? One did not invite oneself to another’s house party! It was not the done thing and considered very rude indeed... though given the way that everyone was looking at him, it was clear that the only thing they were interested in was hearing what he had to say about Lady Templeton’s request.

“I... I am not... that is to say – ”

“We shall send out many invitations to Lord Crestwood’s ball, I assure you.” Again, Miss Townsend spoke before Arthur could even think of an answer, only for her then to draw him away. “Do excuse us, it is the waltz I think and we are to dance it together.”

Arthur, who had not thought about dancing with anyone, not even his betrothed, frowned with confusion, only to then find himself relieved when Miss Townsend led him away from the assembled crowd. They walked in silence towards the center of the room and as the music for the waltz began, Arthur bowed low and then stepped forward, ready to take his betrothed in his arms for what would be their first dance together since this scheme had been put together. Taking her hand in his, he settled his other at her waist and, at that very moment, his heart threw itself hard against his ribs and he was forced to catch his breath.

“I do apologise, Lord Crestwood.”

His eyebrows lifted. “Apologise? To what end?”

“For interrupting you.” Her eyes tugged to the right and she caught her lip for a moment. “I spoke twice before you had opportunity to do so and I am sorry for that.”

Astounded that she thought there was need to apologise, Arthur smiled gently and pressed her hand a little more. “My dear Miss Townsend, you saved me from speaking foolishly. Indeed, I did not know what to say in response to Lady Templeton’s suggestion that my estate is a prison nor whether I might think to invite them to the house party! It is just as well you spoke as you did, else I would have said something dreadful, I am sure.”

A small smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. “Then I am relieved. Though I am sorry that you shall have to invite them all to the ball now.”

Arthur chuckled ruefully. “It is better than having to invite them to the house party!”

At this, Miss Townsend laughed aloud and as Arthur twirled her around the dance floor, he could not help but smile. There was a warmth in being in her company, he decided. A satisfaction which came from simply having her in his life. That was an exceptional thing and he suddenly found himself very glad that Lord Townsend had approached him in the way he had, even though it had been most untoward.

Wait a moment.

His heart thudded violently as his smile shattered.

I cannot be finding myself with an affection for the lady, can I?

The awareness brought with it a sudden dread and he shuddered so violently, Miss Townsend looked at him with wide eyes, clearly being able to feel what had happened.

“Forgive me.” He made no explanation other than that and instead, simply looked across the dance floor behind her as they continued on with the dance. He had already told Miss Townsend that he was not about to permit his heart free when it came to their acquaintance. He was not going to let himself feel, not after Lady Clara and certainly not after how he appeared. The ton had already made it clear that he looked more like a beast than a man and he was not about to let himself fall in love with a young lady who could never, truly, think of him in the same way. There was no sense in hoping, not even for a moment, that Miss Townsend might ever look at him with love. The scars on his face were too great for him to ever truly be considered in that regard, he was sure of it. After all, that was what Lady Clara had stated, what she had given as her reason for ending their engagement. Miss Townsend would marry him, he was sure, but he could not dare risk his heart.

“If you are displeased with me, then you need only say.” Miss Townsend’s eyes caught him, her gaze searching. “I do not mean to upset you.”

“I am not at all displeased,” he reassured her, knowing he could not tell her the truth of his thoughts at present. “Though I should like to make quite clear that what I am displeased with is the thought of having to invite Lady Clara and Lady Templeton to the ball, though I do not hold you at all accountable for that. The way Lady Templeton spoke meant that it was either to be the ball or the entire house party!”

The waltz continued and Miss Townsend danced for a few minutes in silence before she spoke again, albeit with a similar amount of hesitancy. “Might I ask why you think she is so very eager for her daughter to join the ball?”

“I do not know.” Arthur scowled. “And I shall have to invite Lord Drover also. I

think it all an exceedingly frustrating situation and I can assure you that, whatever end Lady Templeton hopes to be making as regards either myself or her daughter, she will not find success.”

The quick smile on Miss Townsend’s face had Arthur smiling back at her, the tense moment fading. The waltz continued on and though Arthur’s heart began to soften all the more, though his desire to pull Miss Townsend a little closer began to burn through him, he ignored both without too much difficulty. Though when the dance came to an end and she smiled, he suddenly found it more difficult than he had anticipated to release her. Clearing his throat, he bowed his head and brought a stern, severe expression back to his face again – the one he usually wore. And by the time he had brought Miss Townsend back to Lady Townsend, he had all of his strange feelings back entirely under control.

“So this is Crestwood Hall.”

Looking around her, Abigail could not help but feel a little overawed. The drive to Crestwood Hall had taken less than a day’s ride in the carriage and she had delighted in the beautiful countryside, in the river, the bridge, the flowers and the meadows in her view. The estate was vast and the manor house, though not intimidating itself, was certainly larger than her father’s and, in that, had a greater presence.

“It is.” Lord Crestwood, who had offered his arm to her the moment she had stepped out of the carriage, gestured to the beautiful oak wood paneling along the walls. “My father had this wing of the house repaired and restored in the years before he died.”

“It is beautiful.” She glanced up at him but Lord Crestwood was not looking at her, his gaze still on the house itself. He had not really looked into her face since she had arrived and that did concern her a little.

“You will want to rest, I am sure. The drive was – ”

“The drive was not in the least bit taxing,” she replied, quickly. “It was not as long as I had anticipated.”

Lord Crestwood frowned. “Then you do not want to rest?”

“No, I would be quite contented to continue walking with you.” An uncomfortable knot settled in her stomach as they walked together, sensing a prickling nervousness rising up within her again. At the ball where she had not only come to his defense but spoken in his place and, unfortunately, been forced to suggest that an invitation to the

house party ball might be forthcoming to Lady Templeton, Abigail had thought there had come an improved connection between them both. Now, however, from the moment she had stepped into his company, that strange tension had reappeared. It was as though he had felt the very same but now did not want to continue with that improvement. Instead, he might wish to push it back, to push it away from them both. That was not what Abigail wanted but it seemed as though Lord Templeton was not about to permit her such a thing.

Her future with the Earl of Crestwood was as unsettling a prospect as it had ever been. If he would not look at her, would not willingly engage her in conversation and had no desire to improve their connection, then what was she to do?

“Miss Townsend! There you are!”

A whirlwind in a shade of pink rushed towards Abigail and she caught her breath, only to laugh as Lady Isabella embraced her. “Lady Isabella, good evening. ”

“How wonderful that you are here!” the lady exclaimed, grasping Abigail’s hands and stepping back. “I did ask for the staff to tell me when you had arrived but I was out in the gardens and it took me some time to return.”

“I am very glad to see you again.” Abigail meant every word, for Lady Isabella was a very kind creature and seemed to be very glad indeed to have her in Crestwood Hall – which was more than could be said for her brother. “I look forward to spending a few days here.”

Lady Isabella squeezed her hands. “This shall soon be your home! You are to be the Mistress of Crestwood Hall, so it is just as well you are here for a few days so that you might know everything about it. It is a beautiful house and my brother keeps the estate very well.”

Abigail cast a look up to Lord Crestwood and though he smiled at his sister, it was a little tight and he did not respond to her in any way.

“Come, let me take you to the drawing room and there we might have tea and cakes,” Lady Isabella said, pulling her towards the door though Lord Crestwood did not make any protest. “The dinner gong will not sound for at least another two hours so I am certain a cup of tea will give us no difficulty.”

Abigail glanced over her shoulder but Lord Crestwood had already turned away. Her heart twisted and she swallowed hard, a little surprised at how sharply an ache came into her heart. Was this what she was to expect from Lord Crestwood? A gentleman so unwilling to consider affection, so undesirous of tenderness between himself and his bride, that he would be nothing but cold and distant? She had seen hints of the sort of gentleman he might be, the sort of character he had within himself – but she had also learned how easily he pushed that down. It was almost too difficult to bear and though she put a smile to her face as Lady Isabella led her forward, the pain in her heart grew with every step she took.

“And a wonderful dinner as well!”

Abigail smiled briefly at her mother’s enthusiasm though she herself did not share it. The dinner itself had been delicious but it was Lord Crestwood’s complete lack of interest in her company which had her heartsick.

“You are all very welcome,” Lady Crestwood replied, sharing Lady Townsend’s smile. “Now, shall we take our leave, ladies, and leave the gentlemen to their port?”

Out of the corner of her eye, Abigail saw how Lady Isabella smiled warmly in Captain Harrington’s direction and how he, in return, responded with a small

inclination of his head. She then turned her attention to Lord Crestwood but he was not looking at her nor even in her direction. Instead, his head was turned as he spoke directly to her father.

A shadow fell over her heart and she rose quickly, hurrying from the room before her distress could be made known.

“You are sorrowful over my brother’s lack of attention to you.” Lady Isabella slipped her hand through Abigail’s arm as they walked to the drawing room. “I will tell you the truth, however, though it may be of little comfort.”

“Oh?” Abigail chose not to deny her sadness, looking at her new friend as Lady Isabella led her to the drawing room. “What is it you wish to tell me?”

“Only that he has been in this dark mood ever since the ball where he met Lady Clara again,” came the reply, though Lady Isabella frowned at this. “He told both myself and my mother what took place and spoke warmly of your defence of him and of your quick thinking when it came to Lady Templeton’s ridiculous demands. I do not know why she is so eager for Lady Clara to be pushed back into Crestwood’s sphere.”

Abigail’s smile was tight. “Mayhap I do.”

“You do?” Lady Isabella’s eyes flared wide. “What could it be?”

Uncertain as to whether or not she ought to say, Abigail sat down on the couch with Lady Isabella beside her, though her friend’s eyes remained wide.

“I – I know that Lady Templeton was most displeased to find that I was engaged to your brother,” she said, still rather cautiously. “I believe that there is hope that there might be a return of affection there.” She pressed her lips together, wondering if Lady

Isabella understood what she meant by that only for Lady Isabella to gasp aloud, her understanding more than clear.

“That is preposterous! Does she not understand how badly Lady Clara hurt my brother?”

“I am sure she does, but she believes that an apology will suffice.”

“Well, it certainly shall not! And it absolutely will not bring about a return of his affections! My brother adored Lady Clara. She promised to wait for him until he returned from war - but when he appeared, rather than being profoundly grateful that he was even alive, she broke his heart by stating that she could not marry him because he looked like a beast. Her words ignited the rumours about my brother and I cannot and will not forgive her for that.” Her chin lifted, her jaw tight. “And I do not think my brother will be able to do so either. The whole idea is quite ridiculous and I do hope you have not let any of Lady Templeton’s words enter your heart. ”

Abigail smiled briefly and looked down at her hands. “I do not think that such a thing will happen, no,” she said, eventually. “Though I am sorry to hear of all Lady Clara did.” Recalling what Lord Crestwood had said about being unwilling to indulge in any sort of affection in their marriage, she let out a slow breath. “Though that does not mean, I hope, that he feels I might think of him in the same way.”

Lady Isabella did not immediately respond to this and Abigail’s heart squeezed.

“You think that he might?”

“I do not know.” Lady Isabella sighed and closed her eyes. “My brother has been a changed man since he returned from war. For a long time, he would not have us look at him and would not, I believe, even look at his own reflection. My mother and I were both determined not to give up on him, however, for we saw him lost in a great

deal of darkness and pain. We told him that we would look upon his face and would have no fear nor desire to turn away. Eventually, he permitted us to speak with him and to look at him as we might normally do and what he stated about himself, what he said of his appearance was nothing akin to what I saw. To his eyes, he believed himself to be ravaged beyond all recognition but I saw my brother still. When Lady Clara spoke those cruel words to him, it only made him believe all the more than he did not deserve to be considered with any sort of affection or consideration simply because of his altered appearance. I believe that he may believe that you think him repulsive but have said nothing about it due to the fact that this marriage is an arrangement. You would not have come to him of your own free will, I suppose.”

“But that does not mean that I find him grotesque!” Abigail exclaimed, tears pricking her eyes now. “He has already told me that I am not to expect any affection from him, that this marriage is to be considered almost as a business dealing whereas – ”

“He said that to you?” Lady Isabella grasped her hand tightly. “Oh, my dear Abigail, I am sorry for it. My brother shoulders a good deal of pain and will not speak of it to anyone – not even to my mother. I do not believe him, however.”

Abigail blinked quickly so as to push the tears back. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that I have seen him watching you. I have also witnessed the two of you dancing and saw how he laughed and smiled. Thereafter, I watched the flickering emotions on his face as he grew quiet and serious again and, in hearing what you have said, I believe that to be a deliberate choice on his part. It must be that he does not wish to permit himself such feelings – but they are there, Abigail, I am sure of it. He has not smiled nor laughed as he did with you for many a month. ”

A faint hope began to build in Abigail’s heart and, drawing in a deep breath, she pressed Lady Isabella’s hand. “Now, tell me about your Captain Harrington.”

“ My Captain Harrington?” Lady Isabella’s tone sounded a little surprised though a flush came into her cheeks almost at once. “I do not know what you mean.”

A quiet laugh broke through Abigail’s sadness. “You speak of what you have witnessed and now I speak of what I have seen.” She smiled, hoping Lady Isabella did not think her too bold given their new friendship, though her friend only blushed all the more and looked away. “I thought you were in town for the Season?”

“I am – I was.” Lady Isabella looked back at Abigail quickly, then leaned forward, speaking in hushed tones. “I have always found the Captain to be an honourable, respectful and considerate man and indeed, he has been strong enough to challenge my brother on occasion! But I am afraid of what I feel. What if the Captain does not return my affection? And what is worse – what if he does?”

A slight frown pulled at Abigail’s forehead. “Why should it be worse? Surely the return of his affections is what you desire?”

“Not if my brother refuses to permit me to consider him,” came the reply. “I am afraid that my brother will insist that I marry a gentleman of high rank.” Her eyes flared. “You might speak to him about it, I think!”

“Me?” Abigail quickly shook her head. “No, I do not think I could.”

“Yes, you could!” her friend insisted, suddenly alive with hope. “Once you are married, you will have better chance to speak with him and you might... well, you might discover his thoughts on the matter, at the very least. It would guide me into what I might do next.”

Abigail hesitated. “You could simply ask your brother, Lady Isabella?”

“Just ‘Isabella’, please. Yes, I suppose I could but I am so very afraid of the answer.”

Pressing her lips together, Abigail chose to be bold. “Then I shall do my best,” she answered, making Lady Isabella squeal with delight. “I shall not let your brother’s determination to push aside all hope. Mayhap he is determined to believe that I am of the very same nature – and opinion – as Lady Clara but I am determined to prove otherwise. He might seek to withdraw from me but I am eager to seek him out. And that means that I will speak to him of whatever I can, whenever I can – including your Captain Harrington, Isabella.”

Her friend threw her arms around Abigail’s neck and though Abigail admitted silently that she felt herself a little anxious about what she had said to Lady Isabella as regarded Lord Crestwood, she felt her courage grow. There was a little flare of hope within her heart now, a little belief that Lord Crestwood might be able to open his heart to her – if only he would allow himself to do so. Trust would have to be built between them, an openness and thereafter, a vulnerability. She could do it, certainly, but would he?

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Arthur frowned. "I do not know what you are talking about."

"Yes, you do." Captain Harrington rolled his eyes and threw back the rest of his port before he continued. "You know precisely what I am describing, you are choosing to pretend that you are ignorant of it."

Looking away, an uncomfortable prickling climbing up his spine, Arthur coughed lightly. "I am doing nothing deliberate, I can assure you of that."

"Ignoring your betrothed will do you no good."

Glad that Lord Townsend had already taken his leave and gone to join the ladies, Arthur turned his attention back to his friend. "I am not trying to ignore her."

"Then what else would you describe your behaviour as?"

"I walked with her through the house from the very moment she arrived!"

"And were thereafter, very glad to give her to your sister," Captain Harrington returned, quickly. "Do not think that I was unaware of that! I took tea with them both and was rather surprised that you did not join Miss Townsend. I thought a betrothed gentleman might wish to spend time in the company of his bride to be."

Sighing inwardly, Arthur tried to find an explanation but none would come to him. Nothing that he was willing to share, at least.

"You would not look at her all through dinner," the Captain continued, giving Arthur

no peace over this matter, even though he wished desperately that his friend would stop speaking. “And whenever she spoke, you did not even give her your attention! Where does this determination to ignore her come from? It is not wise, my friend. You are soon to be wed and – ”

“I cannot permit myself to grow close to her!”

The words flung themselves from Arthur’s mouth before he even had opportunity to think of what it was he wanted to say. Captain Harrington’s eyes flared wide and he blinked rapidly, only to then pour himself another glass of port and, thereafter, to top up Arthur’s glass.

“We shall need this if we are to discuss any further,” he muttered, though Arthur shook his head.

“I have no desire to discuss it.”

“And yet, we shall.” There was a tone to Captain Harrington’s voice which brooked no argument and Arthur sighed aloud in the hope that this might affect his friend’s determination.

It did not.

“Why can you not permit yourself to draw close to her? ”

Closing his eyes, Arthur gave a small, jerky shake of the head. “It is not good for me to allow my heart free, Harrington. You must understand that.”

“No, I cannot understand it in the least! That is why I am asking.”

“Please, my friend, let me have peace.”

The Captain only took a swig of his port and then turned his chair so he might face Arthur a little better, a gleam in his eye which spoke of firm determination. "I do not think I can. This is rather troubling and you know that I am not at all inclined towards ignoring difficulties."

"No, you are more likely to run into them, head on."

Captain Harrington chuckled. "Such determination is what made me a Captain," he replied, with a shrug. "And I shall display such determination now. Tell me, my friend, why can you not let your heart open to her? Miss Townsend is nothing akin to Lady Clara, if that is what you think."

Arthur's heart lurched. "That is precisely what I think."

There came a few moments of silence, only for the Captain to throw up his hands. "How can you say such a thing? Miss Townsend is not at all like Lady Clara!"

"Ah but you cannot know what she thinks of me, can you?" Arthur lifted one eyebrow as his friend frowned. "You can only guess. Lady Clara spoke her thoughts aloud and ended our engagement but Miss Townsend was brought into this engagement by her father. She has no say in it."

"But you asked her if she truly wished to move forward into matrimony," Captain Harrington protested. "Of course she had a choice!"

"Not if her father had already determined that it was to take place and that in doing so, she would not only save her family from ruin but also bolster her sister's chances of matrimony." Rubbing one hand over his face, Arthur let out another heavy sigh. "I do not know the lady so therefore, I cannot tell what she truly thinks of me and my wretched appearance. It is not as though I would have been her choice, had she been given the freedom to make her own match."

The Captain did not respond with a sharp retort as Arthur had expected he might. Instead, he frowned all the harder, rubbed one hand over his chin and let his mouth pull tight to one side. Arthur took another sip of his port, letting the liquid spread warmth through his chest while, at the same time, pain broke through his heart and made him wince.

The betrayal by Lady Clara had torn at him more than he had ever expected. It was not as if he still loved her nor did any part of him desire to have their connection repaired – but yet, the words she had spoken and the rumors she had started had forced him back into a darkness from where he had not yet fully emerged. To let his heart open to Miss Townsend, even if she was his wife, might yet again bring him such pain, might push him back into the shadows and he could not bear that. It was a risk he was entirely unwilling to take.

“The only way you are to be certain of Miss Townsend’s feelings is to speak with her.”

“But she might very well lie to me.”

The Captain shook his head. “My dear fellow, I do not know the lady particularly well as yet and already, I am entirely convinced that she is not the sort of creature who would do such a thing as that. There is an honesty to her, an uprightness which I think would push all manner of things away from her. The way she spoke to both myself and to your sister this afternoon has made a very positive impression upon me and even from looking into her face, I was quietly convinced of her excellent character.”

A pang struck Arthur’s heart. “Mayhap you ought to marry her instead.”

The words were childish and foolish and he regretted them the very moment he said them. Where had they come from? Had that strange fire in his heart been envy?

Jealousy?

Thankfully, the only thing Captain Harrington did was laugh. “Thankfully for you, I have no interest in marrying Miss Townsend.”

“I did not mean that.” Still highly mortified, Arthur looked away as the Captain chuckled again. “Forgive me. I am not always inclined to listen to advice.”

The Captain’s smile faded. “Then at least consider that Miss Townsend is not the same character as that of Lady Clara. The truth is, old friend, I think you do her a disservice by suggesting that she cannot be anything other than what you have deemed her worthy of.”

Picking up his port, Arthur swirled it in the glass and scowled. “The lady is only marrying me because she has no other choice. Yes, I did ask her but her ability to refuse was all but taken from her. I have no knowledge as to what she thinks of my face, of my scars but I can guess. Why would any lady look upon this and think anything good?” Gesturing to his face, Arthur shook his head. “I am not at all the sort of gentleman any young lady would desire to marry. Not when I look like this.”

“And again, you say things about her which are entirely unfair,” the Captain replied, quietly. “You do not know what she thinks of you – though I suspect it will be less than favorable given the way that you ignore her presence!” A smile spread quickly across his face. “Though that comes from your dark mood rather than your injuries. In truth, my friend, I think you consider yourself more of a beast than anyone else does. That name might have been given to you by Lady Clara but it does not mean that everyone in the ton accepts it nor believes it. You, however, have clung to it and have decided that yes, this is precisely who and what you are. This is not something you need to define yourself as, however. You are no beast. You are a gentleman of honour, one who carried the burden of war upon his shoulders and yet returned to his family in safety.”

Arthur shifted in his chair. “But an altered man.”

“It is entirely up to the individual how much they alter,” came the reply just as a fiery anger shot through Arthur.

“How can you say such a thing as that? I had no choice over my appearance!”

“No, but you have a choice in how you behave, in how you respond to others and in what you offer them of yourself.” The calm reply shook some of Arthur’s anger out of him and as the Captain took a sip of his port, Arthur closed his eyes and let the lingering anger fade away. Once it had gone, understanding came and Arthur realized exactly what his friend meant. He was the one responsible for his actions, for what he gave of himself and for the way he behaved towards others. Could it be that he had only been thinking of his appearance and of Lady Clara’s words? Being called ‘the Beast’ had sunk down, deep into his soul and he had not been able to rid himself of it... or had he chosen not to remove those words from himself? Had he decided that he was unworthy of affection, consideration and care from any young lady simply because of those words and because of his appearance?

“I – will think on what you have said.” Speaking a little haltingly, he looked back at his friend and then shrugged. “And I shall attempt to speak with my betrothed a little more.”

The Captain did not grin or laugh aloud as Arthur had expected. Instead, he simply nodded and offered him a small smile, though, to Arthur’s mind, it was one tinged with a little sadness. He said nothing more, picking up his port to finish the glass and, thereafter, rising to his feet.

“Shall we make our way through? The ladies will be wondering where we are or what has kept us.”

“Of course.” The Captain rose and followed Arthur to the door. “Have you sent out your invitations to the ball which is to come at the end of the house party?”

Grimacing, Arthur nodded.

“And are Lady Templeton and Lady Clara invited?”

“Yes, unfortunately,” Arthur replied, heavily. “I would have preferred to have burned their invitation and never sent it but I am afraid that it was already demanded. Besides which, it is better than them attending the house party!”

“That is true,” the Captain responded, albeit with a rueful smile. “I see you are not in the least bit eager for Lady Clara to attend. ”

“Nor Lord Drover, who is also invited, given that he was a part of the conversation at the time.” With a scowl, Arthur marched to the door of the drawing room. “Let us hope that in the crush of the ball, their presence is entirely hidden.”

Captain Harrington nodded. “Those are three individuals who it is entirely proper for you to ignore,” he said, pausing for a moment before the door was pushed open. “But Miss Townsend’s presence ought to be celebrated.”

Arthur nodded and walked into the drawing room. His stomach twisted, his heart leapt and his breathing quickened as he let his gaze fall upon Miss Townsend for what was the first time that evening. She was laughing at something his sister had said, her green eyes bright and her cheeks lightly flushed. When her gaze caught his, the smile did not fade immediately and for only a few moments Arthur was offered the opportunity to see what it would be like for such a happy, contented smile to be placed upon him. His heart warmed and he smiled back at her, even though inwardly, he fought hard not to pull it back, not to resume a harsh, stern demeanor.

“Welcome again, Crestwood.”

Arthur looked to his mother. “Thank you, Mother. Are we to play a little cards this evening, perhaps?”

His mother’s eyes flared, perhaps surprised that he had offered such a thing only for her to beam with obvious pleasure. “A wonderful idea, my dear!”

Soon the games were organized and Arthur forced himself to take a seat next to Miss Townsend rather than sit as far from her as possible. If he was to consider and act upon what Captain Harrington had said, then that would mean doing the precise opposite of what it was he thought best – and perhaps, in time, permitting his heart to open just a little to his beautiful betrothed.

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Abigail rose and pulled on her dressing gown. Having spent the last two days at Crestwood Hall, she now found herself struggling to sleep what with the heat of the day and given that her thoughts were continually fixed on Lord Crestwood and their upcoming marriage. A good many plans had been made the last two days and though she was contented with them all, she still found herself rather anxious over the impending wedding day. Lord Crestwood's attentions towards her had improved a little – at least he looked at her now – but there was still a good deal of reserve displayed. It was as though he had to purposefully remind himself to sit with her, to speak with her and even to smile at her. On one or two occasions, the smile on his lips had come naturally but other times, it had been forced and hurried, barely there before it had disappeared again.

“Perhaps a new book to read?” Murmuring to herself, Abigail made her way to the door of her bedchamber and, opening it, peered out into the darkness. Turning back into the room, she picked up her candlestick and then stepped out again, knowing the house well enough by now to know where she had to go. The library was not too far from her bedchamber though the manor house was very large indeed. Everyone else, Abigail was sure, would be abed by now and the servants had taken to their rooms also. It was only unfortunate that she had not been able to sleep given both the weariness of her bones and the late hour.

Her soft slippers made no noise as she hurried down the hallway, candlestick still in hand. Coming to the library, she pushed open the door and stepped inside, only to let out a cry of surprise.

“Miss Townsend.”

Lord Crestwood rose from his chair the moment Abigail stepped inside and Abigail, her heart still thundering from the shock of seeing him, began to stammer furiously.

“My lord, I – I did not realise. I should return.”

“Nonsense.” There was a small smile to Lord Crestwood’s face and he waved one hand around at all of the books. “You have come to find something to read, I imagine?”

Abigail nodded and set the candlestick down, realizing that Lord Crestwood was rather merry no doubt due to the brandy which now sat on the table in front of him, though the glass was nearly empty. It would not have been his first glass either, she considered, moving towards the shelves slowly while keeping one eye on Lord Crestwood. A lady ought not to be alone with a gentleman under any circumstances – and one where she was wearing only her nightgown and dressing gown even more so!

“I do not mind which book I take,” she said quickly, her heart still pounding rather furiously as Lord Crestwood moved a little more towards her. “Something that I can read to help me sleep.”

“Ah, you see? That is a wise thought. If you cannot sleep, you take a book to read. If I cannot sleep... well... ” Gesturing to his empty glass, he swung back towards her and smiled again, though he stumbled just a little. “Brandy.”

“I think a book would have done you a good deal better.”

He laughed then and Abigail’s heart lurched, making her lick her lips as the Earl of Crestwood drew ever closer. The desire to escape, to hurry away from him and maintain her propriety was entirely absent, much to her surprise and instead, she found herself eager to remain, to linger with him – even though such a thing was most untoward and certainly could not be truly considered!

“I think you are right, Abigail.”

A thrill ran up her spine and she shuddered lightly hearing her name upon his lips. “I thank you, Lord Crestwood.” Swallowing hard, she looked up at him, seeing a softness in his expression which had not often been there before. “Why could you not sleep?”

A frown pulled away Lord Crestwood’s smile. “Because I have been thinking. And thinking too much for any length of time is incredibly taxing.”

Recalling her promise to Lady Isabella about attempting to draw closer to Lord Crestwood even when he might not desire it, Abigail harnessed her courage and spoke boldly. “What is it you have been thinking of? Is it our wedding?”

“Mayhap.” The Earl tilted his head. “And Lady Clara.”

Abigail’s heart dropped to the floor. He was thinking of Lady Clara? Why would he be considering the lady who had injured him so greatly? Was he now eager to resume their connection? Had his thoughts turned in a more positive direction towards her?

“She caused me a great deal of suffering. But mayhap, I have added to my own pain also.” With a sigh, the Earl reached out and caught her hand, pulling her a little closer. “Tell me truthfully, Abigail, do you think me a beast?”

Surprised, Abigail’s eyes widened. “A beast? No, indeed I do not!”

“No?”

The way his blue eyes searched her face had her own heart aching as she pressed her lips together and wondered how she might convince him. “No, Lord Crestwood. I truly do not think you a beast. What I do think is that what Lady Clara said of you is

utterly disgraceful.” Her heart thudded wildly she dared to lift her other hand and, though the Earl’s eyes widened a little, he did not move back as she lightly pressed her hand against his scarred cheek. “There is nothing beast-like about you, Lord Crestwood. Nothing at all.”

For what felt like an age, they stood there together, her hand pressed against his cheek, his hand holding hers tightly. And then, much to Abigail’s astonishment, the Earl of Crestwood smiled, turned his head and caught her hand in a quick kiss before it fell back to her side.

This was astonishing in the utmost! The brandy had made the Earl of Crestwood a good deal merrier, yes, but there was also an openness to him now, a vulnerability which he could not help but reveal even though, in his sober minded state, Abigail was certain he would never have done such a thing. Lightning ran in her veins and she swallowed tightly, looking back at him with careful eyes. He was making no attempt to move back from her, showed no eagerness to move away as she would have expected him to, had he been sober and though her whole body was thrumming with a strange heat, Abigail did not move away either. Yes, she ought not to be in his presence alone and certainly not in her night things, but this was more of an astonishment than anything else and, truth be told, she did not want to depart from him. There might be more for her to say, more for him to express and even though he were a little in his cups, would it not be good for him to do such a thing?

“Captain Harrington says that you are nothing like Lady Clara.”

Abigail’s throat constricted. “I beg your pardon, Lord Crestwood?”

“He says that you are not like her, that you would tell me the truth should I ask it.”

A strange darkness crept over her. “You think that I am akin to Lady Clara? The lady who not only broke your heart but told the ton that you were a beast?” She spoke

freely, seeing him frown but finding the shock of his words so great, she could not hold herself back. “Why should you think that I would be anything like that lady? I should never dream of saying anything like that!”

“Ah but you might think it!” Lord Crestwood tapped her nose lightly with one finger though the scowl on his face took any playful teasing away from his tone. “I do not know what it is you think of me.”

“I do not know you,” Abigail answered, truthfully. “You seem not to desire to spend a good deal of time in my company.”

The Earl frowned. “Yes, but I told you why that was.”

“You do not intend to allow any emotion or affection into our connection,” she repeated, remembering the very words he had told her. “You are determined that very little will change as regards your life even as a married man.”

“And that is still exactly what I think,” came the reply though his gaze slid away from hers as he spoke.

Courage sent strength into her veins and, reaching out, Abigail took his hand in her own. “Then how can you ask me what it is I think of you if you will not give me time to get to know who you are?”

Lord Crestwood frowned and narrowed his eyes as though she were deliberately attempting to catch him out rather than speaking freely. “Yes, but you can see my face.”

“And what does that have to do with who you are?” she retorted, a little more harshly than she had meant. “You are not the injuries to your face, Lord Crestwood. I care very little for that. My only concern is your character though, from what I have

learned of you, I believe that you have the capacity to be a kind, considerate gentleman.”

Lord Crestwood’s frown lingered. “You will not tell me what you think of my appearance, then? You say that I am not beast but mayhap I am repulsive, grotesque or hideous to your eyes. Mayhap you dread taking me as a husband.”

Abigail hesitated, letting her fingers push through his, holding onto his hand a little more tightly. This was what Lady Isabella had spoken of to her, this ongoing concern that Lady Clara’s words did still cling to him. “I have already told you that I do not think you a beast. Nor do I think you repulsive, hideous or grotesque.”

“You cannot ignore my scars!”

“I can and I do.” She lifted her shoulders and let them fall. “When I look at you, Lord Crestwood, I see only your eyes and all the shadows that they hold. I see the questions within them and when you smile, I see the beautiful light which shines in them, chasing the darkness away. I see that you hold me away from you, that you do not want me to draw near and I find myself sorrowful in that.”

“Why?” There was a softness to Lord Crestwood’s tone now, a quietness which had her heart leaping. “Why do you feel any great sadness in that?”

Abigail smiled and pressed his hand, taking a step closer to him as a gentle scent of pine spun through her. “Because you are to be my husband, Lord Crestwood,” she said, putting one hand to his chest and feeling herself tremble with the great swell of hope which rose in her. “To my mind, it is only right that a wife should know her husband and her husband know her.”

Lord Crestwood drew in a long breath. “And you wish to know me?”

“I do.” Hope burned bright as he looked down into her eyes. “Very much. ”

The room spun with stars as Lord Crestwood held her gaze, his hand still in hers, her hand against his chest.

And then he dropped his head and kissed her.

It was so unexpected, so extraordinary that for a moment, Abigail could not quite take in what was happening. The heat of his mouth on hers sent her tumbling to great heights of astonishment and, thereafter, delight. This was more wonderful than anything she had ever imagined! All she had wanted was to be a little closer to Lord Crestwood, to know him better than she did at present and now he was kissing her? It was something she would never have dared do herself but it had been he who had kissed her rather than the other way around – which meant that he had to desire such a thing!

Her delight broke apart in a moment as Lord Crestwood pulled back sharply, releasing her with such force, she stumbled forward and was forced to catch herself.

“I – I should not have done such a thing.” Lord Crestwood put one hand over his eyes and leaned forward, a groan escaping him. “I should never have – forgive me, Miss Townsend.”

No longer did he call her Abigail, no longer did he show any eagerness to be in her company. Instead, he was moving away from her, a look of almost panic on his face as he realized what it was he had done. Abigail felt no such upset, finding herself still glad that he had reached for her in such a way and thus, she spoke honestly of her feelings.

“I am not at all upset, Lord Crestwood. After all, we are to be married and – ”

“ I should not have done such a thing!” he exclaimed again, throwing his hands up in the air and then turning around on his heel to stride to the opposite side of the room from her, blanketing himself in shadow. “It was foolish. I am foolish.”

“You are not.” A slight tremble came into her voice as she reached out one hand but Lord Crestwood only shook his head and she dropped it back to her side. “How can a closeness, an intimacy and even an affection between husband and wife be a foolish thing?”

“Because it will only lead to pain,” he replied, harshly, his face a little flushed now. “Besides which, someone such as myself is unworthy of such affections. I am dark and monstrous whereas you are light and laughter. No, Miss Townsend, it is best that I remain far from you and you stay far from me. We may soon be husband and wife but I can promise you that the next kiss we share will be in front of the clergyman and, thereafter, no more shall follow. Do excuse me.”

Abigail could say nothing, could do nothing other than watch as Lord Crestwood made his way directly towards the door of the library. Stepping out, he left the door a little ajar and for a moment, Abigail made to follow after him, only to come to a stop.

Her heart cried out from the sheer agony within it, from the joy it had tasted only briefly to the brokenness which followed thereafter. She had allowed herself such hope, had believed that he might be willing to open his heart to her even a little, only to see her hopes shattered. Lord Crestwood was determined to remain quite alone, to keep his heart solely to himself and there was nothing, it seemed, that she was going to be able to do to free it.

I should never have kissed her.

The regret was almost entirely overpowering and Arthur let out a sigh of frustration, dropping his head and rubbing one hand over his eyes. Last night, he had been too much in his cups to let his senses take over fully and, therefore, had made the most ridiculous mistake. Despite the fact he had been rather merry, he still remembered everything that had been shared between them, every word he had said and every response she had given. He recalled the tenderness of her touch, the softness of her hand in his and the way she had smiled up into his eyes. He remembered how he had felt when he had kissed her, the sweetness of her lips pressed against his and how he had been so overcome with emotion, with desire and singular happiness, he had wanted to do nothing more than to crush her to himself.

Foolishness.

“You do not look to be in particularly good spirits this morning.”

Looking up, Arthur grimaced at the seemingly ever-joyful expression upon Captain Harrington’s face. “Good morning, Harrington. Alas, I fear that I cannot always be as cheerful as you, despite my very best intentions.”

“Ah but that is because I have much to be cheerful about, much as you do.” Captain Harrington arched an eyebrow. “Or is it that you are entirely displeased with all I have said to you of late and you now have decided you and I shall no longer be friends?”

This brought a faint glimmer of a smile to Arthur’s face, despite his own frustrations.

“No, I think we are just as good friends as we ever were.”

“That is because you have decided that I am correct in everything I said to you.”

Arthur snorted and rolled his eyes.

“You see, you will not deny me!” Captain Harrington chuckled and walked back to the door, holding it open. “Will you come to breakfast? Or will we stand here and argue a little longer over the fact that everything I told you about your future and your bride was entirely correct and you only wish you had followed my advice more quickly than this?”

Again, Arthur smiled and though his friend opened the door wider, he shook his head. “I – I do not think I will join you all for breakfast.”

This had Captain Harrington shutting the door tightly rather than removing himself from it. “And why not?”

“It is for no particular reason!” Arthur exclaimed, turning away entirely so he might look out of the window for fear that what he had done would be written all over his face for his friend to see. “I am simply desirous of my own company.”

“I do not believe that for a moment.” Captain Harrington walked across the room to join Arthur, despite his statement that he sought his own company. “What is this about? Is it to do with Miss Townsend?”

Something must have flickered in Arthur’s eyes or his lip must have curled in one particular way for Captain Harrington immediately gasped and grabbed Arthur’s arm, shaking him slightly. “Please tell me you did not injure her with harsh words!”

“I did no such thing.” Irritated, Arthur jerked his arm out of Captain Harrington’s

grip. “I spoke honestly, as you suggested. I asked her what she thought of me.”

Captain Harrington waited, eyebrows lifted.

“She said she was most upset at Lady Clara’s words and certainly did not think of me in the same way,” Arthur continued, his gaze returning to the view from the window. “She was rather upset, I think.”

“You think?”

Seeing that he was not about to escape Captain Harrington’s questions, Arthur let out a groan of frustration and dropped his head to one hand. “Please, Harrington, desist with the questions.”

“Tell me what happened,” his friend insisted. “You will feel better for it.”

Sighing, Arthur lifted his head. “I had imbibed a little too much brandy. I spoke too freely. I... I acted without thought.”

Captain Harrington frowned. “You upset her in some way.”

“I did.”

“If you did not speak harshly to her, then what... ?” Captain Harrington trailed off, his eyes suddenly widening. “You embraced her?”

Arthur groaned aloud, his eyes closing. “I did worse. I kissed her!”

When he opened his eyes – and much to his frustration – Captain Harrington was grinning so broadly, his eyes were dancing.

“You do not think this as foolish an endeavour as I do, I see.” Arthur shook his head.
“That does not surprise me.”

Captain Harrington laughed aloud. “That is because it is the most wonderful thing! You finally acknowledged that you have some affection for the lady.”

“You do not understand the severity of this! I cannot permit myself to feel anything! It is much too foolish. I asked Miss Townsend what she thought of me, what her true opinion was and even though she gave it, I found myself struggling to believe it.”

“That is not her fault.”

Arthur winced. “No, it is not but all the same, it would be wise of me to refrain, to pull back and to keep myself at a distance from her. After all, I am not her choice, I am not the gentleman she would have sought out had she had every chance to choose her husband for herself. I cannot pretend that I am deserving of such a creature, even if I could bring myself to trust her words.”

Captain Harrington’s smile twisted into a dark, heavy frown. “You are a foolish man, Crestwood.”

Rather surprised, Arthur looked across at his friend. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that you are a fool,” came the reply. “Here is a young lady who seeks to know you better, to grow in intimacy with you and your only response is to draw even further back? You tell yourself you cannot trust her words all because another lady broke your heart and in doing so, you punish both yourself and Miss Townsend – and that is hardly fair!” With a grunt of frustration, Captain Harrington turned on his heel and stomped across the room, back towards the door. “And you say that you do not deserve her – then in that regard, I might agree with you! You are so determined to keep her back from you that you do not deserve the happiness that

might be yours! The happiness you might share with her! Do you know how many gentlemen and how many ladies would wish for such a joy as you have been offered at this moment? Do you understand how much of a fool you are for hauling yourself as far from it as you can? I do not think you do, my friend, else you would be hurrying to Miss Townsend's side and apologising for whatever you did last evening that upset her. Now do gain some courage and come to breakfast. Look Miss Townsend in the eye and consider what happiness you can bring to her future rather than thinking only of yourself."

With that, he walked from the room and slammed the door shut behind him.

Arthur could barely breathe. His friend had never once spoken to him in such a way and the shock of it reverberated right through him. It stole the air from his lungs, sent heat writhing through his veins and try as he might, he could not help but feel a hot, heavy wave of shame begin to pour down over him. Was this what he had needed to hear? His mother, sister and the Captain had always been sympathetic in their support of him, though in the last few months, there had come a little more sternness from his mother, though Isabella remained as sweet as ever. Now Captain Harrington was sending sharp daggers in his direction... but was it something he deserved? Had he become so lost in himself that it was much too easy for him to not even think of what Miss Townsend might require or even desire from him?

Turning back, he looked out of the window again, only to see none other than the very young lady he had been thinking of walking through the grounds. Was she returning from an early morning walk? Or was she thinking about stepping out before breakfast?

"I should not hide myself from her," he muttered aloud, absently rubbing at one side of his face as he considered joining her. His fingers touched at his scars and he frowned, worry rising up within him.

And then he recalled how she had settled her hand against his cheek. How she had smiled at him as her fingers had felt the very same scars he now traced. Miss Townsend had not jerked back. She had not yanked her hand away and then stared at him, horrified. Instead, she had simply smiled – and he had caught her palm with a kiss before she pulled it away. In that moment, he had felt himself soften towards her, felt his heart yearn for something more, something profound and thereafter, had let that desire grow so strong, he had been able to do nothing other than kiss her.

I cannot hide from that now, he told himself silently, making his way across the room even though his heart beat furiously. I must face it. I must speak with her. Wincing inwardly, he recalled how he had stepped away from her, how he had pulled away so quickly when his heart had cried out for the sheer joy he was experiencing in that one, soft kiss. It had been a feeling most unexpected and something he was entirely unused to – and it had terrified him. Pulling back, pulling away had been the only thing he had been able to do, whilst calling himself a fool at the very same time. Making his way to the front door of the house, Arthur found himself wondering if that had been Miss Townsend's very first experience of a kiss... and if it was, then what a dreadful experience it must have been for her! To have her so enveloped, so tight in his arms only to be released, to be almost thrown backwards as he called himself a fool repeatedly must have torn her with both confusion and upset – and then he had quit the room afterwards! He had walked out without saying another word to her.

Arthur's shame grew with every step he took and he lowered his head, feeling the heavy weight of Captain Harrington's words on his shoulders. He had only been thinking of himself but to admit that, to find a new way to consider things meant considering everything differently, and Arthur was not quite sure how to begin.

“Lord Crestwood, good morning.”

Lifting his head, Arthur swallowed hard as Miss Townsend walked towards him. The

morning sun danced across her brown hair, sending flickers of gold and copper into every strand and her green eyes were more vivid than he had ever seen them. There was faint color in her cheeks though Arthur did not know whether that came from the morning air or from being in his company .

“Good morning, Miss Townsend. I saw you out walking and thought to join you.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “You did?”

“I – I think we must discuss last evening.”

Her color heightened. “What is it that you wish to discuss, Lord Crestwood? We shared a kiss. I do not think there is anything too profound in that.”

The tension in his throat clawed at him. “I would agree with you. However, I – ”

“I am surprised at your agreement, given that you tore yourself from me, told me that you were foolish to have kissed me – me, who is to be your bride – and then walked from the room without so much as another glance in my direction.” Her chin quivered and Arthur’s heart tore at the sight of gentle tears in her eyes. “I do not understand what took place within you, Crestwood. I am aware that you were a little... overcome with brandy but you were still in your senses. You understood what I was saying and I understood you. For the first time, I felt as though our connection was growing, strengthening. But then you broke it apart, shattering it completely when you discarded me.”

“I understand that you are pained by my actions. I do not quite know how to explain myself but I should like to tell you that I am sorry.” Arthur inclined his head but did not reach out to take her hand, though his heart urged him to do so. “I should not have kissed you.”

“No, you should have done!” Her loud exclamation surprised him though sparkling tears fell from her eyes to her cheeks. “We are to be wed, Crestwood! I am to be your wife and I am to bear your children, should we be blessed with any. How can you tell me that you ought not to have kissed me? Do you not understand the suffering that comes with your disregard of me? Can you not see the pain and tears at my very soul when you call yourself a fool for kissing me?”

Arthur closed his eyes and reaching out, waited for her to take his hands. There came nothing but silence for some minutes and he did not yet open his eyes, finding the tears on her cheeks and the sadness in her eyes almost too much to bear. When, finally, her fingers touched his, he let out a ragged breath of relief, and finally looked at her again.

“I have not only had Captain Harrington rail at me but now I have you also,” he said, with something of a wry smile. “But I deserve it, Abigail. I know that I do.” Letting out another breath, he shook his head, relieved that her tears had stopped. “There is so much confusion within my heart and mind, so much doubt and uncertainty and none of it ought to be placed upon your shoulders. I told myself that our engagement ought to be just as a business transaction for I did not expect – and did not want – to be drawn to you. I have been fighting it. When you spoke up for me at the ball, when you broke down Lady Templeton’s intentions of joining us at the house party, my admiration was unable to be withheld. Our dance brought feelings to the fore that I wanted to remove from myself at once, for fear that my heart would be injured again.”

“Because of Lady Clara.”

Arthur nodded. “I have much to learn, Abigail. I am sorry that I injured your heart. I am sorry that I called myself a fool and removed myself from you so abruptly.” With a deep breath, he squeezed her fingers. “Might you give me time to find my way? This is not something I think I can step back from any longer. I cannot continue to

build this wall up between us but I need time to understand how to take it down, piece by piece.” Searching her face, he let hope begin to build in his heart as her expression softened, a small smile at her lips. “Could you give me that, Abigail?”

“Of course I can.” The pressure on his hands was returned as yet another tear fell to her cheek, though she brushed it away quickly enough. “I am sure that –”

The sound of a rumbling carriage had them both turning as one, though Arthur found himself more than a little irritated at the interruption. Confused as to who would have taken the carriage out so early in the morning, he led Miss Townsend away the path so they would not be knocked over by the carriage.

“Who is it?” she asked, as the carriage passed them and then came to a slow stop at the steps to the front door. “Were you expecting more guests?”

“No, not as yet. The ball is not until this evening and –”

“Oh, Lord Crestwood, how glad I am to see you!”

The loud voice of Lady Templeton ran out towards them both and Arthur frowned immediately, offering his arm to Miss Townsend so she might take it before they moved forward together. “The ball is not until this evening, Lady Templeton. Might you have mistaken the time?”

The lady laughed, just as Lady Clara stepped out of the carriage, coming to stand next to her mother though she did not look at him. Instead, she kept her head lowered, her gaze fixing to the ground though Lady Templeton beamed at him as though she had every right to have appeared at the house early.

“We were due to stay at a nearby inn but they did not have space to keep our horses for the rest of the day,” Lady Templeton said as Arthur exchanged a glance with Miss

Townsend, seeing the sharp glint in her eye and understanding it to be doubt – doubt that Lady Templeton was telling even a word of truth. “My daughter was resigned for us returning to London but I assured her that you would have no difficulty in our presence for the few short hours until the ball.” Lady Templeton smiled warmly but Arthur did not return it. It would be more than a few ‘short hours’ until the ball which Lady Templeton clearly knew, but she had come here deliberately. Surely this could not be another ploy to push Lady Clara back into his life? He had already made things quite clear in that regard and it was foolish of Lady Templeton to be attempting to change what was already firmly fixed.

“I am truly sorry, Lord Crestwood, Miss Townsend.” Lady Clara barely lifted her gaze enough for Arthur to catch her eye though he was pleased that she acknowledged Miss Townsend’s presence. Her mother had not done so. “I did try to think of an alternative but – ”

“Alas, there was none,” Lady Templeton interrupted, with a broad smile and waving one hand about so as to dismiss her daughter’s words. “And so, here we are, hoping that you will have kindness enough to welcome us in.”

What was there for him to do? Arthur glanced to Miss Townsend who gave him nothing but a small, wry smile and with a sigh, Arthur held out one hand to the door. “I will have a footman sent to bring anything you may wish to take inside.”

“Well, we shall need a room, will we not?” Lady Templeton laughed aloud as though Arthur was being foolish in some way by forgetting to offer them a room. “We have gowns for this evening and will require a space to prepare.”

Miss Townsend’s fingers tightened on his arm and Arthur bit back the sharp retort which had come firing to his lips. Instead, he took in a deep breath and nodded. “Of course. I will have that prepared at once.”

Without another word, he made his way directly to the door of the house, taking Miss Townsend with him and thereafter, speaking quickly to one of the footmen.

“I am terribly sorry,” he murmured, as the footman was dispatched to help the ladies with their things. “I did not think for a moment that she would be as bold as this.”

“There is nothing for you to apologise for,” Miss Townsend replied, quietly. “It is not as though you arranged for this to take place.”

He managed a small smile. “Certainly, I did not! Had it been my choice, I would have refused them entry to the house!”

This made Miss Townsend laugh and despite his frustration, Arthur could not help but smile. This was what Miss Townsend brought about him, what she offered him – a lightness, a happiness and a delight which he could not garner from anyone else. Not even the presence of Lady Templeton and Lady Clara seemed to dampen it and, as he walked with her, back towards the dining room, Arthur’s smile grew all the more, settling into his features as he looked down into Miss Townsend’s eyes .

He had meant every word he said to her, had spoken with true sincerity and her response, her willingness to wait for him, to give him the time he required was more than Arthur felt as though he deserved. He would do everything in his power to make his character one of openness, of gentleness and of kindness rather than clinging to the darkness and shadow he had known for so long. What Miss Townsend offered him was both terrifying and wonderful in equal measure and he was determined to cling to it, to draw near to and no one, not even Lady Templeton or Lady Clara, would prevent him from doing so.

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“What do you mean, they have already arrived?”

“Simply that.” Abigail offered Lady Isabella a small smile and then reached for her cup of tea again. “They came when I was out walking with your brother.”

“I see.” A spark of hope came into Lady Isabella’s eyes. “Why were you out walking with him?”

Abigail smiled. “He came to join me, actually,” she said, her heart still warm with all that he had said to her. “We had a good conversation. One which will lead us forward, I think.”

“Then I am glad to hear that.” Lady Isabella’s eyes searched hers. “And did you speak of the Captain?”

“Not as yet.” Seeing the slight dimming in Lady Isabella’s eyes, Abigail smiled softly. “But I shall. I have every intention of speaking with him this evening about it all.”

Lady Isabella’s snatch of breath had Abigail’s smile growing steadily. “You truly do care for the Captain?”

“I – I think well of him, that is all.” Lady Isabella laughed and blushed as Abigail lifted an eyebrow. “Very well, very well. The truth is, I have no desire to return to London and be flirted with by many a gentleman. I will not know for certain whether or not any of them truly care for me or if they only care for my dowry and the standing that my brother and his title brings. I might only be a respectable wife rather

than a loved one and I do not want that.”

Abigail’s heart twisted but the pain passed quickly as she recalled Lord Crestwood’s words. He had asked her for time, time so he might become better accustomed to all that he was feeling and attempting to consider. It was a good deal better than being determined to push all such feelings away and Abigail was glad of that.

“If I was to tell my brother the truth, it would be that I have no desire to return to London at all, though I know we must.” With a wry smile, Lady Isabella dropped her gaze to her hands. “Why should I indulge in such things, have gentlemen pull at my attentions when the only person I want to consider, the only person I am eager to think of, is already present?”

“And he is a gentleman who will truly love you,” Abigail agreed, though she kept her tone low. “You would never have the fear that the gentleman you wed sought you out only for your dowry or the like, as you said.”

“Precisely.” Lady Isabella sighed contentedly. “I have spoken to Captain Harrington of my feelings. ”

Abigail’s eyes widened in surprise. “You have?”

“And he returns them,” she said, looking back at Abigail. “He wanted to speak to my brother at once but I have begged him to wait until you have learned what it is my brother thinks on the matter.”

Bearing a sense of responsibility in this now, Abigail nodded and reached to squeeze her friend’s hand. “Very well. I will speak to Lord Crestwood this evening, I promise.”

A long breath of relief came from Lady Isabella. “I thank you. I am so very happy

already but this would bring my happiness to complete fulfillment, I am sure!”

The door to the dining room opened and before Abigail could say anything more, Lady Templeton walked into the room, garnering some murmurs of surprise as she came to join them all at the table.

“Well, what a fine morning it is!” she said pleasantly, sitting down and gesturing for the maid to pour her a cup of tea rather than doing so herself. “My daughter and I thought it a beautiful day for a drive and since we could not leave our horses at the inn, we came as quickly as we could to this delightful house. I am very much looking forward to the ball this evening, as I am certain you all are.”

The rest of the table gave a response of sorts to Lady Templeton, though Abigail noticed how her mother and Lady Crestwood shared a look – and it was not a favorable one. Even Abigail’s sister, Charlotte who, thus far had been delighted about everything, seemed astonished to note Lady Templeton’s presence given the way her eyes had widened in Abigail’s direction.

“I think I shall take my leave.” Lady Isabella murmured, rising to her feet. “Miss Townsend, would you care to join me?”

Abigail nodded and with a faint smile to her sister to reassure her that all was well, followed after Lady Isabella to the door. It was only once they had stepped through it that she let out a long sigh and shook her head to herself, her smile disappearing almost immediately.

“I knew Lady Templeton to be bold but I did not think she would be as bold as this!”

Agreeing with her friend’s exclamation, Abigail tried to push her concern away. “I do wonder what it is she is doing here and why she is so very insistent about her daughter and Lord Crestwood given that he has already made himself perfectly

clear.”

Lady Isabella slipped her hand through Abigail’s arm. “Do try not to worry. It is clear that Lady Templeton has decided that my brother is the one her daughter should marry and even though it is much too late, she appears quite determined! I cannot tell what her reasons for such intentions are – mayhap they are more impoverished than they appear or mayhap there is something about Lady Clara that makes Lady Templeton believe Lord Crestwood is the only one who can wed her – but regardless of all of that, my brother is the most determined, stubborn gentleman I have ever known and what he says, he will stand with. It does not matter what Lady Clara thinks or what she wants, nor does it matter a jot what her mother desires! My brother has no interest in reawakening what he had between himself and Lady Clara.”

“I believe that.” With a deep breath, Abigail rounded the corner alongside her friend, only to come across Lord Crestwood and, much to her shock, Lady Clara. They were standing facing each other, with Lady Clara speaking so fervently, she did not seem to notice Abigail and Lady Isabella’s arrival. Lord Crestwood lowered his head, speaking in low tones and Abigail, who had come to a sharp stop, stared in horror as Lady Clara put one hand to Lord Crestwood’s arm.

He did not shake it off. He did not move back from her or turn away entirely, as she might have expected. Instead, he simply stood there and continued to speak as she held onto him tightly.

“This cannot be borne!” Lady Isabella spoke before Abigail could think of what to do next – though her instinct was to retreat – and she hurried forward, pulling Abigail with her. On hearing their footsteps, both Lord Crestwood and Lady Clara looked back at her and in that one moment, Lady Clara dropped her hand and moved back a step or two.

But it was too late. She had already seen what Lady Clara had done and the way that

Lord Crestwood had not moved away from her either. She did not understand it but neither did she want to hear any explanation, not as yet. It was already too shocking for her to fully take in.

“Isabella, Miss Townsend.” Lord Crestwood’s voice rasped a little. “I do hope you have both enjoyed breakfast? I was just encouraging Lady Clara to go and take a little something to help settle her stomach after her carriage drive here this morning.”

“I am sorry you are feeling unwell.” Abigail lifted her chin and tried to smile though her lips refused to move. “I am sure you will want to feel quite recovered in time for the ball.”

“I do, yes.” Was that a spark she had seen in Lady Clara’s eyes? A hint of triumph, perhaps? “A cup of tea will be just the thing, I am sure.” Turning her head, she smiled up at Lord Crestwood. “Will you join me? You said yourself you have not had breakfast as yet.”

Lord Crestwood frowned. “I am not sure I am hungry.”

“Oh, do come!” Lady Clara exclaimed, putting her arm through his and pulling him forward. “I would feel embarrassed to walk in alone and you know very well that my mother is dreadful when it comes to mortifying me all the more!”

Abigail caught Lord Crestwood’s eyes, saw how he flushed, how he frowned and how, after a momentary hesitation, he let himself be pulled away. Her heart dropped, her stomach twisted and she turned abruptly, making her way blindly along the hallway, her breathing ragged.

“Whatever is my brother thinking?”

The cross voice of Lady Isabella reached Abigail’s ears but she barely heard it,

utterly confused over what Lord Crestwood had done. He had assured her that there was nothing between himself and Lady Clara, that he had no desire for her company and yet she had seen him standing talking with the lady, watched as he had not pulled his arm back from her touch and had eventually walked with her towards the dining room, leaving her alone with Lady Isabella.

What could he be doing?

“You are upset.” Lady Isabella let out a harsh breath and much to Abigail’s surprise, stamped her foot in obvious upset. “He ought not to have done that. No doubt he felt immense pressure to do as she asked so that he might not appear to be as callous as he was the first time she came to call.”

Abigail frowned, just as Captain Harrington appeared, coming towards them with a broad smile on his face – though that changed the moment he took in Lady Isabella’s expression. “Might I ask what happened?”

“Oh, he would not speak with her!” Lady Isabella exclaimed, as Abigail’s eyes flared wide. “He would give her no time whatsoever to speak. He did not want to be in her company for a moment and strode from the room, leaving both her and her mother to speak only to myself and my mother. We had to then make polite conversation with two people we did not want to even lay eyes on. She remembered her brother’s reaction when Lady Templeton and her daughter had paid them a visit some time ago. To have Crestwood walk arm in arm with Lady Clara now is quite the opposite reaction, I must say though, no doubt, he has done so simply to appear as well-mannered as he can.”

“I heard that Lady Clara and her mother had arrived early,” the Captain remarked, as Lady Isabella gave him a warm smile. “Forgive me for interrupting but I did wonder if that was true. I heard one of the servants whispering about it.”

Abigail nodded though her throat ached so tightly, she fought to speak clearly. “Lord Crestwood was most displeased at their arrival.”

“I am sure that he was!” the Captain exclaimed, as Abigail managed a small smile, reminding herself of how disgruntled the Earl had been as Lady Templeton had stepped out of the carriage. “It will be just as Isabella has said; Lord Crestwood is now in the unfortunate position where he must be well mannered and even a little jovial, if he can be, which is unfortunate when he will have no desire to be so. ”

Taking in a slow breath, Abigail released it again and nodded, pressing her hands together and pressing the tips of her fingers to her lips as she inclined her head, thinking on all that the Captain and Lady Isabella had said.

“There is nothing for you to worry about,” Lady Isabella said reassuringly, as though she could read Abigail’s mind. “My brother is only being gentlemanly. If things are improved between you as you have said, then do not think he will turn his back on that so quickly.”

“And certainly do not let yourself believe for even a moment that he is at all interested in furthering his connection to Lady Clara,” the Captain added, as Abigail dropped her hands. “I can assure you, after the conversation we had this morning, he does not think of her at all.”

Comforted and reassured, Abigail smiled first at the Captain and then at Lady Isabella. “Thank you, my friends. I am glad to have you both here and to hear your wise words.”

Lady Isabella smiled. “But of course.”

“Now, I think I shall take myself to my rooms for a short respite,” Abigail continued, looking first to Lady Isabella and then, keeping her expression as innocent as she

could, returning it to Captain Harrington. “Captain, I am certain that you are more than able to entertain Lady Isabella.”

The Captain grinned as Isabella’s cheeks flushed hot. “I am not only able, I am also willing,” he replied, with a chuckle. “Thank you, Miss Townsend.”

“But of course.” Smiling at her friend, she squeezed her hand and then stepped away, doing her utmost to push away the image of Lord Crestwood and Lady Clara walking arm in arm down the hallway and away from her.

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The ball was in full swing and Arthur smiled to himself, despite knowing that Lady Clara and Lady Templeton were present. It had been a good few days and he had, surprisingly, enjoyed himself more than he had expected, particularly in getting to know Miss Townsend a little better. He would have to continue that pursuit of her, would have to continue growing the intimacy between them and that, though it did not come naturally as yet, would do so in time, he was sure. For the first time, it felt as though he were stepping out of a dark and dusty place into a place so filled with beauty and light that he could not quite accustom himself to it fully, given he had been so long in the shadow.

“I must admit, I was surprised to get your invitation. I did not think you would be as bold as to invite me.”

His lip curling, Arthur drew himself up fully. “I had very little choice after Lady Templeton basically forced my hand. I had to invite everyone within that company.”

Lord Drover chuckled though there was some great friendship between them rather than this hostility which Arthur felt running right through him. “You could have ignored me. I would not have cared.”

“Though you cared enough to come all the way from London to my estate,” Arthur put in, before he could stop himself. When Lord Drover’s tight smile faded, Arthur only shrugged. “I have never done anything to harm or hurt you, Drover. You may wish to continue on in such a vein but for what purpose? I do not understand the animosity between us, nor do I understand your desire to spread rumours about me but one thing I do understand is that you are not a gentleman to be trusted. So please, do join us. Do come and take the wine and eat the presented food but do not expect

any other sort of warmth in your welcome.”

“The fact that you do not understand explains everything.” Lord Drover’s lip curled. “You always were both blind and foolish.”

Anger swelled but Arthur took a breath and pushed it down. It would do no good to lose his temper here and certainly not with someone so unimportant to him now. “If you do not wish to tell me, then so be it.” With a shrug he turned away, only to walk straight into Lady Clara’s path. “Oh, forgive me!” Stepping back, Arthur held up both hands, already a little embarrassed and hoping he had not stepped on her foot. “Are you all right?”

“Perfectly.” Lady Clara smiled up at him, her face filled with a hope that Arthur did not want to encourage. This morning had already brought about one conversation between the two of them and though it had been a good conversation and one which, he believed, was entirely needed, it had also been awkward and brought with it a tension which he did not like. Lady Clara seemed to think that they would now be friends and he did not want to injure her by stating that was the last thing he desired. When Isabella and Abigail had come upon them both talking in the hallway, he had been somewhere between embarrassment and relief, though he had then mortified himself all the more by permitting Lady Clara to pull him towards the dining room – and had not yet found a way to tell Abigail all that he had said to Lady Clara and all that she had said to him. There had been much preparation for the ball though they had all sat together at dinner thereafter. He had barely managed more than a brief smile in her direction and a brief word of hello rather than the prolonged conversation he wished to have.

“Are you to dance this evening, Lord Crestwood?”

Arthur cleared his throat as he fought to find an answer that would not upset Lady Clara but speak truth at the same time. “I am not yet certain, Lady Clara. I intend to

find Miss Townsend just as soon as I am able so I might offer her whichever dances she pleases.”

Lady Clara’s smile flickered. “I see. That is more than understandable and I am sure Miss Townsend will appreciate your consideration of her.”

“I am sure she shall – and I must now go and find her.” Inclining his head, Arthur made to move away only for Lady Clara to catch his arm. He turned, irritation spiking through him, though he said nothing of it to her.

“Might you return to stand up with me thereafter?”

A little confused, Arthur tried not to let the frown pulling at his forehead spread into his expression. “I beg your pardon?”

“Well, after all we spoke of this morning, it would be a way to show everyone that things between us are perfectly at ease now, would it not?”

Considering, Arthur took in a slow breath. “Mayhap it would,” he admitted, after a few minutes. “But as I have said, I must go and find Miss Townsend first. Do excuse me.”

Walking away from her – and relieved that she had not attempted to pull him back, Arthur made his way all the way around the ballroom in the hope of finding Miss Townsend but try as he might, he could not see her. He even passed Lady Clara again, though she was in deep conversation with Lord Drover and did not so much as glance at him.

“Are you looking for your betrothed?”

Arthur turned, only then to smile warmly at his sister. “Isabella, you look quite

magnificent.”

“I do, don’t I?” The delight in his sister’s voice had Arthur laughing, though he took her hand and bowed over it .

“Yes, you do. I should be very glad to dance with you this evening, if you would wish to stand up with me?”

“I should like that very much.” Lady Isabella smiled at him when he released her hand. “You are looking for Abigail though, yes? She has only just come down.”

“Oh.” A little surprised that it had taken her a time to join them all at the ball, Arthur looked in the direction his sister pointed, only for his breath to hitch.

Miss Townsend looked absolutely breathtaking and, for the first time since they had been introduced, he found himself unable to speak. Her eyes met his and Arthur put one hand to his heart and then bowed in her direction, a prickling running down his spine as he lifted his head to look at her again. He could hardly take her in, could barely think of what to say that might express his feelings adequately. Making his way towards her, he put one hand out to her and, to his joy, she took it without hesitating. Perhaps he would not have to worry about explaining what his conversation had been with Lady Clara until the ball was over. He could speak to her about that come the morrow.

“Miss Townsend – Abigail. I cannot find the words to tell you of my thoughts at this moment.”

Miss Townsend blushed beautifully, the curls in her hair a burnished bronze in the candlelight and the green of her gown highlighting the color in her eyes. The way she smiled at him, the tenderness in her expression and the hope in her gaze filled his heart with warmth and this time, though his first response was to ignore it, to press it

back and down, he did not let himself do so. Instead, he accepted it and let it flow through him and, to his very great astonishment, a happiness spread all through his heart and his mind, giving him a joy which he had never before experienced.

“You are very kind, Lord Crestwood. I am glad to be here with you this evening.”

“As am I,” he answered, truthfully. “I do hope you will dance with me this evening?”

In answer, Miss Townsend slipped the card from her wrist and handed it to him. “I should be glad to dance any of them with you.”

“I shall dance two, at the very least.” Looking at them all, he lifted his head and smiled at her. “What do you say to the quadrille and the waltz?”

Miss Townsend looked up at him. “I did enjoy our first waltz, Lord Crestwood.”

“Then this one shall be even better.” Leaning closer to her, he smiled into her eyes. “I promise not to turn from you, not to pull my smiles away or to hide my happiness in your company. ”

“Then it truly will be a good deal better,” Miss Townsend murmured, quietly, her cheeks still flushed as she smiled gently. “I look forward to dancing with you again, Crestwood.”

He smiled at the intimate way she spoke to him, for there was no ‘Lord Crestwood’ on her lips now but rather only, ‘Crestwood’, just as his mother and sister called him. “Thank you, Abigail.”

“And I do hope you will dance with a Captain?”

Arthur chuckled as Captain Harrington came to join them though Miss Townsend

nodded eagerly and handed him her dance card thereafter. “Do you not have enough dances to complete your evening that you must now come to steal them from my betrothed?”

“Your betrothed has more than enough dances to offer,” Miss Townsend replied, as Arthur laughed. “Thank you, Captain, I would be glad to stand up with you.”

It took some minutes for the Captain to choose his dance and when he moved away, Arthur quickly offered Miss Townsend his arm, eager to walk with her for a short while.

“I did have something I wanted to speak with you about, Lord Crestwood.”

Arthur looked to her. “It is no doubt about Lady Clara and the conversation – and situation – you came upon when we were in the hallway this morning,” he began, only for Miss Townsend to shake her head and quieten him. “No?”

“It is not that though it is not to say that I should not be glad to hear whatever it was that took place,” she answered, her free hand reaching across to settle on his arm for a moment as she looked up at him. “That certainly was an unusual circumstance to happen upon.”

Arthur nodded. “I quite agree and I would be glad to explain all to you once we have spoken about whatever it is on your mind.”

Miss Townsend took in a breath, her forehead crinkling as though she wanted to ask about Lady Clara and was fighting to concentrate on whatever it was she wanted to express to him. “It is about Captain Harrington.”

“The Captain?” Arthur repeated, as Miss Townsend’s eyes caught his. “What is it that you wish to say about him?”

“He is a good friend, yes?”

Arthur nodded.

“And you think him a good man?”

“I do.” The response came quickly and without even a speck of hesitancy. “Both he and I fought alongside each other and he displayed more wisdom, bravery and courage than I have ever seen. I think him the very best of men.”

Miss Townsend’s eyes searched his. “And it does not matter to you that he bears no title?”

“None whatsoever!” A little confused at these questions, Arthur fought back the sudden concern that Miss Townsend was asking such things for her own considerations. They were engaged and she had already agreed to wed him so there was no possibility of her thinking of herself, surely?

“Then I shall have to be bold and ask whether you would be contented with the Captain courting someone close to you.”

Arthur’s eyebrows shot towards his hairline. “I beg your pardon?”

Miss Townsend laughed at his surprise, though her face was a little flushed still. “Have you truly not understood what it is that I am speaking about as yet?”

Hesitating, Arthur let his thoughts run over what she had asked him, only for his memories of how the Captain and his sister had occasionally shared a look or a small smile.

“Oh!” His eyes widened. “You are speaking about Isabella?”

“I am, though I did promise I would do so in confidence – though quite how I was to ask you without mentioning her name, I could not quite understand!”

“What is it that you want to know?”

Miss Townsend took in a deep breath and then stopped walking, turning to face him. “What if your sister does not wish to be courted by any gentleman from London? What if her thoughts are already settled on the Captain?”

It did not take even a moment for Arthur to give her his answer. “Then I should be quite contented. All they need to do is ask me.”

“Oh, how wonderful!” Miss Townsend clapped her hands together, her face alight with a sudden, fierce joy that had Arthur smiling back at her. “She will be so glad to know of your thoughts.”

Arthur’s smile faded. “I am a little disappointed that she did not think she could ask me of such a thing herself?”

Miss Townsend smiled and reached out to slip her hand through his arm again. “You are trying to change into a warmer, more open soul, are you not? It will take time for your sister to see that, though I am certain she would be nervous all the same! I believe that Captain Harrington and she are already very much in love. It would only be right to see them happy.”

The mention of love had Arthur’s heart quickening though he looked straight ahead rather than letting his gaze go to Miss Townsend. He had once thought himself close to falling in love with Lady Clara only for his heart to be broken when she had torn herself from him. With Miss Townsend, his heart was already eager to draw close to her and while some of the sensations and the emotions within his heart were familiar, they were growing rapidly. The fact that he was choosing now not to push them back,

not to hide them away meant that he felt every single thing when it came to being in Miss Townsend's company – but did that mean that he might fall in love with her too?

“Oh, that is the quadrille!” Miss Townsend beamed up at him, her eyes bright. “Shall we make our way to the floor?”

“We shall.” Putting his thoughts to the side for the moment Arthur led Miss Townsend out to the center of the ballroom, ready to step into their dance together. This was meant to be a joyous evening, spent with friends and family, and he was not about to let his thoughts shatter even a small part of that.

“The waltz!” Arthur looked all around, hearing the waltz announced and eager to go and find Miss Townsend so he might walk out with her for it. “Has anyone seen Miss Townsend?”

“I think she left.”

Surprised, Arthur turned around to look into Lady Clara's face. “Left?”

“Yes, she was feeling a little unwell. I believe her mother went with her.”

“Oh.” Surprised at how heavy his heart suddenly became at this, Arthur looked away for a moment, rubbing at his chin. “I should go to her.” He made to step away and again, Lady Clara caught his arm.

“She said she would return in a few minutes, I do not think you need to be overly concerned,” she said, with a warm smile. “Though, since we have opportunity, should we not stand up together? It would make me very happy indeed to be dancing with

you.”

Arthur made to let fly a harsh retort, to tell her that the only person he wished to waltz with was Miss Townsend, only for another hand to grasp his other arm.

“Oh, that would be most wonderful!”

Groaning inwardly, Arthur lifted his chin. “It would be, Lady Templeton, but alas, I am to dance with Miss Townsend.”

“Ah, but she is not here! She is gone to lie down for a short while. No doubt she did not want to disturb you during the house party ball.” Lady Templeton tilted her head. “It would bring me great happiness to see you dancing with Lady Clara. After all, there has been a good deal of pain and strife between you both. How wonderful it would be to have that finally healed – and for the ton to see that there is no further bitterness or animosity between you. ”

“It would be truly wonderful.”

Arthur shook his head. “Alas, I cannot. I – ”

“ Please, Crestwood.” Lady Clara looked up at him, her eyes pleading with his. “It would mean an end to everything.” Her gaze slid to her mother and Arthur understood precisely what she meant. Lady Templeton would no longer pressure her, would no longer attempt to push the two of them together once this dance had taken place. To Lady Clara’s mind, it seemed, it would bring an end to the entire thing and that, Arthur considered, might then make the dance worth doing.

If Abigail is not here, would it not be wise to step out with Lady Clara? It would mean an end to her mother’s incessant demands and I am certain Abigail will understand. He smiled to himself, dropping his head. She is a very good,

understanding sort of creature.

“You are smiling, Lord Crestwood.”

“I am thinking of Miss Townsend, Miss Templeton,” Arthur replied, swiftly, taking the gleam from her eye. “Very well, Lady Clara, we can step out together. However,” he continued, seeing her bright smile and the clasping of Lady Templeton’s hands, “this shall not be repeated. I am not going to pretend that there is no hurt nor pain between us still, Lady Clara. Though I will say that there has come some healing of late, that is solely thanks to Miss Townsend and not because of any improvement between us. I will dance with you so that, as you say, the ton notices it and will see an end to the difficulty and tension between us – but that is the only reason I shall do so. I do not dance with you because I truly wish to or because I have any genuine desire to do so. I step out with you so that there can be an end to any whispered suggestions of ill feeling between us. That is all.”

Lady Templeton’s smile had become a little fixed and Lady Clara herself looked rather disappointed. However, when he offered his arm, she did take it though she did not smile, sharing a glance with her mother before he led her out.

The waltz began and Arthur started the dance, taking Lady Clara in his arms and thinking silently to himself how different it was when he had danced the very same waltz with Miss Townsend. Even though Lady Clara had once been a part of his life, had once had a place in his heart, he felt nothing now. There was no desire to pull her closer, no eagerness to wrap his arm around her waist a little more as there had been with Miss Townsend. He did not want to look deeply into her eyes, did not want to gaze down at her with affection growing in his heart. All he wanted was for this dance to be over.

“You say you have let the past go.” Lady Clara searched his face but Arthur only glanced at her before looking away again. “You say that is due to Miss Townsend.

Might it not be something else also? ”

Frowning, Arthur looked at her. “I do not know what you mean.”

“Could it not be that seeing me again, speaking with me and permitting our hearts to soften has brought about this healing?”

Arthur let out a bark of laughter, spinning Lady Clara around. “I can assure you that it is not. There is nothing between us any longer and I am glad of that.”

Her expression crumpled but Arthur did not let his heart soften in sympathy. He had to be truthful, had to make certain she understood and that meant speaking with her in a clear, precise manner even if it did bring her a little pain.

“I care for Miss Townsend,” he found himself saying, the wonder of it catching in his chest as he looked back at Lady Clara, seeing her eyes flare. “What we once shared is no longer a part of my life and I do not feel broken over that any longer.”

“Then you mean to say you can never come to care for me again?”

Arthur almost stumbled at her question, astonishment rushing right through him and kicking at his heart. In all of his conversations with Lady Clara, he had never once expected her to be hoping for this sort of thing! She had always apologized, had always seemed embarrassed by what her mother had hoped for or had asked him to do – but now, Arthur wondered, had she secretly been hoping for the very same?

“I am engaged, Clara.” With a frown, he saw her blink furiously as though she had been hoping for another answer and was now entirely broken over his response. “As I have said, I care for Miss Townsend.”

“But you cared for me, once,” she cried, as the music began to slow, bringing the

dance to an end. “You cannot tell me that there is nothing within your heart for me any longer for there must be something. There must be even the smallest – ”

“There is not!” Arthur released her, relief pouring through his veins as he let her go. “It is as I have said, Clara, there is nothing between us and I now have a growing affection in my heart for Miss Townsend. I am to marry her. I am glad to marry her for it is she who has taken a hold of my heart – though I confess that I am still learning what that means and how I am best able to express it.” Bowing, he waited until she had curtsied before he finished. “We are barely acquaintances, Lady Clara, and that is all that we shall ever be.”

Lady Clara let out a sob and, to his shock, launched herself into his arms. He caught her, only to realize that her lips were seeking his and, horrified, he caught her arms and set her back. “You are unwell!” he exclaimed, hoping that those around them, those who had witnessed her attempts, would hear what he had to say. “Footman! Fetch Lady Clara a glass of water at once. Come, Lady Clara, you must go to the parlour and lie down. ”

Grasping her arm gently, he led her from the floor, his heart thudding wildly in his chest. Keeping his eyes fixed, he suddenly caught sight of Miss Townsend – and the look on her face had him stumbling. She was white faced, her eyes staring and, as he held her gaze, she clapped one hand over her mouth, tears burning in her eyes, and turned away, hurrying through the crowd and disappearing entirely from his view.

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“Are you quite well, Abigail?”

Abigail flew around the room, her maid’s attempts to pack her things seemingly not quite good – or hasty – enough for her. “I am, Mama.”

“Then whatever are you doing? We are not to take our leave of here until tomorrow!”

“No, we must leave now.”

Lady Townsend’s mouth dropped open but Abigail ignored her, blinking back hot tears that she prayed her mother would not notice.

“But why?” Lady Townsend stepped closer but Abigail continued to evade her gaze.

“I do not understand.”

“You were not there last evening so you would not understand.”

Before Lady Townsend could say any more to this, the door flew open and Charlotte hurried in, not so much as glancing at Lady Townsend.

“Abigail, are you all right? I heard what took place though everyone thinks to blame Lady Clara!”

“Lady Clara?” Lady Townsend put both hands to her hips, her eyes narrowing a little.

“What is this about Lady Clara? I know I had to take to my bed a little early last evening but I did not think I had missed anything significant!”

Abigail tried again to keep her tears back but, unfortunately, they only forced their way forward all the more until she was forced to dash them away with the back of her hand. Her mother, noticing this at once, hurried over to Abigail and grasped her hand. “What is it, my dear? What is it that has you so upset?”

Swallowing tightly, Abigail pulled the handkerchief from her pocket with her free hand and dabbed it at her eyes. “Lady Clara danced in my place.”

Lady Townsend’s eyes flared and she quickly led Abigail over so they might sit on the edge of her bed, though she never once took her gaze away from Abigail’s face. “What do you mean?”

“The waltz,” Charlotte replied, taking a chair opposite them both, her expression rather worried. “That is what Abigail means. There is a waltz at every ball, I think, and Abigail had promised it to Lord Crestwood.”

Their mother nodded. “Of course. That would be expected.”

“But when the dance was announced, I was suddenly pulled back from going to find Lord Crestwood by a most insistent Lady Templeton.” Closing her eyes in the hope that further tears would be held back, Abigail let out a shuddering sigh. “She continually stepped in my path and would not let me past. I told her that I had to go and find Lord Crestwood and she quickly directed me to where she had last seen him – though when I went to the other side of the ballroom, he was not there. Only then did I see him lead out Lady Clara and they danced together as though this was always meant to have occurred.”

“Oh, my dear.” Lady Townsend squeezed Abigail’s hand gently. “I am sorry.”

“What is worse,” Abigail continued, her vision blurring as she looked against her mother, “is that Lady Clara attempted to kiss Lord Crestwood as they stood together

once the dance was over. I am sure that was what she was doing, though Lord Crestwood declared that she was unsteady on her feet and needed to rest after the waltz.”

Charlotte nodded fervently. “He did so in a very loud voice so that everyone could hear him,” she said as Abigail winced in embarrassment. “Though I am sure that many a person thought the same as you, Abigail.”

“And thus, we must leave,” Abigail replied, making to get up from her bed and continue with her packing. “If you will not depart with me, Mama, then I will take the coach and – ”

“You will do no such thing!” Keeping a hold of Abigail’s hand, Lady Townsend tugged her back so she could not rise and begin to walk about the room as she had done before. “I do not understand. What is the matter? If it was Lady Clara’s fault, her foolish action, then what is there to be embarrassed about? The shame lies with her.”

Abigail closed her eyes but it was too late. Tears began to pour down her cheeks as sobs rose in her throat, her eyes squeezing tight closed as she fought for composure. Her mother moved closer at once, putting her arms around Abigail and holding her tightly as Abigail continued to cry, unable to force her emotions into any state of composure. They remained like that for some time, with Charlotte speaking sharply to the maid, instructing her to stop staring and to leave at once. She was to bring back a tray for the three of them so they might have breakfast together – even though eating was the last thing Abigail wanted to do.

“My dear child, whatever is the matter?”

Her sobs finally subsiding, Abigail lifted her head and looked straight into her mother’s eyes. “I think there is still a connection between Lord Crestwood and Lady

Clara,” she said, hoarsely. “When she arrived, he appeared frustrated enough but I came upon the two of them speaking alone in the hallway after breakfast.”

“And did he explain what he was talking about with her?”

Abigail shook her head in answer to her mother’s question. “He did not say a word. I am sure that his intention was to explain it all to me but he did not. We spoke at the ball and I thought all was well, for we danced the quadrille and then arranged for the waltz – only for him to then step out with her. ”

Lady Townsend’s eyes sharpened, though her anger was clearly directed towards Lord Crestwood. “That ought not to have been done. The man is a fool to stand up with the lady he was previously engaged to! Why would he not be searching for you? Why should he even want to dance with her?”

Given that some of these questions had been flinging themselves around Abigail’s mind, Abigail herself could give no answer. Instead, she dropped her head and closed her eyes again, letting out a heavy sigh.

“It was ridiculous what Lady Clara attempted.” Charlotte came to sit back down again just as Abigail opened her eyes, having managed to keep another wave of tears back. “Why she should think that Lord Crestwood would be at all interested in such a connection with her when he is already engaged to you is quite beyond me!”

“Unless,” Abigail whispered, her heart aching furiously, “she has managed to convince him that she is a better choice than I. Mayhap, in my encouragements to Lord Crestwood to permit himself to feel, to allow his heart open and his emotions free, he has realised that there is still a love in his heart for Lady Clara. Mayhap she could not hold herself back. Mayhap her attempt to kiss him came about from such a wonderful, profound hope that it quite overwhelmed her.”

Silence grew like a darkness in the room and Abigail's heart tumbled to the floor. Did both her mother and her sister see the sense on what she was saying? Did they now also agree with her that what she had seen in Lord Crestwood's face, what she had begun to fear, might be of a legitimate concern?

"I think you are seeing too much into the situation, my dear."

Lady Townsend's quiet voice had Abigail looking to her, seeing the small, quiet smile on Lady Townsend's face. "Do you believe so, Mama?"

"I think that there may still be an understanding between them but I do not think that Lord Crestwood would ever be foolish enough to let himself fall back into a connection with the young lady who injured him so severely."

Abigail swallowed at the lump in her throat but it did not fade. "But there is still a chance. After all, what else could they be speaking about with such determination in the hallway? What else might they be saying that would have her putting her hand to his arm?"

"I do not know but I certainly do not think that you should run from this house simply because of what you yourself have come to believe," Lady Townsend said, firmly. "That would be foolish. Come, let us rise and –"

The door to Abigail's bedchamber flew open and she rose quickly to her feet, wondering if it could be Lord Crestwood, desperate to come and make amends but instead, in strode her father, Lord Townsend.

"All is lost!" Throwing up his hands, he began to walk about the room in a most distressed fashion, gesticulating furiously. "I shall have my debts cleared regardless, however! He will not be able to escape that so easily!"

Abigail rose to her feet, her whole body trembling. “What is it, Father?”

“I have just had a visit from Lord Drover this morning who has informed me that there is to be a renewing of the engagement between Lord Crestwood and Lady Clara!” Seemingly entirely unaware of how much this pained Abigail, Lord Townsend continued on as Abigail covered her face with her hands, pain ricocheting through her. Her mother embraced her at once but the agony of her broken heart, the pain which came from realizing too late just how much Lord Crestwood had come to mean to her, did not soften in the least.

“We are going to leave this house at once! I will not stay here and let my daughter’s name be so ruined! We will return to London immediately, find Charlotte a suitable match and thereafter, return home. Be ready within the hour!”

“The hour, Townsend?” Lady Townsend hurried forward, catching her husband’s arm. “But what of all our things? It will take the staff much longer than an hour.”

As Abigail watched, a dark gleam came into her father’s eye as he shook his head firmly. “No, my dear. Do not concern yourself. The staff will do as they are required to do and we will be away from Crestwood Hall within the hour. Abigail, Charlotte, prepare yourselves at once. The sooner we are away from this house, the better!”

The carriage rumbled away from Crestwood Hall and Abigail, her eyes sore from crying, took one last look at the manor house. No one else knew of their departure, she was sure, for there were many guests taking their leave, having arrived the previous evening for the ball and then stayed overnight so they might return this morning. Her heart was torn into a thousand pieces and yet seemed to break asunder over and over again until she could hardly bear it. The pain of Lord Crestwood’s actions and what her father had told her was so dreadful that she could not even think clearly.

“You said Lord Drover said something to you, father?” Charlotte spoke up as Abigail continued to look out of the window, seeing a tall figure begin to hurry down the stone steps and come after their carriage. “I do not know who that is. ”

“Nor did I though he knew me – and I am very grateful indeed for his warning.” Lord Townsend scowled darkly as Abigail frowned, realizing that the man hurrying after their carriage – now running as fast as he could, in fact – was none other than Lord Crestwood himself. “He warned me of what he had overheard after the ball had come to its conclusion. A secret conversation between Lady Clara and the Earl, it seems.”

Lord Drover?

A memory of Lord Crestwood speaking of Lord Drover had Abigail’s heart quickening suddenly, her eyes flaring as she fought to recall what he had said. Her eyes still lingered on the figure of Lord Crestwood, though he had stopped running by now, seeing the futility of his endeavors. Wanting to cry out for the carriage to stop, wanting to give herself time to think, to remember, Abigail closed her eyes tightly and leaned her head back against the squabs.

It was all much too painful and much too confusing for her to think concisely. Yes, she decided, it would be best for her to return back to London where, perhaps, she might then begin to make sense of all that had taken place – and allow her heart time to heal.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:16 am

“Where has Miss Townsend and her family gone to?”

Arthur strode into the drawing room and, spying his mother, directed his question to her though there was only Isabella and Captain Harrington in the room also. “Why did they leave? They were only due to depart come the morrow.”

Lady Crestwood set down the book she had been holding at once, her eyes rounding. “Gone?”

“They drove away in the carriage only a few minutes ago. I went to their rooms and were told they had already packed to leave early this morning.” Dread filled his heart as he saw his mother shake her head. “You do not know?”

“I do not.”

“Nor do I,” Isabella interjected, though the Captain got to his feet and began to meander slowly across the room, a heavy frown on his face. “Do you mean to say that Abigail has quit this house without so much as a word to you?”

Arthur’s heart twisted fiercely. “Yes, it would seem so.”

“Then something dreadful has occurred, surely.” Captain Harrington rubbed one hand over his chin. “She would not leave without telling you unless there was something untoward.”

“But I do not know what it could be!” Lady Crestwood exclaimed, though Isabella immediately sent a look towards Arthur which told him, in no uncertain terms, that

she had every idea of what it could be. “You are to be wed very soon! The wedding day is fast approaching and – ”

“You did not see Lady Clara attempt to throw herself into Crestwood’s arms last night, Mama,” Isabella interrupted, as a flush rose up Arthur’s chest and into his neck. “I will say that Crestwood dealt with it very well – though I am not certain that everyone believed your statement that she needed to rest and was a little overwhelmed after the waltz.”

“What else could I say?” Arthur protested, flinging up his hands. “I did see Miss Townsend thereafter and I should... I should have gone to speak with her at once but then the ball was to come to a close and I was required to make a speech to all of the guests who had come so far to join us and thereafter, she had already retired.”

“You were foolish.” Captain Harrington spoke pointedly but Arthur did not disagree. “If you saw she was upset – confused, even – then you ought to have made it your duty to go to speak with her. The speech could have waited. ”

Arthur nodded and letting out a long breath, ran one hand over his face. “I do not understand at all what happened. I was convinced that Miss Townsend had gone to rest and would be unable to join me for the waltz and that was my only reason for stepping out with Lady Clara. I told her firmly that this was only to satisfy the wagging tongues of the ton rather than because I wished to – and then not only did she speak to me in a most direct and unexpected manner, she then attempted to throw herself into my arms and as I took her from the floor, I saw Miss Townsend in the crowd. If she had truly been resting, then why was she in the ballroom?”

“Does it not seem obvious?” Isabella rolled her eyes and let out a frustrated breath. “Brother, it was all Lady Clara’s doing. She clearly wanted to dance with you and was not about to let your betrothed stand in her way.”

“But that makes very little sense,” Arthur protested, quickly. “Lady Clara has always been embarrassed by her mother’s forwardness, has reassured me that she does not want to pursue any connection with me and – ”

“And you have believed her,” Isabella interrupted. “That was your mistake. You ought never to have done so. I believe that she said all of those things, made out as though her mother was the only one with that particular idea because, in truth, she did want to draw close to you again and thought that to be one way for such a thing to take place. When you became engaged and when she came to this ball, I believe that, in desperation, she tried to kiss you so as to cause a scandal and force your hand. How glad I am that she did not succeed!”

A buzzing rang in Arthur’s ears and he sat down suddenly, shock racing through him. Could it be as Isabella said? Had he truly been so blind to it all?

“But why should she choose me?” he rasped, looking up at his sister again as though she would have all the answers he required. “There are plenty of other gentlemen who might accept her.”

“Are there?” Lady Crestwood tilted her head and looked up at him, though she had now become a little paler than before. “She is a young lady who has already been engaged. She was then the one who ended the engagement and, thereafter, spoke of you in such cruel, hard terms that she herself has garnered something of a reputation in how she speaks and how she acts. That is something to consider, is it not? What if there is more difficulty in her finding a match than you think?”

It was as though the clouds cleared and, for the first time, Arthur could see exactly what it was that Lady Clara and her mother had been attempting to do. With a groan, he lowered his head to his hands, his heart aching with both regret and anger at his own foolishness, at his own lack of clarity. He had been so busy being wrapped up in his own feelings, in his own thoughts and confusion as regarded Miss Townsend, he

had not given Lady Clara's motivations any real thought.

"Though I would not disagree with all that has been said thus far, there is another question I should like to ask." Captain Harrington's voice was thoughtful, filled with doubt and Arthur looked up at his friend.

"What is it?"

"I do not know Lord Townsend well," the Captain began slowly, taking out one thought at a time, "but it seems to me as though he is a gentleman who has very little consideration for his daughters."

Arthur nodded. "Yes, that is so."

"Which is strange, then, that he would hurry off from this house without questioning it, is it not? I would have thought that, given the sort of fellow he is, he would have told Miss Townsend not to be ridiculous and would not have rushed off at her demands, if that is fair. Do you not think so?"

Slowly, Arthur began to nod, his heart quickening. "I do. Lord Townsend's debts are still to be cleared given that I have not married his daughter as yet." His gut twisted fiercely and his breath hitched, silently praying that he would yet have a chance to do so. "He would not want to end this engagement. If Miss Townsend had gone to him with her concerns, you are quite right to suggest that he would have both dismissed them and thereafter, refused to leave early simply because she desired to... which means that he must have been convinced that the connection between myself and Lady Clara was quite real."

"So she must have spoken to him." Isabella looked from Captain Harrington to Arthur. "Lady Clara, I mean, or mayhap her mother?"

“Would he have listened to them?” Arthur bit his lip as Captain Harrington shook his head. “I do not think that he would have done.”

“Then someone else must have spoken to him.”

In one moment, Arthur’s breath rolled in his chest as one name, one face came to mind. One other person who had been present at the ball, who was, no doubt, still present given that he might not yet have taken his leave and one person who, to Arthur’s mind, had no intention of doing Arthur any sort of kindness.

Lord Drover.

“It could not be, surely?” he murmured, getting to his feet and walking to the door. “Harrington, come with me, would you?”

“Of course.” His friend hurried after him as Isabella got to her feet. “Who is it that you seek?”

“Lord Drover,” Arthur replied, growing angry now. “He is the only one I can think of who would do such a thing as this... though he has never explained to me why he holds such a darkness against me. ”

Striding out of the room, Arthur grabbed the first footman he saw and demanded to know whether or not he had seen Lord Drover. It took some time but, eventually, Arthur discovered that Lord Drover’s carriage had been called and the gentleman was already on his way to depart the house.

Without hesitating, Arthur turned on his heel, strode to the front door with Captain Harrington hard on his heels. The door was opened for him and, stalking outside, Arthur glared at the figure of Lord Drover who was descending the stone steps.

“Drover!”

The man turned, then frowned. “If this is your way of bidding your guests farewell, I —”

“What did you say to Lord Townsend?”

Arthur did not need to wonder whether or not Lord Drover had said anything at all, given the way that the man jerked visibly, though he shrugged thereafter.

“I only told him the truth.”

“And what is that?” Unable to contain himself, Arthur reached and grabbed Lord Drover by the front of his coat, hauling himself closer. “What did you say to him that had him driving Abigail away from my house as fast as he could go?”

Lord Drover scowled and jerked backwards, pulling himself out of Arthur’s grip, though the restraining hand of Captain Harrington held Arthur back from grabbing at the man again. “Lord Townsend was boasting to me last evening about his many debts and how you were going to pay them all,” he spat, his eyes as sharp as blades. “After what I witnessed last evening, I took great pleasure in telling Lord Townsend exactly what was now going to take place between Lady Clara and yourself. Your reputation will be nothing but dirt now, Crestwood and it is just as you deserve. I wish Lady Clara and you the very worst of futures, one that is filled with darkness and discontent.”

“Whatever are you talking about, man?” Arthur roared, making Lord Drover move back a step. “There is no engagement between myself and Lady Clara! I was tricked by both herself and her mother into dancing with Lady Clara last evening, though I made it perfectly clear to them both that I had no real desire to do so.”

Lord Drover's dark expression began to clear, his eyes rounding at the edges.

"She was the one who threw herself into me! I led her from the ballroom with the explanation that she required rest and a glass of water simply because I was doing my best to save myself from the very situation you are now describing! Do you not understand, Drover? I have no intentions as regards your cousin. I do not want to draw close to her again. She broke my heart but it has healed and is renewed but not because of her." Taking in a breath, he let it out again slowly, his hands still curled into tight fists. "Because of Miss Townsend. It is all because of Abigail. Why ever should you think to tell Lord Townsend such a thing?"

"As I have said," Lord Drover replied, though there was not as much force behind his words now. "It is because I want you to be drawn low, to have your reputation to be as little as it ought to be."

"But he has done nothing deserving of such censure!" Captain Harrington stepped closer, his eyes searching Lord Drover's. "Nothing at all."

"Why do you want my reputation to be smeared, to be mocked at by the ton? I do not understand why you have always had this animosity towards me." Throwing up his hands, Arthur let them fall helplessly back to his sides. "We were friends back in Eton. We came to London for the Season and it was only after you introduced me to your cousin that... that..."

Arthur's hands uncurled, his jaw going slack as he stared at Lord Drover, seeing how the gentleman closed his eyes, his whole body going rigid. Understanding dawned and Arthur could hardly take it in, could barely accept what it was that he now understood.

"This... this is all because of Lady Clara."

“Why did you have to take her from me?”

Lord Drover opened his eyes and shards spat from them. “I introduced her to you and suddenly, all she could see, all she could think of was you. There was meant to be an understanding between her and me!”

“But you did not tell me such a thing!” Arthur exclaimed, taking a step closer to Lord Drover. “Had you told me that she was your betrothed, then I would never have taken a step near her.”

“Except she was not my betrothed,” Lord Drover retorted, his face flushing hot. “She was meant to be considering me. I – I will not pretend that I did not care for her but then you step into her sphere and any hope I had of taking her as my bride vanished.”

Arthur shook his head, pushing one hand through his hair. “You should have told me.” Recalling everything that Lord Drover had ever said or done, he let out a heavy breath. “You tried to ruin my reputation so that Lady Clara would step away from me but instead, she clung to me, determined to be of support to me.”

“Of course she did.” His lip curling, Lord Drover looked away. “Because she is the most loyal creature anyone might ever wish for.”

“And the most manipulative, most cunning and wily creature also.” Captain Harrington shook his head as Lord Drover practically growled at him. “Why continue in this pursuit of Lord Crestwood, though? Once Lady Clara ended the engagement, then you were able to step into his place!”

“Except Lady Templeton determined that she ought to return to Lord Crestwood. Even in my presence, she spoke of how Clara ought to beg for your acceptance of her again, Crestwood. The ton does not hold her in high standing due to all of the gossip she spread about you – though they are just as guilty for spreading such stories – and

therefore, Lady Templeton urged Clara back towards you. And Clara determined that she would do it.”

Arthur scowled and turned away. “Well, now you may go to her and beg her to accept you as her husband, Drover,” he said, gesturing to a nearby footman. “For I do not ever want to see her or you again.”

Captain Harrington put one hand on Arthur’s shoulder. “What is it that you intend to do?”

“I intend to ride to London in the hope that is where they have gone,” Arthur replied, as the footman came over. “And I will do whatever I can to explain to Lord Townsend what happened and, thereafter... ” Drawing in a breath, he set his shoulders and lifted his chin. “Thereafter, I will tell Miss Townsend that I am in love with her and I want never to let her go from my sight again.”

“I do not think we should have left so hastily.”

“Please, Townsend!”

Abigail watched through dulled eyes as her mother rose from her chair, lifting her chin in the air as she spoke with a great deal more firmness in her tone than Abigail had heard before.

“Your daughter is most upset. Why then must you go on in this fashion?”

“Because I think we may have made a mistake!” Lord Townsend exclaimed, throwing one hand out towards Abigail. “At the very least, I should have spoken with Lord Crestwood. I left without doing so because of my anger but now that we have returned to London, I feel as though I was too hasty.” He gestured to the window. “We drove through this dreadful summer storm and that perhaps, in itself, is an omen.”

“Why should you have any concern, father?” Abigail threw herself out of her chair, the sorrow in her spirit suddenly turning to anger as she listened to her father speak only of himself and his concerns rather than giving her a moment of consideration – despite the fact that her mother had asked him to do that very thing. “Your debts will be paid regardless!”

Lord Townsend blinked.

“Debts?” Charlotte who, thus far had said very little, looked up at Abigail with wide eyes. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that father decided I should marry Lord Crestwood so that, in exchange, Lord Crestwood would settle the many debts our father has brought upon himself by his foolish gambling and ridiculous investments,” Abigail returned, as color flooded Lord Townsend’s cheeks though he did not look angry, more embarrassed at the truth being offered to Charlotte.

“What?” Charlotte got to her feet, her hands clenched. “You asked Abigail to do this, father? Why should you trade your daughter for such a thing as this?”

“It does not matter,” Abigail replied, before their father could do so. “I did it because I wanted you to have a good future, Charlotte.” Her eyes began to flood with tears as she turned to her sister, reaching out one hand to her. “And though I found Lord Crestwood to be a confusing and indeed, dark natured gentleman, over the last few weeks I have found his character to be entirely different from the one he presented and, indeed, I have felt my affection for him growing steadily.” Tears began to course down her cheeks as Charlotte too began to cry. “And now I find my heart entirely broken but all our dear father can think upon is himself and his own position in all of this rather than giving me, his own daughter, a modicum of consideration! ”

“How can you speak to me like that?” Lord Townsend flung up his hands, his face now scarlet. “I am your father and – ”

“And is it not precisely as she says?” Abigail did not need to say a word for her mother, much to her surprise, interjected before she could even think of what to say. Lady Townsend drew closer to her husband, her eyes narrowing and her hands going to her hips. “I came to you with the thought of Abigail marrying Lord Crestwood, I will admit to that, but I never once thought that you would attempt to swap her for your debts being repaid! In all of this, you have never once mentioned Abigail’s feelings, have never once seemed to think to ask her about her present state of mind. Instead, you think only of yourself and it is little wonder that Abigail feels as she does. I am horrified by your selfishness, Townsend. And it is time that I spoke about

such things clearly.”

Charlotte pressed Abigail’s hand as their father took a step backwards, the color fading from his face as he looked at his wife. Abigail herself could say nothing more, looking back at Lord Townsend and seeing how he fell back now that his wife’s support had faded.

“I did not know about your debts, father.” Charlotte’s voice was filled with tears. “How could you do such a thing to Abigail?”

“None of us knew the true extent of your father’s debts, Charlotte,” Lady Townsend replied, still gazing at her husband. “I did not know where they had all truly come from, though I do now and I am both horrified and deeply disappointed to hear of it all.”

“My dowry?” Charlotte asked, as Abigail squeezed her fingers. “What about my dowry?”

Abigail made to say that even if she had no dowry, she was sure they would find a way to improve it, only for Lord Townsend to say something so wonderful and yet so utterly shocking, weakness stole away every bit of strength from her.

“Lord Crestwood has made certain that your dowry is even better than it was, Charlotte.” Lord Townsend passed one hand over his eyes. “Though I have never taken a penny from either of your dowries, I can assure you of that.” His hand fell back to his side. “I may be something of an unfeeling fellow but I have some awareness of my responsibilities towards you both.”

Abigail stared at her father, her mouth opening and closing as she tried to take in what he had said. Perhaps seeing her shock, Charlotte asked the very question which was now on Abigail’s mind. “What do you mean as regards Lord Crestwood, father?”

Lord Townsend sighed. "I mean that he has taken the dowry I was to give him for Abigail and insisted that it be added to yours, Charlotte." His gaze went to Abigail. "He does not want a penny of it. "

Abigail sat down hard, her hand loosening in her sister's grip. What could such a thing mean? Either Lord Crestwood had decided he did not want her dowry due to his sympathy over her father's present standing with his debts and the like, or he did not want to take it because he had true compassion, true consideration and had wanted both her and Charlotte to be happy.

The rap at the door made her jump and though they all turned to it, the butler came in at once, apologizing profusely for his haste.

"Forgive me, my lord, but it could not wait. Captain Harrington is here and requests your urgent assistance."

"Captain Harrington?" Abigail asked, as the butler nodded.

"What is the matter?" Lord Townsend frowned, looking irritated at having been so interrupted. "What is it that cannot wait?"

"It is Lord Crestwood," the butler said, making Abigail's heart leap in surprise. "They rode through the summer storm and Lord Crestwood is now rather unwell. I believe he would not stop and the cold and the wet have brought on a fever."

Abigail's hand flew to her mouth, tears welling in her eyes.

"Then have him settled in a room at once!" Lady Townsend took charge of the situation, striding across the room. "Have the maid build up the fire in his room also. Send a footman for the doctor and have another bring the brandy." Turning, she looked back at Abigail. "Abigail, wait here until he is settled. Charlotte, look after

your sister.”

Abigail could do nothing but nod as Charlotte came to sit beside her. Their father harrumphed and quit the room, thereafter, leaving the two sisters alone. Lowering her head, Abigail closed her eyes tight against the swell of tears though she could not fully hold them back. With her sister’s arm around her shoulders, she dissolved into tears, crying over the pain, the confusion and the uncertainty which wrapped around her like a shroud.

“He came to speak with you, I am sure of it,” Charlotte whispered, though Abigail could only fight the sobs rising in her throat. “He chased after you.”

Though might he have come to end our engagement? Abigail wondered to herself, her whole frame shaking now as tears took hold. What drove him towards me with such fervency that he would not stop for the storm? And what if he does not recover?

“Once the doctor has finished his examinations, you will be able to see him.” Lady Townsend put an arm around Abigail’s shoulders as she fought to hold back her tears. “All will be well, my dear, I am sure.”

Captain Harrington, who had been given dry clothes to change into, nodded fervently. “Of course he will be. It will take him a day or two to recover his strength, perhaps, that is all. ”

Abigail looked to Captain Harrington, seeing how he did not smile, how the lines by his eyes did not crinkle and how he clasped his hands behind his back and began to pace up and down in front of the fire place. That did not show a man who was contented, who was safe and secure in the knowledge that his friend would be quite all right. That was a man who was concerned but who did not want to let the true depths of his concerns be made known.

“Why was he coming here?” she asked, stepping away from her mother and moving towards Captain Harrington who immediately stopped pacing and turned to her, giving her his full attention. “Why did he ride after me so furiously?”

Captain Harrington smiled and, keeping his voice low, tilted his head a little. “Can you not guess, Miss Townsend?”

Hope flared in her heart only to die away as she recalled what she had seen with Lady Clara at the ball. “But Lady Clara – ”

“All a great misunderstanding and, I should say, deliberate confusion on the part of Lady Clara and her mother.” Captain Harrington scowled, his expression dark. “Lord Crestwood did not know that you had taken your leave and could not understand why. A good deal of consideration later, we soon realized what had happened, followed by the shocking revelation that Lord Drover had been involved also.”

Abigail’s eyes flared in surprise. “Lord Drover?”

“He has always been eager to injure Lord Crestwood in any way he can, though the truth of it has come out now.”

“And what is it?”

Captain Harrington dropped his gaze. “It should be Lord Crestwood telling you this but, given the circumstances, I shall do so.” Taking in a breath, he spread out both hands. “Lord Drover was the one who introduced Lord Crestwood to Lady Clara. Thereafter, there grew an interest between Lord Crestwood and Lady Clara, to the point of engagement. During that time, however, Lord Drover did all he could to injure Lord Crestwood by spreading rumours about him. Lady Clara promised that she did not believe any of them and thus, their relationship remained strong. Lord Drover, it seems, was himself in love with Lady Clara and was broken hearted – and

angry – over Lord Crestwood’s connection to her. Therefore, he sought to pull them both apart by any means necessary, even by spreading rumours that were entirely untrue.”

Abigail’s breath caught. “But how could he do such a thing to a gentleman he considered a friend?”

Captain Harrington shook his head. “I do not understand it and Lord Crestwood, on learning this, told Lord Drover that he ought to have spoken honestly with him rather than bearing so great a burden. He would have stepped away from Lady Clara had it been asked of him for the sake of Lord Drover.”

“And it might have been better for him if he had,” Abigail murmured, looking away from the Captain. “Goodness, how sorry I am for it.”

“Lord Drover spoke to your father,” Captain Harrington continued, as Abigail’s gaze drove itself back to him. “He stated that he knew there was to be a reaffirming of the connection between Lord Crestwood and Lady Clara and he did so solely to drag Lord Crestwood’s name and reputation into the dirt. He wanted there to be nothing but pain and suffering and all because he had never once chosen to be truthful with Lord Crestwood about his feelings as regards Lady Clara.”

Abigail let out a sigh, shaking her head as clarity came to clear her mind. “I see. I thought... I thought as regarded Lady Clara that there was something between them. After all, she stood up with him in place of my waltz.”

“Ah but Lady Clara convinced Lord Crestwood that you had gone to lie down, that you were fatigued or unwell or some such thing. Thereafter, she was eager to force herself into your place, using all manner of words and manipulations to do it. Lord Crestwood was convinced that he should step out with her for what would be the one and only time so that the ton would no longer believe there was any animosity

between them only for Lady Clara to make more... overt remarks and to then try and kiss him when he refused them all.”

Her heart twisted. “I did see that. He told everyone that she was unsteady on her feet after the waltz and required some rest.”

“He did his best to cover up her obvious intentions,” Captain Harrington agreed, “but do you not see how desperate she was to cling to him again? Lady Clara would have forced herself upon him – and had not Lord Crestwood acted with such haste, she might have succeeded!”

“Goodness.” Lady Townsend put one hand to her heart. “Then all that Lord Townsend was told was quite wrong?”

“Certainly it was,” Captain Harrington replied, as Abigail closed her eyes in relief. “That is why Lord Crestwood rode here with such speed.” His eyes went to Abigail’s just as she opened them. “There is more to be said but I would not say it on his behalf. Those words need to be spoken by Lord Crestwood himself, though I should like to reassure you, Miss Townsend, that Lord Crestwood’s heart has not attached itself to any other. The reason he rode here with such haste, the reason he rode through the summer storm, was because of his affection for you. I have never seen him so upset, so angry and so desperate at the same time – desperate to reach you so he might set everything to rights. ”

Abigail clasped both hands to her heart and closed her eyes again as tears began to burn. “I must pray he will recover quickly, then,” she said, hoarsely as her mother pulled her close again. “So that we both might share the feelings present within our hearts without any further delay.”

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The roar of the enemy swelled and Arthur's heart slammed so hard against his chest, it felt as though it left bruises behind. Panic grew as he gripped his weapon, ready to take to his heels and fight should it be demanded of him.

Sweat broke across his forehead and he snatched in air, feeling even that stolen away from him by the fear in his mind and the dread in his heart. Looking from his left to his right, he took in the expressions of the men beside him, the men who would fight with him and maybe even die with him. This was what he had determined he would do, what he had said he would give of himself and yet the fear of it all still took a hold of him.

“What has happened to you?”

A faint voice spoke and Arthur turned his head, horrified to see none other than Abigail standing beside him. Her eyes were wide, her face filled with terror and from his throat came a guttural sound.

“It is all right.” A soft smile began to spread across her face, stealing away her fear and instead, replacing it with a gentle hope though Arthur could not understand where it came from. “I am here.”

“Why are you here?” A rasping, broken voice spoke those words and Arthur reached out for her, only to see that she was no longer there. Turning his head this way and that, he looked desperately for her, fear mounting up so greatly, it practically choked him.

“I am here, Crestwood.” Her voice came to him again, though more distant this time

and Arthur turned his head, only to see Abigail walking away from him, walking backwards but towards the enemy.

“Abigail!” Reaching for her, he tried to move, tried to run but nothing did as he asked. He seemed to be fixed in place, held back by an unseen force and as Abigail continued to move away, still making her way to the enemy line, Arthur’s heart tore in an explosion of feeling and fright. He screamed her name, knowing what was coming, knowing that she would not be free from injury and from death and seeing his future laid out for him as nothing more than darkness, deeper and blacker than he had ever experienced before since she would not be in his.

“Crestwood, I am here! I am here with you.”

Something pressed at his fingers and he looked down at his hand, only to blink furiously and realize, with agonizing slowness, that it had been nothing more than a dream.

Still breathing furiously, he looked all about him, trying to take in his surroundings, trying to come to terms with the realization that Abigail had not been on the battlefield, that he had not returned to war and there was nothing now for him to fear.

“It is all right,” she murmured, softly, his eyes drawing back to her, his fingers tightening on hers so that he was almost clinging to her, his breathing still ragged as her soft, green eyes smiled back into his. “You are quite safe here.”

“Abigail.” Trying to reach out his other hand to her, Arthur found himself a little surprised at the weakness in his frame.

“Rest.” A faint shimmer came into her eyes though her smile lingered. “You were unwell and I have been concerned for you.”

Arthur closed his eyes again, recalling how he had ridden through the fierce rain and wind which had come upon him unexpectedly – but how he had been so determined to get to Abigail, he had not given the weather even a moment's thought. "I had to speak with you."

"We can talk about such things later," she said, quietly. "Now, all you must do is continue to recover."

"Captain Harrington?" His eyes flew open as he looked back at her. "Is he –"

"He is quite well and without injury," came the reply, flooding him with relief. "You were a little reckless, Crestwood." Her voice softened with tenderness and Arthur's heart leapt with relief. Might he hope that she had not rejected him? "You should have waited for the storm to pass."

"I could not." His voice was still rasping but he held on to her hand as tightly as he could and gazed up into her face. "I had to see you. I had to speak with you so you might understand – and so that I might apologise."

With her other hand, she reached out and ran her fingers lightly across his cheek. "My dear Crestwood, I understand now. I am sorry I ran from your house without speaking to you but my heart was broken. I believed that Lady Clara had managed to find her way back into your heart but the Captain has explained all to me."

Arthur closed his eyes briefly. "I was foolish. I should not have allowed myself to be convinced that you were gone to rest and nor should I have agreed to step out with Lady Clara. Her words were convincing and I did not believe for a single moment that she was seeking to regain her connection with me. I thought... I thought her mother was the one pushing for such a thing and Lady Clara was only highly embarrassed by her actions. How foolish I was!"

“But it is at an end now.” With a small smile, Miss Townsend pressed her hand to his cheek again and then let out a slow breath. “It is all at an end. The confusion, the doubt, the uncertainty... it has all faded. All that is left now is complete clarity and, with that, hope.”

“Hope?”

She nodded though her cheeks warmed. “Hope that I might be able to tell you all that I feel and that, in doing so, there might be even the smallest hint of a returned affection.”

Unable to remain lying down, Arthur pushed himself up though Miss Townsend protested immediately. Determined despite the weakness in his body, he eventually sat back against the pillows and looked into her eyes, finding her hand again so he might take it in his own. “You need not have any fear in that regard, Abigail,” he said, softly. I came here as fast as I could, I came here with dread in my heart that you had set yourself against me now, because of what Lady Clara had tried to do – and what my own foolishness led me to do.”

Miss Townsend let out a slow breath and closed her eyes. When she opened them, Arthur was alarmed to see tears there, though she smiled quickly as if to reassure him.

“My dear Crestwood, when we were first introduced and when I first found out what my father intended for me, I was filled with so much dread, I could barely even think of my future without sorrow. The more we began to speak, however, the more we discovered of each other, the less that sorrow and fear became – to the point that my heart began to feel more for you than I had ever anticipated.” Leaning closer, she lifted her hand to his cheek again. “Crestwood, I have come to care for you. My heart has a growing and steady affection for you that I cannot hide from any longer. When I thought that you were drawn again to Lady Clara, my heart tore with so much pain,

it was almost too much to bear. As I travelled home, I realised then just how deep my affection for you had become. The truth is, Crestwood, that I love you dearly. To me, you are no beast. You are the courageous, kind, open-hearted gentleman that has claimed my heart.”

Arthur’s throat had constricted so tightly, it took him a few moments to respond. Never had he felt as he did at this moment. There was nothing but light everywhere, nothing but joy and happiness running wildly through him and, had he the strength, Arthur was sure he would have crushed Miss Townsend to himself.

“I am only open-hearted because of you, Abigail.” Lifting his hand, he settled it against hers as she rested it against his scarred cheek. “You have brought that out of me, have encouraged me to step out of the darkness and to see myself in a way which I never expected to again. Had it not been for you, for your kindness, your willingness to pursue me, to defend me and to come alongside me, I am certain that I would have continued to push away all that I felt.”

“But you are not doing so now. ”

He shook his head. “No, I am doing nothing of the sort now, Abigail, not when it comes to you. My heart is filled with an affection for you which is utterly overwhelming. It fills every part of me, burns through me and makes my life brighter in every way. You say that you love me, Abigail, and I feel as though I do not deserve such a gift.”

She smiled at him, leaning closer still so that the sweet scent of lavender clouded his senses. “You deserve it all and a good deal more, Crestwood.”

“I shall never be convinced of it,” he answered, though she laughed softly at his response, “but I do love you, Abigail. And I promise you that I always shall.”

Quite who it was who moved first, Arthur did not know but one moment he was looking into Miss Townsend's eyes and the next, he was kissing her. It was soft and sweet and unlike anything he had ever known before. He had cared for Lady Clara, he realized, but he had not loved her, not in the way he loved Abigail. She had brought him out of the darkness, taken him out from himself and had forced him to be in the light – and what a light it was! It brought him beauty and joy and happiness to such an extent, it felt as if he were entirely filled with sunlight.

“I do not think I have ever been as happy as I am at this moment,” he murmured against her lips, knowing that he had to break the kiss given that they might be joined by anyone from her family at any moment. “That is all thanks to you, my darling Abigail.”

Her eyes twinkled as she pulled back from him, though her fingers still laced through his. “I think I should continue to plan our wedding then, given that you are well on your way to recovery.”

Arthur chuckled and pressed her fingers. “I am delighted to hear you say so, for I cannot think of anything I want more than to stand up in church and take you as my bride.”

She pressed one hand to her heart, her eyes filled with the love she had spoken of. Love that was held solely for him. “And I want nothing more than to be your wife, Crestwood. The sooner we can marry, the happier I shall be. I love you.”

“And I love you.”

“Are you quite prepared?”

Abigail caught one last look at herself in her reflection before she smiled and nodded. “I am.”

“Then let us depart.” Lady Townsend came across to her and, reaching out one hand, took Abigail’s in her own. “You look very happy, my dear child.”

Abigail let out a slow breath. “I am very happy, Mama.”

“And I am still very sorry for what I did at the beginning of all of this.” Lady Townsend’s smile wobbled. “Though I can see now that it has brought you a good deal of happiness, had I known that your father was – ”

“Please, do not distress yourself on my account,” Abigail interrupted, not wanting her happy day to be sorrowful in any way. “I am happier than I thought I might ever be and it is all because you thought that Lord Crestwood would be a suitable match for me. You might not have had the same thoughts nor ideas as I had about it all but I believe that you did it with the right motivations and out of consideration for my future.” She pressed her mother’s hand and then let it go, twirling around so that her wedding gown might be displayed in all its glory. “And see now what it has brought about!” With a laugh, she threw up her hands just as Charlotte came into the room. “I am to marry the gentleman I love with all of my heart, knowing that he loves me just as much. It is more happiness than I ever thought I should have in my life and I am beyond grateful for that.”

“Oh, and you look so very beautiful.” With a sigh, Charlotte clasped her hands under

her chin, her eyes shining. “I am glad to see you happy. I could not have borne it if you were not.”

Abigail smiled and reached out to embrace her sister. “I am certain you will find your own happiness soon enough,” she murmured, as she pulled back and looked into Charlotte’s eyes. “There is my own wedding, then there will be Isabella’s wedding at the end of the Season – and then, mayhap, your wedding the following Season?”

“Lady Isabella is to marry?” their mother exclaimed, as Abigail and Charlotte giggled together. “Who is she to wed?”

Abigail turned, her heart swelling with happiness. “Captain Harrington asked for Lord Crestwood’s permission to court Isabella and he gave him his blessing. I believe the courtship has turned very swiftly to engagement and they shall marry at the end of the Season.”

Lady Townsend blinked. “Captain Harrington? She is to marry a Captain when she is the daughter of – and sister to – an Earl? ”

“Yes, Mama,” Abigail laughed, as Charlotte smiled happily at the news. “My dear Crestwood understands that one cannot help whom one falls in love with. If he were entirely unsuitable, that would be quite another matter, but Captain Harrington is brave, kind, considerate and cares very deeply for Lady Isabella. I think they shall have a very happy marriage.”

“As I am sure you shall also,” Charlotte replied, before Lady Townsend could say anything more. “Come then, I think the carriage is waiting.”

“And your betrothed will be also,” Lady Townsend continued, her smile breaking through again. “Abigail, I am very happy for you. Truly, I am. May this day be the beginning of a joyous union between yourself and Lord Crestwood, where your

future is nothing but joy and happiness within your own house.”

“And may you bring him the required heir within the right time!” Charlotte quipped as Abigail’s face burst into flame. “Come now, we must hurry. We do not want to make Lord Crestwood wait any longer than he has already done!”

With a laugh, Abigail followed after her sister, her mind already on Lord Crestwood. Soon, she would be his bride, soon she would take her place as his wife and then, she was certain, her happiness would be complete.

“I – I am sorry, Abigail.”

Abigail looked to her father, her eyes wide in surprise.

“I have had a good many things to consider and I realise that you were quite right.” Lord Townsend turned to her a little more, though her hand rested on his arm, ready for her to step into the church and make her way down to Lord Crestwood. “I should not only have been thinking of myself and yet that is precisely what I have been doing.” His eyes closed for a moment, his jaw tight. “And I will admit that I have been thinking solely of myself as regards your marriage and your future. It was my debts that concerned me – debts that I did bring upon myself, I will admit.” He turned beseeching eyes to her. “Might you think to forgive me?”

“Father.” Abigail looked up at him steadily. “I am happy. I am contented. In fact, I am overjoyed to marry Lord Crestwood! I love him and he loves me in return. Though that does not excuse what you did nor your selfishness, for I will admit that it is precisely what you have been, it has come to some good, Father, and I am more than eager to step forward this day and become Lord Crestwood’s bride.”

Lord Townsend blinked furiously but nodded rather jerkily. “Then I am contented. ”

“Though I should like to ask you something,” Abigail continued, holding back even though every part of her wanted to do nothing more than hurry into the church. “I should like your word on it.”

Again, her father looked at her but there was a steadiness in his eyes that she had not seen before. “Yes, Abigail. What is it?”

“I want you to make certain that Charlotte can pick her own husband,” Abigail replied, firmly. “And to swear that you will not touch her dowry, now it is substantially greater than it was before. I know that you have said you did not take a single penny from my dowry and I am grateful for that, but I should like you to promise that you will not do so to Charlotte’s dowry either.”

Her father lifted his chin and for a moment, Abigail thought he was going to rail at her angrily only for tears to spark in his eyes. Dropping his head, he paused for a few moments before putting his hand over hers as it sat on his arm.

“I give you my word, Abigail.”

She smiled and leaned into him. “Thank you, Father.”

“You are better than I could ever be,” he told her, nodding to the two footmen who held the doors. “Now come, let me see you happy.”

Abigail took in a long breath, steadying herself as the doors were pulled open. She did not look to the right nor to the left but only straight ahead, seeing the gentleman she loved standing there, waiting for her, with Captain Harrington beside him. Her heart leapt with joy, her face wreathed itself with smiles as she walked down towards him, her father beside her and her happiness overwhelming. She wanted to cry for the sheer joy of it but managed to contain her tears, seeing the love in his gaze as he waited for her to reach him.

Coming to stand beside him, Lord Townsend still between them both, Abigail dragged her gaze to the vicar, watching as he opened The Book of Common Prayer and, with a glance to them both, began the ceremony.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony; which is an honorable estate, instituted of God in the time of man’s innocency, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church; which holy estate Christ adorned and beautified with his presence, and first miracle that he wrought, in Cana of Galilee; and is commended of Saint Paul to be honorable among all men: and therefore is not by any to be enterprised, nor taken in hand, unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly, to satisfy men’s carnal lusts and appetites, like brute beasts that have no understanding; but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God; duly considering the causes for which matrimony was ordained. First, it was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name. Secondly, it was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ’s body. Thirdly, It was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity. Into which holy estate these two persons present come now to be joined. Therefore, if any man can show any just cause, why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter forever hold his peace.

Abigail looked up into Lord Crestwood’s eyes, smiling as the silence wrapped around them both. She did not expect anyone to speak up and though the wait became almost unbearable – for all she wanted was to make her vows – the vicar finally continued.

“Very well. Now, I shall speak to you both. I require and charge you both, as you will answer at the day of judgment when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed, that if either of you know any impediment why you may not be lawfully joined together in

matrimony, you do now confess it.”

Again, Abigail was forced to wait though a small smile began to spread across Lord Crestwood’s face. Did he too feel the same agony as she? Was he waiting for the moment where he might make his promise to her, where they might finally be declared as husband and wife?

“Very well.” With seemingly agonizing slowness, the vicar cleared his throat and, thereafter, turned to Lord Crestwood.

“Arthur, Earl of Crestwood, will you have this woman as your wedded wife, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Will you love her, comfort her, honour, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep only unto her, so long as you both shall live?”

“I will.” Lord Crestwood said those words so quickly, a quiet murmur of mirth ran around the church and Abigail herself smiled so brightly, even Lord Crestwood grinned.

“Miss Abigail Townsend, daughter to Viscount Townsend, will you have this man as your wedded husband, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Will you obey him, and serve him, love, honour, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep only unto him, so long as you both shall live?”

“I will.” Abigail spoke clearly, seeing Lord Crestwood’s expression soften as she smiled up at him.

“And,” the vicar intoned, “who gives this woman to be married to this man?”

Lord Townsend cleared his throat. “I do. ”

Nodding, the vicar gestured to Lord Townsend and, much to Abigail's joy, her father took her hand and placed it upon Lord Crestwood's. The touch of his hand to hers had her heart beating a little more quickly, her eyes fastening to him, knowing now that they were about to make their final vows to one another.

Lord Crestwood cleared his throat, speaking in rich, deep tones that flooded right through Abigail, settling him into her heart all the more.

"I, Arthur, the Earl of Crestwood, take thee, Miss Abigail Townsend, as my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth."

Tears of joy burned in her eyes as she spoke her promises, her voice shaking slightly but her happiness increasing with every word she spoke, with every vow she made. "I, Abigail Townsend, take you, Arthur, Earl of Crestwood, as my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and to obey, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I give thee my troth."

With a deep breath, Lord Crestwood turned and Captain Harrington stepped forward, offering Lord Crestwood the ring he was to place upon Abigail's finger. Holding her hand out, her heart beat furiously as Lord Crestwood took her hand and held the ring to her fourth finger.

"With this ring I thee wed. With my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow. "

Abigail watched as the ring was slipped onto her finger. It tied her to him, proclaimed to all that she was his wife and that he was her husband. Lord Crestwood smiled softly as he pressed her fingers and it took all of Abigail's strength not to lean into

him. The vicar cleared his throat gently and Abigail turned, her hand still in Lord Crestwood's as they turned to kneel.

Then the Groom will put the Ring

“Let us pray.”

Abigail inclined her head as the vicar spoke a blessing over them both.

“Eternal God, send thy blessing upon these thy servants, this man and this woman, whom we bless in thy Name; that they may surely perform and keep the vow and covenant made between them, where this ring given and received is a token and pledge. May they ever remain in perfect love and peace together and live according to thy laws; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. ”

Pressing her lips together, Abigail looked up as the vicar smiled gently, perhaps aware of just how much her heart longed for him to say these final words.

“Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder.”

Lord Crestwood rose, taking Abigail with him as they turned to face the assembled congregation.

“As both the Earl of Crestwood and Abigail Townsend have consented together in holy wedlock and have witnessed the same before God and this company, and thereto have given and pledged their troth either to other and have declared the same by giving and receiving of a ring, and by joining of hands; I pronounce that they be man and wife together.”

Abigail wanted to throw herself into his arms but there were still lines to write and documents to be signed. She did all of this in something of a daze, hardly able to

believe that she was his bride and looking up into Lord Crestwood's eyes at almost every moment, just to make certain that it was true.

“Come, my dear.”

It was done. Her hand still tight in his, Abigail turned again to face the gathered congregation of friends and family. Everyone was smiling, her mother was dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief and smiling beatifically. Charlotte and Isabella were standing to one side, ready to follow out after them and, looking up to Lord Crestwood, Abigail found herself lost in his eyes.

“My darling wife,” Lord Crestwood murmured, pressing her hand tightly. “We shall walk down this aisle and then I must be alone with you – even for only a few minutes.”

Those words sent a joyous trembling to her soul and they walked down the aisle together as husband and wife, her heart singing with the sheer joy of it all. Cheers and cries from well-wishers surrounded her, flower petals and rice thrown over them and many a blessing given. Abigail laughed and smiled and wanted to weep from happiness, looking up into Lord Crestwood's face and thinking to herself that she had never seen him smiling as happily as he was at this moment.

“You will have to all excuse me for a moment,” Lord Crestwood declared, as though he had seen her thoughts. “I must take my bride for a short walk around the churchyard and then we will return to you all.”

This brought with it some laughter and knowing looks and, blushing from head to foot, Abigail ducked her head but let Lord Crestwood lead her away from the crowd, satisfied to be, at last, solely in his company .

“My darling.” Lord Crestwood took both of her hands in his now that they were both

hidden from the view of the other assembled guests. “We are wed at last! Is that not wonderful?”

“It is.” She squeezed his hands lightly, having no desire even to blink for fear of missing a single moment of being in his company. “I can hardly believe that we are man and wife!”

Lord Crestwood lifted one of her hands to his lips, pressing a kiss to it. “I do not think I have ever been happier than when I put that ring on your finger. It was as though heaven itself had opened in the sky and sent light down upon us both. It is a wonder that I did not collapse where I stood such was the sense of gratitude and happiness within my heart.”

“I am glad you did not for I do not think I would have the strength to catch you!” Abigail laughed, as he laughed along with her. “But in truth, Crestwood, I am truly overjoyed at being your wife.”

“And a Countess, no less,” he murmured, as heat rose in her cheeks. “I could ask for no-one better, my dear. I think you are the most wonderful, the most beautiful and the most incredible lady – not only in England but in all the world!”

She smiled and then, pulling her hands from his, stepped into his embrace, putting her hands around his neck and letting her head rest on his shoulder for a moment. Lord Crestwood held her tightly, his strong arms around her waist, the steady beat of his heart a comfort. Letting out a contented breath, she looked up at him and Lord Crestwood immediately bent his head so he might kiss her. She leaned into him all the more, her heart full as his lips met hers in loving kiss, knowing that she was safe, that she was loved and that she was protected, standing here in the arms of her new husband, the supposed Beast of Crestwood... who was beast no more.

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Winter was normally Julian Hawthorne's favorite time of year. All the warmth and joy that came with Christmastide filled Julian with joy. His family, the Duke and Duchess of Thornmire, and his older sister, Elizabeth, upheld many holiday traditions, from their own private Yule log celebration with just their family and close friends, to decorating the mansion from top to bottom with beautiful, extravagant ornaments. In his youth, he would help his mother and sister handmade lush garland strands. As a grown man, his role in the preparations became to help hang decorations in places that were hard to reach for the women in his family, and to help gather berries and flowers to make the décor.

However, during the Christmastide of his twentieth year, the holiday season was the furthest thing from Julian's mind. The snow in which Elizabeth and he once loved to play, even once they were grown, now felt oppressive and uninviting. The fires burning in each hearth throughout Thornmire Manor did nothing to chase away the chill that settled in Julian's soul. The lack of decorations, which had been postponed when the duchess fell ill, was the only thing that matched the dreary way Julian felt.

As he stood outside his mother's chambers, he leaned against the cold walls, trying to pull strength from the air around him and finding none. He closed his eyes, sending up another futile prayer to the heavens for a miracle recovery for his mother. Just two weeks prior, she had seemed to be getting better. But then almost overnight, her illness had worsened, and she had been bedridden ever since, getting sicker by the day.

Just outside the manor gates, the cheery voices of carolers could be heard, muffled by

the thick walls. The notes of “In the Bleak Midwinter” grazed Julian’s conscious, but he paid it no heed. The song felt too personal that particular season, and he wanted nothing more than to tune out the music. His mother once led their family in singing carols of their own throughout the season. Now, it sat collecting dust, just as the grounds collected snow.

He clenched his fists, his nails digging into his palms. Reality was too cruel, too sharp, and he couldn’t bring himself to face what his unconscious mind knew was to come. The typically lively household had fallen eerily quiet. Rooms in which Julian’s family experienced so much love and joy were now filled with frantic whispers and fear. Even the servants, who were happy to serve in the duke’s and duchess’s employ, had grown sullen and solemn in the wake of the hushed conversations with the family’s physician.

The door to her chambers opened suddenly, startling Julian, and setting him on high alert. A moment later, the physician appeared once more, looking graver still than he had when he first entered the duchess’s room earlier that day. Julian rushed toward him, pulling him away from the slightly ajar door and looking at him with earnest.

“What is it, Doctor?” he asked.

The physician sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose with the fingers of one hand while holding his spectacles in the other.

“Just since I arrived, her strength has waned,” he said. “Her fever broke, but only for a short time. It has already returned, and it is far worse than ever before. I’m afraid there’s nothing more I can do for her.”

Julian shook his head, feeling as though the floor had vanished and he was now falling into a black, bottomless oblivion.

“How much longer...” he trailed off, unable to voice the rest of his question.

The physician understood, even though Julian couldn't say the words.

“I cannot say for sure,” he said. “But she will surely not last much longer than Christmas day.”

Julian was reeling, and his stomach tried to force the coffee, which was the only thing he had consumed in days, from his bowls. The physician reached out with strong hands and held onto Julian's arm until the sick feeling passed. Then, he patted Julian softly on the back, gesturing back toward the door.

“I recommend spending as much time with her as possible,” he said. “It could be any day now. As I said, I cannot be sure. Prepare yourself for any scenario.”

Julian nodded, stepping aside so that the physician could see himself out. Then, he turned and headed toward his mother's bedchamber door, tears stinging his eyes. With each step he took, he felt a tightening in his chest, apprehension squeezing his soul. Taking a deep breath, he pushed open the door, revealing a scene that he never wanted to confront.

Her thin, waxy figure lay still and as white as the snow outside against gray sheets that had replaced her bright pink and purple bedclothes as her illness had progressed. The physician had been right: she looked infinitely worse than she had even the day prior when Julian had looked in to see about her. Her once glowing eyes, the exact same shape and shade as his own, were dull, their light and life lost to the illness that was rapidly taking her from their family. Her laughter was long gone, replaced by a harsh, rasping cough that made him flinch with every heave of her chest.

She tried to greet her son with a weak smile, which to Julian only looked like a pained grimace. With a great effort, she motioned to the space beside her on the bed.

Swallowing hard, Julian complied, his feet feeling heavier with every step. He gently lowered himself onto the bed, feeling the mattress dip beneath his weight. Tentatively, he reached out, taking his mother's hand. It was impossibly thin, the delicate veins visible beneath skin that had become almost transparent. Despite the cold, her hand felt feverish, and it was all Julian could do to keep from recoiling from the heat.

"Julian," she whispered, her voice barely audible, but imprinting him with all the warmth and affection it always had. "My dear boy."

"Mother," he choked out, struggling to keep his voice steady, "I'm here."

Her eyes, still filled with so much love, brimmed with tears.

"I am happy to see you, sweetheart," she said.

Julian blinked back his own tears, his regret pressing heavily on him.

"I should have come to sit with you more often," he said. "In fact, I should have never left your side. Please, forgive me, Mother."

She squeezed his hand, but he only knew she had done so because he watched her make the effort. Her fingers were no stronger than the legs of a newborn pup, but the effort was apparent in her eyes.

"You are here now," she said. "That's all that matters."

Julian lifted her hand onto his lap, covering it with his free hand. Emotions were building within him faster than he could register them: fear, sadness, pain, worry, and anger at a universe that could do such a terrible thing to a woman as sweet and loving as his mother. He held her hand tightly, fighting with all his might to blink back his

tears.

“Is there anything you need me to do for you right now, Mother?” he asked.

The duchess shook her head, her eyes becoming briefly unfocused as she did so.

“No, darling,” she said. “I am just glad you are sitting here with me.”

Julian nodded, swallowing again.

“I am happy to sit with you for as long as you like, Mother,” he said.

They sat in silence for a while, his mother’s increasingly raspy breathing filling the wordless room. Julian’s mind raced, and he had to keep pushing his anguish to the back of his mind. He wanted to offer his mother comfort and keep her adequate company. But all he could think about was the moment when the rasping would stop, and her last breath would leave her.

He desperately wanted to turn back the clock, to relive those moments of joy and laughter. He would do anything to have such an opportunity. The wild notion of the magic in storybook tales being worth a try crossed his mind more than once. If he thought even for a second it might work, he knew that it would. But for now, he would cherish the time they had left. He would hold her hand and offer her solace and try not to let the storm cloud of his grief drown him.

As the days wore on, Julian couldn’t help but behold his mother’s dignity and grace with awe. Even as the illness took over, as the pain and discomfort increased and her strength decreased, she maintained much of the poise Julian had known all his life. It showed in her weak but gentle smiles and in the serene acceptance of what awaited her in her eyes. She seemed at peace with her situation. While Julian did not share the sentiment, he respected his mother’s bravery. It helped him make the most of the time

he had left with her and forget the hopelessness that was quickly sinking into his heart.

The Christmas season continued outside the walls of his mother's bedchambers. The servants bustled about, making preparations for the holiday feast and family events, and carolers came to the gates more frequently and in larger numbers. The duchess seemed content to listen to them from a cracked window in her chambers. But Julian's heart found no comfort in the songs that used to fill him with immense Christmas spirit.

As the final days of the year drew to a close, the notes of his mother's favorite song, "Auld Lang Syne" began to drift in through the window. His mother closed her eyes, her weakest smile yet on her lips, but the song was nothing more for Julian right then than a reminder that time would move on, no matter how much he wished he could make it stop. It wasn't just a year that was ending for Julian. It was the end of the life Julian had always known. It was the end of Julian's ability to open his heart to the world.

As the clock signaled the new year's beginning, his mother drew her last breath. The stillness left in the wake of her passing was palpable, and all Julian could do was weep. Grief-stricken, he found himself falling into the cold, dark pit of loss and heartbreak. His mother's death left behind a hole in his heart that no merriment or celebration could ever again fill. Every holiday song, every joyful well wish and holiday tradition, served as a reminder of what his family had lost, forever turning him bitter toward the time of year that had once meant the world to him. No world that had cruelly ejected his mother from it would ever be worth celebrating to him again.

At present

The Berrington Estate drawing room was filled with the golden light filtering in from tall windows that overlooked the snow-covered gardens outside. The hearth burned brightly, the flames producing an inviting warmth that made the room feel cozy and magical on that cold December afternoon.

Clara Bennett sat at the ornate wooden table, surrounded on either side by her younger siblings. The table was littered with piles of ribbons, paper strips, colored beads, and small silver hooks, all meant for crafting Christmas ornaments, as was her family's tradition. Clara's fingers moved deftly, twisting and curling a piece of wire into an intricate pattern that, when she finished, would be in the shape of a star.

"I think this one will be my best yet," Amelia, the second eldest Bennett child, said, holding up a fragile glass ornament that shone with freshly painted snowflakes.

Clara smiled, looking at her sister with great pride and her heart filling with the spirit of the season.

"It's lovely, Amelia," she said. "But do remember not to let William near it, lest he sends it crashing to the floor."

Sixteen-year-old William rolled his eyes at his elder sisters, a smirk playing on his lips.

"I'm not a child, Clara," he protested, even as he fumbled with a roll of ribbon, wrapping it around his fingers in a haphazard manner.

With a chuckle, Clara shook her head, her chestnut curls cascading over her shoulder.

“Perhaps not,” she said. “But you have all the grace of a spooked horse.”

William narrowed his eyes, and the distraction was all it took for him to drop the ribbon spool.

“That was your fault,” he mumbled, his eyes sparkling despite the pouting in his voice.

Clara giggled again, exchanging a glance with her eighteen-year-old sister.

“Is he not just incorrigible?” she asked.

Amelia laughed, nodding.

“He most certainly is,” she said.

The Bennett children went back to their tasks, the playful banter continuing. They had always been close. Clara had loved her siblings from the first moment she laid eyes on them when they were born. And the holiday season always made her appreciate their bond and connection that much more. She sighed happily, finishing the shaping of her star, and holding it up for inspection.

“Christmas is only a week away,” she said, reaching for the gold ribbon spool. “It’s always been my favourite season.”

Amelia looked up from her bauble with a twinkle in her eye.

“Because of the festivities, Clara?” she asked impishly. “Or is it because of the tall, dark-haired, green-eyed, and intriguing Lord Hamilton you met at the vicarage last

year?”

Clara’s cheeks flushed, and she playfully nudged her sister.

“Hush, Sister,” she said. “It’s not because of that. Lord Hamilton was quite handsome and charming, to be sure. But there was very little of substance to him apart from that.”

Amelia raised her eyebrow, her teasing expression temporarily confused.

“He was there to help Mary and Hannah with the baskets last year, was he not?” she asked, referring to the vicar’s wife and daughter. Hannah and Caleb were close with Clara’s own family, and Mary was her dearest and longest time friend.

Clara nodded, but she made a face as she recalled the stiff, emotionless husk that was the earl of Hampship.

“He volunteered his time for a day,” she said. “But it couldn’t have been clearer how unhappy he was to do it. It was only to make himself look good, I am certain of it.”

Amelia nodded, giving her sister a smile.

“I know that you take your charity work very seriously,” she said.

Clara nodded, sighing dreamily.

“Every year, I find joy in assisting at the vicarage, distributing donations to those in need,” she said. “Their smiles, their gratitude—it’s the true spirit of Christmas.”

Her younger siblings, having grown up witnessing their elder sister’s charitable endeavors, nodded in understanding. Clara’s passion for helping the less fortunate

had been well known to, and supported by, her family for years. And in the past couple Christmastide seasons prior, William and Amelia had even gotten involved with the charity work at the vicarage alongside Clara. She was thrilled that her siblings seemed to be taking an interest in helping those less fortunate than their own family was.

As the afternoon wore on, the room was filled with the siblings' banter, laughter, and occasional arguments over who got the last of the silver beads. Clara never felt more connected to her family than she did during the festivities of the season. Even with their playful taunting and fighting, that was the time of year that always made Clara the happiest.

Lost in her thoughts, she barely noticed Amelia nudging her.

"Dreaming of Lord Hamilton again?" she teased.

Clara rolled her eyes, but her smile was genuine.

"For the last time, no," she said. "Now, let's just revel in the magic of Christmas."

And with that, they continued their crafting, the room bathed in warmth, love, and the promise of the festive nature of the season to come.

The chatter and energy in the room were interrupted as the door swung open with a loud creak. All eyes turned toward the doorway, where the Earl of Berrington stood with a thoughtful expression. The sudden change in atmosphere felt like the cold winter draft seeping into a once warm room.

"Clara, darling," he said, his voice gentle but rather serious. "May I have a word with you in my study?"

Clara's heart skipped a beat. Her father rarely displayed such gravity without cause. But what could make him sound so formal during such a happy time of year?

Swallowing the lump in her throat, she rose gracefully, casting a quick, reassuring glance at her younger siblings who wore matching expressions of puzzlement.

"Of course, Father," she said, giving him a sweet smile.

The earl bowed slightly, holding open the door with one hand and gesturing for her to step into the hallway ahead of him. She complied, trying to assure herself that she was overreacting. Her father didn't look angry, though the intensity of his eyes indicated something of major importance. She chided herself for being so nervous. Her parents had always loved their children well, and she had no reason to be afraid of whatever her father had to say to her. So, why was she?

Inside the study, a fire identical to the one in the drawing room burned in the fireplace, casting an amber glow upon the shelves of books and rich red, shining furniture. The room had always reminded her of the protection and care her father provided for his family. But on that day, it felt different, as though there was a storm creeping in through the walls and waiting to open up above them as they made their way to the earl's desk.

Her father motioned for her to sit before taking his place behind the desk. His eyes remained intense, even as he offered his eldest daughter a warm smile.

"I wanted to let you know that I've had a meeting with the duke of Thornmire," he said. His tone was pleasant enough, but Clara detected something like uncertainty.

Her brow furrowed. She knew the family, of course, as her siblings and she had grown up with the duke and duchess's son and older daughter. But she couldn't think of any business that her family would have with theirs that would be so official

sounding. Certainly, none that involved her. And the Bennett's hadn't heard word from the family since the duchess had died several years prior. What could have prompted a meeting that would seem to be of such great importance?

"Oh?" she asked. "How is their family doing? It has been some time since I have heard you speak of them." She did her best to keep her confusion and concern out of her voice. If her father noticed it, he didn't let on. He took a deep breath, his fingers tapping the top of the desk.

"They are well," he said, pausing to shrug. "Well, as well as you might expect after such a devastating loss."

Clara nodded, biting her lip.

"Is there something that you need me to do for them?" she asked. It occurred to her that they might be in need of something to bring them cheer during the holiday season. Or, they could have fallen on hard times, and they might have reached out to their closest friends for help.

The earl shook his head, but his eyes flashed with something that Clara couldn't understand.

"The duke and I have reached an agreement, one that concerns you directly," he said.

Clara's heart raced, but she gave her father another small smile.

"Oh?" she asked again, trying to sound casually curious, rather than suddenly on edge.

Her father nodded, a smile spreading across his face. Whatever was on his mind, he seemed rather proud. She chastised herself for tensing up and worrying. Her father

would never do anything to hurt her. Whatever his announcement was, she might even find herself delighted by it.

“Shortly after Christmastide,” he continued, hesitating for just a moment, “you are to be wed to Julian, his son.”

Time seemed to stop. Clara’s mind raced faster than her heart, her thoughts becoming a storm of chaos. They knew the duke and his family well, of course. But a marriage? And one of convenience at that? She hadn’t even seen Julian since his mother died. What had prompted her father’s brash decision?

“But why?” she asked, her voice barely audible.

Her father sighed, running a hand through his graying brown hair.

“There is much to be gained from such an arrangement, Clara,” he said. “Both his estate and mine, as well as both our families stand to benefit from this union. And as you just finished your second season, I believe it will be beneficial to you, specifically.”

Clara’s mind screamed in protest, even though her mouth could not form words. She had always dreamt of marrying a man that she loved, someone who touched her heart and soul, and loved her as passionately as she loved him. But now, that dream seemed to vanish before her eyes.

She blinked back tears, allowing the enormity of her father’s revelation to sink in. Her father’s gaze held a combination of sympathy and resolve, as well as a silent plea for understanding. Clara drew a deep breath, digging deep to hold her composure. She knew it was pointless to argue with her father. But how could she just accept his decision?

Once, Julian and she had been considerably close friends. He had been the mischievous boy with twinkling blue eyes who pulled on her hair and chased her into mud puddles and played games with her and her governess during events attended by him and his entire family. There had even been a time during which she had developed feelings for him, the feelings of a young, smitten teenage girl who could have seen herself marrying him one day, if he had only ever returned her affections.

But the universe seemed to have other plans for Clara and Julian. When Julian's mother died, so, too, did the young man Clara had known for so much of her life. The devastating loss transformed Julian, and they had lost touch a few months after her passing. She couldn't believe that Julian would be entertaining the notion of marriage with as terribly as his mother's death had affected him. She certainly couldn't understand how she, of all the women in London, had been chosen to become his wife. But with the arrangement made, what choice did she have?

With a deep breath and the weight of years of tradition behind her, Clara nodded slowly.

"I understand, Father, and I will respect your decision," she said flatly.

Her father exhaled in evident relief, but Clara noticed the hint of sympathy in his eyes. He knew the sacrifice he asked of her. Unfortunately, that didn't make her feel better. It made the notion that he would even ask such a thing, especially without consulting her beforehand, that much harder to comprehend.

"I am glad to hear that, darling," he said. "Now, you may rejoin your brother and sister with the ornament making, if you like."

Clara nodded once more, but she didn't say anything more. There was nothing else to say. The decision was made, and her agreement was entered with her father. Her reluctance and dread about the situation were hers alone, and she would sift through it

in the sanctuary of her chambers.

Exiting the study, the world seemed different. The approaching holiday events and plans, which she looked forward to every single year, now had an extra, unwanted layer of significance. It would now also be the season of her betrothal. It would be the season of her marrying Julian. Could she ever truly reconcile with that notion?

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:16 am

The brilliant sun splashed the sprawling, snow-covered grounds of Thornmire Manor in warm shades of yellow. The steady claps of hooves echoed against the crunchy snow as Julian and his cousin, Thomas, rode along with all the care of young children chasing butterflies in the summer. Julian, tall and regal, urged his horse onward, shivering at the briskness of the cold wind on his face. Beside him, Thomas, two inches shorter and two years younger, grinned, his laugh ringing through the meadow.

“Last one to the back of the meadow treats the winner at White’s next time,” Thomas said, narrowing his eyes and focusing on the landscape before him.

Julian chuckled.

“Impish as always, dear cousin,” he said. Julian only ever lost a race against his cousin if he chose to do so. And on that day, he decided he would do just that. It was nice to be on horseback with the cousin who was more akin to a brother to him. But he was enjoying the light atmosphere of a relaxing trot, rather than the competition of a full-blown race.

The race was short, with Julian keeping a steady but intentionally slower pace behind his cousin. When they reached the edge of the meadow that melted into the edge of the woods between Thornmire Manor estate and the neighbouring mansion, Thomas was laughing and wiping his brow.

“You let me win, didn’t you?” he asked.

Julian grinned, reigning in his horse with care and shrugging.

“Perhaps,” he said. “Or perhaps old age is catching up with me.”

Thomas pretended to look shocked.

“You think you are old?” he asked. “Cousin, we shall live forever. And even if you were getting old, you’d be the most handsome and charming elderly gentleman in all of London.”

Julian shook his head, giving his cousin a bemused smirk.

“Flattery will get you everywhere, it seems,” he said with another smile. He looked out towards the horizon, his usually aloof demeanor dissolving as he relished the time with his cousin. “I cherish our rides, Thomas. They are a most welcome escape from life and responsibility.”

Thomas seemed to sense the underlying currents in Julian’s words. He shifted his horse closer to Julian’s, reaching out to pat him on the shoulder.

“You’ve always been a source of great strength for me, Cousin,” he said. “Even when society wrote you off as cold and uncaring, I always felt the warmth coming from within.”

Julian’s eyes shimmered with unshed tears.

“Dear Thomas,” he said. “Your parents would be so proud of the man you’ve become.”

For a moment, a slew of memories hung between the two men.

The death of Thomas’s parents had brought him to live with Julian and his family. And Thomas had been Julian’s lifeline after the death of the duchess of Thornmire. The shared tragedies made the bond they shared, having spent many of their years

growing up together, unbreakable. And yet, in some ways, those tragedies had broken the men. Julian, especially.

“I miss them,” Thomas whispered, the playful glint from earlier replaced by a melancholic shadow.

Julian reached over, taking his turn in placing a comforting hand on Thomas’s shoulder.

“They live on in you,” he said. “And you’ll never truly be without them. Remember that.” He understood the irony as he spoke the words. But he pushed aside his own thoughts and pain. His cousin needed his support. And he gave it happily.

Thomas’s eyes welled up, but he nodded.

“Thank you, Julian,” he said.

The two sat in silence for a while, absorbing the serenity of the meadow. Even with the ground and trees coated with snow, it was a picture of peace and calm. Julian hadn’t realized how long they had been riding until he noticed how low the sun was sitting in the sky. He looked at his cousin, whose eyes were now dry and his earlier easy smile was returning.

“We best return before Father sends a search party for two rogue gentlemen,” he said.

Thomas chuckled, his spirits seeming to lift immediately.

“Lead the way, dashing elder,” he said.

As they approached the sprawling estate, Julian thought about the circumstances that formed his bond with Thomas. They were good friends as children when Thomas’s parents came to visit the duke and duchess. But after Julian’s father adopted Thomas,

he became Julian's best friend. Even though he was, regarding his station, merely a very wealthy wine businessman, he was still closer to Julian than any of the gentlemen with whom Julian attended Eton.

He was also, in Julian's opinion, far more deserving of a spot within ton society than most of the noblemen. He was sure that he and Thomas would have grown close, even if tragedy hadn't stricken their family. And even though their closeness was borne from that tragedy, he couldn't help being grateful for having a friend who was more like a brother to him. Julian loved his elder sister, Elizabeth. They had also been close growing up, and he adored her. He saw little of her since she married her husband and heir to an earldom, Stephen Farley, and less still since she had her children, Sarah and Edward, whom he adored just as much as he did his sister. But there was nothing quite like the brotherly bond between Thomas and him. Despite the constant ache in his heart over the loss of his mother, Julian could take a moment to appreciate his cousin, and the time he got to spend alone with him.

Dismounting, Julian looked to Thomas, a soft smile playing on his lips.

"Thank you for today, my dearest brother in all but name," he said.

Thomas returned the smile, his heart full.

"And thank you for letting me win the race today," he said.

Julian laughed as they walked together toward the mansion.

"I look forward to our next one," he said.

Thomas laughed and clapped him on the back.

"I suggest you look forward to losing another race, as well," he said.

Julian chuckled at his cousin's good-natured ribbing.

"Next time, I might not let you win," he said.

The men laughed.

The echoes of the men's footsteps as they entered the mansion were swallowed by the vastness of the grand hallway. The chandeliers swayed gently, casting golden patterns on the well-designed marble floor. Thomas and he parted ways, and Julian prepared to make his way to his small study. But just as he turned the corner to head through the grand hall, the butler intercepted him.

"Lord Silverstone," Jenkins greeted with a respectful nod. "Your father wishes to speak with you. He awaits you in his study."

Julian nodded, puzzled. It was the holiday season, and he didn't think that his father would need his assistance with any business dealings, as many London businessmen would be taking time off from work, by and large, to spend the holiday season with their families. And he knew that his own family had no holiday plans, apart from a feast on the day of Christmas, which Julian tended to skip since his mother died. What could his father want to discuss?

"Thank you, Jenkins," he said.

Without hesitation, he proceeded to the study, the heavy wooden doors swinging open to reveal a dimly lit room dominated by towering bookshelves and a grand desk. His father sat at the desk, his grey hair shining in the light from the fireplace.

"Julian," Albert Hawthorne said, his voice, deep and authoritative. He motioned for Julian to sit across from him. As Julian complied, the duke poured two glasses of amber-colored whiskey, pushing one towards Julian.

“Thank you, Father,” he said, accepting the drink. “What was it that you wished to discuss?”

Taking a tentative sip, Julian barely had time to savor the warmth before his father spoke. And as soon as he did, Julian wished he hadn’t taken a drink right then.

“I’ve decided it’s time for you to marry,” he said.”

Julian choked on his whiskey, the liquid burning a fiery trail down his throat.

“Father,” he sputtered. “What on earth are you talking about?”

Albert met his gaze squarely, his steel-blue eyes cold and determined.

“It’s time you settled down, Julian,” he said. “Your persistent bachelor state has drawn attention within the ton. And I can see clearly that it is not good for you. That is why I spoke to the earl of Berrington about his eldest daughter. Clara and you are to be betrothed, with the announcement to be made at the annual festive ball.”

Julian stared dumbly at his father. The annual ball had been withheld since his mother died. Not to mention the fact that he hadn’t seen Clara in years, and marriage had never even crossed his mind. That his father would present such a proposition out of the blue was ludicrous to Julian. He shook his head, taking another long pull from the drink before slamming the glass down on the desk.

“Surely, you can’t be serious,” he said. “I am in no position to even consider marriage.”

The duke narrowed his eyes at his son.

“This isn’t just about you anymore,” he said. “This is about our legacy, continuing the dukedom after you and I are gone. It is the duty of every man who is to reign as a

nobleman to produce an heir. Now, it is your turn to do so.”

Julian’s temper rose.

“I will not be dictated to, especially not about what will permanently affect my own life,” he said. “You cannot just arrange a marriage without my consent. Mother would never allow such an atrocity.”

The duke’s irritation with his son’s insubordination was palpable. He frowned at Julian, shaking his head.

“It’s been six years, Julian,” he said. “You’ve secluded yourself, allowing the world to paint you as a recluse. You cannot live this way forever.”

Julian glowered at his father. Can’t I? he wondered with biting bitterness.

“That’s my life, my choice, Father,” he said. “I do not care what society thinks, especially where my own life is concerned. And I won’t be forced into marriage.”

The tension in the room thickened, both men locked in a silent battle of wills. It was the duke who broke the silence, his voice barely above a whisper yet carrying a weight that Julian couldn’t ignore.

“Your mother loved the festive season,” he said. “It brought her so much joy. She would’ve been heartbroken to see you so distant, so removed from life and from the world. This isn’t what she would have wanted for you.”

Those words, laced with truth and pain, hit Julian like a train. The room suddenly felt suffocating, the memories rushing in like a tidal wave. The vibrant laughter of his mother, her bright eyes shimmering with festive spirit, and the heartbreaking Christmastide season that had stolen her from their family. He could almost hear her voice, the lullabies she sang, and her ever-encouraging words. And he could also hear

her objections to his father trying to force him into marriage.

The duke, contrasting with his earlier sternness, seemed to waiver, a hint of regret reaching his eyes.

“Julian, I want you to produce an heir, but I want you to find happiness, as well.” he said. “Your mother would want that for you, too. You will not find that by wallowing in your sorrow alone for the rest of your life.”

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Julian looked away from his father.

“Happiness cannot be forced, Father,” he said. “And who’s to say that happiness exists only in marriage and conforming to societal expectations?”

With those words, Julian rose. His mind was reeling and his heart was racing, but his expression remained cold and stern. He let the study door slam behind him, pretending not to hear his father call after him. He was in shock. How could his father think that the solution to anything was forcing him into marriage? And why would he not give Julian, as a full-grown man, any say in what happened with his future?

The portrait room beckoned him like an old friend, promising solace from the brewing anger and frustration bubbling within Julian. His father had caught him completely off guard, and Julian couldn’t pick one single thought from the turmoil that was his mind in that moment. Pushing open the door, Julian stepped into a room bathed in the soft light of the setting sun. The walls were lined with portraits of ancestors, each face telling a silent story. But it was one particular portrait that always drew him in—a painting of a younger Julian, his face innocent and hopeful, standing beside his mother. Her eyes sparkled with joy and love, and there was a smile forever painted on her lips.

He approached the portrait, a sad smile touching his own lips.

“Oh, Mother,” he whispered, his voice catching. “I wish you were here. You always knew how to help me make sense of the world.”

Losing himself in the depth of his mother’s picture, memories once again flooded him. The sound of her laughter, the touch of her hand, and the endless words of wisdom she bestowed upon him resonated in his mind as clearly as if he had just experienced them that morning. He remembered how she used to tell him that true love was worth waiting for, and how she wanted him to find a wife that he adored, and who adored him just as equally in return.

His thoughts turned to Clara, the girl with chestnut curls and the innocence in her eyes. She had been a constant in his life, their families intertwining in various events and gatherings since childhood. He recalled their playful squabbles, his constant teasing her, and their shared adventures on the grounds of both Thornmire Manor and Berrington Estate. Over the years, Clara had blossomed into a young lady typical of the ton.

Yet, for Julian, their friendship had dissipated during the years since his mother died. He hadn’t even seen her in years, so he didn’t even know how she looked now. Whether he had pushed her away, or she had distanced herself from his brooding, he wasn’t sure. But the fact remained that he didn’t know her anymore. The thought of marriage felt almost sacrilegious, especially since his mother would not be there to witness the union. He harbored no illusions of passion or deep-seated romantic desires for Clara. And he was sure that she had to feel the same way.

“Why would Father do this?” he asked, addressing the portrait of his mother.

But the silent image of his mother offered no answers, only a reminder of a life lost too soon.

Julian sank into a plush chair, the weight of his thoughts pressing down on him. He could never do what his father was expecting of him. But he also didn’t have the

emotional strength to fight with the duke. His father thought he was doing what was best for Julian. But how could Julian ever convey that his father was pushing him further into the darkness that had ruled his life since his mother died?