



# Bound by her Earl (Seductive Mysteries #2)

**Author:** *Scarlett Osborne*

**Category:** Historical

**Description:** "You are bound to me, wife. And I want to make you beg..."

Earl Benedict will never trust a woman. So a debutant he has no attraction to seems like the perfect match. Until he meets her infuriatingly alluring older sister.

Emily loves her sister too much to let the cold Earl have her. Yet, giving him a piece of her mind turns into a heated argument, a kiss, and total ruination...

Married amidst the scandal, Benedict vows to never touch her again. No matter how mad she drives him when she begs for it...

\*If you like a realistic yet steamy depiction of the Regency and Victorian era, then Bound by her Earl is the novel for you.

**Total Pages (Source):** 29

## Page 1

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“Should we try to...talk to people?” Miss Emily Rutley asked her friend Lady Frances Johnson.

Frances’ wide-eyed look of horror spoke volumes.

“Yes, well,” Emily said, feeling only the tiniest bit defeated. It wasn’t that she felt any desperate need to go mix with the assembled members of the ton. She’d been fortunate enough to gather a small, close group of friends at the start of the Season and felt little need to expand that circle, especially when so many of the other debutantes felt it abidingly necessary to comment upon Emily’s height.

Did they think she didn’t know she was tall? Did they really, truly think she’d moved through life for twenty years not realizing that she was head and shoulders taller than most other young ladies?

And if it wasn’t her height, it was her age. Yes, twenty was a bit older than your average debutante, but she was hardly decrepit. And her sisters had needed her.

They still needed her, of course, though now they needed her for a different matter.

Now they needed her to marry.

Hence her interest—such as it was—in not continuing to linger near this wall with its hideous hangings.

But she couldn’t abandon Frances, could she? No, certainly not.

“We’ll wait for Grace,” she said, even though she knew this was an excuse to remain safely at the edges of the room for a few minutes longer. “You know Grace always has someone new to introduce.”

Lady Grace Miller was the shining star of the Season, a luminous beauty who not only was the daughter of a duke but who had (as rumors held it) a prodigious dowry. She was also, despite all this, another member of Frances and Emily’s small group of friends.

According to the rules of Society, it hardly made sense, but, then again, Grace was just like that; no matter that the world had given her a dozen reasons to be petty, spoiled, or snobbish, she was genuinely kind and clever and sought kindness and cleverness in her friends instead of things like wealth and pedigree.

Not that Emily, daughter of a viscount, or Frances, daughter of a marquess, lacked pedigree, but nobody would claim that they were up to Grace’s level of perfection.

“Good idea,” Frances said, even though she looked faintly green at the idea. Frances was a lovely, charming, wonderful girl...who clammed up the instant anyone whom she didn’t consider a close friend was within earshot.

“My goodness!” came a teasing cry from a few paces away. “If it isn’t the very wallflowers I was hoping to see!”

This was Lady Diana Fletching, daughter of the Earl of Preston and the fourth in their quartet. Her dark green eyes gleamed with feisty humor, even as her expression held the lingering tension that suggested she’d just escaped her mother’s clutches. The Countess of Preston was matrimonially minded to an aggressive degree, and Diana had no intention of marrying that Season.

None of Emily’s friends were seeking marriage that year, actually. Frances was

terrified of the prospect, and Diana preferred books to men. Grace, meanwhile, intended to have as much fun as she could before she settled down.

Only Emily approached the thing with any seriousness...not that this had helped her garner any prospects.

“Really, Diana,” she chided gently, “you oughtn’t call us ‘wallflowers.’ Someone might hear you.”

Diana made a pointed, skeptical gesture at the wall. “And think I’m wrong?” she asked.

“And diminish our popularity,” Emily corrected. “We needn’t give others any reason to consider us undesirable.”

To consider me undesirable, she amended mentally though she couldn’t bear to say it out loud. It sounded far too self-pitying.

It was the truth, though. Although the others had no interest in marrying yet, they were all better poised for it. Diana’s golden hair made her a beauty even if she didn’t seem to know it, and Frances’ diminutive figure lent her the kind of feminine stature that men supposedly found more appealing than Emily’s willowy height.

Plus, there were her dratted curls, she recognized as she felt the telltale pull of one threatening to spring free from its pins. Fashion dictated that hair should be meticulously curled with a hot iron into neat, manageable waves. Emily’s hair was a force of its own, constantly threatening to break free.

But Diana knew how Emily felt about all this; she didn’t need to be told. She came to stand next to Emily, peering at her dance card.

“How’s your card looking this evening, Em?”

Emily sighed. “Not good. I’ve only two dances spoken for, and they’re both country dances. Hardly helpful for striking up conversations.”

Emily tried not to think too hard about just how far Diana had to reach up in order to deliver a sympathetic pat to her shoulder.

“We need Grace to come make introductions to some gentlemen,” Frances said, picking up the thread of their conversation. She stood on her toes to look out over the crowd; the effort still put her eyeline lower than Emily’s. “Where is Grace?”

Emily looked, too. Even at her height, though, there was no sight of Grace’s shining blonde head. “I don’t see her.

“Well, heaven knows she won’t be able to see us, tucked back here as we are,” Diana claimed, grabbing Emily’s hand. Emily grabbed Frances as Diana led them. They moved easily to the center of the ballroom as the pause between sets sent the rest of the attendees filtering towards the room’s edges.

Even Emily went to her toes to search, not that the height helped much. She was already taller than half the gentlemen here. But it felt as though it should help, somehow. Yet...nothing. A frown crossed her face.

“Do you see her, Diana?” Frances asked.

Before Diana could answer, a man spoke. “Excuse me.” The three girls whirled. “Have you seen Lady Grace?” asked the unassuming man, whose name Emily could not immediately place. “She and I are due for the next dance, but I’m afraid I cannot locate her...”

Something about the broad smile on Diana's face made Emily's confusion turn to worry.

"Oh, Mr. Cartwright—" Ah, yes, that was it. "—I am so sorry," Diana said earnestly. "Grace stepped on her hem and has had to hie to the ladies' retiring room. She bid us to make her apologies and asked if you would be so kind as to dance with Miss Rutley for this set, instead."

Emily tried not to look surprised by this.

"Of course," Mr. Cartwright said kindly. "Miss Rutley, if you would do me the honor?"

"Of course," she said. She looked back at her friends as he led her to the dance floor. Diana and Frances had bent their heads together and were whispering furiously, their faces masked in dismay.

Emily might have enjoyed doing the Allemande with Mr. Cartwright—who was soft spoken, occasionally funny, and rather handsome once she looked past his spectacles—were she not so worried. It was silly to worry over Grace's absence for a mere handful of minutes, but Emily was quite accustomed to worrying. Raising her sisters since their childhood had rendered the habit ingrained. As it was, she barely executed a proper curtsy to poor Mr. Cartwright before she bolted for the edge of the ballroom.

"Did you find her?" Emily demanded when she found Diana and Frances. She knew the question was pointless; they would not look so vexed if they had located Grace.

Diana worried at her lip. "I saw her earlier. Two dances ago now, I think? She was with the Duke of Hawkins."

Frances looked horrified. “Him? He’s old enough to be her father.”

The Duke’s age, however, was not what bothered Emily. “He’s also rather...forceful,” she said, thinking of the way the Duke looked at Grace, which had always struck her as being aggressive, somehow. “He hovers around Grace quite a lot and isn’t terribly gracious about it when she pays attention to other people.”

She hated to even suggest what she was suggesting. Diana immediately gathered the implication.

“You don’t think he would...?” she broke off, aghast.

“No,” Emily assured her, despite feeling no such assurance herself. “But perhaps he pressured her to accompany him for a walk?”

Frances bit her lip. “Maybe we should check the gardens?”

Emily felt instantly sick. Going unchaperoned into a garden was practically asking for one’s reputation to be obliterated, and she’d spent years carefully honing her sense of propriety, so she could make an advantageous marriage that would help her set her sisters up for happy lives.

But for Grace, she would do it.

“I think we should,” Diana agreed though even she sounded hesitant. “We shan’t go far from the house. Just far enough to call for her.”

“Surely anyone who...took her for a walk would release her once he knew we were looking,” Emily said, her voice less convincing than she’d hoped.

Still, they went. The strange turn of the evening was too much for Emily to wrap her

mind around, so she focused on the fervent hope that nobody would note their odd behavior. When she made fleeting eye contact with a dowager, the older woman raised her eyebrows curiously, and Emily felt herself flush to her hairline. She offered the woman a nervous smile, hoping she'd chalk the trio off as merely overwhelmed by the close heat of the room. It was hot inside in a way that made the cool night air feel like a slap.

"Are you sure?" Frances asked as Diana led them towards the stairs that led down from the empty veranda.

Her words were cut off by a scream, sharp and terrified. All thoughts of propriety, of reputation, fled Emily's mind as she bolted towards the sound, nearly turning her ankle when hard stone gave way to the soft lawn.

"Grace?" she called, her voice too frightened and breathy to travel far. They'd scarcely gone a few paces into the garden, and she already felt disoriented, the pounding of her heart in her ears making it nigh on impossible to hear anything. Even if she could hear, however, the scream had faded, gone as quickly as it had arrived.

Frances and Diana nearly crashed into her when she stopped; her height had served her well, for once, and she'd long outpaced them.

"I'm going back for help," Diana panted. She spun on her heel and raced back toward the house without even pausing to ask if the others wished to risk being found in the garden. Whatever was happening out here was far more important than idle gossip.

Frances slipped her hand into Emily's.

"Grace?" she called, her voice shaking. "Are you there?" Her fingers shook, too, where they held Emily's tight.



There was no response. Even so, the girls kept calling, kept straining their eyes to peer into the dark. By the time Diana returned with half the ton beside her, Grace's father, a whey-faced Duke of Graham, in the lead, Emily had come to fear that there never would be a response, not from Grace.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:38 am*

Three Years Later

“Inever should have found them a governess,” Emily muttered to herself as she searched for her sisters. “Let alone one that encouraged independent thinking. I should have locked them in the cellar and let them out when they were five-and-twenty. Nay, thirty.”

Emily herself might only have been two-and-twenty, but she felt confident that the twins would require more time to become respectable members of Society who did not seek to sow chaos at every turn. The events of this evening were, she felt, ample evidence of that notion.

Tonight was, after all, only the twins’ second night out in Society; they’d debuted only days earlier. In advance of that debut, Emily had reminded them again and again (and again and again and again) to comport themselves in a manner that would not bring scandal down upon their house and name.

Amanda and Rose had managed the thing perfectly. They’d been pleasant and popular, had danced with a variety of gentlemen, and had avoided insulting anyone or speaking too outlandishly on any of their radical viewpoints. And Emily, who was apparently the worst kind of idiot, had patted herself on the back. A job well done, she’d considered it. Clearly the girls knew how to behave.

So, tonight, she’d only impressed the importance of propriety upon them once.

It had not been enough, apparently.

They'd given her the slip within ten minutes, their manner too coordinated to have been circumstance. They'd been retrieving their cups of punch when Amanda had made a distressed sound over her hem. She'd handed Emily her glass and bent to fuss with her skirts. Just then, Rose had spotted a friend. She'd needed to check her coiffure. When Emily had turned back to Amanda, she was gone. When Emily turned to ask Rose where Amanda had hied off to, Rose was also gone.

And Emily had been left juggling three cups of punch.

"Too clever," she grouched now as she searched the crowd for them. If her sisters had been as tall as Emily was, this would have been easy. Alas, Emily topped them both by several inches. The girls blended easily into the crowd.

"Too clever," she said again. "And can they use those powers for good? No. I should see about marrying Amanda off to some kind of intelligence officer. If we're lucky, that will improve the nation's security. If not, well, at least he'll have experience dealing with slippery characters."

Emily recognized that she was working herself into quite the state. And most of this had to do with irritation with her sisters. Could they never just listen to her? She was constantly trying her hardest—had been doing so since she was a child herself, really—to provide a good model for them and was always working to be proper and helpful and motherly though she knew she could never truly make up for the mother they had lost.

Emily would normally have commended the twins on knowing their own minds; Emily's dear friend Diana Young, the Duchess of Hawkins, was not the type to listen to the demands of others, and Emily adored her for that.

But all Emily wanted was to keep the twins out of trouble. Why couldn't they see that?

“Excuse me, excuse me,” she muttered reflexively as she moved through the crowd, craning her neck to seek her sisters.

The small part of her that was not merely irritated, however, was tied in a sick knot of worry. Emily had never shared the events of that evening with her sisters—she didn’t want them to carry around those sorts of fears—but searching for someone in a ballroom would always bring back the way she’d felt searching for Grace...searching, but never finding her.

It wasn’t the same, of course. It wasn’t the same!

But sometimes it felt the same.

She was so lost in these layers of feeling—annoyance upon fear upon grief upon utter frustration—that she didn’t even see the man until she’d crashed into him hard enough that she would have fallen on her behind, right there in the ballroom, if he hadn’t been so quick to seize her about the shoulders.

“Oof,” she said.

Emily was the kind of well-bred young lady who had had the rules of comportment so sufficiently drilled into her that she had, in times past, reflexively apologized to bookshelves and settees after bumping into them. Yet she found that the word sorry died on her lips in the face of the gentleman’s glare.

And his size. Emily was unaccustomed to looking up to meet a gentleman’s gaze; it was far more usual that she had to look down. But this man was so tall that she not only had to look up, she had to tip her head back to do so.

Only to be met with fire when he glared back down at her.

“You really must watch where you are going,” he snapped.

Her mouth dropped open and, again, decades of propriety fled her mind.

“Excuse me?”

“I said,” he began tersely and Emily—shocking even herself, truly—interrupted him.

“No, no, I heard what you said.” Her eyes were wide. She surely looked like some gaping country bumpkin, but she simply could not help herself. The rudeness of the man! “I am merely shocked at what I heard.”

Now it was his turn to act surprised. “I beg your pardon?”

In the back of her mind, Emily recognized that this was likely the moment when she ought to retreat. She should play the demure young lady, as she always did. She could blame her initial words on the shock, could salvage this moment.

But the rest of her, the parts that had already been bubbling over with emotion, felt that if she had to bite her tongue one more time, she was going to scream.

“It’s just that the traditional response, after colliding with someone in a ballroom, is my apologies.”

The man frowned fearsomely down at her, but Emily found, oddly enough, that she was not afraid. He would likely be handsome, she imagined, if not for that scowl. He had thick, dark hair that waved pleasantly over his brow and intense eyes that were so rich a brown they were nearly indistinguishable from the black centers. But his eyebrows were a bit heavier than classical good looks dictated, and his determination to use them to make himself intimidating did not help.

“You didn’t apologize either,” he pointed out, the tiniest note of sulkiness in his tone.

“But neither did I offer you...let’s call it advice about watching myself,” she pointed out reasonably.

This was, she decided, the moment when he should retreat. But perhaps this giant of a man was consumed by the same temporary madness as she, for he did not do so any more than she had.

“It was,” he said archly, “good advice.”

“Advice that you might likewise follow,” she countered.

“I was scarcely moving,” he returned. “Whereas you were surging ahead like this was a racetrack, not a ballroom.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Are you comparing me to a horse, sir? I feel if we are tallying poor behavior, that ranks higher than a misstep.” Strangely, she did not feel insulted, however. She felt rather...invigorated.

“You are being purposefully difficult, miss,” he retorted with a scowl. “I was doing no such thing, and you know it perfectly well. You are merely, for a reason I cannot divine, looking for some way to extend this peculiar encounter.”

“Could you divine, perhaps,” she asked, a hint of mockery in her tone, “that I am trapped in this encounter as your hands are still upon my person?”

His hands were, in fact, upon her shoulders. He looked at them for a long moment like they belonged to a stranger before snatching them down to his sides.

“I—my apologies,” he said stiffly.

“So you can apologize!” she exclaimed.

She was being ungracious, she knew, wretchedly so. But he had been ungracious, too, and highly irksome. And wasn't it quite enough that gentlemen got to go around, doing whatever they pleased with their lives, without also refusing basic politeness to young women they nearly knocked to the ground? Was that really too much to ask?

And, argued a tiny voice inside her—and frankly, Emily had a bone to pick with that tiny voice, too, come to mention it—she was enjoying this conversation just the tiniest bit.

“I can apologize,” the man said crossly, “when I have reason to do so. But no matter what you women seem to think, I am not on this Earth merely to make good on your conversational whims. I have things to do, miss, things that do not include being lectured on deportment. If you do not have better ways to spend your time, might I recommend watercolors? I have heard that ladies find that enormously diverting.”

Emily's mouth was open again. Of all the rude and condescending and self-important things...

Except then the full significance of his statement hit her. Goodness. She did have better ways to spend her time. Hadn't she been rushing for a reason? She needed to find the twins before one or both of them (why was she pretending; it was always both) did something indefensible, like setting fire to the building.

It wouldn't be on purpose, of course. The twins weren't malicious.

They just had a seemingly inexorable penchant for chaos.

So instead of continuing to quibble with the gentleman (even though she really, truly, deeply wished to do so) she raised her nose pertly in the air. This tended to have more

effect on gentlemen who weren't quite as massive as this man, but was, she felt, still worth doing.

"You are quite right, sir," she said in a prim tone that suggested she did not think he was right, but rather that she thought he was awful yet merely not worth the time of telling him so. "I shall be on my way at once."

She sidestepped him neatly, feeling a rare rush of gratitude for her long legs, and swept past him, not even looking over her shoulder for a last glance.

He, she decided, was certainly looking over his shoulder after her. And as long as she did not check, she could continue to enjoy this fantasy.

Her ire, though intense, faded quickly as she caught a glimpse of the pastel purple of Rose's skirts. She was huddled in close to Amanda in a manner that always promised trouble.

"What are you two doing?" Emily asked in a furious whisper as she approached her sisters. Amanda quickly hid her hands behind her back. "What do you have there?"

"Nothing," Amanda said.

Emily counted it among her blessings that the twins were terrible liars.

"What do you have?" she repeated, putting more menace into her tone.

Rose sighed in disappointment as Amanda returned her hands to her front, uncapping them to reveal...

A frog.



Emily didn't know whether to laugh, cry, or groan. In the end, she did none of those things. Instead, she stepped closer, blocking the sight from the rest of the room. Her first instinct had always been to protect her sisters—and always would be.

“Why,” she asked, the question sounding vaguely desperate, “do you have a frog in a ballroom?”

“We found him on the veranda and didn't want him to get squished,” Rose supplied as if this were a reasonable answer.

“Why were you on the veranda without a chaperone?” Emily asked.

Amanda pouted. “Well, Emmy, you know you're not a proper chaperone, don't you? You aren't married.”

If Emily hadn't been terrified of losing sight of the frog—a frog! In a ballroom!—for a single second, she would have closed her eyes at that comment. Yes, despite her best efforts to fashion herself into a proper chaperone for her sisters, she remained unmarried. She knew Amanda didn't mean to be unkind by reminding her of this failure, but it did still sting a bit.

“Besides,” Amanda continued blithely. “There were plenty of chaperones out there. We went out there to talk to Lady Averton, after all.”

“Lady Averton is seventy-four years old,” Emily said, confused. What business could her sisters have with a woman some fifty years their senior?

“Yes,” said Amanda happily. “And she smokes. She had a cheroot. A cheroot, Emily!”

Emily stifled a sigh and began composing a mental lesson for the next day: Things

One May Do When One is a Very Old and Very Rich Dowager but which One May Not Do When One is an Eighteen-Year-Old Debutante Who Wishes to Marry. It was part of an ongoing series of lectures that Emily had begun in a so far fruitless attempt to preserve her own sanity.

But now was neither the place nor the time.

“Right,” she said tiredly. She was so exhausted. Was it normal to feel this tired at her age? Certainly, it wasn’t. “Fine. Well, in the future, please put the frog somewhere that is both safe and outside. For now, let’s return him to the outdoors, so he can resume his happy, froggy life.”

“I have a partner for the next dance,” Amanda said, having the decency to at least look a bit abashed about this.

Emily turned to Rose, only to find the other girl had the same look on her face. “As do I,” she said.

“What were you planning on doing with the frog while—?” She cut herself off. Did it matter? She put out her hands, cringing slightly. “Fine. Fine. Give it to me.”

“Goodbye, little froggy,” Amanda whispered, pressing a kiss to its little head. Emily’s gorge threatened to rise, but she accepted the slimy package, careful not to let it escape her grasp in the transfer. The last thing she needed was for the blasted frog to get loose in the ballroom.

She struggled to keep a pleasant look on her face as her sisters’ dance partners retrieved them, trying hard to ignore the squirming movement from between her cupped hands. When her sisters were occupied with the quadrille, she heaved a sigh of relief before laughing at herself.

Oh yes. Now all that remained was the simple matter of smuggling a frog from a ballroom undetected. She shook her head. Say what one would about her sisters, but life was never boring when they were around.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:38 am*

“There’s nothing there, you know.”

Benedict frowned briefly as his friend Evan, the Marquess of Ockley, and resumed brushing at his jacket. Benedict knew nothing was there, technically speaking. He just merely wanted to...restore himself to order after the interaction with that dreadfully outspoken young lady. Sadly, however, no one had yet invented a manner of brushing off one’s mind, so fussing with his jacket would have to do as far as soothing actions went.

“You really missed your calling as a valet,” Evan went on, completely ignoring Benedict’s scowl. “There’s still time to change careers. Perhaps it will bring you joy.”

“You propose,” Benedict asked dryly, “that I give up being an earl to become a valet? Whose valet would I even be?”

Evan shrugged. “Perhaps you and your actual valet could switch places. Let him be the Earl of Moore, and you can be...what’s your valet’s name?”

“Well, I think I’d be allowed to keep my own name.” Benedict could not believe he was engaging in this absurd conversation. “I suppose I’d just be Hoskins.”

“Hm,” Evan mused. “Suits you.”

With a huff, Benedict reminded himself that he didn’t have enough friends to go about alienating any. “I daresay, Ockley,” he bit out. “it’s my name.”

“Just so,” Evan agreed affably, but the gleam in his eye gave him away.

Benedict sighed and stopped brushing at his jacket. “You,” he accused, “are being purposefully antagonistic.”

“I might be,” Evan agreed.

“Has anyone ever told you that you are dreadfully annoying?”

The instant the question left his lips, Benedict regretted it. For someone had been constantly complaining, in a good-natured way, that Evan drove her mad—his younger sister, Grace, who had been abducted and killed three years prior. Benedict knew that Evan hated discussing his sister, knew that his friend still harbored guilt over failing to protect her.

The pain Evan felt over his sister’s loss had been a wound that was torn open again the previous year, when it had come to light that Grace had not been killed by the late Duke of Hawkins, as had been long assumed. Instead, she’d been killed by a man named Theodore Dowling.

It was Benedict’s family’s connection, however tenuous, to Dowling that made him cringe the most...

In an effort to distract his friend from his painful memories, Benedict took up a new line of complaint. Evan loved to mock Benedict’s complaints.

“I cannot believe you dragged me to this...circus,” he lamented, waving an arm out over the crowd. “Remind me again why I agreed to do this?”

The look Evan shot him suggested that his friend knew precisely what Benedict was up to...but that he appreciated it, nonetheless.

“You are here,” Evan said, “because you want to marry this Season. Now, why you

want to do that is beyond me, man; you're young yet, and you have plenty of time to wed and bed one of Society's darlings and get yourself an heir. But you have proven obstinate on this, as in most things, so here we are."

"My father did not live a long life," Benedict pointed out. "I may not have time to waste."

"Your father was nearly fifty when he died," Evan returned. "You are six and twenty. And unless you think falling off horses runs in families, I'm not sure you're on the right path with that logic."

Benedict shrugged. In truth, he had no real reason to suspect he should live anything but a long life. Even so, his father's sudden death had taught him that things happened beyond one's control. Procrastination was never a wise move.

Therefore, Benedict saw no reason to dally in getting himself a wife and heir. It was something he could check off his list of responsibilities easily enough. He just had to find someone appropriate.

"Don't tell me about logic," he grunted irritably.

When he looked back at his friend, Evan was peering at him curiously.

"Don't bite my head off," he said, "but you seem...slightly more peevish than usual. Might I ask why?"

"I am not peevish," Benedict snapped. Then he held up a hand before Evan could reply. "Yes, fine, I heard it. I just had an unpleasant encounter with a woman is all."

"Oh, yes?" Evan asked, looking intrigued. "Do say more."

With another beleaguered sigh, Benedict recounted his spat with the woman.

“She really was very abominably rude,” he concluded.

“Indeed,” Evan said with mock sagacity. “It sounds very much like she was being abominably rude.”

“Do shut up,” Benedict responded irritably which only made Evan laugh aloud. “Stop laughing at me and try to focus on the matter at hand, will you? You know perfectly well that the Season is only slightly less chaotic than the madhouse, so I need to start meeting ladies posthaste, otherwise all the respectable ones will find themselves inundated by suitors.”

“Most of those are unlikely to be an earl, though,” Evan pointed out.

“That fact has somewhat less impact when coming from someone poised to inherit a dukedom,” Benedict observed idly, “but yes, fine, I take your point. Even so, there’s no sense in dallying. Help me meet some suitable ladies, so we can depart this absolute circus.”

“I don’t mind a ball, personally,” Evan commented offhandedly though he sighed when he saw Benedict’s baleful look. “Oh, yes, all right. Let’s get to business.” He raised an eyebrow as an idea seemed to occur to him. “Wait, I’ve got it—why don’t you ask the lady who’s put you into such a pique if she would like to dance?”

This time, it was Benedict’s turn to laugh. “I said suitable, Ockley. Harridans who accost people on the dance floor are not anyone’s definition of suitable.”

Evan mumbled something under his breath that might have included the phrase “keep you in line.” Benedict, the picture of maturity, pretended not to hear this.

“Fine,” Evan went on. “We’ll find you a lady more to your liking, then.”

“Christ, no, not that either,” Benedict said, earning himself a look of censure from a passing matron for his blasphemy.

Evan’s look was similarly startled though for a different reason.

“You’ve lost me with that one, I’m afraid, Moore,” he said. “I thought you were looking for a wife.”

“I am,” Benedict said, feeling as though he were really showing more patience than Evan strictly warranted at this moment. “But I am not looking for some love match—” He practically spat the words. “—like seems to be all the rage these days. I don’t need to give some woman the power to control my happiness, not like?—”

He cut himself off. The reason wasn’t important, anyway. What mattered was the outcome.

“I just need a reasonable young lady to make a suitable Society wife,” he said, his tone calmer. “One who will give me an heir and accompany me to the odd event. Then she can spend the rest of her time as she wishes. Needlepoint. Charity. I don’t know—whatever it is that women like.”

Evan had the oddest look on his face, but his voice was even as he said, “So you’re looking for someone who makes you feel entirely indifferent, then?”

Benedict nodded, pleased. Finally, his friend was starting to understand.

“Precisely. And I don’t see why such a thing should be difficult; it’s the way aristocrats have been marrying for hundreds of years. Why change something that works?”



The words felt slightly flat in Benedict's mouth, but he stopped that thought before it could go any further. Evan, likewise, seemed uninterested in a response.

"Right," he said. He held Benedict's gaze for one more moment before turning to look out over the gathered crowd. "Well, I suppose you're right that there are quite a few potential brides that fit that description here tonight. Do you see any that make you feel absolutely nothing?"

If this last question was a jibe, Benedict ignored it. Instead, he took the question in good faith, scanning his eyes across the collection of expertly coiffed young women.

His gaze caught upon a pair huddled off to one side of the dance floor, heads pressed together, giggling. It was the one on the left that drew his attention, for she was smiling amiably in a way that suggested simple contentment. Her dark hair was neatly swept back, and her gown was fashionable but not ostentatiously so. Women who adored fashion would likely want to go places to show off that fashion and might ask their husbands to accompany them. Benedict was, naturally, far too busy for that sort of thing.

She did look a tad bit young, he allowed, but wasn't that the way of debutantes?

"That one," he said, jerking his chin in the direction of the young lady in question. "The young lady over there in the blue."

Evan followed Benedict's gesture. When his eyes landed on the right woman, there was another quick flicker of something in his expression. But it was gone before Evan turned to face his friend again.

"Right on," he said. "Well, if you've noticed her, surely others have as well. You'd best go ask for a dance before her card is full."

This was sensible. Wise, even.

So why did Benedict still get the sense that he was being mocked?

Again, he chose to ignore whatever nonsense Evan was trying to impart through implication and innuendo.

“So I shall,” he declared. With a decisive nod, he started striding towards his desired partner.

As he went, he put firmly from his mind any thoughts of mysterious friends and quarrelsome young ladies and tried to convince himself that finally things were going according to plan.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:38 am*

It was surprisingly (or perhaps unsurprisingly? Emily couldn't even tell anymore; this was the effect the twins had on people's minds) difficult to secretly remove a frog from a ballroom without letting anyone know what she was doing or compromising her own reputation.

By the time she'd managed the thing, Amanda and Rose had disappeared.

Again.

Mentally swearing (and lamenting that her dictionary of mental swears was sorely lacking), Emily searched through the crowds for her sisters—again—though this time she did manage to watch where she was going.

What she did not manage, however, was to find both sisters; when she located Rose, Amanda was nowhere in sight.

“Where is Amanda?” she asked as she approached her sister, the question somewhere between a demand and a lament.

Rose gave her a stubborn look.

That was never good.

While Amanda was, generally speaking, the twin far more likely to overflow with the kind of brilliant ideas that gave Emily a blistering headache, she could also often be distracted by a different idea—a more appropriate one if Emily had anything to do with it—so long as it amused her. Rose, in contrast, was typically more likely to

default to appropriate behavior unless Amanda was there to tempt her into chaos, but she was far more intractable when she put her mind to it.

“You are being far too controlling, Emily,” Rose accused, chin jutting out mulishly. “I simply don’t know why you feel you must act this way.”

And perhaps whatever devil possessed Rose when she got in this mood affected Emily as well, for though she knew every move to this argument as well as she knew her own name, she found herself engaging in it anyway.

“Because I’m your sister,” she said as she had a hundred times before. “I am trying to protect you.”

“Protect us?” Rose asked, rolling her eyes and tossing her head like she had a thousand times before. “From what? From enjoying ourselves? From having our own personalities?”

“No,” said Emily through gritted teeth. “From people who would try to take advantage. You know the world is not safe for young ladies?—”

“I don’t know that,” Rose retorted. “How could I know that when you’re constantly trying to keep us from ever experiencing anything?”

“That’s not what I’m trying to do.” It was highly inappropriate to quibble like children in a ballroom, but they both had the sense at least to keep their argument to heated whispers. Even so, the part of Emily that was always worrying about decorum—both for her own sake and for the twins’—fretted that glances had started to drift their way.

“You’re not our mother!” Rose hissed, and they both froze.

There it was. The place this argument always ended up, the hurdle it could never overcome.

Emily felt all the ire drop out of her, replaced by a heavy mantle of sadness.

“I know I’m not,” she said softly even as Rose tripped over herself to apologize.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Em; I’m being horrid,” she replied, lunging for Emily’s hand.

Emily squeezed her sister’s fingers. “You’re not—well, you are,” she amended, and Rose chuckled, the tension between them dissipating in a flash. “But I understand it. I shall try to be more...understanding.”

Even as she said it, though, she couldn’t stop her nose from wrinkling.

“I do not believe you,” Rose said, but there was no heat to her tone. “I have no doubt that you will continue to be your terrible, overprotective self.”

Emily had no suitable response to this—as she probably would continue to be protective though she refused to acknowledge Rose’s other descriptors—so she merely offered her little sister her arm. Rose looped her elbow through Emily’s.

“Will you please tell me where Amanda is, though?” she prompted after a moment.

“Incorrigible,” Rose chuckled. “Yes, very well—she’s dancing? Really, Emily, what did you expect?”

Emily assumed that question was rhetorical as, with Amanda, no expectation was too outlandish.

She could not resist, however, muttering to her sister, “You might’ve said that from

the start, you know.”

Rose’s mouth quirked with devilish amusement.

A couple standing across the room caught Emily’s eye.

“My goodness!” she exclaimed. “What on earth is Diana doing here?”

She and Rose began to cross to the woman in question, who beamed and waved excitedly as soon as she saw them coming, leaning heavily on her husband’s arm when the move upset her balance.

Diana Young, the Duchess of Hawkins, was in the advanced stage of pregnancy when a woman’s shape defied conventional physics. Her husband, Andrew Young, the Duke of Hawkins, looked anxiously aware of this fact as he clung to Diana like he feared she would capsize.

“There you are, Emily,” Diana cried, reaching out one arm to pull Emily towards her, so she could plant a kiss on her cheek. “And Rose, look at you! You look beautiful. Are you enjoying your debut?”

“Very much so,” Rose agreed. And then, when Emily stepped on her foot, added, “Your Grace.”

“Oh, stop it,” Diana chided Emily. “I’m not going to stand on ceremony with your sisters.” To Rose, she said, “Keep calling me ‘Diana.’”

Emily wanted to argue that the twins could only be aided by increased practice in decorum, but she didn’t intend to argue with Diana in her current state...at least not while Diana’s protective husband glared on like he thought his wife was made of glass.

Instead, she said, “Are you really meant to be out in a crush like this, Diana? I thought you’d already entered your confinement.”

“No,” said the Duke firmly just as Diana replied, waving an airy hand, “Oh, it’s fine. Besides, confinement is boring.”

“But you have all those novels,” Andrew argued, sounding very much like a man at the end of his rope.

Diana smiled at him beatifically. “And I am as surprised as you are to learn that there is, in fact, a limit to my interest in enjoying sensationalized gothic fiction. And after a week of trying to relax and repose—” she said the words like they pained her. “—I have hit that limit. Besides, some physicians on the Continent believe activity is good for a mother-to-be. Thus, here I am.”

“Where did you read that?” Andrew demanded suspiciously. “You don’t read scientific papers. They’re not bloodthirsty enough for you. Was it a novel? You do know novels are fiction, Diana!”

Diana waved her hand again, entirely unperturbed by her husband’s increasingly frazzled air.

“One reads things,” she said simply. Then, before Andrew could retort—as he clearly looked poised to do—she grinned again. “Look! There’s Frances. Hello, darling.”

“Um, hello,” Frances said, a touch nervously. Frances had become somewhat more comfortable expressing herself around Diana’s husband in the year since their friend had wed, but Emily knew it was still a struggle. “Good to see you, Your Grace, Diana, Emily, Rose,” she said in order, with a nod to each member of their little circle.

“Good evening, Lady Frances,” Andrew said.

Frances furrowed her brow as she looked at Diana. “Are you sure you’re meant to be out, Diana?” she asked cautiously.

“You see!” Andrew burst out as though he could hold it back no longer. “I am not a madman, Diana. I told you it was highly irregular for you to come out in your condition, but you insisted that I was being absurd. No woman would think as I did; that’s what you said! And yet, here we have two women—your dear friends, no less—who seem inclined to my way of thinking.”

Diana scowled up at him. “I don’t know why you’re so bothered about this, Andrew, truly I don’t. I feel fine. And you don’t see me telling you when you need rest, do you?”

“Yes,” said Emily, Andrew, and Frances all at once. Andrew looked intensely smug at this; Frances looked mortified.

Rose, the only one who hadn’t spoken, looked highly entertained by this whole thing.

“I love Society,” she whispered happily.

“That was different,” Diana told her husband sternly. “You’d been shot.”

“You were shot?” Rose asked, aghast and visibly intrigued. Emily winced. She’d been hiding the gossip pages for weeks to stop the twins from learning about that as she’d no doubt it would excite their curiosity beyond manageable limits.

Fortunately, Andrew did not even glance at Rose. His stern gaze was fixed on his wife. “You don’t even like coming to balls, Diana,” he insisted.



“Ah,” she said, “but I am needed at this ball.”

Andrew sighed. “Explain.”

Diana practically vibrated with triumph. “Well, Emily is here chaperoning her sisters, is she not?” Emily wondered how on earth she was at the middle of this marital debate but decided her best chances of escaping unscathed involved not putting forth that question. “But Emily herself is unmarried. What if she attracts a suitor? Then who will chaperone the twins? I’m clearly the logical choice, Andrew.”

Emily could think of approximately ten rebuttals to this, but she chose to offer the one that her sister was most likely to latch on to and save for later.

“I’m not going to attract a suitor, Diana,” she said.

Diana looked affronted. “I don’t see why not, Emily Rutley. You’re lovely, you’re clever, you’re from a fine family. There’s no reason why a gentleman shouldn’t admire you. You’re simply being difficult.”

Rose, watching her sister get scolded by an enormously pregnant duchess, looked as though she’d died and gone to heaven.

“I’m not—” Emily began, but Frances’ hasty tap on her arm halted her. She looked down at her friend, who nodded over Emily’s shoulder.

“Amanda is coming,” Frances whispered.

Emily turned. Indeed, Amanda was approaching them, her arm linked with that of a gentleman.

Emily felt the flash of relief that only truly struck her when both her sisters were

present, accounted for, and not involved in any form of mischief. That relief lasted only a moment, however, for in the next instant she looked at the gentleman accompanying her sister.

“You!” she gasped.

It was the gentleman from earlier, the dreadfully rude one who had harassed her on the ballroom floor. She was so shocked to see him that it was only when Frances cleared her throat quietly that Emily realized how dreadfully rude her own reaction had been as well. Flustered, she refused to make eye contact with the man, turning instead to her sister.

“Oh good, Amanda,” she said, forcing a smile onto her face, “I was looking for you. And here you are. Good, good.”

Despite also refusing to make eye contact with her friends, Emily couldn’t miss the highly intrigued look she was receiving from Diana.

“Yes, hello,” Amanda said, blinking at Emily like she’d grown a second head. “Emily, I would like to introduce the Earl of Moore, Lord Benedict Hoskins. My Lord, this is my sister, Miss Emily Rutley.”

Emily’s mind blanked, only her body drawing upon its years of training to drop her into the requisite curtsy. The Earl of Moore. The Earl of Moore.

If this dreadful gentleman was the Earl of Moore, that meant his mother was the Dowager Countess of Moore.

From the sharp way Diana sucked in a breath, Emily knew the connection was not lost on her friend, either.

The Dowager Countess of Moore had played a role, however obliquely, in the incident that had left Andrew shot and fighting for his life during the previous Season. Diana's husband had taken a bullet to the shoulder after an altercation with a man named Theodore Dowling who, they had discovered, was the villain responsible for killing Lady Grace Miller, Diana, Frances, and Emily's dear friend.

Dowling's confession, made only moments before his death, had come as a shock, not only to Grace's loved ones but to all of Society, who had believed the culprit already punished. Indeed, Andrew's father, the late Duke of Hawkins, had been hanged for Grace's murder several years prior. This miscarriage of justice was not quite as horrifying as it could have been, given that Andrew and Diana had discovered proof of the late Duke's culpability in many other crimes, but it had still struck the ton with all the force of a boulder falling into a tranquil pond. The waves of gossip and speculation had lapped for months.

The question on everyone's tongues has been thus: how had Theodore Dowling (who had, in the end, turned out to be no gentleman at all, merely a pretender) gotten sufficient access to the upper echelons of Society such that he could come to encounter Grace Miller, let alone kill her?

The answer came to light, eventually, sending tongues wagging with new shock.

Theodore Dowling had been having an affair with the Dowager Countess of Moore. The woman had evidently been as duped as the rest of them, but still, Emily did not find it easy to forgive the woman her lack of good sense when it had cost the world Grace's light.

"How...nice to meet you, Miss Rutley," the Earl said with a perfunctory bow.

At his hesitation, too marked to be anything but intentional, fury rose inside Emily as inexorable as the tides.

How dare this this man act like Emily was the problem when his mother had—had liaised with a murderer!

“I see you’ve met my sister,” she said icily, not returning the pleasantry. “Perhaps you also know my friends, the Duke and Duchess of Hawkins?”

If Emily had been in the mood to give the Earl credit, she might have granted him some for the miniscule flinch that crossed his face.

“A pleasure, Your Graces,” he said, the greeting just long enough to be polite, and then his eyes were back on Emily.

She narrowed hers at him.

“Emily,” Amanda said, a note of warning in her voice, “His Lordship said that he would like to pay us a call during visiting hours tomorrow. Isn’t that lovely?”

“No.” The word came out of Emily like a whip.

“Emily!” Rose exhorted in an urgent whisper.

Emily knew she was being unladylike—possibly even irrational. The only accusation she could throw at the Dowager Countess’ feet was that of poor judgment and perhaps, insufficient discretion when it came to her amorous pursuits. Emily might be unmarried, but she was not naïve; she knew it was common, even accepted, for widows to have liaisons so long as those affairs were kept quiet.

And she could scarcely fault the Earl for his mother’s poor selection; for one, such things were not inherited, and for another, he’d chosen Amanda, who, despite her penchant for trouble, was one of Emily’s favorite people in the world.

But Emily had looked after her sisters for all their lives. Protecting them was a habit, one she had no intention of breaking. And she loved them too dearly to let any whiff of the trouble that had affected their lives—had ended Grace’s life and nearly Andrew’s, too—near her sisters.

Additionally, the man had been unforgivably rude.

“No?” the Earl asked, sounding almost amused. “I assure you, Miss Rutley, it is quite the done thing for a gentleman to pay a call to a lady after he enjoys a dance with her. If you’ve not had the experience to inform you of this, I should be glad to provide a book. I can bring it to your house when I pay my call tomorrow.”

Emily’s mouth dropped open in shock. The gall of the man! He’d all but called her an unappealing spinster, right here in the middle of everyone!

Andrew seemed to agree that this went a bit far. “Now see here,” he said sternly.

The Earl tipped his head toward the Duke in a conciliatory manner though his eyes remained fixed on Emily’s. “No offense meant, I assure you,” he said in what was one of the most patently obvious lies Emily had ever heard. “The younger Miss Rutley here had merely informed me that her sister was serving as a slightly unconventional chaperone. It’s why she was so eager for us to meet, you see,” he added.

At this, Emily’s glance flickered over to Amanda who was looking...well, furious was too mild a term for it, Emily thought.

“A chaperone’s duty,” she said through gritted teeth, “is to protect her charges from unsuitable advances.”

“Emily!” This time the word came from Amanda, a low warning.

Emily ignored it. The Earl did, too.

“I cannot think why you should think me unsuitable, Miss Rutley,” he said, the words a challenge.

“I,” she returned, “cannot be held responsible for your inability to think.”

The Earl’s expression flickered briefly in a way that suggested he was amused by this exchange. Diana choked back a sound that said she was definitely amused by this exchange. Emily, decidedly unamused, kept her spine straight and her chin tilted up as she looked the Earl of Moore directly in the eye.

It was Amanda who broke the fraught moment.

“Oh, you are awful!” she exclaimed, stamping her foot petulantly like an angry child. “I am positively sick to death of you, Emily!”

And then she turned on her heel and fled, Rose only steps behind her.

Emily felt a wave of misery overtake her though she could not quite call it regret. She hated angering her sisters, hated how often it was necessary. She hated it even more when she felt she’d gone about it in a manner that was...less than optimal.

For while she did not think the Earl of Moore had any business around her sister, she supposed she could admit that there might have been a better way to express her disapproval than by quarreling with the man in public.

This, she decided in an instant, was something else she could lay at the feet of the dratted Earl of Moore.

“Look at what you’ve done now!” she cried, dismay loosening her tongue and

causing her to forget that, mere moments ago, she'd recognized the foolishness of fighting with him in the middle of a ball.

"Me?" He looked appalled. "I haven't?—"

But she had neither the time nor the inclination to fight with him. Instead of waiting to hear the rest of his retort—which would, no doubt, have been nothing but nonsense, anyway—she stepped aside, ready to pursue her sisters.

And that would have been fine, except the wretched, terrible, awful Earl of Moore had evidently decided that he, too, needed to depart in precisely that moment—never mind that he didn't have any furious sisters to chase after. They moved—together yet opposite—nearly crashing into one another for a second time that evening.

This time, however, Emily saw it coming. She jerked herself back before they could collide...

And her slipper lost traction on the polished ballroom floor. She careened backwards, her mind conjuring the half hysterical thought that perhaps it was destiny that wanted to see her flat on her bum in front of the ton this evening. How else could she explain that this had happened twice?

Except once again, she did not fall. Once again, strong arms came around her, halting her progress towards the ground.

It was not her shoulders the Earl of Moore grasped this time, however. No, this time when he lunged to stop Emily from falling to the ground, he seized her by her waist, pulled her up firmly until she was pressed well and firmly against him.

Against the whole of him, she realized with a startled blink. Impossibly, her hands were pressed against his chest. What on earth were they doing there? His gaze bore

into hers, intense and sharp and lit with something that was not quite animosity. Something about that gaze made Emily feel even more breathless than had the near fall.

“Oh my,” breathed Frances.

This seemed to jolt the Earl, at least, back into his senses.

“I beg your pardon,” he said gruffly.

“Right,” Emily replied which was terribly inane, but her mind didn’t seem to be working quite correctly.

But then he blinked, and she blinked, and the severing of that hypnotic gaze was enough that she could gather a smidgen of her composure. She realized, abstractly, that she had only moments before her mortification caught up with her, so she hastily got her feet underneath her, tore herself out of the Earl’s grasp, and—it was cowardly, she knew—refused to so much as glance at her friends.

“I must find my sisters,” she said stiffly. “If you all will excuse me. Good evening.”

And then she fled.



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:38 am*

The fury was coming off Amanda in waves, choking the air in the carriage. Rose's disapproval was only slightly less palpable.

Emily swallowed against the apology that wanted to jump to her lips for the dozenth time since they'd started for home. She wasn't sorry. If she was sorry for protecting Amanda tonight, then she'd have to be sorry for a thousand other things.

For delaying her debut to care for her sisters. For taking charge of their educations from childhood. For trying to mother them, as best she knew how, because Emily, at least, had gotten to know their mother for a little while—something the twins had been denied.

She would not apologize, not for any of it.

So even as Amanda crossed her arms so tightly under her bosom that it looked physically uncomfortable, Emily bit her tongue. She waited.

She did not have to wait long as it happened.

"I don't know why you were so dreadful tonight, Emily!" Amanda exclaimed less than five minutes into their ride through Mayfair. "I wasn't even being improper!"

Emily inhaled sharply. She hadn't considered that Amanda thought herself to be the problem.

"No, sweet, you were lovely," she said soothingly, deciding that now was not the moment to discuss the frog.

“Then why did you have to embarrass me like that?” Amanda all but wailed.

Emily clenched her jaw.

“Because I don’t want you affiliating with unsuitable gentlemen,” she explained as patiently as she could. “One’s debut Season is a serious business?—”

“Serious business!” Amanda scoffed. “Goodness, listen to you! I know you think you’re some sort of matronly figure, but might I remind you that you are only two and twenty, Emily!”

In conversations like these, Emily didn’t feel two and twenty. Though she supposed that was precisely what Amanda was lamenting. That was one way she could connect to her sisters, she thought mirthlessly, though it was little balm when she so often felt so, so disconnected from them.

She hoped her frustration didn’t show as she responded. “Yes, but dancing and courtships lead to marriage?—”

“Marriage!” Amanda cut her off again, her voice high and scornful. “Emily, tonight was my second ball ever. Do you really think I’m looking to marry already?”

“Ah,” Emily said. She had, rather, thought that.

This was another moment where she felt the divide between herself and her sisters was vast, oceanic, continental. Amanda and Rose lived among the stars while Emily remained chained to the ground.

Because, from her very first ball, held a year after she rightfully should have debuted, Emily had been singularly focused on finding a match, not because she was particularly enamored of matrimony as a concept but because she wanted to serve as

chaperone to her sisters.

She'd failed at that, of course, so perhaps there was some merit to Amanda's stance.

Not as pertained to the Earl of Moore, obviously—he still was clearly not worthy of Emily's little sister—but generally speaking.

Emily's pause must have gone on too long because Amanda gave a derisive snort. They were nearing Drowton House now, the London home of Lord Drowton and his daughters, and Emily couldn't tell if this was a good thing or a bad one. On one hand, this was as unpleasant a carriage ride as she'd ever taken. On the other, once they arrived at home, she'd lose the opportunity to have her sisters as a captive audience.

"You did think that!" Amanda was saying in a huff. She turned to Rose. "Can you believe this?"

Rose frowned, and it was something of a relief that Emily could see her inner struggle—she did still know her sisters, after all. Rose didn't want to quarrel with Emily, not when they'd already argued and made up earlier in the evening...but she agreed with Amanda. That much was clear.

"I don't think there's any real reason to rush..." she said carefully. Amanda jerked up her chin and shot Emily a triumphant look.

"I'm not saying there is," Emily returned, spreading her hands plaintively. "I just want you to understand that dancing with a gentleman is one thing; having him come to call upon you is another thing entirely. It suggests things. It will generate talk." They were pulling up in front of Drowton House now. Emily could hear the low murmur of the grooms who approached to settle the horses in for the night. "And you do not want your name being bandied about with that of the Earl of Moore. He is not going to call upon you."

The look Amanda shot her was wounded and not mollified in the least.

“No,” she said bitterly, “not anymore, he won’t. Thanks to you.”

And she leaped out of the carriage with a huff and a flutter of skirts, not even bothering to wait for a servant to help her down. Rose shot Emily a look that was half sympathy, half recrimination, and followed her twin.

Emily did not immediately leave her seat. Instead, she sat for a moment, letting a small, grim smile cross her face.

Perhaps tonight had not gone at all according to plan. It had been messy, irritating, and her sisters would no doubt remain cross with her for days, but there was one thing that Emily had certainly managed.

There was no possibility of the Earl of Moore coming to call, not after everything that had happened.

Benedict was, to put it frankly, in a proper snit when he knocked on the front door of Drowton House the next morning. He’d arrived at the very first moment that could be considered a reasonable visiting hour.

This was, he told himself, because he was eager to get the matter of courtship and marriage sorted. It was not because he wanted to rub it in the face of the quarrelsome Miss Emily Rutley.

Not even if she deserved it.

And she did deserve it, he thought as he smoothed the front of his coat, waiting for a servant to open the door. For not only had she bumped into him, argued with him, and made a scene over his visit to her sister, but she had also left him in a highly

uncomfortable situation after she'd stormed away.

He grimaced, recalling the stern, irritated look of the Duke of Hawkins, the highly intrigued look of the Duchess of Hawkins, and the alarmed look of Lady Frances after Miss Rutley had stormed off.

"Well!" the Duchess had said with evident relish.

"Quite the charm you have there, Moore," the Duke added dryly.

Resisting the urge to wince had been a challenge.

Benedict had long since learned that the best way to handle his mother's...indiscretions was to ignore them. This was, of course, easier said than done—even before his mother had taken up with a man who had turned out to be a bloody murderer. But though he tried not to reward his mother's outlandishness with the attention she so clearly sought, he had never quite managed to remain entirely ignorant of her actions.

Thus, he remained unfortunately aware that the man in front of him had been shot by a villain who had gained access to the ton via Benedict's mother's bedchamber.

It was, to put it mildly, a fucking mess.

Facing down this trio—well, two of them as Lady Frances' gaze hadn't left the floor—in the wake of a highly embarrassing altercation with a woman who was, apparently, their friend was therefore incredibly awkward.

Yet some perverse, proud part of him forbade him to apologize for something that was not, he maintained, his fault.

“Right,” he said instead, hearing the echo of Miss Rutley’s words a moment too late. “Well, please excuse me.”

It hadn’t been the most elegant of retreats, he’d allowed, but it had gotten the job done. He’d given up the evening for a loss and headed home to regroup for the next day.

In most other circumstances, he’d have given up the nascent courtship with Miss Amanda Rutley as well. It was no fault of her own; the girl was pretty enough, interesting enough, and likeable enough. Indeed, “enough” was, to Benedict, the perfect descriptor.

But he was looking for an easy courtship, not one that brought him into social contact with his mother’s worst mistake. Not one that included a harridan of a sister by marriage in the deal.

It was, alas, this harridan that had made him cling to the idea of paying Miss Amanda a visit.

A stately butler with a thinning pate of hair answered the door.

“The Earl of Moore to see Miss Amanda Rutley,” he announced politely and with only a hint of triumph.

He was not in the habit of letting persnickety misses get the best of him. He would not bow to the whims of Miss Rutley simply because she had decided—baselessly, he felt—that he ought not be allowed to call on her sister. It was absurd. She was being absurd.

And even if he did not get the chance to tell her so directly, he could at least show her that she was being absurd by showing up here and serving as a perfectly adequate

suitor. And then, assuming all went to plan, an unobjectionable husband. Miss Rutley would change her tune, certainly, when her sister was a countess.

And if she didn't? Well, perhaps he could identify some Scottish lord in need of a wife. If the gentleman was rather hard of hearing, all the better. He wouldn't be able to hear Miss Rutley quarrelling.

"Just a moment, My Lord," the butler said, accepting Benedict's proffered card.

Benedict nodded then waited in the comfortable foyer, gazing idly around Drowton House. It was a nice enough place though something that Benedict could not quite put his finger on made it feel...impersonal, somehow. Strange, given that the eldest lady in the household was evidently Miss Emily.

He shook off the uncharacteristic thought. What did he care about a house's décor? He was here for the expedient acquisition of a wife, and that was it.

Yet somehow, it seemed that merely thinking of Miss Rutley had been sufficient to summon her, as if she were some sort of cursed apparition created to stymie his plans. Because it was not the younger Rutley sister who appeared in the hallway after a few moments; it was the eldest, her hands on her hips and her face a mask of disapproval.

"What are you doing here?" she asked peevishly.

Benedict felt a gleam of a smile cross his face. Apparently, he would get to tell Miss Rutley that she was being absurd. Marvelous.

"Why Miss Rutley," he said, feeling rather like the cat that had got the cream, "good morning to you."

Disapproval melted into a full scowl.

“Why,” she said, coming closer, “are you here, My Lord?”

His title sounded like an epithet. It was very impressive.

“I am here to call upon your sister, of course,” he said, feigning shock just because it was certain to annoy her. “I am quite sure I said as much last night. Do you not recall? Are you quite well, Miss Rutley?”

Her expression was murderous.

“I think rather,” she said, tone acidic, “that it is you who is struggling with his memory as I very expressly forbade you coming to call upon Amanda.”

She’d taken another few steps towards him—as had he, he was astonished to realize. They were standing practically nose-to-nose now, something that would not have been possible with any other woman of his acquaintance. She really was quite tall, this eldest Miss Rutley. Uncommonly tall for a woman.

Benedict had always stood head and shoulders taller than every other man in the room; women too often made him feel like he was some other species entirely, so high did he tower above them. Miss Rutley had to tilt her head back to look at him, but she did not have to crane her neck. He found he liked that.

Liked it, he hastily amended, because he could more effectively give her his sternest look, of course.

“You,” he sneered, “do not have the authority to forbid me from calling upon your sister. You do not have the authority to command me in any way.”

Her eyes widened—no doubt in irritation. She opened her mouth to argue; the motion drew his attention to her lips. The lower one was rounded, pouty in a way that struck



him as incongruous with her stubborn personality. She bit against it in a quick, frustrated motion, and Benedict's mind flashed to the image of his teeth biting that lip and?—

He moved back so suddenly he almost stumbled. Christ, where was his head? He was here to court the sweet younger Miss Rutley, not the irksome elder one. This was likely just a sign that he was sensible to marry; it wasn't natural for a man to go so long without a woman's embrace. It had been too long since his last discreet liaison (one only had to meet Benedict's mother to gain an appreciation for the value of discretion), and he found the quick interludes with merry widows or winsome actresses dissatisfying.

The benefit of a wife was the convenience of the thing. And the social approval. Then a man could easily resolve his bodily needs and return to his regular business.

Which was why he needed to keep his mind focused on marriage.

He cleared his throat. Miss Rutley looked faintly surprised, perhaps at his sudden movement.

"In any case," he said, his voice thicker than it had been a moment before, "you shan't bully me?—"

"Bully!" Outrage supplanted the surprise; Miss Rutley gaped at him. "How dare?—"

"My Lord!"

A cheerful voice caused both Benedict and Miss Rutley to jerk their gazes upwards. There, on the landing, stood Miss Amanda Rutley, looking fresh and pink-cheeked, rather as though she had hurried to greet them.

When her welcoming smile turned briefly into a censoring look (this directed solely at her sister), Benedict decided that Miss Amanda had hurried—to break up the mounting argument.

A faint flicker of annoyance shot through him at the interruption. He'd not yet gotten to tell Miss Rutley what he thought of her antics. That was the only reason he disliked Miss Amanda's arrival, naturally.

He pasted on a genteel smile. No matter what the Duke of Hawkins had implied the night prior, Benedict could be charming.

"Good morning, Miss Rutley," he said to the younger sister as she descended the stairs. "You are looking well this morning."

"And you, My Lord," she said, curtsying as she reached the bottom floor. "I am so glad you were still able to call after our—" Eyes flashed towards Miss Rutley the elder. "—interruption yesterday evening."

"I wouldn't miss it," he said as Miss Emily fumed so intently that he could practically smell the smoke. "Shall we adjourn to the parlor?"

"Marvelous," Miss Amanda said, taking his proffered arm. "I am so looking forward to getting to know you better, My Lord."

"And I you," he returned. It was the prescribed conversation. Easy, obvious, proper.

Boring, a voice whispered. He ignored it.

They turned to exit the foyer but not before he caught a glimpse of Miss Emily's sharklike smile.

“And I shall be so pleased to accompany you,” she said.

He was entirely certain it was a threat. And he could not help but think that he enjoyed it anyway.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:38 am*

Emily liked visiting, and she disliked murder. These, she felt, were not controversial opinions.

As she sat in the parlor with her sisters and the Earl of Moore, however, she found that visiting was a misery, and murder was sounding oddly appealing.

Amanda and the Earl, for their part, seemed to be having a perfectly lovely time. Amanda was doing a perfect impression of someone who hadn't touched an amphibian in the last twenty-four hours, and the Earl was playacting as a gentleman instead of showing his true form, that of the Patron Saint of Annoying Behavior.

Rose appeared to be having a moderately fine experience. She'd stuck her head into the room moments after Amanda, Emily, and the Earl had entered, had murmured a low, "Oh dear," and had promptly set herself up as a barrier between Emily and the conversing couple. Rose was occasionally contributing to the conversation but reserved most of her attention for the sketchbook in her lap.

Emily was trying to follow her little sister's example—and wasn't that something she'd never expected to do—but she was less attending to her embroidery and more stabbing frustratedly at a piece of fabric.

She was simply so furious with that awful, awful, awful man!

And, even worse, her mind kept insistently returning to the low, shivery cadence of his voice when he'd said words like authority and command. And how he'd looked when he'd leaned in close to her. The way she'd felt delicate and oddly protected when he'd loomed over her.

This was, quite obviously, insane. She was clearly going insane.

“...don’t you think, Emily?” Rose was asking.

Emily’s head jerked up. She prayed she wasn’t blushing as she forced a pleasant smile to her face.

“Sorry, darling, what was that? I was plotting some stitchwork.” She waved her embroidery circle aimlessly. The Earl quirked an eyebrow as if to say he knew she was lying.

He didn’t, of course. Even suspecting that was insane. And Emily didn’t have time to go insane, not when she had her sisters to mind.

Rose gave her a terse look, her turned back hiding the expression from Amanda—who looked far too gleeful for Emily’s comfort—and the Earl.

“Don’t you think it’s unlikely that the rumor about a ball where everyone must attend on horseback is true?” Rose asked sweetly.

It was a monumental struggle to keep her smile from slipping. Emily knew that rumor was false because Amanda was the one who kept trying to get it going. She’d read a gossip item—Emily really needed to find a better hiding place for the papers—wherein a highly intoxicated young lord had attempted to ride his horse into the middle of an assembly. Amanda had become obsessed with the potential hilarity of a ballroom full of horses. When Emily had told her point-blank that she would be dead in the ground before she allowed such a thing at Drowton House, Amanda had taken to bandying the idea about as rumor in the hopes that someone with more authority over their own ballroom would overhear the idea, decide it sounded like good fun, and make it a reality.

This was the kind of thing Emily had to deal with.

“I think,” she said, locking eyes with Amanda, who was barely managing not to giggle, “that such a thing is highly unlikely and would be, if real, extremely impractical and irresponsible, not to mention likely to result in considerable damage to person and property.”

Amanda stuck her tongue out at Emily though she managed to arrange her face back into a mask of demure politeness before the Earl turned back to face her.

“I suppose so,” she sighed. “The rumor mill is truly the oddest thing, is it not? Why, I recently read...”

Emily ceased listening as Amanda turned to a far more likely—and far more appropriate—conversation about a sailing competition that was interrupted by a flock of cantankerous geese. It was not quite genteel talk of fashion and Society, but Emily would take what she could get.

Besides, she thought with a tiny smile, if Amanda was trying to rile her, it likely meant that her little sister was starting to forgive her for the previous night’s antics. And if she was focused on riling Emily, it meant she was not overly serious about the Earl of Moore.

And that was a good thing. Because Emily wasn’t entirely certain what to make of this tall, brooding earl, who was frustratingly difficult one minute and effortlessly charming the next, but she did know one thing.

The sooner he was out of their lives, the better.

After his visit to the Rutley sisters, Benedict returned to his house feeling curiously drained of energy. He wanted to blame his sudden exhaustion on Miss Emily Rutley

and her endless argumentativeness, but as the visit had stretched on, he'd found himself wishing for more of her arguments, oddly enough. He'd been strangely disappointed when she'd sat there quietly, massacring her embroidery.

He shouldn't feel that way. He should feel pleased that the woman had finally seen sense and had left him to his perfectly aimable conversation with Miss Amanda.

Except...

Well, it had been a bit boring, hadn't it?

Miss Amanda, with the occasional interjection from her twin, had kept up a perfectly suitable conversation. She'd put forth perfectly reasonable questions about his life and work and had offered responses that were polite and thoughtful. But he'd seen no true spark of interest in her, except for when she was talking about that strange bit about the horses.

And he'd certainly felt no spark of interest when she'd talked about things she'd read in the gossip columns.

Pretending to feel that spark when it didn't exist had been far more tiring than he'd anticipated. And, worse, he'd spent the whole time fighting to keep his eye from wandering back to Miss Emily, fighting to keep his mind from wandering back to their unfinished argument or the way she'd bitten that plump lip of hers...

He threw open his front door with more violence than was strictly necessary. He wasn't going to think about it now, either. He was going to return to his study and attend to the day's work and leave the thorny tangle of courtship for tomorrow. Or several days from now. Next week at the latest.

"Oh, there you are, Benedict!"

Or perhaps, he realized with a barely stifled sigh, he was going to deal with his mother.

Benedict supposed that deep, deep down, he probably loved his mother. She was his mother! People loved their mothers, didn't they? He found, however, he had to admit that he sometimes struggled to access that love for his mother, given her persistent conviction that the world was against her and that it was Benedict's job to both hear her (endless) complaints on the subject and to resolve her (unceasing) woes.

"Hello, mother," he said, not bothering to conceal the weariness in his tone. It didn't matter. No matter what he did, no matter how he acted, his mother would find a way to be sour about it.

As gossip told it, the Dowager Countess of Moore had been considered a great beauty in her day; it was her bewitching green eyes and thick raven tresses that had lured the previous Earl of Moore into her orbit. Despite marrying a rich, titled man who thought she hung the moon, Priscilla Hoskins had long suffered the abiding conviction that her beauty should have earned her something more in life.

She had spent all of Benedict's life searching for this 'something more,' usually in the arms of other men—both before and after her husband's passing. Benedict had been only eleven when he first heard the rumors that he was not his father's son in truth, though the late Earl, who had never once looked upon Benedict with suspicion, had been quick to put end to those rumors.

"Who on earth told you such nonsense?" asked the Earl angrily, furrowing the strong brows that would appear on Benedict's own visage a few years later as he entered his adulthood. "I shan't have you listening to a word of that, Ben. I shan't."

And he hadn't. He'd heard it again, of course, but he'd not listened. To Benedict, his father's word was absolute; he'd never been given reason to doubt it. When the late



Earl had died some five years prior, leaving Benedict a titled lord at one and twenty, he'd felt his father's loss like a hammer blow to the head.

Priscilla had scarcely seemed to notice.

Benedict supposed he could see traces of that beauty who had captured and broken his father's heart in the pinched visage of the annoyed woman who stood before him. It was hard, but he supposed he could manage it.

"Where in the good Lord's name have you been?" his mother cried dramatically as if Benedict was a child who had escaped from the nursery and not fully grown. "You are always gone, Benedict. Why are you always gone?"

Benedict handed off his hat and coat to his butler, who did not so much as blink at the Dowager Countess' high, plaintive whine. The staff, alas, was well accustomed to such theatrics.

"I was paying a call," he said shortly, knowing his mother wouldn't probe further. She didn't really care where he'd been, no matter what her question implied. What she cared about was that he hadn't been available the moment she wanted him. "Can I help you with something?"

He started walking into the house, knowing she would follow.

"I should think so!" his mother huffed, close on his heels. "It's my allowance, Benedict. It's a disgrace. A disgrace! Do you mean to shame me in front of all my friends? Are you hoping to give me fits? Because if I have to be seen in the ancient fashions that I have in my wardrobe for one moment longer, I shall have fits. And then you shall have to send me to one of those sanatoriums on the Continent, so I can take in the healing waters. But maybe that is your plan! Perhaps this is your plan to get rid of me."

Benedict stopped walking—not because he wished to give credence to this absurdity but because he had nearly reached his study, and if she entered his study, he would have to practically pry her out with a crowbar.

The hallway was, to its credit, a much less comfortable place for a lengthy session of complaints.

“Mother,” he said, digging deep into his reserves of patience as he turned to face her, “I am not trying to get rid of you.”

His mother’s lips were pursed so tight that one might have thought she’d been sucking on a lemon.

“You have a funny way of showing it,” she said prissily.

He sighed then looked directly at her for the first time since he’d entered the house. His brow furrowed.

“Mother,” he said, “you are wearing a new gown right this moment.”

He knew this was the case because she had gone on and on about something to do with the lace trim and how Lady Something-or-Other had clearly stolen her ideas.

His mother could not have looked more shocked if he’d slapped her directly across the face.

“Benedict, don’t be ridiculous,” she gasped. “This gown is months old.”

“Months,” he said flatly. He was nearly certain the shirt he was currently wearing was at least two years old, and while gentlemen’s fashion did admittedly change more slowly than that of ladies, he struggled to believe that a gown that was only a few

months old could be as horrendously out of date as his mother had so clearly implied.

The Dowager either missed his tone or chose to ignore it.

“Yes!” she cried triumphantly. “Months! And you wouldn’t have me look the fool in front of the ton, would you, Benedict?”

Benedict had so many potential responses to that.

He could point out that he knew, as an absolute matter of fact, that not all of the ladies of the ton, not even all the ones considered fashionable, had new gowns on a monthly basis. He could point out that there were ways to alter dresses to suit new fashions rather than acquiring an entirely new frock and that this, too, was accepted practice among Society women.

He could point out that accosting people in hallways with outlandish accusations of them trying to drive one to madness over allowances was far more foolish than any gown could ever be.

He said none of this. There was no point. His mother had long since proven that she was not beholden to such forces as logic or reason.

Instead, he made his voice as cold and firm as it could go and said, “Mother. No, you are being ridiculous, and the allowance I give you is not paltry. Surely you realize the money of the estate has to go to more than satisfying your endless vanity.”

He hadn’t really expected it to work. It never worked. But it still felt like a piercing knife to his skull when his mother clasped her hands in front of her and let her lower lip quiver.

Her eyes, however, he noticed, were entirely dry.

“I see,” she said, voice wavering. It physically pained Benedict not to roll his eyes. “I see how you think of me. And why shouldn’t you disdain me? I am merely your mother, the only parent you have left living, and you are merely my only child. Why should I deserve your forbearance? I am but a woman, left to drift aimlessly in the world of men, entirely dependent on their sympathy and charity—such as it is.”

An agonizing headache was radiating from behind Benedict’s left eye. It could scarcely be later than noon, and he already felt that this day had gone on forever. He rubbed his temples and ignored his mother. Sometimes ignoring her was the best route to get her to stop her nonsense. Or if not the best route, the one that at least annoyed Benedict the least.

Today, however, his mother was in rare form.

“I’ve no husband,” she lamented, his lack of response not hindering her speech in the least. She’d produced a handkerchief from somewhere and was now dabbing furiously at her still dry eyes. “And I shall never have means of attracting one, now that I am fated to be dressed in rags for all my days.”

The Dowager had, Benedict knew, no intention of seeking a second husband; she’d scarcely been interested in the first. But logic would hold no sway when she got into this mood where her primary motivation was melodrama for melodrama’s sake.

Rags for all her days, he thought, not even resisting rolling his eyes. Honestly. What had he done to deserve this histrionic nonsense constantly being cast at his feet? He felt his lip curl in disgust at the bereft act his mother was putting on.

“I shall just be a lonely, dried-up old woman, cast aside by those to whom she gave her youth,” the Countess went on. “Unloved, unwanted?—”

“Mother.” Benedict had lost his patience. He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Stop, I

beg you. I will increase your allowance if you just leave me in peace.”

Part of him hated to give in to her. Surely that would only make things worse, would only make her continue to act like a spoiled child who had been denied a sweet. But he simply could not take it anymore, the whining and the pretend tears.

It was all so bloody typical, he thought scornfully. Why did women insist on thinking that men would be moved by their pathetic displays? Did they not realize it only generated irritation and disdain?

“Oh!” chirped Priscilla, face suddenly bright as morning.

So much for the tears, Benedict thought, shaking his head disgustedly. He didn’t voice the thought aloud, however; doing so would just prolong this miserable interview and that was the last thing he wanted.

“Well, yes, darling, that would be wonderful,” Priscilla went on cheerfully, as if the whole thing had been Benedict’s idea to begin with. “I do thank you, you know I do. I know just the thing that will suit. I have a wonderful outing planned with a gentleman next week, did I tell you about that? I will want to look my finest, naturally.”

This was the last thing Benedict wanted to hear. He held up a quelling hand.

“Mother, please,” he said. “I would prefer not to know about your...suitors. And do please try to be inconspicuous. I would hate to see our family name in the gossip columns again. Just...subtlety. It’s all I ask.”

Priscilla trilled out a little laugh, like Benedict was being charmingly clever.

“Oh, my dear,” she said with a teasing shake of her head. “You needn’t be so stuffy. Everyone needs companionship, you know.”

The headache was behind both Benedict's eyes now. Forget a quiet room, he was going to need to lie down with a cool compress, like a fainting maiden in a sensational story. For Christ's sake.

"I am not telling you to avoid all companionship," he explained wearily. "I am merely asking for some discretion."

Now that she'd gotten what she wanted, however, his mother refused to be anything but happy.

"Oh, Benedict," she laughed again. "You really need to relax."

She was already walking away; she had no further use for him. As a parting shot, however, she threw a last comment over her shoulder.

"Perhaps you ought to seek some companionship of your own."

And with that suggestion—horrifying from one's mother, truly—she was gone.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:38 am*

“I think I’ve gotten larger,” Diana lamented, staring down at her protruding stomach which currently had a small plate of biscuits balanced atop it.

“You have absolutely gotten larger,” Frances said matter-of-factly. The three friends were alone in Diana’s parlor which meant that Frances’ personality had emerged. No matter how long she’d known her, Emily never failed to be tickled by the capacity for bluntness that hid behind Frances’ typical retiring demeanor.

Diana pouted mightily. She’d gone through various stages of moodiness in her pregnancy, including grouchiness, weepiness, and a strange combination of hunger and anger. Fortunately, this pout seemed to be primarily for show.

“I don’t think you’re meant to say that to me,” she said to Frances.

Frances shrugged and applied herself to nibbling the frosting off a biscuit. “If you can’t ask your friends for the truth, who can you ask?”

“Not your husband,” Diana said sourly. Perhaps her bad mood wasn’t just for show. “He said I looked beautiful.” She said it like she’d never heard such an insult in her life.

“The gall of him,” Frances said dryly.

“In fairness,” Emily said, “you do look beautiful. Just also quite round.”

This was true; Diana was one of those women who had bloomed in pregnancy. She looked almost as though she were glowing.

But yes, she was also very, very round.

And a bit feral, given that she responded to this by biting a biscuit like it had offended her.

When she was done, she heaved a sigh.

“Oh, goodness, don’t listen to me; I’m a mess. Everything is uncomfortable, and I know I’m being perfectly intolerable. Distract me. Distract me, please. Emily, tell me, have the terror twins gotten up to anything interesting?”

Emily shot her friend a baleful look. “Don’t even mention it!” she complained. “I know they’re half a city away, but they’ll hear you and get ideas.” She rolled her eyes while her friends snickered. “But no—and I’m certain to be cursing myself by saying this, no doubt—but they’ve been relatively well-behaved since the incident with the Earl of Moore.”

Frances and Diana exchanged a glance that suggested they had many thoughts that pertained to the Earl of Moore.

“Well, Em,” Diana said cautiously, and Emily felt that it was quite rich indeed for Diana to act as if Emily were the volatile one in this room, “you were a bit harsh on the man the other night.”

Emily’s mouth dropped open. “His mother’s lover shot your husband!” she exclaimed.

Diana narrowed her eyes in a clear invitation for Emily to listen to herself.

“True,” she allowed, “but the Earl of Moore, by all accounts, had nothing to do with that. And while I suppose it’s not impossible that he was involved, it seems highly



unlikely that he and the criminal liaising with his mother were on speaking terms.”

That was...annoyingly reasonable.

“Fine,” Emily huffed. “But that wasn’t even the incident in question. The incident,” she repeated with the correct level of gravitas, “was when he called upon Amanda the following morning.”

Her friends were not suitably impressed.

“Yes, he did say he was going to,” Frances observed.

“Yes,” Emily scoffed, “but then I forbade him from doing it.”

“Right, but you were being insane,” Diana opined.

Emily opened her mouth to argue with this blatant assassination of her character but was halted by Frances’ thoughtful look.

“You were being insane,” Frances observed as if this somehow had more meaning coming from her. “And that’s very unlike you, Emily.”

“Thank you,” Emily said, eyes narrowed as she did not trust this compliment.

“Which rather makes me wonder why you were acting so strangely,” Frances continued, proving that Emily should always trust her instincts.

Diana gasped so sharply that Emily feared, for a heart-stopping instant, that her friend was going into labor. But Diana merely sat up straight (with some difficulty) and pointed an accusing finger at Emily.

“You,” she said dramatically, “have a tendre for the Earl of Moore!”

Emily felt quite convinced that the look on her face was one of abject horror.

“Have you—” she paused, her head whipping around to look at Frances, who seemed to be struggling with the urge to laugh. “Have both of you lost leave of your senses?” She pointed at Diana even as she addressed Frances. “I can imagine such a thing coming from her—the other day she wept because she had ‘lost’ her favorite hatpin when she was holding it in her hand?—”

“That was an isolated incident, and it’s very rude of you to bring it up,” Diana said primly. “I am in a delicate condition.”

“—but you, Frances?” Emily went on, exasperated. “You’re meant to be the sensible one.”

“Am I?” asked Frances, seeming flattered. “Well, that’s quite nice.”

Emily simply could not take it anymore. She let out an incoherent sound of pure frustration. This proved too much for her friends, who lost themselves to helpless laughter. After a long moment of glaring at them furiously—which only led them to laugh all the more—Emily found her irritation dissipating until she, too, was chuckling at her own overblown reaction.

“Very well,” she allowed. “Perhaps I was a tad less polite to him than I could have been.” Frances snorted delicately. “But he was very rude to me first and therefore deserved it,” she finished with a decisive nod.

Diana shrugged. “Well, Andrew terrorized him a bit after you ran away—walked away elegantly,” she amended when Emily shot her an aggrieved look. “Your earl looked quite flustered over it.”

Emily declined to object over fashioning the Earl of Moore her earl as it seemed only likely to open her up to further teasing.

“If Andrew terrorized me, I would faint,” Frances muttered.

“It’s not as bad as you think,” Diana said with a dreamy sort of sigh that made Emily and Frances exchange alarmed looks. Diana caught the exchange and let out an embarrassed little cough. “Sorry.”

“Right,” Frances said. “So back to Emily.” Diana nodded eagerly. “Is he still courting Amanda, then?”

The question made something twist in Emily’s stomach. Annoyance, probably. That was probably what that feeling was.

“I suppose so,” she said. “He hasn’t come to call again, but he sent some flowers. Respectable, neither too paltry nor too flashy,” she added before either of her friends could ask. “But... Oh, I don’t know.” She tossed up her hands. “He just isn’t right for Amanda. I know it.”

Frances’ mouth was twisted thoughtfully. “Perhaps you’re right,” she said absently, fidgeting with the remnants of her biscuit. “Perhaps he isn’t the right match for Amanda at all...”

As their conversation turned to other matters, Emily wondered if she’d imagined the emphasis Frances had placed on her sister’s name...

While it was traditional for heirs to a title to attend Oxford, it was also traditional that they make an utter hash of their studies. The things future earls had to learn weren’t found in a university lecture hall; they were taught by their fathers, their father’s stewards, and by other titled gentleman who spent their lives running sprawling

estates. Despite this, Benedict had taken a first in math. He'd always had a head for math.

Which was why it was ridiculous that he could not make the bloody expense ledger add up.

“What in the fresh hell is going on,” he growled at the book, as if swearing were likely to accomplish what several accountings of the figures had not.

He was half tempted to chuck the bloody thing into the fire. The earldom wasn't in debt. He had enough money. Who cared if he knew how much?

Benedict cared. Stupid, wretched sense of responsibility.

With a sigh that just skirted the edge of self-pity, he flipped back several pages through the ledger. Perhaps seeing what had gone right the previous year could help him understand what was going wrong this year.

The idea, he realized only a few minutes later, had considerable merit.

Unfortunately, that didn't make him feel any better.

He checked the numbers twice more.

“Mother,” he huffed, frustrated already, “what are you up to?”

The ledgers told a confusing story; his mother was spending absurd amounts of money, far more than she ought to be spending. And yet...the bills didn't seem to be coming out of Benedict's coffers. The bills had come to the house, yes; that's how they'd ended up in the book. And they'd been marked as paid.

But he wasn't the one paying for them.

Which meant whatever money the Dowager Countess was spending, it wasn't the money he had given her.

He scoured the numbers one final time in a vain hope that the books would yield more answers, but alas, none were forthcoming. He needed to discuss the issue with his mother, it seemed.

She was, unfortunately, far less likely to be honest than a book of numbers.

He shoved aside the ledger and got to his feet with a reluctance so marked, it practically weighed down his feet.

It was midafternoon. At this hour, the Dowager Countess was likely to be at home and awake; it was too late for her to still be abed, but too early for her to have gone out for the evening's entertainments. This meant she was most likely to be found in the Countess' drawing room.

Like most aristocratic London homes, Moore Manor had a parlor that was for the personal use of the lady of the house. When Benedict married—and on that note, he thought, he should send another posy or something to Miss Amanda Rutley—the parlor would become the domain of his wife. But until then, the Dowager Countess had no challenger for her preferred room in the house.

Benedict wasn't sure if his mother liked the room itself or merely liked that it was the space in the manor over which she held the most definite claim. He could only imagine that asking her would not bring him peace.

"Mother?" he asked when he reached the door. It was slightly ajar.

No answer.

He rapped his knuckles lightly against the heavy oak door which swung inward at his touch.

“Mother?”

He looked inside; she wasn’t there.

Benedict was already half turned to leave, to search for her elsewhere, when the scattered papers on the table caught his eye. God help him, if these were further bills...

He pulled the topmost paper towards him.

Theodore, it read.

It’s been far too long since I’ve heard from you. You know you cannot leave me waiting like this?—

Benedict had already half recoiled—he did not wish to see his mother’s love letters to a dead murderer, and he did not wish to know why his mother had left them out on this table—when the next phrase caught his eye.

--without consequences.

He blinked. What?

Meet me at our usual place, or else I shall have to have a conversation that I daresay you shall be less than pleased with. Don’t push me, dear Teddy. You know things are so much better when you behave. And you have not yet seen how poorly things can

go when you do not.

Benedict's head swam. This was... This was a threat. His mother had been threatening Theodore Dowling.

And Dowling, apparently, had not reacted well to it, if the scrawled response at the bottom of the parchment, carved in a man's rough scratching, was any indication.

Fine. This time. But I won't be bullied. Watch yourself.

Benedict reread the letter as if it would make what he was seeing make more sense. What did his mother have to threaten Theodore Dowling with? Yes, the man was involved in all sorts of nefarious acts, but his mother hadn't known about them...

...had she?

Torn between needing to know more and desperately not wanting any confirmation of his worst fears, Benedict paused, fingers hovering over the paper. There were more letters here. Should he read those, too?

In the end, the decision was taken out of his hands. He heard, from closer to the front of the house, his mother's cheerful trill as she addressed one of the members of the staff.

Frustrated at being interrupted, he left the paper where it lay and bolted from the room. He wasn't ready to confront his mother about what he'd read.

Not yet. He needed to figure out what he thought about the letters before he let her get into his head with her explanations and obfuscations.

Even so, he cursed his shortsightedness in not taking the letters with him. Was his

mother going to accuse him of theft? In his own bloody house? Although, knowing her entitlement, she would probably try...

He slipped up the servant's staircase to avoid her, making for his own bedchamber where he would not be disturbed. If he'd had a bad feeling about the mysterious money, it was nothing compared to the way he felt about this newest discovery. His mother had never cared much about other people, that much had always been obvious. But he'd never thought that this would extend into outright criminal activity such as blackmail. For one, he would have thought she'd lack the initiative. Why bother with such a mess when there were men to seduce, pointless trinkets to buy, and sons to annoy?

But this newest discovery suggested that maybe he'd underestimated the extent of his mother's selfishness—and the lengths to which she was willing to go in order to get the things she wanted.

He dropped into his armchair, feeling frustrated, confused, and so bloody furious. His mother was a constant thorn in his side, but this felt like more than that.

Something, he feared, was very much not right.



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:38 am*

There was always another bloody ball.

Christ, but Benedict hated the Season.

He would have found the whole thing intolerable (instead of, as it was, barely tolerable) if not for his purpose: Miss Amanda Rutley would be here tonight. He would dance with her again this evening, avoid offending her sister (or at least minimally offend her as not offending Miss Emily Rutley was perhaps too Herculean a task for even him), and call upon her the next morning. He would repeat this pattern several more times, whereupon he would set up a meeting with Lord Drowton, gain his permission to ask for Miss Amanda's hand, then summarily marry her.

Neat. Easy.

Benedict loved it when things were neat and easy.

He had to focus on things that were neat and easy to distract himself from the undoubtedly messy and complicated thing that was brewing inside of his home, the evidence of which he presently had secreted in his breast pocket.

"You look even more sullen than usual." Evan's voice at his shoulder practically made Benedict jump out of his skin. His friend frowned. "And a bit more nervous, too."

Evan was, honestly, the last person he wanted to talk to about this whole business with his mother and Dowling...at least not until he had more information.

The more information in question was practically burning a hole in his pocket.

“Sorry,” he told his friend with a wry, self-deprecating grimace. “I’m just...planning.”

Evan’s sharp bark of laughter was teasing but not unkind. “You? Never.”

That made Benedict’s grimace intensify. Because the thing was, he had planned rather poorly when it came to stealing the letters. He’d been walking to his mother’s parlor this evening when the opportunity had presented itself. His mother wasn’t in the room...but the letters had been, still laid out on the table.

Almost like she wanted them to be found.

In reality, Benedict didn’t much care what his mother did or didn’t want. What he wanted was to make sure she wasn’t about to bring some other hideous scandal down on his head. He was goddamned sick and tired of seeing their name dragged through the papers because his mother was up to her unceasing antics.

After all, if he intended to make a respectable bride of Miss Amanda Rutley—and he did, ideally soon, so he could stop coming to these wretched events—he needed to not be hip deep in yet another scandal.

So he’d taken the letters without feeling a prick of remorse. Though he did feel a great deal of irritation at himself for grabbing them too close to their departure to secret them in his study or bedchamber before departing.

If one was working to avoid a scandal, one should not bring the evidence of potential scandal into a room with half the ton present. Not that he knew what the letters said; he hadn’t had a chance to read them yet, which was both torment and relief because he feared what those letters would reveal.

Feared they would show that his mother had known Dowling to have been a criminal and instead of turning him in to the proper authorities, had blackmailed him over it.

He tried not to let his thoughts show on his face as he addressed his friend.

“Yes, yes, have your laughs. A courtship is important business, though.”

Evan looked skeptical. “You aren’t flustered by serious business, Moore.” His mouth twitched. “Are you perhaps less ambivalent to Miss Rutley than you initially believed?”

And damn Benedict’s traitorous mind because the image this evoked was of unruly black curls that heralded their owner’s penchant for sass. It evoked a pouty bottom lip that deserved to be nipped.

It took him far too long to realize that Evan had been, of course, speaking of Miss Amanda Rutley.

“No,” he said more gruffly than was perhaps necessary, given the innocent teasing of Evan’s comment. But he was off kilter, not only because of the letters but also because he was not a man who was commonly plagued by unwanted thoughts.

“No,” he repeated more calmly. The last thing he needed was Evan probing into what was wrong. He didn’t know what was worse, that his friend would uncover that Benedict had been having...thoughts about Miss Rutley the elder or that Benedict suspected that his mother had knowingly protected a criminal.

Well, no—the latter was certainly worse.

But...

Even if his mother had known Dowling to be not a gentleman as he had claimed but rather a scoundrel of the worst kind, surely, she hadn't known him to be complicit in Lady Grace Miller's murder. He'd known his mother to do desperate, foolish things in order to gain the attention of men which she seemed to crave like some men craved the drink.

But she wouldn't do something that foolish. He couldn't believe it. He refused to believe it.

He tried not to dwell on the difference between those two statements.

Either way, he would figure out what had happened and deal with it accordingly. Most likely, he'd have to have an uncomfortable conversation with his mother about the idiocy of blackmail, since if someone had done something that merited being blackmailed, they might very well be capable of worse crimes as well.

Like murdering an innocent young lady in cold blood.

Evan was still looking at him, so Benedict drew his mind back to the present, lest his friend probe further into the direction of his thoughts.

"I am merely calculating my next move," he said, turning his face to look out over the crowded ballroom. Why was it always so deucedly crowded, too? Why did no hostess ever think of how many bodies could reasonably fit into her ballroom and then invite fewer people than that? Surely a favorable mention in the gossip papers couldn't be worth the stuffiness and the stepped-upon toes.

"I'd calculate quickly," Evan said, tipping his chin to an area to Benedict's left. "Your lady awaits."

Benedict followed Evan's gesture. The crop of curls caught his eye first—damn him,

truly—but then he saw, just beyond their elder sister, Amanda and Rose Rutley stood, facing in his direction. He caught Amanda’s eye, and she brightened.

Benedict did not feel the same enthusiasm, thank goodness.

“Right,” he said to Evan. “Duty calls.”

As he left his friend behind, he heard the other man laughingly echo the word duty.

Well, hell. What did Evan know? He wasn’t looking to marry anytime soon. His father was a legend in the political sphere; the Duke of Graham would likely remain in his title for decades to come if from no other force than sheer determination.

Benedict put these thoughts behind him as he approached the three Rutley sisters, who were talking and laughing together. As he grew close, Rose indicated to her sister; Emily turned, a smile still lighting her face.

That smile, Benedict could not fail to notice, was uncommonly pretty.

It vanished the second she registered him.

Her shift into the scowl stopped him like a physical force. Had he never seen her smile before? She looked rather lovely when she smiled. She should do it more often.

Then he mentally shook himself. What did he care if Emily Rutley smiled or not?

“Oh,” she said flatly as he reached their small group. “It’s you.”

He chose to ignore this. He was, he reminded himself, a grown man. He did not have to be drawn into childish banter with a cantankerous miss who fashioned herself her sister’s guard dog. He could rise above. He could simply refuse to engage. She would

eventually grow bored, no doubt.

The thought was less reassuring than it ought to have been.

“Miss Amanda,” he said with a polite bow to Amanda. “You are looking well tonight.” He spared a fleeting glance to the other two. His eyes did not linger on Miss Rutley’s skeptical expression. “As are your sisters, of course.”

Polite conversation, as approved by whatever sadist had written Society’s rules, might be a tad boring, but it was, Benedict allowed, easy. He gave an impersonal compliment, Miss Amanda accepted it with a demure nod. He asked her for a dance, she made a show of glancing over her dance card before graciously accepting him for the upcoming waltz which she’d no doubt reserved for him, given that he’d sent a bouquet to her home this morning to remind her of his attentions.

Easy. Nobody had to be bothered by anything.

Nobody except perhaps Miss Emily Rutley, but she wasn’t Benedict’s problem.

Except perhaps she was slightly his problem, he amended as he and Miss Amanda worked their way through the steps of the waltz, an entirely proper distance between them.

Miss Amanda was telling him a charming story about her childhood fascination with the menagerie at the Tower of London.

“I was forever after Emily to take me,” she admitted with a trilling laugh. “I was certain that the tiger cubs would make good house pets, like overgrown kittens, if only given the chance. She wouldn’t let me try to pet them—which I suppose I can admit was sensible of her if not terribly sporting—but she was very patient about letting me sit and watch them as long as I liked.”

Benedict imagined that this idyllic childhood scene should make him think of how Miss Amanda would be a loving, attentive mother to their children, one who would keep their offspring from any genuine harm without crushing their young imaginations.

What it made him realize, however, was that Miss Amanda Rutley loved her quarrelsome sister.

This was idiotic, naturally; he should have realized it before. But the relationships between siblings had always seemed faintly mysterious to him, likely because he was an only child himself. Some siblings seemed inextricably bound to one another while some acted like people who merely happened to share parents and a house.

Since he had considered Miss Rutley to be a persistent disruption to his equilibrium, one best kept at a distance, he'd assumed that Miss Amanda felt similarly.

He cursed his error.

"That sounds very pleasant," he said politely as his mind weighed the implications of this new discovery.

"Oh, it really was," Miss Amanda agreed, smiling. "And I do know Emily can be a bit...fixed in her ideas, sometimes, but she isn't always like that."

He knew his return smile probably looked more like a grimace, but it was better than the wince he wanted to give her.

Blast. If Miss Amanda had noticed the animosity between himself and her elder sister and thought enough of it to make a comment... well, he would have to fix it. Otherwise, he'd end up alienating his potential bride. And then he would have to start this whole courtship mess over with some other unobjectionable young lady. And he

really didn't know how many more balls he could attend without the sheer inanity doing some sort of permanent damage.

Better to make nice with the harridan than to risk the entire courtship.

Probably.

He tried to focus on the pragmatism of his plan as he finished the dance with Miss Amanda and retreated to the corner where Miss Rose and Miss Rutley stood with a gentleman who appeared to be making them both laugh.

Benedict tried not to focus on the instinctive stab of dislike he felt when he saw this or on the flutter of relief he felt when the gentleman left for the dance floor with Miss Rose on his arm.

Miss Amanda also had a partner for the next dance—confirming Benedict's suspicion that she'd been saving the waltz for him which should have made him more pleased than it did—which left him, in short order, standing alone with the eldest Miss Rutley.

Who was clearly ignoring him.

He cleared his throat.

She continued gazing placidly out at the dance floor where couples were arranging themselves for a quadrille.

"Miss Rutley?"

She still wasn't facing him, but he could practically see her consider continuing to ignore him. Those wild curls of hers, particularly one that had sprung loose from its



pin, seemed to tremble in anticipation of this potential mischief.

But with a heavy breath that was not quite a sigh, she turned to him. The expression on her face was also not quite welcoming.

“Yes, My Lord?”

“Do you not have a partner for the next dance?”

Her brow furrowed briefly, the corners of her mouth tipping down into a frown in turn, and he felt a foolish pang of regret for phrasing himself so bluntly.

“You’re not asking me to dance, are you?” she inquired, sounding faintly horrified by the idea.

He no longer felt bad for his bluntness.

He scowled, too. “I am not,” he confirmed. “I was merely hoping that we might have a word.” He glanced towards a nearby older gentleman who was clearly eavesdropping. “Privately, if you don’t mind.”

This was likely foolish, too. He wanted to make amends with the young lady, not make it seem like he was some sort of wastrel who lured young women out of ballrooms. When Miss Rutley narrowed her eyes, he assumed she was considering all the ways to tell him no, she would not, and he was also never to see her sister again as he was an appalling rake who had no place in polite society.

To his utter shock, however, her expression evened out, and she gave a lazy shrug with one shoulder.

“Oh, all right,” she said. “Let’s go, then.”

Emily was curious. That was the only reason she'd agreed to this foolishness.

And yes, she had better sense than this. She did! She had spent years following every last rule of propriety so that she could stand in as a respectable chaperone for her sisters—even as an unmarried spinster. People who followed every rule of propriety did not go skulking about with tall, broody gentlemen who were very clearly up to no good.

Yes, she thought triumphantly to herself as she followed the Earl away from the noisy throng of the ballroom. It wasn't merely her curiosity that led her to follow him down a dimly lit hallway; it was her duty. It was her duty as a chaperone and elder sister to find out what devilment the Earl of Moore was up to...

...and then use it against him to make him drop his suit of Amanda.

Indeed, her actions were practically sensible if she thought about it that way.

As a result, Emily was feeling rather smug when the Earl beckoned her into a quiet corner, apparently his destination of choice.

"This is where you wanted to go?" she asked doubtfully.

That ferocious scowl took over the Earl's face. "And what's wrong with it?" he snapped. "I said I wanted to speak with you privately, and this is private. Without," he added with a note of triumph that Emily felt was entirely unwarranted, "putting us behind scandalously closed doors."

She made a great show of looking around. "You really think this does not count as scandalous?" She made an incredulous sound in the back of her throat. "It is a good thing you were not born a lady, Sir. You'd have been ruined in an instant."

A look of horror passed over his face. “Good Lord. You don’t think?—”

She rolled her eyes as he broke off. She might have been less irritated if she believed for an instant that he was worried about her reputation instead of his own.

“It’s fine,” she said, waving him off. “I’m a spinster. Nobody cares what a spinster does. Now, would you stop being so precious and tell me what you wanted to say?”

“Precious? I’m not being prec—” the Earl cut himself off, looking as though it took physical effort to do so. He took in a deep, slow breath and rearranged his features into neutrality. When he spoke again, his voice was calm. “Miss Rutley, I would like it very much if we could put our differences behind us.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Why?” she asked suspiciously.

“Wh—.” His placid expression flickered but remained in place. He took another breath, this one slower than the last. “Because...” he said, and there was a definite note of strain in his voice. Emily tried not to find this amusing. “...I would like to court a lady in a peaceful, civilized manner without having to constantly fight her guard dog. Which I mean with the utmost respect,” he added hastily—and unconvincingly.

Emily looked him up and down. He really was so tall. It was unseemly to be that tall. She’d heard a thousand barbs about her own height—had those people never seen the Earl of Moore? He was so tall it seemed inhuman. Perhaps his ancestors were part bear. It would explain his surly attitude at least.

“I take it,” she said carefully, “that the lady in question is my sister, Amanda?”

“Yes,” he said on a sigh, looking relieved.

“Oh,” she said. “No.”

The relief vanished in an instant. “No?” he demanded incredulously. “What do you mean no?”

It would be improper for Emily to admit that she was enjoying baiting the Earl, so she decided not to admit it, not even to herself.

“I mean no,” she explained patiently. “It’s a very simple word. It means that I do not agree to your terms.”

“But—” he sputtered, and the baffled look on his face almost softened him enough to make him endearing. “But—but why? All I am asking is for a modicum of civility so that I might peacefully court your sister—which is, I might add, the whole reason we all submit ourselves to the circus that is the marriage mart!”

Emily watched, intrigued, as the Earl lost himself in what could only truly be termed a snit.

“And,” he went on, apparently warming to his topic, “not to put too fine a point on things, but I am an earl, Miss Rutley. I am not a fortune hunter. Your sister would be a countess with a fine allowance. I truly, truly cannot fathom why you would not want that for her.”

“Well, that’s very simple,” Emily said plainly. “It’s because I don’t like you.”

The Earl of Moore stared at her as if she’d said it’s because you have four heads and cannot play the hurdy-gurdy.

“Don’t like me?” he echoed. “What on earth does that have to do with anything? I’m not marrying you.”

This last bit was said with just enough emphasis that Emily decided it was insulting.

“I suppose,” she said archly, not letting on that his words had stung, “it has to do with whatever reason you had for dragging me over here and asking for a truce. I decline. If you would like peaceful interactions with the family of a lady you’re courting, I suggest you find another lady. My sister is not the woman for you.”

“Oh, no,” he said, shaking his head decisively. The confusion was gone, and he no longer looked even the slightest bit amusing. No, he was glowering again. And that left him looking...

Well, not handsome. That was obviously ridiculous, and Emily didn’t even know why it had popped into her head.

“No,” he repeated. “I cannot find another woman. Absolutely not.”

Emily rolled her eyes. “Oh, please. You scarcely know her. You cannot mean to argue that you’re already in love with her or some such nonsense.”

“No, certainly not,” the Earl said, almost offhandedly. “That’s the point.”

There was a tense moment where her eyes narrowed, and he froze, seeming to realize his mistake.

“What,” she asked, tone dripping acid, “do you mean that’s the point.”

He went for haughtiness again. “That’s not your concern. What matters is that I am a suitable match, as is your sister. I intend to marry her.”

Oh, he couldn’t possibly think that was going to work, could he?

“Marry her but not love her,” she demanded, taking a furious step towards him. “Is that what you mean to say?” His silence spoke volumes. “Perhaps you think you can get her to give you an heir and a spare and then ship her off to molder in some dusty country estate?”

“Of course not!” the Earl exclaimed, and for two heartbeats Emily wondered if she’d slightly misjudged him. Then he kept speaking. “She can stay in London, of course. I’m not the villain from a gothic novel.”

Emily felt rage set upon her like a haze.

She’d been angry before. She’d been angry when she’d been twelve and the twins seven, and they’d ‘borrowed’ her best pair of stockings to stitch together a kite. She’d been angry at her father during the countless incidents where she’d begged him to pay more attention to his younger daughters to absolutely no avail. She’d been angry with the man standing in front of her, even, numerous times before.

It was nothing like the anger she felt now.

“How dare you!” she cried. “You awful, awful, awful man! My sister deserves someone a thousand times better than you—a million! She deserves someone who will love her and care for her just as she is, not some horrible Earl who thinks he’s impressive because he has some money and a title. She deserves someone who would die for her. And I will die before I let you marry her, just see if I won’t!”

At some point in this diatribe, Emily’s voice had become—it had to be said—a true shriek. She hadn’t noticed how loud she’d gotten though, in truth, she was unlikely to have cared, anyway.

What she did notice, however, was the Earl of Moore’s hand coming down over her mouth.

She blinked at him in utter shock. If the hand hadn't already been stopping her speech, the shock that the man was touching her mouth would have done it.

"Would you please," he hissed furiously—but quietly, "shut up? You are going to attract attention, and I do not want to be the subject of gossip."

Emily reached up and grabbed his hand in hers, yanking it away from her face. When she retorted, however, she did make sure to remain quiet.

"Perhaps," she suggested in an irate whisper, "you wouldn't be the subject of gossip if you didn't go around accosting people?"

"Accosting." His eyes flashed. "Isn't that just so typical—you are overreacting. Again. Tell me, Miss Rutley, why must you persist in making a fuss over matters that do not affect you in the least?"

He was trying to intimidate her with his looming and his closeness and his low, irritated voice. She would not stand for it.

"My sisters do affect me?—"

She had not been quiet; in a flash, his hand was out of her grasp and back upon her mouth. This time, when she tugged, he was not so easily moved.

"You test my patience," he whispered angrily. He had to bend down to keep his hold over her mouth. Good, Emily thought. All the better for him to see the fire in her glare. Her back was against the wall, so she couldn't tilt her head back, but with him bending, she found she didn't have to move at all in order to meet his eye. It was perhaps the first time she'd ever been grateful for her height.

The Earl, wretched man that he was, pressed his advantage and kept talking.

“All I wanted was to make peace with you. Is that so hard? It is simple. Just peace, nothing more. But no, you could not manage it. You insist on pushing and pushing and pushing?—”

With each repetition of the word, the Earl’s chest heaved with breath, and on the third utterance, the very front of his waistcoat brushed against the very front of Emily’s bodice.

She stopped glaring and her hands, as if of their own accord, stopped trying to remove the Earl’s grasp, instead fluttering down to wait placidly at her side.

His closeness was making her feel...something.

It had to be anger. Surely it had to be anger. He had manhandled her! He was behaving in an exceedingly ungentlemanly fashion!

It did not feel like anger.

And maybe whatever the Earl was experiencing did not quite feel like anger, either, because he let his hand drop. She was almost sorry to lose the contact. She didn’t move, barely breathed, as she looked up at him, looked at the tortured expression that flitted across his face.

“I cannot stand,” he whispered, “the way you make me feel.”

The words were like a sigh of air. They clearly signaled the end of his speech, but he did not move back.

She did not tell him to move back, not by word or by deed.

Her heart raced too quickly to mark any normal passage of time.



And then they were kissing.

Emily didn't know if she'd kissed the Earl or if he'd kissed her, but she couldn't dwell on it overmuch because she was being kissed for the very first time in her life.

It was, she was astonished to report, extremely nice.

Unlike her friends, Emily had, from her debut, sought a husband. This was for practical reasons, rather than romantic ones though she'd long understood that this would mean submitting to the indignities of her husband's marital attentions. Lovemaking was, after all, necessary to beget an heir which was why most gentlemen deigned to marry in the first place.

She'd never given much thought to kissing.

She was thinking about it now. Or, no—she was scarcely thinking at all, was merely feeling the softness of the Earl's lips against hers and the contrast of that softness with the bruising intensity with which he pressed against her. She felt the warmth of his body, the rasp of his face where his whiskers were just starting to grow in again.

She felt the heat of his tongue, probing at her bottom lip. With a gasp, she granted it entrance, and then she felt the lazy, warm caress as it moved against her own tongue.

Her hand clutched in the collar of his jacket, tugging him closer. Her other hand found his, their fingers intertwining as he pressed her wrist back against the wall. The pressure felt curiously good—so good that her knees went weak.

But the Earl was there, the long, hard plane of him; he pressed harder against her, pinning her body between his and the wall behind her so firmly that she could not have fallen even if she'd tried. And that felt so curiously good that it tore a moan—a needy, humiliating sound—from Emily's throat.

The Earl didn't seem to mind it, however, not if the way he pressed harder against her and kissed her with renewed vigor was any indication.

Or, rather, he did not mind it for the scant few seconds between when Emily moaned and when there was a soft, shocked "Oh my" from far too close behind them.

The Earl could not have leapt away from her any more quickly if she'd burst into flame. He staggered away from her, putting two long paces between them in an instant, an appalled look on his face.

His movement was not quick enough, however; the damage was already done. For when Emily's eyes blinked open, she saw the worst thing she could possibly have conjured in that moment: half a dozen members of the ton, staring at them with expressions ranging from shock to horror to the delight of someone who knows they have just witnessed the greatest gossip of the Season.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:38 am*

“It’s going to be fine,” Emily insisted to her sisters with more calm than she felt.

“I really don’t think it’s going to be fine,” Rose fretted.

Unsurprisingly, it had taken no time at all for the twins to learn of what Emily was calling, in the privacy of her own mind, the incident.

“It’s going to be fine,” Emily reiterated for what had to be the dozenth time that morning already. The three sisters were seated around the breakfast table, having all arrived at an hour far earlier than their usual repast. Emily had come down early because she’d been plagued by restless dreams of firm hands clutching at her and steadying weights pressing down upon her, only to be unceremoniously snatched away as she bolted into wakefulness.

Rose had evidently come down early because she was worried.

Amanda had come down for the sole purpose, it seemed, of delighting in the entire situation.

If Emily had worried that Amanda might be upset over Emily being caught in a compromising position with the Earl, such effort had apparently been wasted. It had taken Emily only a few minutes, the night prior, to break away from the scandal erupting around her and press through the crowd to find her sisters. If the Earl of Moore had called after her, she’d resolutely ignored him.

Emily only had her own two legs to carry her, however, and even those were shaky from the earl’s kis—from the incident. Gossip had wings.

By the time she found the twins, they clearly already knew what Emily had just been up to. Rose looked stricken. Amanda could barely contain her laughter.

Rose had, to Emily's undying gratitude, taken Emily's side over Amanda's in the short, tense carriage ride home, urging her twin not to bother their elder sister with probing questions about what had really happened. Amanda's forbearance had been for one night only, it seemed, as she'd arrived to breakfast with a gleam in her eyes.

"It simply doesn't seem fine," Rose insisted. "I mean...you've been compromised, Emily. Surely someone has to do something."

"Nobody is going to do anything," Emily soothed. "There will be gossip, and it will be unpleasant. We will withstand it. That is all."

"Yes, Rosie, don't be so stodgy," Amanda scolded absently. "We should be pleased that Emmy has finally done something exciting for once. Tell us, Em, how was it? Leave out no detail."

Rose looked like she was about to faint.

"It was ill advised," Emily said firmly.

"Spoilsport," Amanda complained, slumping into her chair with a pout.

"It will be fine—" Emily directed this part of her comment at Rose. "—but we shouldn't dwell on it or make more of the matter than is necessary." This part was for Amanda.

"But your reputation, Emmy!" Rose explained, exasperation tinging her concern like she couldn't quite understand how she was the only one to see the problem with the prior evening's events.

“You’re probably right that nobody is going to want to marry me after this,” Emily said kindly to her sister, who was gnawing at her lip. “But nobody wanted to marry me before this, either. I am rather on the shelf; this just confirms things a bit.”

Emily dabbed smartly at her mouth with her napkin, determined to put an end to this whole debacle. The sooner things went back to normal, the better.

“Besides, it’s all for the best,” she said decisively. “The Earl had it in his head to marry Amanda?—”

“He what?” Amanda yelped, sounding horrified.

“—something that Amanda clearly did not intend,” Emily continued with a pointed look at her sister, who was muttering furiously under her breath about “innocent flirting” and “having a nice time” and “stupid gentlemen and their stupid ideas.”

Emily decided to leave Amanda to work through that matter herself and turned, once again, to Rose.

“This might not have been the tidiest conclusion to the matter, but it is quite final. I highly doubt any of us will ever see the Earl of Moore again.”

Rose was just opening her mouth, no doubt to argue further, when a knock in the doorframe drew their attention. A footman stood in the doorway, a look of polite apology for the interruption on his face.

“Excuse me, miss,” he said, “but the Earl of Moore is here to see you.”

Amanda yelped and shot to her feet. “No!” she exclaimed. “I’m not in. I’m not ever in. Tell him I died—no, that won’t work. Tell him I’ve become a nun—no, drat, that’s bad, too?—”

The footman cleared his throat in the gentlest interruption.

“Here to see Miss Emily,” he clarified.

“Oh good,” Amanda said with a sigh. Emily shot her sister a betrayed look which did not affect Amanda in the least. “Better you than me,” she said with an unrepentant shrug. Then she piled three pieces of toast together, buttered side in, and made for the rear door to the breakfast room. “Still, I’m going to make myself scarce, lest that lunatic see me and get any bright ideas about matrimony. Good luck, Emmy!”

And then she was gone, the disloyal little thing.

Rose, at least, stayed though she did look on the verge of being sick.

Emily wondered if she, too, could claim to have joined a convent. She was not particularly religious, but surely a life of feigned piety was better than having to face the man who had made her...feel...things.

Before she could calculate her likelihood of escape, however, the Earl of Moore appeared directly in the doorway because he was precisely the sort of man that did discourteous things like wandering about someone else’s home uninvited or kissing someone until they made embarrassing sounds.

His glower, Emily couldn’t help but notice, was exceptionally pronounced this morning. She declined to think any other thoughts about his face, mouth, or overall person.

“Very well,” she said with a sigh. “Good morning, My Lord. As you can see, we are at breakfast. Would you care to join us?”

The Earl looked as astonished as if she’d asked him to join him in a light spot of

murder. This felt a bit much, even if Emily allowed that it was somewhat irregular to ask a near stranger—and no matter what they'd done the night before, she refused to think of him as an intimate—to the breakfast table.

But she was tired, hungry, and sullenly opposed to making concessions for a man who really should have been anywhere but at Drowton House this morning.

The Earl shot a glance at Rose, who was pointedly looking at her plate as if it was the most fascinating thing in the world.

"I'd prefer to stand," he said.

Emily shrugged. He really was being most absurd. Didn't he know that the best way to make gossip continue was to feed it? She'd never had a scandal of her own before, but even she knew that. Given the Earl's, er, colorful mother, he should have realized that the best course of action was to stay away from her.

The Earl, apparently unimpressed with this response, cleared his throat pointedly.

"Miss Rutley," he said emphatically.

Emily set down her piece of toast. She wouldn't be able to enjoy it with him grumbling at her, not even if it was coated with a generous helping of her favorite orange marmalade.

"Yes, My Lord?" she asked, managing to hide most of her exasperation.

He did not even try to hide his exasperation.

"Could you please pay attention, Miss Rutley?" he asked hotly. "I am trying to ask for your hand!"

Rose squeaked.

“Good God, why?” Emily asked.

The Earl looked at her as though she was being purposefully obtuse which—oh, all right, fair enough. But she hadn’t meant why was he asking as much as why would he think that a reasonable solution to this conundrum.

“Because it’s the right thing to do!” he exclaimed.

“Ugh,” said Emily.

The Earl looked a bit like he was choking on his own tongue...or perhaps like he would like to choke some sense into Emily. When he spoke again, it was through gritted teeth.

“I compromised you,” he said, sounding as though it hurt him.

“So?” Emily asked.

This proved more than the Earl could take, apparently.

“So!” he burst out, throwing his hands up in the air. “So? So, Miss Rutley, when a gentleman compromises a lady, he marries her unless he is no gentleman at all. I cannot fathom why you are pushing me to explain this. You know this. You know nobody else will wish to marry you with this scandal hanging over your head.”

Emily did know that nobody else would wish to marry her—with or without the scandal, frankly. She’d just been saying as much to her sisters. Still, she felt it impolite for the Earl to point it out.



“You needn’t trouble yourself,” she said with a sniff that she hoped sounded prim, rather than wounded. “I had no intention of marrying anyone else.”

“Correct,” said the Earl sharply, “because you are marrying me.”

“No,” Emily said, just as sharply, “I am not.”

“Yes, you are.”

Except this time, it wasn’t the Earl who had spoken.

It was Emily’s father.

Clayton Rutley, Lord Drowton, made only rare appearances in his daughters’ lives for all that he lived in the same house with them. He had, Emily always assumed, never recovered from his wife’s death. Though he was forever consumed with matters of business, finances, and status, she had a few memories of him being playful, of laughing, in those years before her mother’s death.

In the years since, Emily could count on one hand the number of times she’d seen her father smile—and this was always directed at her. The twins, born the day their mother had died, were never graced with his approval.

Part of Emily hated him for that, even as part of her clung to hope that he would somehow, someday, treat all his daughters with love and care.

No matter how much Emily normally resented his absence from their lives, however, she wished he had not chosen this moment to make a reappearance.

The Earl recovered more quickly from the shock of the Viscount’s appearance. Emily noted that Rose had vanished; had she fetched their father? Traitor.

“Lord Drowton,” the Earl said with a polite incline of his head. Emily wanted to smack him. He was never polite like that with her, but now, he planned to use manners to sway her father. Blasted man! “I’m so glad you have joined us. Perhaps you could entreat your daughter to see reason?”

“I certainly shall,” the Viscount said, nodding smartly at the Earl and not even looking at Emily.

Men! Lord, but they were completely wretched, the lot of them! Even halfway decent ones like Diana’s husband had clearly been planted as a scheme to better the perception of the whole of their cursed sex.

“But Papa—” Emily began. Her father cut her off with a sharp shake of his head.

“You have,” he said gravely, “spent the last several Seasons in search of a husband, have you not, Emily?”

His fixed gaze warned that she should not dare attempt to lie.

“Yes, Papa,” she admitted, “but?—”

He cut her off again.

“And I am to understand from your sister’s hysterical explanation that there was some manner of scandal that occurred?”

It really was a shame that Emily was going to have to murder Rose.

“It really wasn’t—” she tried, but this time the Earl interrupted her.

“Yes, I’m afraid so,” he said, somehow managing to sound both firm and apologetic.

“And now the man is here to do the right thing and request your hand?” the Viscount continued, eyes fixed on his daughter.

She didn’t bother answering. Clearly this conversation did not actually require her participation, and if one more man interrupted her, she was going to start screaming and never, ever stop.

Indeed, the Earl proved quick enough with a response. “Yes, My Lord. It would be my honor—” How he managed that with a straight face, Emily would never know. “—to ask your daughter to be my wife.”

“She accepts,” said the Viscount promptly.

“I do not,” Emily interjected, and this time she was not so much interrupted as ignored entirely.

“Come to my study,” the Viscount instructed, no longer even pretending to involve Emily. “And we shall sort out the details.”

“Papa!” Emily tried again. She had to. She just had to.

Naturally, it had no effect.

Or, rather, it had no effect on her father. The Earl, on the other hand, took only one step in the direction the Viscount indicated before pausing.

“I would prefer, My Lord,” he said in that imperious tone of his that brooked no argument, “if Miss Rutley were present for this conversation.”

Lord Drowton looked faintly confounded by this, as if the Earl had asked for something baffling but ultimately harmless, like he had asked to show the portrait

gallery to his pet rabbit.

“Yes, very well,” he said impatiently. “Come along, Emily.”

Emily considered protesting—it was the principle of the thing, really—but decided to save her protests for the really important matters. She would give in to this command to join them; it was harmless enough.

She would stand firm, however, on the things that mattered.

She would not end this meeting engaged to the Earl.

She ended the meeting engaged to the Earl.

Miss Rutley, Benedict noted, looked positively mutinous as she signed the contract he had negotiated with her father—though negotiated was perhaps a strong word. Her father had seemed almost desperate to be rid of her in a way that Benedict had found somewhat excessive.

Certainly, Miss Rutley had seemed destined for spinsterhood, even though Benedict wasn't entirely sure why, given her admission that she'd spent several Seasons actively pursuing a match. Presumably she was more polite to the men she saw as potential husbands, and it wasn't as though she was unattractive.

He stopped this train of thought before he could dwell overmuch on how not unattractive he'd found her when she was in his arms the night before. She hadn't been unattractive at all. She'd been soft and lush and pleasantly tall; he hadn't had to bend at the waist to reach that pouty mouth; she had opened so eagerly to him?—

This was very much not the time to be having those thoughts.

“Thank you very much, My Lord,” Benedict said, laying down the pen with a decisive click. He waited for the ink to dry before taking his copy of the marriage contract, folding it, and putting it into his pocket. It was, he felt, an eminently fair contract. The bulk of Miss Rutley's dowry would be kept for her use, she'd be provided with a more than adequate allowance, and he would manage to avoid any further scandal.

“And you,” the Viscount said with a satisfied nod. “I assume, given the...nature of

the thing, you shall be seeking a special license?”

“I shall,” he agreed as Miss Rutley gasped, “Wait, what?”

“Don’t be naïve, Emily,” her father snapped and despite his own personal quibbles with Miss Rutley and her persnickety ways, Benedict found this to be a step too far. She was, after all, going to be his wife—and soon.

“I understand things are all moving rather quickly,” he said to Miss Rutley in as calm a voice as he could manage. “But I wish to quell the talk. A speedy marriage is the most expedient way to do that.”

She slumped in her chair, nodding.

He found, oddly, that he didn’t like that.

Not that it seemed to bother her father.

“Excellent,” he said, rapping his knuckles against his desk in an unequivocal dismissal. “I’m sure the two of you would like to discuss things. Emily, show the Earl to the front parlor, would you?”

And just like that, the Viscount had washed his hands of the whole affair.

Miss Rutley did, as instructed, lead Benedict to the front parlor though they’d scarcely made it two steps inside the room before she whirled on him.

“Why did you do that?” she asked, a plaintive note lurking beneath her exasperation.

He gave her a sardonic look. He’d used up all his patience for this morning.

“You know why,” he said.

She threw up her hands and started pacing furiously. Her tall figure, he couldn’t help but notice, was shown to particularly good effect while she was walking in the light fabric of her morning dress.

“This is ridiculous!” she exclaimed. “I am not some—some horse at a posting in that you can trade in when the one you had no longer serves. You wanted Amanda, not me!”

Benedict blinked. Curiously enough, he had not thought about Miss Amanda Rutley once, not this whole morning. Not the evening prior either, come to think of it, not since the moment his lips had touched those of this Miss Rutley.

Still, that was no longer important, and he told her so.

“Immaterial,” he said shortly. “It was you there with me in that corner, and that means it is your name that is inextricably linked with mine in the annals of gossip.”

“So we are meant to link them in the eyes of God as well?”

She asked the question like it was ridiculous, but he chose to answer it at face value.

“Yes,” he said, aiming for gentleness but probably missing the mark. “It’s the only way to preserve your reputation.”

“Oh, who cares about my dratted reputation?” she exclaimed. “I was going to be a spinster anyway! I was fine with being a spinster!”

Benedict found, to his surprise, that he cared about her reputation, but he felt more compelled to address her last comment than to answer her question.

“Why?” he asked curiously. Most young women—not that he knew any of them on a particularly close basis—dreaded the specter of spinsterhood and treated it as a form of social death from which one could never recover.

There were exceptions, of course. There were bluestockings and those who agitated for women’s rights, who protested marriage on principle. There were women who preferred the company of other women. There were wealthy heiresses with unentailed estates headed their way who merely had to wait out their fathers to achieve the kind of freedom that most women could only imagine—and many of these, he allowed, still married anyway.

Even so, Miss Rutley fit none of these categories. She wasn’t overly rich though not destitute either. She wasn’t a bluestocking.

And she had enjoyed his company, at the very least, if the needy moans that had come from her were any indication.

But, again, he put those thoughts aside. His trousers were far too tight for such recollections, and besides, it would not do to become, ah, intrigued by Miss Rutley’s person in her father’s house.

She stopped walking suddenly, her skirts pressing momentarily against the shape of her legs which did nothing to help Benedict’s intrigue.

“Why what?” she demanded.

“Why were you so happy to become a spinster?” he pressed.

She waved a hand like this question was the height of foolishness and returned to her pacing. Benedict knew, though, that the dismissal of a question rarely indicated it was irrelevant—rather the opposite.



He grasped her by the wrist, pulling her to a halt. She looked at him with wide, wide eyes.

“Why were you content to become a spinster?” he asked again, voice quieter, more probing.

For a moment, he thought he had her then her eyes flashed.

“Because nobody had asked me to marry him, My Lord,” she said with the patient tones of someone explaining something very simple to a very small child.

Benedict tightened his grip on her wrist, not enough to cause any discomfort but enough that she couldn't fail to notice. He had a suspicion that his little bride was used to managing everyone around her. Well, now was as good a time as any for her to discover that she wouldn't be managing him.

“That's not what I asked,” he said quietly, his eyes fixed on hers. Her lovely hazel eyes, he couldn't help but notice, faded seamlessly from brown to gold with the barest hints of green towards their centers. “I asked why you were content with this.”

She sighed, and he felt the surrender in that sigh, felt it reverberate through his touch on her wrist and settle, curled up with contentment, somewhere inside him.

“I sought a husband so that I could serve as chaperone to my sisters,” she said. This was nothing he hadn't already gathered, yet it still felt like a confession. “I did not succeed. Yet, when my sisters debuted, only the sternest sticklers sniffed at my chaperoning them. So, it turns out that I did succeed after all.” She shrugged but only with the arm not held in his grasp. “Why should I be sorry about that?”

His thumb moved over her inner wrist, across the soft skin and thrumming pulse there. She remained still, but he saw her reaction in the widening of her pupils.

“Well, perhaps,” he said, his voice dropping low, “you did not only want things for your sisters.” His thumb stroked again. “Perhaps you wanted something for yourself; perhaps you still do. After all, Miss Rutley, could you really be content with spinsterhood after you melted so beautifully in my arms?”

He hadn’t consciously been aiming to seduce his little bride here in her front parlor—and good bloody thing, too, because she did not melt into him again when he referenced their kiss. Instead, she gasped in affront and yanked her wrist out of his grasp.

He told himself he was not disappointed.

“I—” she said, looking at him reproachfully. “You—” She huffed out an irritated breath. “You should not mention such things,” she said imperiously.

It was a sickness, really, the perverse entertainment he got from needling her.

“Why not?” He took a step toward her. She took a step back in turn, but a settee got in her way. “You cannot tell me you didn’t like it.”

“That,” she said archly, her prim tone somewhat undercut by the way she was pressing herself against the back of a piece of silk-covered furniture, “is entirely beside the point.”

He pretended to think about this.

“I really don’t think it is,” he concluded.

Her ire was raised now, her cheeks pink with it.

“It is,” she insisted. “You wanted a convenient wife. You wanted one without

scandal, too, it's true, and you haven't gotten that. But convenience? Well, I'm neatly on the hook, am I not? You've gotten what you wanted, and you were very clear about what you did not want. You are not looking for love nor affection. So why should it matter to you what I did or did not like?"

Benedict had a great number of answers to these questions—too many as it happened as they all swirled around in his head which he found to be once again oddly muddled by Miss Rutley's proximity. He could point out that love, affection, and desire were all different things. He could argue that he might seek a marriage of convenience, but that he was not a monster, and he would not take an unwilling woman to his bed. He could retort that nothing about this entire situation could be labelled as convenient, and he resented the implication that he'd somehow planned the entire mess. Not only was he not some sort of rakish seducer of innocents, but if he had come up with an actual plan, he would have done a far cry better than this.

That was far too many thoughts, far too many words, to organize. So, instead, he took the expedient route.

He kissed her.

And hell, Benedict didn't know if he was cursed or blessed because Miss Emily Rutley, with her argumentative tongue and her willful ways, collapsed into him like she'd been starving for it.

He could not deny her, not then.

She was a fast learner, apparently, and this too was either marvelous or terrible because she opened her mouth to him immediately this time, letting the kiss turn heated in an instant. He pressed, and she folded, welcomed him, and God, how could she be so difficult and yet so good?

They should not be doing this he thought, even as he canted his hips to press more firmly against hers. With the settee behind her, she had no room for retreat, not that she seemed to want one.

“Emily,” he murmured against her mouth, her given name tasting good on his lips. “We?—”

Shouldn’t. He’d meant to say shouldn’t. But before he could get the word out, she made another of those little sounds, the kind that would no doubt haunt him for the rest of his days, an eager, needy little noise.

His mind blanked of everything except fulfilling that need. He kissed her harder, putting one hand behind her head to pull her in towards the press of his mouth. He was too tall for most women, but Miss Rutley was not most women, and when he pressed against her, they nearly matched, hips to hips, chest to chest, mouth to mouth.

He was consumed. He was not himself, or perhaps he was his truest self. He didn’t care. It didn’t matter. Kissing her, getting more of her—that mattered.

She evidently felt the same because one of her hands came up to grasp at his hair. That, decided the possessive, animalistic part of Benedict that had taken control, would not do at all. He removed his hands from her to grasp her wrists—she whimpered again—and pressed them firmly against the back of the settee.

“Leave them there,” he whispered into the soft skin of her throat.

She nodded, the gesture not nearly as obvious an acquiescence as the way she arched up into him, pressing closer even as she obeyed, her back bending her into a beautiful, glorious portrait of submission.

It sent Benedict’s mind wild with ideas, of Emily, laid out before him, willing, eager,

ready and bound?—

He thrust himself away from her with a gasp like he'd been drowning.

She blinked, confused, before she processed this swift change in their positions. Her cheeks had been flushed with pleasure, but now, they heated further, obviously with embarrassment. She lifted one of her hands—and despite everything, he wished to lunge at her and put that hand back where he'd left it—to press against her flaming cheeks.

He did not wish to embarrass her. Despite the animosity between them, she was to be his wife which meant that she was his to protect—which included, whenever possible, her feelings. But he could not make an apology, not when the most urgent thing from which she needed protection, in this moment, was his appetite.

Good Lord, but he wanted her. Enough that he'd practically debauched her in a parlor.

He was a disgrace.

He was a disgrace whose body had not, unfortunately, caught up with his mind. His blood thrummed, his heart raced, and his trousers?—

Well, he was not fit for polite company.

“I beg your pardon, Miss Rutley,” he said stiffly. “I should not have behaved in so ungentlemanly a manner.”

Her flush deepened, and he knew she was taking his comment as a slight against herself. He should clarify, he should, but he was helpless to do anything but take his leave before his senses decided to take their leave.

Again.

“Of course,” she said faintly, hand still pressed to her cheek.

“I shall call upon you once the special license is sorted,” he said brusquely, already half turned towards the door. The sooner her flush and the heaving of her delectable bosom were out of his sight, the better. “Good day, Miss Rutley.”

And then the esteemed Earl of Moore turned and fled.

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Benedict walked home, relying on the chill of the foggy London morning to quell his lingering ardor from that ill-advised encounter in Miss Rutley's front parlor.

This was effective, if unpleasant, given that the fog gave way to a freezing drizzle when Benedict still had some fifteen minutes of walking to do.

Little did he know, however, was that his soggy walk was far more enjoyable than what awaited him at home.

"Scandal!" shrieked his mother the instant he stepped through the front door. She flew at him, her face twisted into a mask of outrage, a fistful of papers clutched in her hand. For a moment, Benedict thought she'd discovered the stolen letters until he registered that she held that day's copy of several of the gossip rags.

"Scandal!" she cried again, waving the papers so furiously and so close to his face that Benedict had to push her arm aside, lest he lose an eye. "What do I find in the papers this morning, but my son embroiled in a scandal for debauching some wretched wallflower in a hallway?" She shook the papers again. "This is ridiculous, Benedict! Outlandish! Preposterous!"

She punctuated each synonym with another furious shake of newsprint.

Benedict was cold. He was wet. He was experiencing the unpleasant physical effects of unfulfilled lust, which was not a desirable experience at the best of times but even more so when one was conversing with one's screaming mother. He felt that his mother's characterization of Emily was quite unfair, and to top it all off, he was sick and bloody tired of being shrieked at in his own home.

So, he felt that he could be forgiven for snatching the papers from his mother's hand and throwing them to the floor.

"Stop that at once," he ordered coldly as his mother gaped at him in affront. "Just stop. Stop the screaming and the hysteria. Stop."

Most of the time, this was when his mother switched to her martyr routine. She would wail and cry about how cruelly Benedict mistreated her. Today, though, she reared up like a snake about to strike. The different tactic might have been interesting if Benedict didn't know it was destined to be just as tiresome as her tears.

"You shall not tell me to stop, Benedict Hoskins," she spat. "You are a hypocrite, always scolding me about discretion then turning around and tuppung a spinster in the middle of a Society event. You should be ashamed of yourself. Ashamed!"

Benedict tugged off his sodden waistcoat, never mind the decorum of getting partially undressed in one's front hallway—it was bloody past time that people started recognizing that this was his house, and he could do as he pleased. He was not, however, he noted absently, ashamed of what he'd done with Emily. It hadn't been smart, he knew that. It had certainly created a mess.

But he wasn't ashamed.

"Mother," he snapped, "cease with your appalling language and infernal noise. I was not, as you so crassly put it, tuppung anyone. Miss Rutley—who is not a spinster, I might add—and I were found embracing." His mother opened her mouth, probably do to more goddamned screaming, so Benedict cut her off. "And even if I owed you an explanation about any of this—which I do not—I would assure you that the situation has been handled."

His mother still wore an injured look, but at least when she spoke again, her volume



was less extreme. It was a wonder, Benedict thought, that he hadn't been stricken deaf years ago.

"I don't see that there's any need for you to speak to me in such a tone, Benedict," the Dowager Countess sniffed, as if she hadn't been speaking to him in a far more aggressive tone. "But I suppose I should be grateful that you have handled things before they got out of proportion."

"Splendid," he said curtly, brushing past her. He needed a hot bath—or possibly a cold one. He suspected Emily would creep back into his thoughts once he was alone again, and that would not do.

Priscilla Hoskins had never been one to give up her audience without a fight, however. She followed him.

"It isn't that I object to you having a little fun, Benedict," she wheedled. "I am not so uptight as all that—you know that."

Unfortunately, he did know that, far more than he wished. He kept walking.

"But for goodness' sake, keep it to widows and actresses, and do endeavor to be behind a locked door when you cannot keep your trousers on." Benedict resented every minute of this conversation. "There are rules about these things, and you cannot go about ruining and casting aside young ladies, even if they are positively ancient and unpopular." She sniffed dramatically then tugged on his arm when he didn't respond. "Benedict, are you even listening to me?"

He was so close to his bedchamber door. A little further and he would be free, but she was clinging to him like a limpet.

"Mother," he said shortly, only half turning in her direction and shaking free of her

grasp. “I told you. I have taken care of it. There is nothing further to say on the topic. It will not be an issue.”

He wasn’t sure what gave him away, but a dawning awareness bloomed across his mother’s face.

“Oh, dear God,” she muttered, clasping her hands against her chest. “You’re going to marry her.”

Benedict rolled his eyes.

“Yes, Mother,” he said. The words came out impatiently which he felt was still better than she deserved. “I am going to marry her. That is what a proper gentleman does when he compromises a young lady’s reputation.”

“Proper,” she scoffed. “Who cares about proper?” This, Benedict supposed, was at least consistent with her character, if not her earlier objection to his being named in a scandal. “I suppose that father of yours put this nonsense in your head.”

Benedict’s blood turned to ice. “Do not,” he said in a deadly tone, “discuss my father.” He would not hear anything negative about the one parent who had loved him—and certainly not from the lips of a parent who only sought to use him.

Priscilla barely noted his admonishment, however, as she was already onto a new subject.

“No, Benedict, this won’t do at all. I don’t know the chit, obviously; I don’t associate with the unpleasantness of washed-up wallflowers, but clearly, she is an unacceptable choice. Do not proceed any further. Call off whatever farce of a betrothal you have concocted. There shall be scandal, of course, but we shall weather it, and then you shan’t end up shackled for life to some unwanted, discarded old maid.”

This relentless barrage of insults against Emily killed the remaining dregs of Benedict's patience. Not only did Emily not deserve such comments for her own sake, but he did not deserve to hear such disrespect regarding the woman he had chosen to be his wife, no matter the circumstances that had gotten them there.

"Enough!" he roared. He so rarely raised his voice with his mother—her penchant for screaming had left him disdainful of shouting, and honorable men, his father had always taught him, did not shout at women. Benedict felt, however, that his father would understand that sometimes exceptions needed to be made.

And, God help him, it worked because his mother stopped speaking, turning instead to stare at him in openmouthed shock.

Benedict did not shout when he spoke again, but the words were no less forceful.

"I will not," he said, anger thrumming through him, "hear any such comments about Miss Rutley from this moment forward, Mother. I am marrying her. It is decided. I shall obtain a special license, and in a week's time, she will be my wife—and mistress of this house. If you wish to continue living in this house, I suggest you find a way to show her the respect she deserves."

And then, for the second time that day, Benedict turned on his heel and departed—only this time, he was left with the satisfaction that he had, for once, gotten the last word.

"Oh my goodness, Emmy, why on earth are you wearing that monstrous bonnet?"

Emily met Amanda's horrified expression through the mirror of her dressing table.

"It's not that bad," she said.

This was, if you took an extremely, technical look at things, not a lie.

Because the bonnet wasn't that bad. It was worse.

But Emily didn't care about what the bonnet looked like—or, at least, she didn't care much. She wasn't entirely without her vanity.

But looking attractive was not her primary goal that morning. It was, in fact, potentially antithetical to her main goal which was, no matter what happened, to not kiss the Earl of Moore again.

"It's terrible," Amanda said flatly, inviting herself into Emily's bedchamber. "Though I don't think it's terrible enough to make everyone forget about the scandal that led to your betrothal if that's what you're thinking. It just might make them think you also have scandalously bad taste in headwear."

Emily peered critically at the hat, then her sister, then the hat again before snatching it off her head with a huff. She hadn't considered the potential for further scandal. And while that would probably help her no kissing quest, it would also doubtless irritate the persnickety earl.

The wretched, annoying, stupidly good at kissing earl who had not been on Emily's mind these past few days. Why would she think of someone who had kissed her, bullied her into an engagement, kissed her again, and then run off like she was on fire?

She wouldn't. Obviously.

And she wasn't, moreover, worried, nervous, or upset in any way about her upcoming promenade in the park with the man. Obviously.

And if she patted her curls in a way that suggested she was nervous, that was merely because her hair was very annoying.

To wit, Amanda came up behind her, hands gentle and already armed with pins. “Here, let me,” she said, tucking in the locks that had come loose during Emily’s careless bonnet removal.

Emily sighed and slumped back, letting her sister fix that one spot on the back of her head that Emily could never properly reach. The sisters had a maid, of course, to help with such things, but Emily’s curls misbehaved so frequently that if she went running for a servant every time one came loose, she’d never have time to do anything else. The twins had learned to help, too, out of necessity.

Besides, Emily had shooed her maid off in an (evidently pointless) effort to answer any ugly hat-related questions.

“If he’s really that bad,” Amanda said quietly, “you know Rosie and I will help you, right?”

Emily looked up at her sister with such sudden, wide-eyed surprise that she nearly caused Amanda to yank out a fistful of her hair.

“What?” she asked.

“The Earl,” Amanda said. Her eyes, usually gleaming with mischief, were uncharacteristically serious. “If he’s so terrible, we’ll help you find something—some way of fixing it.”

Emily’s heart twisted in her chest. God, but she did love her sisters. Yes, they drove her mad, and she was already afraid to look too closely at her own hair, lest they had already given her gray hairs.

But she loved them, she really did.

“No, sweetheart,” she said with a soft smile. “He’s not that bad. Everything is fine.”

Amanda, bless her, looked disappointed.

“Very well,” she said with a sigh. “Though I feel I could have done a splendid job figuring out how to get rid of him. I suppose my talents shall be wasted again.”

Emily chuckled along with her sister even as she felt the steel return to her spine. Amanda’s offer was precisely why Emily couldn’t indulge in any further scandalous behavior—including wearing hideous hats. She had spent a lifetime acting as the perfect role model for her sisters, and they still tended to pursue chaos at the slightest provocation. She’d let herself get caught up in...sensations twice now. She would not do so again.

She would not make another decision that could compromise her sisters’ futures.

She would be proper, she reminded herself. She would be perfect.

She repeated this to herself like a prayer as she politely greeted the Earl as he arrived at Drowton House, and as they rode together to Hyde Park, their silence only occasionally interrupted by the odd comment about the weather or other passersby.

It was, Emily allowed, a tad boring. But it was proper. Perfectly so.

It was, in fact, so perfectly proper that she did not even notice that the Earl was looking fine in his well-tailored jacket or that the crisp line of his trousers made his tall, strong form look even taller and stronger. Who even knew what his cravat looked like? Not Emily because she had not so much as glanced at his throat, which might have tempted (in a less perfect person, of course) thoughts of the way he had nibbled

against her throat.

When they arrived at the park, she, of course, had no choice but to touch him when he offered his arm. But that, too, was proper.

“Miss Rutley,” murmured the Earl after they’d gone a few moments with Emily exhibiting a truly marvelous level of self-control, “could you please look a bit less like I’ve abducted you?”

Her mouth dropped open, and she whipped her head around to look at him.

“I—that’s not what I look like!” she protested hotly—but quietly. Impropriety didn’t really count if nobody overheard it.

“It really is,” he said grimly.

“It was an expression of serenity!” she objected.

“It really was not,” he returned.

Her perfection slipped; she blew out an irritated huff. Her eyes must have been deceiving her when she thought she saw the Earl’s mouth twitch as though he were tempted to smile. He drew them to the side of the path, so they could confer quietly.

“Listen,” he said, and it sounded more like exhortation than command, “I understand that this situation is...unexpected. And I further recognize that I have not, perhaps, behaved in the most gentlemanly manner possible during our previous...encounters.”

If he referenced the incidents—God help her, it was now incidents, plural—she was going to die right here on Rotten Row. Fortunately, he made no further allusions to anything untoward.

“But,” he added, and she recognized that he was putting in considerable effort towards sounding reasonable, “the best way to cut off the circulation to the gossip is to act like nothing is amiss. We must act as though we lo—” He cleared his throat. “Like one another.”

“Right,” Emily said, ignoring how ugly it felt that he couldn’t even say the word love. This was the height of foolishness since it wouldn’t apply to them in any case. And really, liking one another—or even pretending to—was ambitious enough. “I can do that.”

The Earl looked unflatteringly doubtful.

It was thus a matter of pride when Emily made her next, ill-advised decision.

She thought about what it would be like if she did like the Earl. Hell, she thought about what it would be like if she even loved him. She thought about the incidents and the way she felt when he held her. And then, for good measure, she thought about other things she loved, too, like the feeling of being tucked tight into bed, snug and safe, like the patter of rain against a windowpane, like that pure feeling of home when the people you loved surrounded you.

She took all those emotions, and she channeled them into the smile she shot in the Earl’s direction.

He looked like he’d been slapped.

“Right,” he said. “Good. Let’s carry on, then.”

And so they did.

It took Emily only a few moments to realize that she’d made a grievous mistake.



Because, having allowed such feelings to turn on, she found it difficult to turn them back off. Or rather—not the feelings themselves but the idea of them.

Emily had never expected to marry for love. She'd been seeking a husband for her sisters' sake, not her own. But now, knowing that she would never have that love, would never look around her house and feel it was a true home...

Well, it stung rather more than she'd expected.

And, even worse, despite her convincing performance as someone who adored the Earl (and the resulting turmoil it had offered her), the assembled members of the ton were looking at her like she was...

Well. Emily was too much a lady to even think it. But there was definite scorn there. Disgust, even. Enough to make Emily, unaccustomed to such censure and not at all suited to it, want to shrink against the Earl's side.

"Ignore them," he murmured silkily, tilting his head down towards her. To anyone else, they would have looked like conspiratorial lovers whispering sweet nothings.

"That's easier said than done," she returned, hating how nervous her voice sounded. "They all seem so...angry."

"It's a performance," he said, even as one matron fully craned her neck to continue glaring in Emily's direction as she passed. "It might be one that convinces even themselves, but it's a performance. By deciding that you have done wrong, they make themselves feel better, more powerful. It's a tactic of the weak."

"I did do something wrong," she reminded him.

He paused their walk then, putting a gentle finger under her chin to lift her eyes to

his. She had the strangest feeling that he was looking right through her.

“Emily,” he said, and she was immediately taken back to the last time he’d used her given name, “ignore them. Or else I shall devise another way to distract you.”

His dark eyes flashed with wicked intent.

You are not, she reminded herself, going to kiss the Earl.

Her mental voice did not sound very forceful. She wished she’d worn the stupid bonnet.

“Moore!” cried a friendly voice, freeing Emily from the Earl’s hypnotic gaze.

She looked toward the voice to find Evan Miller, Grace’s brother and the Marquess of Ockley, approaching them, a hand raised in greeting.

Despite the way her heart still raced—ridiculous as the Earl had only touched her with one finger—she shot the Marquess an easy smile.

The Earl looked a bit less pleased to see him. “Ockley,” he greeted.

Evan’s grin widened. It seemed he was familiar with the Earl’s moods.

“Good day, My Lord,” Emily said politely, dropping a quick curtsy.

Evan snapped up her arm before the Earl could take it again. “None of that, Miss Emily,” he scolded. “Think of how Grace would shriek if she heard you My Lord-ing me.” His smile grew tight around the edges when he mentioned his sister. Emily gave his arm a comforting squeeze which he subtly returned.

“You, Sir,” she said teasingly, “are trouble.”

“The best kind,” he added with a wink, making her laugh.

The Earl was looking at her carefully as though something had just started to make sense. “You knew Lady Grace,” he said, the words not quite a question.

“Yes,” Emily agreed, knowing her own smile was just as fragile as Evan’s had been at the mention of her lost friend. “The four of us—myself, Grace, Diana, that is, now the Duchess of Hawkins, and Lady Frances Johnson were all quite close.”

The Earl nodded. “I see.” It did sound, rather, as though he did see something—though what he saw, in particular, was not clear. Emily stifled a sigh. The man she was to marry was as opaque as tar.

Still, Evan kept up a cheerful patter as they strolled down the path.

“Yes, and Grace used them like her own little troops to torture me. Do you know what a man, just home from university, wants most to have around his home? Well, I don’t either, but I assure you that it is not a passel of debutantes.”

“Oh, hush,” Emily mildly. “You were just as much in her thrall as the rest of us; don’t even deny it. How many times did she bully you into practicing dancing with us? If any of us can do a passable waltz, it’s thanks to you.”

“Except Lady Frances,” he said. “She always declined.”

This was a polite way, Emily thought, of saying that Frances was far too shy to dance with Evan, even if he was Grace’s brother.

They chatted pleasantly for another minute or two, the Earl doing absolutely nothing

to contribute to the conversation, until Evan stopped.

“Well,” he said brightly, loud enough for others to hear, “it’s been splendid. I can’t wait to see you both again though no doubt it’ll have to wait until after the wedding, eh?” Then, in a lower voice, he said to Emily. “There. That should help with the snobs a bit. Sometimes being a future duke has its uses.”

“Sometimes?” she asked, even as gratitude washed over her.

He gave her a grin and a quick kiss to the back of her hand before heading off, long legs eating up the path before him at far more rapid a pace than any of the fashionable strollers.

And then Emily was left with her betrothed. It was, she couldn’t help but notice, much more serious company.

Still, she tried to keep a pleasant look on her face as they kept walking. They rounded a bend in the path, taking them to a comparatively private stretch of park where the nearest people were too far away to identify. The Earl came to a sudden halt.

“I have to tell you something,” he said as if he were forcing the words out. “I realized you knew the Duchess of Hawkins of course, but?—”

She waited, surprised. It was unlike him to stumble. Even when they’d been at one another’s throats, he’d been quick with a quip.

“I didn’t realize you were close with Lady Grace, as well,” he said lowly. He had been looking out over the park, but now, he met her eye. “I have letters,” he said, gaze probing. “Between my mother and Dowling.”

This had not been what she’d expected him to say. She’d assumed they would never,

ever touch the topic of his mother's connection to Grace's murderer.

"Oh," she said.

"I think you should have them," he said firmly. "I haven't read them all the way through, but I think—" He broke off again. "You should have them," he said after a long pause. "You should read them and decide what to do about whatever they say."

Emily was confused, but she also very much wanted to see those letters and didn't dare push him into changing his mind.

And it was very considerate, wasn't it, for him to offer? It hinted that she, as his wife, might deserve some...loyalty or perhaps respect. It was a sign that he valued her in some way, wasn't it?

"Thank you," she said softly.

He nodded. Again, he was looking away.

"And maybe," he said. "Maybe it will improve things. Maybe it will...make amends."

Emily's heart sank. This wasn't a gesture of respect. It was a bribe. An apology, perhaps, for the kisses he so clearly regarded as a terrible mistake. The thought made her want to fight with him again, to claw at him, to shout—never mind the publicity and never mind propriety.

But she wanted those damn letters.

So she didn't. She held her tongue as they finished their promenade, got back into his carriage, and rode silently back to Drowton House.

At least, she thought with a slightly hysterical inner laugh as they rode in uncomfortable silence, you didn't kiss him. Perhaps she even ought to thank him, come to think of it, for making it so abundantly clear what he really thought of her.

Yes, his behavior today had clearly put to bed any amorous thoughts she might be having about her future husband. Which was surely a relief.

Yet when the letters arrived at her house that evening, neatly bundled and conveyed with a note that said, You deserve these. –B, she couldn't help but let her fingers linger over the curve of that one initial and wonder.

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“This,” Diana proclaimed, “is the most bloody ridiculous thing I have ever read in the entirety of my life.”

Frances even let out a long, slow whistle though whether it was at Diana’s swearing or at the pages spread out before them, Emily didn’t know.

Perversely, Emily’s brain insisted on wondering if this really was the most ridiculous thing Diana—who had a taste for gothic novels, the bloodier and more dramatic the better—had ever read. She shook that thought away and attended to the task at hand.

She’d not gathered the courage to read the letters by herself, so she had dashed off notes to Frances and Diana, asking them to meet. They’d agreed instantly though Diana had informed them that, as she no longer fit through her own front door, they would have to gather at Hawkins Manor. Emily had assumed this was an exaggeration, but looking at Diana, it seemed frankly possible.

Ever since her sudden plunge into scandal and subsequent engagement, Emily had been avoiding her friends just the tiniest bit. If they had enjoyed teasing her back when she’d just been arguing with the Earl, how would they react now that she’d been caught kissing the man?

Emily was not prepared to find out.

With the letters, however, she held the power to distract them from a matter even as dramatic as Emily’s incipient marriage.

“I don’t...” Frances began, trailing off as she read through one of the documents

again. “It doesn’t make sense.”

Emily rubbed the back of her neck tiredly. They’d been too long hunched over the pile of documents, trying to puzzle out their meaning. Only a few were dated, meaning that they’d had to sift through them like ancient Romans panning for gold.

“Well,” she offered, knowing it would not help the confused furrow of Frances’ brow, “it does make a sort of sense. The letters do on their own, I mean. It’s just the other things—” She waved her hands to show the expansive, messy nature of these ‘other things.’ “—that make it all more confounding.”

Frances frowned ferociously.

“I abhor this,” she said.

Which, honestly, did a fine job of summing up what they had learned.

The letters between the Dowager Countess of Moore and Theodore Dowling had not been tender love notes exchanged between paramours. Instead, viewed together, they revealed two indisputable truths.

One, the Dowager Countess had been blackmailing Dowling.

Two, Grace had not been the first person Dowling had killed.

There were other questions left unanswered. They did not know how many people Dowling had killed, nor why he’d done so. Though the mentions of money suggested that he hadn’t killed on his own behalf but because others had paid him.

Frances was clearly performing some quick mental calculations. Because she was so shy, Frances hid her intelligence from most of the world. In front of her close friends,



however, she was whip-smart and often sharp-tongued.

“I’m not sure the letters do make sense on their own,” she said slowly. “I mean—yes, in a way they do. Dowling was a killer. An established one. But a man who could commit a crime like murder multiple times without getting caught... Why would a man like that turn to a crime of passion?”

Emily frowned. She didn’t follow. “Because he was a killer,” she said. “He’d killed before, and so he killed again.” The words came out like a question.

Frances shook her head sharply. “No, it’s different. Killing for someone else—that’s cold. Mercenary. He didn’t love or hate his other victims—he did it for the money. But Grace...” She looked at Diana, who was gazing off to one side. “He did that because he was obsessed with her.”

Diana didn’t respond.

Frances turned back to Emily, a somber expression on her face.

“Or maybe he wasn’t,” she said.

Emily worried that she was starting to understand now. She didn’t want to understand.

“What would that mean?” she asked quietly.

Frances sucked in a slow breath then let it out.

“It would mean,” she said decisively, “that someone paid him to kill Grace, too.”

“But why?” Emily asked, her voice cracking on the last word. Frances merely shook

her head, her eyes looking wet.

It didn't make sense. It didn't. There was no reason for anyone to want to harm Grace. She'd been a bit of a flirt, it was true, but she'd never led suitors on nor been cruel to any of them, not enough for them to want to murder her. Emily had understood in an oblique, horrible way, the idea of a crime of passion. Grace had been beautiful, desirable, wonderful—and who could predict the mind of a madman? Who knew why a lunatic like Dowling had behaved as he had?

Except perhaps Dowling wasn't a lunatic at all. Perhaps he had killed Grace because someone else had coldly and knowingly paid him to do so.

But who? Why?

It didn't make any sense.

Emily looked over at Diana, who had been uncharacteristically quiet during the last several minutes. Her friend was pale, her jaw clenched hard enough that it had to hurt.

"Diana?" she asked gently.

"It was supposed to be over!" Diana burst out, like the words had been fighting their way free for a while. "It was supposed to be over," she said again. "We got Dowling here, and he confessed—he said it was him; he said it. And then he shot my husband—" She was crying now, powerful tears that turned her face instantly splotchy. Late pregnancy had made Diana more emotional than usual, and well, this was worth crying over.

Emily moved to sit on one side of her while Frances took the other. Together, they wrapped their arms around Diana as sobs wracked her body.

“He admitted it, and he died,” she said between sobs. “And he’s dead—he died right here in this house, and now, he’s dead, and that means if he knew anything else, those answers died with him, and—” She hiccupped. “What if we never know, and it’s my fault?” she asked, sounding like a sad, scared little girl.

Emily pressed her forehead into the side of Diana’s face. “It is not your fault,” she whispered intently. “We all thought it was the Duke until you proved otherwise,” she reminded her friend. “We would never know even part of the truth if not for you.”

“That’s true,” Diana said, but the warble of her voice suggested she didn’t quite believe it.

Instead, it was Frances’ quiet comment that made Diana’s tears dry up.

“And we do have another clue,” Frances said, tapping one small scrap of paper that they’d all but disregarded.

Diana tried to lunge for the paper but was impeded by her stomach. Frances handed it over before Diana could topple herself entirely.

The note was simple, so simple that they’d not thought much of it.

G—I know. And if you’re not careful, dear, I’ll tell. –P.

The author was clearly Priscilla Hoskins, the Dowager Countess. The initial gave it away as did the handwriting.

“But who,” Diana asked, speaking aloud what they all were wondering, “is G?”

Benedict’s first impression of Lord Drowton had not been a favorable one. He had found the man to be too bloviating, too self-important, and too unconcerned with his

daughter's welfare. After all, Benedict knew he wasn't a virgin-seducing, reckless cad who intended to treat Emily like a useless, cast-off handkerchief. But the Viscount had no way of knowing any such thing. And after the unconventional lead up to Emily and Benedict's betrothal, Benedict felt that the Viscount should have at least asked.

But he hadn't. Instead, he'd acted like Benedict had done him a massive favor in getting himself tangled up with Emily and had acted not at all worried of the how of this entanglement. He'd not asked a single question about Miss Amanda which made Benedict wonder if the Viscount had known of his previous pursuit of the younger Rutley daughter.

He had come to wonder if the Viscount knew much about his daughters at all.

And he had come to wonder if this didn't perhaps explain something about the way Emily acted around her sisters.

Benedict was not, in summation, looking forward to dinner with the Viscount, all three of his daughters, and Benedict's mother.

This last attendee seemed a fine candidate for making the evening go poorly.

"Mother," he said firmly on the carriage ride to Drowton House, "do not make advances toward Lord Drowton."

His mother had acted predictably offended.

"Why, what a simply horrid thing to say, Benedict! You act like I am some slattern who is not fit to be in public. I am a countess—" Dowager countess, he thought tiredly. "—and have been moving in Society for years. I cannot understand why you persist in pecking at me so. Furthermore, your reluctance to the idea is entirely

unfounded. The Viscount is a widower, and if his daughter is good enough for you, I cannot imagine why her father should not be good enough for me. But perhaps you are not accounting for the fact that I have not been caught debauching him in public. Is that the difference?”

He ignored her. He couldn't afford to waste his patience before the event had even started.

Another mark against the Viscount: he hadn't liked how demure and self-effacing Emily had become in her father's presence. This was, of course, absolute nonsense as he was constantly lamenting the eagerness with which Emily fought with him. He should have liked the proof that she was capable of acting demure and gentle as befitted a lady of her status.

He did not like it.

He did not like, furthermore, that he had not heard from Emily in the two days since he'd sent her the packet of letters. Was it so hard to write a note? Thank you for sending these, for example. Or, I have received the stolen package; it has not fallen into other hands. Or even, Your mother is clearly a criminal, and I am disgusted with you and will never permit you to kiss me again; please enjoy a miserable life of celibacy which you deserve, given your cursed ancestry.

Anything.

He had become somewhat obsessed over this silence in a manner that truly did not befit his status. He'd even indulged in a brief fit of jealousy over how easily she'd chatted with and smiled at Evan before reminding himself that he was a busy man with many things to do that were not fretting over a woman.

This was, he decided, entirely Emily's fault. If only she had sent the note, he would

have been free to worry about other things. Like business. Or, ah, Parliament. Anything else, really.

When he and his mother arrived at Drowton House, the three Rutley sisters were waiting to greet them. The Viscount, Benedict noted sourly, was not with them.

“Good evening, My Lord, My Lady,” Emily said with an extremely correct curtsy. “I am so glad you could join us this evening.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” his mother said with an icy smile. Benedict cut her a warning look. So far, she’d not offered further insult against Emily—his threats about the Dowager finding a new home had apparently hit their mark. But he could tell that she was pushing against these boundaries like a child forever trying to escape the nursery.

“My father shall be with us shortly,” Emily went on smoothly. Benedict could only assume that she was pretending not to hear the snub in his mother’s tone; Emily was too clever to have genuinely missed it. “Shall we adjoin to the sitting room in the meantime? Dinner should be just a few minutes more.”

“Wonderful,” Priscilla simpered, sounding like she found it anything but.

Emily ignored this, too, leading them towards the sitting room with a gracious gesture. Priscilla followed her as did Rose.

Amanda did not.

“Well, well, well,” she said, propping her hands on her hips.

Benedict was a confident man. For one, he was very tall. That helped, he’d found, in facing down opponents—in business, in politics, in life. For another, he knew himself. He was steady, certain, competent.

Standing in front of this eighteen-year-old debutante, he experienced the exact same feeling as he had as a first year at Eton, being scolded by one of the masters for his poor performance on an assignment.

He shook the feeling off. That was ridiculous, of course.

Although he probably did owe Miss Amanda something of an apology, come to think of it.

“Miss Rutley,” he began, wincing slightly. “Please allow me to assure you, I did not intend...” He trailed off. Well, there was no good way to end that sentence, was there?

Miss Amanda Rutley remained silent, merely arching an eyebrow.

The Eton masters, Benedict decided, could learn a thing or two from Miss Rutley.

He scrambled for how to explain...everything.

“It’s merely that...” he tried again. Dash it all, but this was uncomfortable. This was why he preferred to occupy the moral high ground.

“I really am desperately curious to hear if you can finish a sentence,” Miss Amanda commented.

It was then that Benedict began to suspect that she was toying with him.

He scowled, and she burst into laughter.

“Oh, bravo,” she said, her face lighting up with a grin. “That is a ferocious look. You should try that on my sister. And by that, I mean that you should try that on my sister

when I am there to witness it. I am desperate to see what she would have to say.”

Despite the fact that he was being soundly mocked by a girl barely out of the schoolroom, Benedict felt himself begin to lighten. And strangely enough, this also helped him find his words.

“I am sorry for how it all happened,” he said sincerely. “I did not mean to...imply things that I was unable to deliver.”

She waved him off, still laughing. “Oh, never mind that. I feel rather that I might have been the one leading you on. Unless Emily was telling tales when she said you intended to marry me?” Why did she sound hopeful about this?

Feeling once again that there was no right answer—and that if he ever found himself needing a dose of humility, he would seek out Amanda Rutley posthaste—Benedict said, “Ah, well, yes. I did. Rather.”

“Good Lord,” she muttered, apparently to herself. “But you’re so old.”

Well, that was him told, wasn’t it?

Then Miss Amanda shrugged, her appalled expression disappearing in a flash.

“Ah, well, never mind. It has all worked out in the end, hasn’t it? You’ve got Emily, who is quite a dear for all that she’s a bit of a stickler for being proper. Always on about ‘Amanda, don’t bring amphibians inside,’ or ‘Amanda, you cannot perform social experiments on unsuspecting gentleman.’”

She shot Benedict a glance that said she assumed he would be sympathetic to this clearly dreadful plight. He wondered for the first time if, had he actually ended up marrying Amanda Rutley, he wouldn’t have found himself in completely over his



head. After all, here she was, saying so many bizarre things that he very nearly glossed over the clearly mad observation that Emily, the little hellion, was excessively proper.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “But did you say your sister was a stickler for propriety?”

Amanda sighed as if this was a disappointing if predictable answer.

“I suppose you go in for that sort of thing, don’t you?” she said with a distinct note of pity in her voice.

This was not an answer—and Benedict truly could not conjure a response.

Which, in the end, might have been just as well as Emily chose that moment to reenter the foyer, a harried expression on her face.

“There you two are,” she said. “I’ve been looking all over for you.”

Her voice was tense, and Benedict felt a sudden stab of terror that perhaps she’d thought he’d hied off with her sister for nefarious purposes. He could hardly blame her for suspecting him, given how he’d ended up with Emily in his arms in the first place. He felt intensely grateful that there was an entire foyer’s worth of space between himself and Amanda.

He felt, moreover, curiously annoyed that Lord Drowton wasn’t here punching Benedict in the face. Benedict had been so caught up in worrying about his previous inappropriate behavior that he hadn’t paused to consider that his current behavior—which was to say, alone with Miss Amanda—was even more inappropriate if one disregarded the lack of amorous intent. After all, he hadn’t been betrothed the first time.

If his daughter had been spending time with such a man, Benedict certainly would not have been so lackadaisical about it. Nor, he assumed, would Emily, who could transparently hold her own and would no doubt prove a fearsome parent.

Case in point, she was presently eyeing her sister with a glare that could have melted glass.

“What,” she asked Amanda archly, “have you been up to?”

Amanda put on an entirely unconvincing look of innocence. “I have been welcoming my new brother into the family!”

Despite everything—and at this point, he really did mean everything—Benedict found himself oddly flattered to be considered someone’s brother. It was also rather astonishing how comfortable the title settled upon him. Already any time where he had considered Miss Amanda Rutley as a potential bride felt like the distant past, like a bizarre dream that fades upon waking. He’d not been flattered when she’d called him old, of course, but she did now strike him as rather too young for him as well.

Emily, on the other hand, was no flighty child, and the unimpressed look she gave her sister only served to emphasize this point.

“Kindly endeavor to at least pretend you were raised properly, would you?” Emily asked in a tone that made it clear this was an order, not a true request. Benedict found himself fighting back a smirk. Perhaps he was suited to the older brother role after all for all that he’d not had practice.

Emily turned on him as Amanda sighed, put out. “And you—” she began before cutting herself off. He watched as she wiped her ire away and forced her face into a mask of politeness.

He...did not care for it.

“I beg your pardon,” she said solicitously, and it was just awful. “But we are gathering for dinner, My Lord. My father and your mother have already been seated at the table. Would you be so kind as to join us?”

She was every inch the proper hostess, and he struggled to consider this a good sign.

“Of course,” he said, offering her his arm. He didn’t know how else to respond, not in the face of such aggressive politeness. She tucked her hand neatly into his elbow, not making eye contact for even a moment.

He tried not to let it bother him. He would not demand she look at him—he was not quite so autocratic as all that. Besides, her sister was still present. And he would not, as he longed to do, drag her off and demand to know what she’d thought of the letters...and then kiss the answers out of her if she refused to give them. She always did give up arguing when he kissed her.

Instead, he led her wordlessly into the drawing room, feeling that he’d successfully navigated his relationship with one Rutley sister...but worrying that he still had a long way to go with the sister who mattered to him the most.

“I like him.”

Amanda would not be Amanda if she stooped to such banalities as, say, knocking before entering a room, so Emily was not at all surprised when her sister burst through her bedchamber door while Emily was still tending her morning toilette.

It was now two days until the wedding; the special license had been procured, and the church booked. There were approximately a thousand other things to do, however, and Emily struggled to care overmuch about any of them. All told, she would have preferred to stay in bed, instead.

Being the object of roiling gossip was, as it turned out, very tiring.

“Who, dear?” she asked absently as she jabbed a few extra hairpins into her simple coiffure. She had far too much to do today to be lackadaisical about controlling her curls.

“The Earl, Emmy. Do keep up.”

Amanda was splayed flat on her back on Emily’s bed. If Emily had tried such a thing after getting dressed for the day, she would lose every single hairpin she’d ever placed in her curls. Amanda popped up. Her hair looked fine.

Emily turned away from her dressing table to look at her sister head on.

“I’m not sure I’ve properly apologized to you, Amanda,” she said, feeling her cheeks flush with the admission. “The Earl was your beau, and though I didn’t approve?—”

“Oh, no!” Amanda exclaimed. “No, no! Ick. No.” She shook her head wildly—and her dratted coiffure remained perfectly in place. “I admit, it isn’t entirely flattering to be thrown over so easily—not because of you, specifically, Emmy, just in general,” she added when Emily cringed.

This was kind of her sister, but Emily knew the truth. Amanda was a young, vivacious debutante who, yes, could be a bit too, ah, creative sometimes. But she was still a superior catch to old maid, too tall Emily. The Earl never would have chosen Emily if they’d not been caught in a compromising situation. She knew that.

Amanda kept talking. “No, I actually meant that I like him for you, sweet sister. He and I would not have suited, I don’t think, and I am not yet ready to marry. But I think he will not be able to glower you into submission, and you shall not be able to manage him.”

Emily again suspected that her sister was trying to be kind, but being characterized as a managing type stung.

“Anyway,” Amanda went on, blithely unaware of her sister’s discomfort, “it shall all work out, mark my words. The two of you will no doubt be very upright and accomplished together, and Rosie and I will try to behave ourselves even without you here to constantly nag us into submission.”

This last bit was delivered as a joke, but in the context of facing all her manifold inadequacies, Emily struggled to find the humor.

“Right,” she said, her smile more a wince.

Rose entered the room then—also not bothering to knock.

“Oh, hello,” she said. “Em, Lady Frances is here to help with—” She made an

expansive gesture. “—everything.”

“Right,” Emily said again, this time her tone considerably more decisive. “Wonderful. Let’s go meet her and have some breakfast. We have much to do today.”

The three sisters went downstairs and threw themselves into preparations. There was plenty to do, and the Dowager Countess had not shown any interest in aiding in the work of putting together a short-notice wedding worthy of an earl. Since Emily’s mother was no longer with them, that left the bride in charge of most of her own preparations. Frances, of course, had been a wonder, organizing and planning with the utmost efficiency—she was splendid at that sort of thing as long as she wasn’t asked to speak to any strangers. And even the twins had been surprisingly helpful. They’d remained on task for the past few days, even when endless opportunities for mischief presented themselves.

Diana, who was due to give birth any day now, was not able to join them, of course; in the days since Emily had shown her friends the letters (which she’d scarcely had time to even think about since), Diana had struggled to get out of bed, let alone the house, given the enormity of her stomach.

Their absent friend made her presence known, however, by sending little notes of encouragement and advice. At one point the day prior, she’d arranged to have cakes from Emily’s favorite bakery delivered, designed, as her note indicated, to fortify them during their labors.

Emily thought this last one might have been a pun about childbirth. Her friend, she gathered, was very, very bored by her confinement.

The quartet of women had designated the Rutleys’ front parlor as their main working location, and the four of them flitted in and out of the room as needed, chaperoned by their various maids and footmen whenever an errand popped up. Emily spent the day

resolutely not looking at the settee where she'd recently been soundly kissed by her betrothed.

Emily was returning from one such errand—she'd confirmed with the florist that their order would be delivered, checking with her own eyes that the hothouse flowers were in decent condition—when she found her sisters sitting with their heads bent close together over a piece of paper, whispering furiously. Frances, who had left on her own errand at the same time as Emily, had not yet returned.

“What have you got there?” she asked, casting her bonnet and spencer to the side. There was no point taking it back to her room; she'd no doubt be hurrying out again in short order. Her maid seemed to feel the same, taking a seat in the corner of the room with a tired huff.

Amanda, never known for subtlety, snatched up the paper, folded it, and stuffed it underneath her rear. “Nothing,” she said.

The corner of the paper was still sticking out from beneath her. Emily held out a hand.

“Give it to me, please,” she said patiently. This was probably one of her sisters' misguided attempts at helping, but if a vendor had cancelled or some other such tragedy had befallen them, Emily needed to know so she could handle it.

Rose, however, shook her head. “No,” she said firmly. “It's private.”

Emily fixed them with a look. She had abundant practice with this look.

Amanda pursed her lips stubbornly. “Fine, if you must know, I've drawn a very unflattering picture of you. I made your hair massive. It will hurt your feelings. I am very repentant for what I've done. Kindly leave me to self-castigate in peace.”

“You would think,” Emily observed mildly, “that with all the times you two have attempted to lie to me, you might have gotten better at it.”

The twins exchanged a glance, and it was then that Emily began to worry that whatever they were concealing was really bad, indeed.

“Give me the paper,” she said seriously.

Moving very slowly, as if Emily might forget what was happening if only she moved slowly enough, Amanda stood just enough to remove the paper from beneath her person and handed it over to her sister.

It was one of the gossip pages, that day’s edition.

Emily’s stomach sank as she started to read.

To the shock of every reasonable member of the ton, the marriage between the Earl of M— and Miss E— R— is scheduled to take place later this week. Let me assure you: nobody is more shocked than I, dear readers! To think that someone like Miss R— (who was not known even to my well-informed self prior to her shocking intrusion into the scene last week when she was found in a most compromising positions) has managed to snare the illustrious Earl. For indeed, a snare it must be. How else could a wallflower giantess trap herself one of the most eligible bachelors of the Season? But remember this: a hasty marriage is only sweeping things under the rug, my dear Miss R—, and some stains can never come out.

Perhaps we cannot blame Miss R— entirely. After all, she and her pair of younger sisters have had no mother to teach them how to behave themselves properly. (Though I was once uninformed about the so-called lady in question, my dear readers know I never stay uninformed on matters of gossip. I have found out all that is worthy of being told.) Of course, I can think of scores of lovely, decorous ladies who



have lost their beloved mamas and did not turn out to be—well, I am far too polite to commit to print a word such as that.

And while we could praise the gentleman for his sense of honor, I am not so entirely convinced that we should. For there is gentlemanly behavior, and then there is this...

Emily wished she had just believed Amanda when she'd said it was a nasty drawing. For this was so, so much worse.

It was one of the crueler bits of gossip she'd ever seen printed. Forget the personal insults though those were bad enough. The author had all but called her a harlot outright, and though the piece technically did not reveal her identity, there was no doubt as to the "wallflower giantess" might reference.

No, that was all quite enough, but the part that chilled her was the reference to her sisters. This had been her greatest fear, that somehow her behavior would damage their prospects. If that happened, she'd never forgive herself...

And then there was the implication that, if the Earl threw her over, Society would not blame him. If that happened, Emily would be doomed—a scandalous spinster for all her days.

The frisson of worry that coursed through her at that thought gave her pause. Since when did the idea of being a spinster bother her?

She shook her head at herself. Clearly it was just the 'scandalous' part that bothered her. She was worried for her sisters' prospects, naturally.

Those same sisters were peering at her with anxious expressions on their faces.

"I don't think it's the least bit accurate," Rose said loyally.

“Me neither,” Amanda agreed promptly. She instantly ruined it by adding, “You are not sneaky, Emmy. You could never scheme to trap a gentleman.”

“Um, thank you,” Emily said, her voice shaky, both from what she’d just read and from that astonishingly backhanded compliment.

“Besides,” Amanda went on, her tone suggesting that she really thought she was being helpful, “who needs a mother when we’ve got you to natter all the time about proper behavior and all that.”

If one squinted, Emily supposed this was almost kind.

Rose took in Emily’s pinched expression and kicked her twin in the ankle.

“Ow!” Amanda exclaimed, giving Rose a reproachful look. “Why?—”

“Stop talking,” Rose commanded out of the side of her mouth.

Amanda glanced at Emily, and whatever she saw in her elder sister’s face caused her to clasp her hands behind her in what, Emily could only assume, was meant to be a gesture of innocence.

“Don’t pay it any mind,” Amanda said, and this actually was helpful. “Rosie, the Earl, and I all know the truth—and that’s all that matters.”

As they continued their preparations, Emily hoped fervently that this proved to be the case.

There was a crowd outside the church.

Benedict did not understand.

His wedding was not, by his understanding, an elaborate, flashy affair. True, he'd left most of the preparations to his bride—planning weddings was the kind of frivolity that women loved to concern themselves with—but surely, he'd have noticed if Emily had planned an affair so large that the crowd spilled out onto the street.

Furthermore, he'd gotten the distinct impression that Emily had a small, close-knit circle of friends, and he knew that his own social sphere was really more of a social dot, given that he had no close associates aside from Evan Miller.

Perhaps Emily had a great number of cousins she'd failed to mention?

He disembarked from his carriage, feeling decidedly baffled.

That was, he felt baffled until one of the gathered dandies glanced in his direction and let loose a dramatic gasp. "It's him! He actually came!"

Benedict did not like the sound of that at all.

This was cemented when another man, his accent far too broad and uncultured to suggest he was likely to be found outside a Society wedding, asked, "Yer really plannin' on goin' through with it, are ye, M'Lord? Any chance of changin' yer mind? I've a guinea against it."

These people, he realized in a flash of hot rage, weren't here to see the wedding—they were here to see if the wedding was even going to happen.

"Get away from me," Benedict snarled at the man in front of him, wishing he could instead slap the smarmy grin off the man's face. It would not do, however, to get into fisticuffs on the morning of his nuptials. He raised his voice, "All of you, get away from here. Unless you're attending the ceremony, I expect you to be gone in the next two minutes."

He did not need to add “or else.” His tone said it for him.

He shoved his way none too gently through the assembled spectators, heading for the front doors of the church. Christ, there were even women here. What was wrong with people?

He could only hope that Emily had gotten safely inside before the hideous crowd of vultures had gathered.

He’d seen, of course, that hideous article in the gossip pages. His mother never would have let him get away with missing it. She’d thrust the paper under his nose then sniffed that at least someone was seeing sense and that there was still time to make the right choice. Then she’d scampered off before he could either read the paper or shout at her for her unwelcome comments about his impending marriage.

When he’d actually read the damned thing, he’d forgotten all his ire at his mother, having none to spare for anyone aside from that wretched gossip columnist.

He’d fumed, read the thing again, then fumed some more. He’d considered various legal channels he could use to ruin the hideous creature who had felt it appropriate to write such things about his Emily—his future wife. He could think of none—the whole purpose of using initials was to protect against accusations of libel—but he did enjoy a brief, savage fantasy of having the writer declared a lunatic by the Court of Chancery.

But writing in the gossip pages was one thing. Showing up at his actual wedding was another thing entirely.

Inside the vestibule of the church, he found Lady Frances Johnson pacing back and forth, wringing her hands anxiously. She startled when he entered.

“Are they still out there?” she asked, her voice scarcely above a whisper. He was reasonably certain he’d never heard Lady Frances speak before; now, she sounded enormously reluctant to do so. He felt a flash of appreciation for the act, which was clearly done out of loyalty to Emily.

“I sent them away,” he said.

She nodded in relief. Then she darted a quick glance up at him, making eye contact for only a moment.

“We can never tell Emily about this,” she said, her voice slightly more confident than it had been.

“Agreed,” he said.

Normally, he’d have thought it a poor idea to enter into a conspiracy against one’s wife on the first day of one’s marriage, but sometimes silence really was for the best.

Lady Frances shot him a small smile, and Benedict felt oddly encouraged.

“She’s here, then?” he asked, hoping it didn’t make him sound pathetic. Not that he had any reason to doubt that she’d come—her reputation was at stake, and Emily did not strike him as flighty—but perhaps the crowd outside had rattled him, too.

Lady Frances’ smiled widened for a split second before disappearing.

“She is,” she told him simply.

Good. That was good.

He nodded, took a slow breath, and entered the main portion of the building so that he

could wait for the reverend to show him where to stand. There was nothing to be nervous about. After all, he was not a nervous man.

Curiously enough, he found himself able to shed his last traces of nerves only when Emily entered the back of the church and walked down the aisle towards him looking beautiful, of course, but also tremendously nervous herself. There was something about the way she held her mouth—that plush lower lip looked as though it wanted to puff out into a worried pout and was being held back only by sheer force of will—that made all his concerns seem timid by comparison.

If she was nervous, he would be steady for both of them. Wasn't that what a husband did, after all?

That was why—it must have been why—when she arrived at his side, he reached out and clasped her hand in his, holding on firmly.

Her eyes flew to his, her expression evened out, and she nodded. Just once.

But it was enough. It felt...right.

He did not release her hand, not when the reverend pronounced them man and wife nor when a polite smattering of applause broke out across the church, just loud enough that it wasn't insulting.

He didn't release her hand, and she did not drop her gaze from his.

Not until it was time for them to leave together. And even then, when he offered her his arm, he held her a bit more closely to his side than was perhaps strictly necessary.

It felt necessary, however. This was his role, now, to provide her the support she needed.

They walked past the gathered guests, a few of whom eyed the newly wed pair a bit more speculatively than Benedict liked. He would remember their names, that was for sure. When they reached the foyer where he'd spoken to Lady Frances—had it truly been less than an hour before?—Emily let out a long breath that was almost a laugh. Tension leached out of her shoulders.

“You did well,” he said, the words springing, unbidden, to his lips.

He was immediately glad they had, however, for Emily gave him a smile, one that even hinted at the fire he knew lurked just beneath any proper veneer she placed upon herself. Good. He liked to see that, too.

“Thank you,” she said politely. But he knew now that politeness was just a game—especially when it was aimed at him. The other side of her mouth quirked up, and she nodded at the door in front of them. “Shall we?”

Inside the main church, rustling indicated that the assembled guests were getting to their feet, gathering their things. He wanted to be gone before any of them—by which he of course meant his mother, who had sat in the front row looking sour throughout the ceremony—caught up with him and his new wife.

“Let's,” he agreed. He pushed open the door with his free hand, leading them, blinking slightly, into the weak spring sunlight.

Benedict let out a breath of relief when he saw that the crowd had, per his snapped instructions, departed. Perhaps they'd taken him seriously, or perhaps once he'd arrived, they had considered the marriage a fait accompli and left, seeking other entertainments. He didn't much care as long as they were gone, and Emily never saw them.

“Oi!”

Benedict stiffened at the cry. He considered for a wild moment simply tugging Emily along, using his grip on her arm to pull her away before anything more could be said.

But it was too late. She was already looking towards the sound, her brow furrowing in confusion.

It was the man who had spoken to Benedict earlier about his bet. He was now, unlike before, quite profoundly drunk.

“You!” he called, waving a flask in their direction. If it had any liquor left, Benedict would be astounded. “Y’owe me a guinea, mate.”

“What’s going on?” Emily asked him worriedly.

“It’s nothing,” he said. His carriage was only a few paces away. He tried to lead her in that direction, but her feet weren’t moving.

The drunk man kept talking. “Shoulda been a sure thing, weren’t it? But y’had t’go an’ ruin it.” His words were so slurred as to be nearly unintelligible—though unfortunately not unintelligible enough. The man leered at Emily up and down. “Though p’rhaps I can’t blame ye, man. Papers di’n’t say she were a looker, for all she’s tall.”

Benedict tugged more firmly on Emily’s arm. Where was a fucking constable when you needed one?

“If I’d’a known she looked like that, maybe I’d’a wagered on ye marryin’ ‘er after all,” he hiccupped.

Benedict saw the moment Emily put it all together. Her eyes flashed wide, her mouth dropped open, and though she quickly shoved her reaction beneath her mask of



propriety, he saw the hurt.

He felt it as if it were his own. Not five minutes married, and he'd already failed in his role as husband. If that hadn't ensured that the drunk man was going to receive Benedict's fist to his face, his next words would have done so.

“Whaddya say ye let me ‘ave a go a’ ‘er, and we’ll call it even for the guinea, eh?”

Emily gasped. Benedict lunged.

And, he allowed, even if his hand ended up being broken, it would be worth it just to see the lout collapse into a puddle in the street.

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:38 am*

On the carriage ride to her new home, Emily wondered if it were possible to actually die of humiliation.

One part of her hoped so. If it were possible, that was certainly her imminent fate. And then she'd be too dead to worry about things like people taking bets on whether or not she would be left at the altar. That gossip columnist would probably lose a night of sleep or two over it, too.

Poor, dead Emily, everyone would say at her funeral. We should have been nicer to her.

A larger part of her (though at this particular moment it did not feel much larger) hoped such a thing was impossible. Because, well, life. And her sisters. And friends. People who loved her even though she was a tragic figure who got appalling offers from drunkards in the middle of the street on her wedding day.

Although she did manage to almost smile when she saw the way her new husband was shaking out his hand. It had been rather satisfying—flattering, even—to see him flatten the lout with a single blow.

It had been, additionally, impressive in a way that made Emily feel...things.

She stifled a sigh. Apparently, she would live after all.

“My mother has moved to the dower house,” her husband said abruptly after they'd been traveling for a few minutes, only the clattering of the wheels against the cobblestoned streets breaking the silence.

“Oh,” she said when he looked as though he was waiting for a response. “Good?”

He nodded though he did not look entirely satisfied. “Yes. It is good. You are the Countess now—” Oh, Lord help her, she was a countess now. “—so it will be good for you to get to settle into the house without its former mistress underfoot. I doubt I shall be able to keep her at bay forever, but we shall have some time to ourselves.”

“Right,” she said. Her mouth was suddenly very dry. Why was her mouth so dry? It could not possibly be due to any alarm at the prospect of having time with her new husband. Uninterrupted time.

Time where they might, with the approval of God and Society, do...

Things.

“Right,” he echoed as if waiting for her to say more.

She looked out the carriage window. How interesting she found the streets of Mayfair! She wasn't avoiding his gaze because she was a coward! No! Not at all!

She thought she heard her new husband sigh, but surely, he was too dignified for that.

Emily spent the remainder of the ride letting the phrase time to ourselves bounce around her head, the ball of nerves it generated growing larger and larger by the minute.

Death by humiliation was apparently impossible, but perhaps death by anxiety was still a possible outcome.

She tried very hard to focus on other things, she really did. It helped somewhat that, when they arrived at Moore Manor, there was the staff to greet and a tour to

undertake. She found, however, that her mind kept traveling back to the tall, upright man who stood at her side, the stern man who had essentially herded her into marriage with him.

The man who had given her letters that could help her understand her friend's death.

The man who had punched a drunkard for her.

The man who had held her hand throughout the wedding ceremony to help her feel less afraid.

Really, it was all too confusing.

She was reminded, not for the first time in her life, to be careful what she wished for, however, when the housekeeper concluded their tour by leading them back to the front hall where they'd begun just at the same moment that the Dowager Countess of Moore swept imperiously through the front doors.

"Mother!" the Earl snapped, his voice a furious snarl.

Emily looked up at him in surprise. She wasn't sure she'd ever heard him sound quite this irritated, not even when she was doing her best to needle him into an absolute fury.

The Dowager Countess frowned at her son, not even sparing a single glance for Emily. Emily found she could not be overly sorry about this. This was the first time she'd faced the woman who might have known something about Grace's murder since she'd read the Dowager Countess' letters. It was hard to imagine that this woman, whose dress was cut inappropriately low—especially given that she'd only just come from her own son's wedding—and who was wearing too much rouge, could have been in cahoots with a hired killer.

And yet Emily had read the letters. Her new husband's mother had known that Dowling was a murderer. And she'd done nothing.

Or rather, she'd done nothing right. She had done something—she'd blackmailed him for her own gain.

Only a lifetime of training in propriety kept Emily from shaking her head in disgust.

“What?” the Dowager Countess asked her son, a distinct whine in her voice. “Do you always need to be quite so cross with me, Benedict?”

“You,” he said through clenched teeth, “are meant to be at the dower house.”

The Dowager gave him a pitying look. “Well, I am going, am I not? Or did you think I shouldn't pick up my bags before I decamp? Would you like me to be without clothing or food, Benedict?”

This was, Emily felt, a tad dramatic.

“Of course not.” The Earl was practically vibrating with annoyance. If Emily didn't so vehemently dislike the Dowager Countess, she might have considered taking notes on the older woman's technique. At present, Emily and her new husband were in something of a truce, but that didn't mean Emily would never again wish to bedevil him.

After all, the previous incidents had ended in a highly satisfying manner.

Except, no. She wasn't thinking of that. She was still on a strict no-kissing regime.

“But,” the Earl went on, “you were meant to have already moved over there. Before the wedding.”

The Dowager shuddered in an exaggerated motion. “Why, don’t be ridiculous. Why should I spend one more minute than is strictly necessary in that awful, dour place?”

“It’s a fine house,” the Earl began. His mother spoke right over him.

“Besides, I know you were caught in a compromising position with your—” Now she did finally look at Emily; her eyes were shining with disdain. “—wife, but I rather assumed that you could control yourselves long enough for me to gather my things.”

Emily gasped at the crass implication. How dare this woman...? And about her own son!

The Dowager Countess’ expression flickered between victory and pity, as if Emily were so obviously pathetic that it didn’t even need to be said.

“I warned you to watch your tongue, Mother,” the Earl said tersely. “I will not repeat myself again. If you wish to remain welcome in this house, you will not speak out against my wife again—not overtly nor in implication,” he added when the Dowager Countess opened her mouth, clearly intending to argue that she hadn’t actually said anything untoward.

Emily felt the tiniest flicker of pleasure at being defended.

The Dowager, meanwhile, was clearly furious.

“Fine,” she said, thrusting her nose in the air. “If you wish to be that way, I cannot see that I have any way of stopping you. I shall gather my things and go. I know better than to stay where I’m not wanted.”

“If only that were true,” the Earl muttered under his breath.

Emily wasn't sure if she was shocked at this or if she wanted to laugh. In the end, she was blessedly free from having to choose as the housekeeper (a brilliant woman, Emily decided, who need a raise posthaste) took that moment to draw Emily aside with a detailed question about the upcoming week's menus that could have easily waited another day...or three.

Despite the distinct lack of urgency to the task, Emily let herself be drawn into a lengthy conversation about butchers and cuts of meat, grateful both for the comfortable terrain and for the distraction from her new mother-in-law's departure.

For, indeed, by the time Emily was returned to her husband's side, his mother had (with several annoyed sighs that went unanswered) decamped for her temporary lodgings at the dower house. And if the Earl looked slightly put out, Emily decided to believe this was because his mother was (it must be said) rather trying and not because he'd been abandoned barely an hour into his marriage.

"There you are," he said irritably when she found him pacing in the upstairs hallway, putting an end to Emily's pleasant fiction that he hadn't been irritated at her. "Where were you?"

"My apologies, My Lord," she murmured politely. "I was speaking with the housekeeper regarding my domestic obligations."

To her surprise, this made his frown deepen. Goodness gracious, if he wasn't the most impossible man alive! Weren't men meant to be pleased when their wives did...wifely things? But oh no, not this man. When she was quarrelsome, he didn't like it; when she was demure, he also didn't like it.

Maybe he had some sort of rare medical condition, she allowed, one that had rotted the part of his brain that most people dedicated to not being utter prats all the time. Perhaps a medical journal would like to write about him. She should make inquiries.

“What?” she demanded, her resolve to behave correctly weakening under the weight of her frustration.

“You shouldn’t call me that,” he said, his annoyed mumble containing a hint of sheepishness.

What in the...? She had no idea what he was on about. “Call you what?” she asked.

“My Lord,” he replied. Whatever bashfulness he might have felt over this current absurdity was quickly being overwritten by snappishness. How utterly typical. “You shouldn’t call me that. I’m your husband. It’s ridiculous.”

That was... Well, it was annoyingly reasonable in a way that made her want to snap at him. She summoned the part of herself that had spent a lifetime practicing how to not shout at the twins seventy-four times per day and took a deep breath before responding.

“What would you prefer I call you?” she asked, her tone remarkably controlled if she did say so herself.

He scowled again, but this one seemed pro forma. “My name is Benedict,” he said. “Try that.”

She had to take another deep breath.

“Very well,” she said. “Benedict.”

She’d meant for the word to come out exasperated. For one, she was exasperated. He didn’t need, after all, to be so eager to jump to offense. For another, it seemed a way to show that she was onto him, that she understood his cantankerousness was more bark than bite while remaining within the bounds of propriety.



Instead, it came out...

Breathy.

Drat, she thought, her thought somehow also sounding breathy. If I wanted to change the mood, I've managed the thing nicely...

Benedict was no longer looking at her like he was annoyed. No, now he was looking at her with heat. With hunger.

She took an involuntary step backwards. A predator's smile spread across her husband's lips, and oh, Emily's body remembered how those lips felt against her own, against her jaw, against the pulse of her throat which now pounded and raced.

"Say it again," he purred.

She shook her head, an instinctual protest. It was unreasonable, she knew. She had to call him something, after all—they were now bound for life, and wasn't that quite a thought. He'd already disallowed polite address, and he was not the type to allow trite nicknames.

His given name would have to do.

But she feared if she gave in on this, she'd end up giving in on everything.

Yes, whispered a traitorous voice. Do that. Give in.

And because Benedict really, truly was the most contrary man alive, her refusal—her foolish, nonsensical refusal—was the thing that seemed to please him. He prowled forward. She stepped back and bumped into the wall.

“Come now, Emily,” he said. This, she felt, was an object lesson on why she should not cede to this demand. When he said her name, after all, it didn’t feel like a mere word. It felt like a caress.

And then it was a caress, his fingertips reaching out to touch her elbow—Emily had never before paid such attention to her shoulder—before sliding up her arm in a glancing touch.

She didn’t know whether she should jerk away or lean in to get more of the contact. Trapped between the two, she stayed utterly still.

Benedict, however, did not. Leaving gooseflesh in his wake, he trailed his fingers up and up, skipping over the short sleeve of her wedding dress, then across the shelf of her collarbone, up her throat, and around the edge of her jaw. He twined his fingers into her hair and gripped.

It didn’t pull. It didn’t hurt. But it was firm and undeniable, that grip.

Something fragile inside Emily trembled under the pressure of it, threatened to break.

Yes, said the traitorous voice again. Yes.

Stubbornly, she rebelled, steeling herself, even if nothing felt quite right about that choice.

“Emily,” he prodded again, the tiniest, barest hint of a mocking lilt to the word. “I’m waiting.”

He leaned in, his frame perfectly sized to let him curl all around her. She could feel the heat of him from her toes to her crown. She could feel the gentle brush of his breath against her cheek.

True to his word, he waited.

He waited and waited with some sort of wretched wellspring of eternal patience, the only movement in him that gentle flow of his breathing. His grip in her hair remained firm, unyielding. She thought she might die if he let go.

And something in the surety of that grip freed her just enough to close her eyes and whisper his name, something in her certain that this wasn't just giving in, that this was being brave. Something in her certain that those two things were more related than they seemed.

"Benedict," she said, letting the word grow as breathy and syrupy and warm as she felt inside.

His hand clenched tighter—he didn't let go—as his mouth came crashing down on hers.

It was more of a kiss than the ones they'd shared previously, more heat, more fury, more passion, more everything. It was a cliff, the highest mountain, and Emily wanted to throw herself off it. He'd catch her, wouldn't he? He was still holding on.

She opened as his tongue invaded, wanting more, more, always more. His body surged against hers, pressing her firmly against the wall, his free hand clenched in a fist beside her head, the veins bulging at the wrists. The sight of those veins, the controlled strength they indicated, touched her straight down to her bones as he kissed viciously against her pulse point.

It was all so good that she almost didn't care that they were still standing in a hallway. Almost.

"Benedict," she moaned which made his attack on her neck become even more

vigorous. He was going to leave a mark, something that, oddly enough, filled her with a sense of satisfaction. “Benedict, wait?—”

The groan that ripped from him was agony. “No, Emily. No, please?—”

Oh, no. He thought she meant wait as stop, and goodness, she didn’t want that either.

“No,” she said, interrupting, her words coming out as gasps. “Not—I just meant—hallway.”

It was the best she could do when her mind only wanted to conjure words like yes and more and surrender.

Benedict—and she liked the way his name sounded on her tongue, the way it felt in her mind, now that she was growing used to it—blinked like he was coming out of a trance. He looked at the hallway like it was he, not she, who was new to this house.

“Hallway,” he echoed. “Fuck.”

The combination of his startled tone and the profanity on the lips of her eternally stern husband shocked a laugh out of Emily. When he turned from staring bemusedly at their surroundings to staring bemusedly at her, she realized it was the first time he’d ever made her laugh. The thought made her want to laugh again, and she nearly did, except Benedict took that moment to glance at the hallway again and step back, releasing her.

The loss of his grasp, of the way he pressed against her, was like a shock of cold water.

He grabbed her again in an instant, his hold coming firm about her wrist as he dragged her into one of the bedrooms—she wasn’t paying good enough attention and

lacked sufficiently familiarity with the house to know if it was her bedchamber or his—before he grasped her again, bringing her face back to his with both hands.

And it was a good kiss. It was. She felt it course through her veins like little sparks, making her hot and dizzy.

It just...wasn't the same.

She wasn't the puddle she'd been outside, wasn't feeling her bones turn to mush within her. She kept being distracted by the cool air at her back and that annoying little internal voice, the one she'd been trying to silence before, was now gone. She did not, she found, care for it. Not one bit.

She pushed up on her toes, pushed closer and closer and closer to Benedict, hoping to find that this was the thing that let her dissolve again. But it wasn't. It didn't. She remained firm—rigid, even.

Benedict noticed. He pulled back, frowning.

“What's wrong?” he demanded and for once, Emily was certain that his clear irritation wasn't at her. “Are you—Emily, we can wait?—”

She shook her head sharply, cutting him off. She didn't want less, didn't want to stop. She wanted more.

She just didn't know how to get it.

She glanced at the nothingness over her shoulder like this would provide some answer.

“I just—” she said, breaking off. She just what? “Can we—” She caught a glimpse of

the armchairs sitting before the fire and thought of the kisses in the parlor, thought of the settee. Perhaps that might...?

She nodded in that direction. “Can we stand over there?” she asked, praying he didn’t command her to explain herself. She couldn’t explain herself.

But maybe, she realized as her husband’s eyes tracked over her in careful, assessing motion, intelligence glinting in his gaze—maybe Benedict could explain.

Slowly, aching slowly, his hand came up again, an echo of the path it had followed in the hallway. Only this time, his fingers didn’t make contact with her skin, didn’t touch her at all, in fact.

Not until they entered her hair with a firm, controlling, claiming grasp.

Yes. The voice was back. Yes, yes.

Her breath left her like a sigh.

A smile threatened at the edges of Benedict’s mouth. “Do you like this, wife?” he asked. There was no doubt what he meant—no hiding from it, not when there was only this one point of contact between them.

But Emily couldn’t lie.

“Yes,” she whispered, certain, somehow, that she should feel ashamed of this.

But she didn’t. She didn’t feel an ounce of shame and in fact, felt a warm glow of pride when Benedict let out a strangled groan.

“Oh yes,” he murmured, voice throaty of approval. “You are a very good girl, aren’t

you?”

Emily’s cheeks blazed and a whimper escaped her lips. But even so, she nodded, the movement causing his grip in her hair to tighten and loosen just a smidgen.

His grin was marvelously wicked as he took her mouth again.

His grip on her was firm, and while it wasn’t as comforting as the wall at her back, it was enough to let her relax into the embrace, to meet his tongue with hers, to let her hands rise to meet his chest, pressing against him to check the surety of his hold even as she never wanted to be separated from him.

It was enough that she scarcely even noticed when he began maneuvering her, deftly steering past any obstacles. She walked backward, following the urging of that grip, of the guiding pressure of his body against hers.

She very much noticed, however, when the back of her knees hit the edge of the bed, when Benedict pushed her with just enough extra force that she topped back onto it, the soft mattress and plush duvet enveloping her in an instant. She couldn’t have even tried to push herself up before he was climbing atop the mattress as well, his legs on either side of hers, his weight lowering atop her.

He was a tall man, a strong man. He was heavy. Very heavy.

It was perfect.

The groan that escaped her was meant to have words, she was nearly sure of it. She just had no earthly idea what those words were supposed to have been.

When Benedict chuckled lowly against the side of her throat, she trembled.

“Oh, yes,” he murmured, his lips brushing against her skin. She wanted to pull him closer, heavier atop her, but her arms were pinned, and she made no effort to get them free. “Is this better, darling girl?”

“Yes,” she managed, very pleased with herself that she’d spoken in coherent English. “Benedict.”

His breath sharpened when she said his name. She liked that, too.

For all that she saw the signs that he was nearly as affected as she by this...curious type of embrace, his voice was silky and sinuous as he spoke, his lips seeking hers.

“Let’s try this again, shall we?”

And so they did.

It was easier like this, Emily noticed with a rush of relief that felt nearly euphoric. Her mind wasn’t urging her to notice a thousand different things. After all, there was nothing else she could notice.

There was the bed beneath her and Benedict above her. For these precious moments, they were her whole world. It was simple. Blissful.

And that wicked, greedy voice inside her hissed, More.

Benedict—who really might have been a mind-reader; she’d have to investigate this later—noticed this, too. Or maybe it wasn’t that subtle, she thought, when he pulled his mouth back from hers, and she realized that her hips had been canting up against his body, seeking...something.

She was, she had to say, well and truly bloody tired of this not knowing business.



He looked down on her, his dark, serious brows furrowed. She squirmed under the probing intensity of that gaze which felt good enough that she squirmed again. He didn't budge—except for his hand which came down firmly on her hip.

“Stop that,” he ordered sternly. Emily's body ignored him—though her mind would have done the same, were it still in control of the situation. He pressed more firmly. “Emily, stop, you'll ruin me?—”

She squirmed harder, and he sucked in a sharp inhale, his eyes closing briefly. When he opened them again, fire shone in his gaze.

“You,” he said lowly, “are very wicked.”

She shook her head. She really wasn't...at least, not usually. “No, I'm?—”

He silenced her with a kiss.

“No more tricks, wife,” he said, the words almost playful as he pulled back. The only thing that disrupted their lightness was the intensity in his face. “You've shown me well enough what you need, you perfect little thing.”

The praise silenced her protests even as it stoked the restless heat within her. He moved with slow, deliberate precision as he moved her arms so that they were no longer tucked beneath his weight but instead pinned beneath her own. It was an odd position but one that Emily found oddly reassuring. Even as he pulled his weight off her, movements languorous, she did not feel that gaping nothingness that had bothered her when they'd stood in the middle of the room.

Somehow, staying in the position he'd assigned her made her feel as though his hands were still upon her, even as he regained his feet, pausing a moment to loom over her, eyes searching the long stretch of her form.

“Beautiful,” he murmured, and she could barely breathe. Nobody had ever considered her, too tall, too prim Emily Rutley, beautiful.

“I—” she said. I’m not. It had been on the tip of her tongue, but she didn’t want to deny it.

And the look on her husband’s face suggested, in no uncertain terms, that she’d regret it if she did. And as much as she, as a general rule, liked to annoy him, the roiling want inside her told her that now was really not the time.

So, she swallowed her protests, pushed back any sense of propriety that threatened to reveal itself, and said the honest thing.

“Please, Benedict.”

It wasn’t clear in the slightest as far as requests went, but he—not that she’d ever admit it—was some sort of genius because he seemed to understand her perfectly.

His gaze didn’t leave hers as he bent just enough, so he could grasp a handful of her skirts, raising them slowly.

“Do you know what I think, Emily?” he asked, sly as the devil. “I think that you are a lie, wrapped up in a prim little package.”

She sucked in a breath. She didn’t even know what that meant, but goodness, it had to be criticism, didn’t it?

But his smirk suggested otherwise.

“Oh, yes,” he said, almost to himself. “You pretend to be oh so proper. A wallflower. Miss Rutley, who never causes a scandal.” Her skirts were past the edges of her

stockings now, the hem grazing against her thighs. The gentle rasp was loud as gunfire.

“But that’s just a mask, isn’t it?” he teased. His fingers were trailing up her skin now, too, the sensation obliterating the lingering feeling of her skirts. “Beneath all that, you are the most tempting woman in the world, and I am merely the only one lucky enough to see it.”

Lucky? Her mind caught on the word, uncomprehending. He couldn’t possibly look at everything between them and still call himself lucky, could he?

But he didn’t look like he was lying. He looked like he was...

Well, she might have said happy if he didn’t also look like he planned to devour her whole, a prospect she greeted with an entirely inappropriate sense of excitement. He pulled her skirts up those last inches, until all of her was bared to him and her frock puddled awkwardly around her waist.

Except even that sense of awkwardness was so fleeting that she scarcely noticed it. Because he was looking down at her like she was beautiful. Like he was lucky.

Just then, it felt like possibility and hope.

His eyes flicked up from where they’d been focused on her bare flesh—which should have mortified her but very much did not—to meet her gaze.

“Would you like me to give in to that temptation, Emily?” he asked, the curving twist of his smirk leaving her breathless.

“Benedict, yes.”

She wasn't certain what she was agreeing to, but she didn't care—Lord, how good it felt to not care, to know that she could be reckless, that she could just be.

Because he would be there, firm and steady as her weight upon her.

“Yes,” he echoed, his hands dropping to clasp her, right above her knees. He pried her legs further apart, his firm grip brooking no argument until the stretch was a glorious ache. He dropped to his knees before her, and if there was a moment where she ought to have been embarrassed, it truly was now when she was laid out before him for his leisurely perusal.

The feeling did not come. In fact, the only shift in the happy, hungry mood that tumbled inside her came when Benedict cursed soundly and pulled his hands from her so he could shuck off his jacket and chuck it carelessly across the room. She could see him just well enough to register the movement and was able to get out one breathless laugh before he grasped her again, spreading her legs just the tiniest bit wider, and pressed his mouth to her.

The laughter died in her throat as ever particle of her being focused his feeling of his mouth against her. His lips and, oh, God, his tongue. Her breaths came out in panicked gasps, so many in a row that she felt nearly lightheaded or maybe that was just the effect of that wicked, irritating, talented mouth on her too hot flesh.

“Oh my,” she heard herself say. “Oh my, oh my.”

She thought it was possible—maybe even likely—that Benedict was smiling. But she decided not to care about that, either. Not just then.

How could she care about whatever inane nonsense coming out of her own mouth when her husband released one of her legs, wedging his shoulder against her so that she couldn't close her legs even an iota, and trailed his fingers closer and closer to her

center? Closer and closer until he wasn't approaching, he was there and then inside, pressing against her in a place she hadn't ever imagined existed.

Still pinned beneath her body, her fingers clenched in the soft fabric of the duvet, squeezing so tightly that she would have worried about tearing the clearly expensive spread were she not so thoroughly distracted by other things.

Heat spiraled within her, winding her up like a spring, tighter and tighter even as, no matter how contradictory it seemed, lazy heat floated through her. And then he moved just right, touched her so perfectly. She ruptured, shattered, detonated. Her back arched, her whole body focused in on her pleasure, waves wracking through her until she was left as nothing more than an exhausted, wrung out puddle of bliss.

Oh, she thought. It was the best she could manage.

"That," she said, her voice sounding slurred like she'd overindulged in spirits. "Nice."

She felt sure that she'd missed some words in there, but it was hard to imagine what they should have been. Puddles, after all, were not known for their oratory skills.

And besides, the low chuckle that left her husband's mouth at her garbled nonsense made her feel warm and cozy inside.

So she just lay there, limp as a rag doll, as Benedict slipped off her shoes and unlaced the back of her gown and corset, already drifting off into sleep as he left her in chemise and stockings, a blanket draped carefully over her form.

It was no doubt, she knew, far too early to head to bed, but between the fuzziness of her mind and the heaviness of her limbs, she felt it impossible to worry about that overmuch. It had been, after all, a dreadfully long day, what with waking up as Miss

Emily Rutley and going to bed as Emily Hoskins, the deliciously debauched Countess of Moore.

Surely tomorrow was soon enough to become responsible again, she thought sleepily. And perhaps Benedict would help her. That would be nice.

The thought brought a smile to her face as she slipped into slumber, too far gone to realize that her husband was leaving the room and closing the door behind him with a decisive, ominous click.

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:38 am*

Benedict sat, scowl firmly in place, at his breakfast table, not even able to enjoy the peace of knowing his mother was living elsewhere and therefore unable to barge in and disturb his peace with her squawking.

It was hard to enjoy things, after all, when one had made such an absolute, hideous, shuddering mess of things the way he had the evening prior.

He'd been up half the night, chastising himself over it.

Or rather, most of it had been self-denigration. Other parts had been...other self-inflicted torment, brought about by the memories of the way his wife had gasped for him, the way she'd trembled as she'd unraveled, the way her eyes had gone soft and hooded as he'd gripped her by the hair...

He stopped that line of thinking before it went too far.

He was very glad about this in short order as it was only a moment or two later that his new wife entered the room, looking proper, pristine, and a far cry from the well-pleasured jumble he'd tucked into her bed the night before.

Not that he was thinking of that, of course. The conversation they needed to have was not one for which he wished to be aroused. Especially since his furious arousal had caused this bloody problem in the first place.

"Good morning," she said with a polite smile that held just enough brightness to make him cringe. There was hope in that smile. Expectation. Exactly the things he did not need to see from her.

His return smile was the barest twitch of the lips.

“Good morning, Emily. Please sit.” He nodded to the chair to his right.

Her expression flickered, just a bit, confusion taking momentary control of her face, and he swore inwardly. This was what happened when he was derelict in his duties, what happened when he let his passions—the word sounded fouler in his head than any of the epithets he’d just imagined—take control of his sense.

She sat with an easy elegance, and he admitted that, for all the nonsense that had led to their union and the uncomfortable conversation they were due to have, she would make a good countess.

“Is everything all right?” she asked, only polite concern in her tone. This was, he knew, complete shite. He could see through her all too easily now. She was trying to puzzle him out, and her confusion was quickly turning to worry.

“Of course,” he said tersely. Better to get this over with, after all. “I merely thought, now that we are officially wed that we might have a frank and honest discussion about the terms of our marriage.”

She blinked—just once. “The terms...?” she echoed. It was an opening, a generous one.

He wanted to go back in time to the day prior and kick his own arse for not having this conversation before he’d dragged her to bed. He’d meant to. It had been, in fact, very high on his list of priorities. But then his mother had, as usual, caused a disturbance, and then Emily had disappeared, and when he’d found her again, it just happened to be adjacent to their bedchambers.

He was only a man, after all. How could he resist, especially when she’d given him



those wide, innocent looks, when she'd tried to show him that missish façade that covered up a vixen...

He cleared his throat. He was meant to be speaking, not...remembering.

"Indeed," he said crisply. "I have always found that clear rules?—"

"Rules?" she interjected, apparently startled out of her propriety.

"—expectations," he amended seamlessly with a nod. "I have always found that clear expectations at the outset of an endeavor help matters go more smoothly for everyone involved."

She didn't respond right away, instead taking a long moment to gaze at him with wary, assessing eyes.

"Very well," she said eventually.

"Wonderful," he said dispassionately. Calm and collected. That was how he would get through this without anything so distasteful as feminine tears. Emily's tears, in particular, sounded abhorrent to him.

"First," he said, careful to keep his tone level, "no affairs."

"What?" she yelped. This time she wasn't just surprised—she was offended if the bright spots of color that leapt to her cheeks were any indication. "I beg your?—"

"This goes for both of us," he interjected. "It's not hypocrisy. I will remain faithful, but I demand the same from you as well." When she gaped furiously at him, he arched an eyebrow. "Do you have an objection to this?"

She scowled at him and some deep, wretched part of him adored it.

“I do not,” she said primly. “I merely think you’re being redundant; this was covered in the vows yesterday. Perhaps you should learn to pay better attention.”

He grinned a sharp, vicious grin but stopped himself before he could get lured into sparring with her. That was the kind of thing that led him to pin her down on her bed, arms trapped behind her back while he touched her until she exploded for him.

Which was antithetical to his purpose here today. A purpose he cared about. A purpose he needed to see fulfilled.

“I prefer clarity to brevity,” he said simply instead, refusing to take the bait. “Next, we shall always present a united front when in public.”

She looked very distinctly annoyed, but she nodded. “Fine.”

“No matter what is happening between us at home,” he warned.

Her eyes narrowed, and he had the impression that now she was the one holding back from sparring with him.

“Fine,” she repeated through clenched teeth.

He breathed in and out through his nose. This was going—well, it wasn’t precisely going swimmingly, but it was fine as Emily had said. Or, at least, close enough to fine. But this last part was the most important—and he feared, the one she’d find hardest to swallow, given what he knew about women.

“And no love,” he concluded firmly.

She didn't even bother to protest that time, merely stared at him in openmouthed shock.

Benedict was not about to lose that advantage, no matter how cowardly it seemed.

"Excellent," he said, preparing to stand. "That is all. I'm glad we understand one ano?—"

"What are you talking about?" she demanded, her voice shaking with a low, dangerous anger. He looked at her, and for a moment, he thought her eyes spoke of pain, but it was quickly replaced by a clear, pure rage.

He fought to not match her fire with his own. It never helped, he'd long since learned, to get emotional with an overemotional woman. His mother had shown him that again and again and again.

"I'm sure this is not a surprise," he said coolly. "You and I both know perfectly well how we ended up at that altar. This is a marriage of convenience. You got to save your reputation, and I got a countess. Convenient. Feelings are not convenient."

She'd returned to gaping at him, and again, he pressed the advantage.

"I must reiterate, Emily, I am not a hypocrite. I know there are men who would demand adoration from their wives while having no intention of returning that feeling in kind. That is not what I mean. Do not ask for love—and do not feel it, either. That will keep matters simple between us."

There. That was reasonable, wasn't it? After all, he wasn't asking for anything he wasn't prepared to offer in return. It was positively liberal-minded, frankly.

From the way his wife shot to her feet, scarcely seeming to notice as the chair almost

toppled behind her, she did not agree with his assessment.

“I—” she began before cutting herself off with a sharp shake of her head. Her curls looked even wilder than usual, as if they were responding directly to her heightened emotions. The vibrant flush on her cheeks was annoyingly fetching.

When she spoke again, her tone was cold as ice.

“I should not be surprised at this—stunt.” She practically spat the word, made it feel like the vilest epithet. “I really shouldn’t. After all, you’ve shown yourself more than capable of surpassing my wildest imaginings of appalling behavior. But truly, this does outdo your previous efforts, Benedict.”

Hearing her say his name like that, full of spite, felt like a slap after only ever hearing it moaned in pleasure. It struck him violently, knocking loose his last grasps of composure. He, too, rose to his feet.

“Don’t be a child, Emily,” he scolded, voice dripping disdain. “You can feign surprise, but it’s nothing more than a game; you cannot fool me in that regard. I’ve seen how easily you wear a mask.”

There it was again, that flicker of hurt in her expression. He felt his own matching flicker of regret, but her sharp words brushed away both his reaction and hers.

“A child,” she repeated, humorless laugh grating. “That’s what you see me as, isn’t it?”

It really, really was not, but Benedict was trying not to think about all the ways he knew—intimately—that she was a woman, fully grown, and as tempting a one as he’d ever known.

“Because you meant it the way you said it first, I gather,” she went on, staring defiantly up at him. “These are rules, rules you intend to lay down like I am some—some misbehaving schoolgirl who needs to be shown the error of her ways. Well. Allow me to explain some of my personal rules to you.”

She stepped into his space, the movement a clear challenge. She still had to crane her neck to look up at him, but her height meant that she didn’t need to do it with quite the acuity that another woman would have required.

“You are—and trust me when I tell you I get no pleasure from admitting it,” she continued, “right about some things. You will have my fidelity. And I do not intend to do anything to sabotage this marriage—or my sisters’ prospects for marriage—by making our private disagreements public. We will, as you say, present a unified face to the world.”

Her words were conciliatory, but every single other thing about her made it more than clear that he was not going to like what she had to say next.

“But if you think—if you even presume to suspect—that you can tell me how I am or am not allowed to feel?” Her face melted into a sneer. “Well. I daresay, My Lord, that you are setting yourself up for a lifetime of disappointment. Don’t say I did not warn you.”

She was breathing heavily as though chiding him had taken a great deal of physical strength. It made her bosom heave over the neckline of her perfectly appropriate day dress—and damn him to hell for noticing it. His reluctant attention to her physical form sparked his irritation all the higher.

“I don’t know why you’re arguing with me, Emily,” he snapped back at her. “Are you being stubborn just for the sake of being stubborn? Because if there is any other reason, pray, enlighten me—for I cannot see it. You know what I sought in a bride;

you went into this with your eyes open. Do not now turn around and pretend like a blindfold has come off. It's ridiculous and unbecoming."

"Ridiculous and unbecoming," she scoffed. "Well, that's me told, isn't it? After a lifetime of being called a wallflower, a spinster, a nag, a giantess, a poor motherless dove—" Her gazes grew as incisive as a knife. "—a secret temptress hiding behind a polite façade, well, yes, Benedict. After being called all those things, I am simply distraught at being thought ridiculous and unbecoming."

Benedict felt strangely caught between emotions. On one hand, he wanted to shake her. She was being ridiculous. It was unbecoming—at least, mostly. But he also wanted to slap himself for turning those comments about her tempting nature, which he'd made while his tongue was turned honest by lust, into weapons to be used against her.

And he wanted to do more than slap anyone else who had thrown careless cruelty in her direction.

This was about two and a half more feelings than he was comfortable experiencing at one time, so he tamped them down and gritted his teeth.

"Don't be melodramatic," he told her.

"Melodramatic!" she exclaimed, throwing up her hands melodramatically. She really did have a tendency to do that, he noted—to repeat his words and gesture outrageously—when annoyed. In this case, however, she was standing close enough that he was lucky he didn't lose an eye.

She stalked a few steps away from him as she continued to gesticulate (fortunate, that, for the state of his face) expostulating on his apparent absurdity to the empty breakfast room.

“I’m melodramatic?” she asked his untouched plate of eggs and kippers. “And this, coming from a man who solemnly sat me down to breakfast to announce what feelings I am and am not allowed to experience?”

She whirled on him again, the heat of her anger scorching. This was, he supposed, marginally preferable to her shouting at breakfast foods.

“Do you really not see how this is insane?” she demanded. “Or are you so wrapped up in self-importance that you truly, honestly believe yourself able to dictate the emotions of those around you?”

He took a step forward this time—because, damn it, he wasn’t going to be perpetually retreating, not in his own house with his own blasted wife—bringing him within arm’s reach of her.

“Do not insult me, Emily,” he warned. “I won’t stand for it.”

“Why not?” she returned. “I thought you were not a hypocrite. And you have insulted me most dreadfully.”

Again, there was that flicker, the one that looked like pain. She ducked her head—he didn’t like it—and turned as if she was going to brush past him. He liked that even less. He reached out and grabbed her arm, staying her movement. She froze, even though his grip wasn’t very tight at all, and looked back up at him.

He was, he realized, frankly horrified by it, going to kiss her.

This was obviously a very bad idea. Excessive kissing—and things beyond kissing—was what had gotten them into this situation in the first place. If he hadn’t kissed her the first time, they’d not be married at all. (Benedict resolutely ignored the part of him that wondered if that was actually as preferable an outcome as he

thought.) If he hadn't kissed her the second time, the first incident could have been disregarded as an outlier.

And if he'd kept his damned hands to himself the night prior, he wouldn't have generated any expectations. They could have calmly discussed their plans for their marriage then could have enjoyed a peaceful, appropriate marriage night, without any of the...additional nonsense that had left him tossing and turning all night long.

Kissing Emily had a proven record of mucking things up for Benedict. Well established. No evidence to the contrary.

He was going to do it anyway.

His hands were already reaching for her, his traitorous mind already wondering if she'd like behind grasped by her sweet, round arse as much as she'd liked being gripped by her hair. He could practically already feel the way she melted against him, soft and eager—and wasn't that so much nicer, for both of them, really, than this shouting and squabbling?

Maybe kissing her was a good idea after all.

In the end, however, the choice was taken from his hands—and not by anything Emily did. Frankly, she was no help at all, given that she was already sort of starting to softly sag into the grip on her arm which wasn't even tight enough to hold her up and was probably a good sign that he should grip her tighter.

But he didn't even get to decide to do that, either, because a soft, timid knock came from the doorway to the breakfast room. Benedict and Emily both swiveled their heads to look at a very unhappy maid.

“Begging your pardon, My Lord, My Lady,” she said in a tone that suggested a



lightning strike would not be unwelcome. “But there’s been a message for Her Ladyship.”

Benedict blinked. Of all the things?—

“Marked urgent,” the maid continued. Oh, very well. “From the Duchess of Hawkins?—”

Emily tore free from his grasp, crossing to the maid in an instant. The young woman handed the note over with a distinct air of relief and left in a manner that said she was fleeing but trying very hard not to seem like she was fleeing.

Emily’s eyes flickered over the note, quick and keen, and then she gasped.

“Diana’s having her baby!” she exclaimed, this news sufficient to replace the previous anger in her eyes with excitement. “I have to go at once.”

He took a lurching step toward her.

“Emily, we have to—” He didn’t even know what he was going to say. Keep talking? Kiss until she melted beneath him? He’d prefer the latter option, obviously, but he could make do with a return to the former, so long as the kissing came after.

But she gave him a faintly harried look; her mind was already clearly elsewhere. Despite all this morning’s evidence to the contrary, Benedict was not a stupid man. He knew when to retreat.

“Go,” he said, resigned. “Give my felicitations to Their Graces.”

He wondered if he was deluding himself when he thought that look in her eyes was gratitude. It was too quick to tell, certainly, for he’d scarcely finished speaking when

Emily was gone.

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:38 am*

Emily would have never thought to call Diana's husband Andrew a nervous man. If anything, her main objection to him would have been that he was a bit too certain of himself. It didn't bother her overmuch, aside from the slight difficulty it provided to getting to know him, but it made poor Frances downright twitchy.

When Emily reached Diana and Andrew's home, however, panting like she'd dashed across Mayfair on foot instead of sensibly taking a carriage, she did not find the usual poised, steady Andrew Young.

Instead, the man she saw before her looked so sick with anxiety that it stopped Emily from dashing directly up to Diana's bedchamber.

"Andrew?" she asked. She'd never before referred to the Duke of Hawkins by his Christian name, but she'd also never before seen him so clearly in need of comfort over proper address. "Are you all right?"

The man stopped his pacing at her words, looking at her as though he'd been too lost in his thoughts to notice her entry.

"Emily," he said on a huff of a sigh, apparently also realizing that now was not the time for formality. "I'm sorry, I didn't see you—no, I'm afraid I am not all right at all." He let out a humorless laugh. "She's been at it since before dawn, you see. Wouldn't let me send for you or Frances until it was a decent hour."

Andrew, for all his typical sternness, consistently looked at Diana like she was the sun itself. As such, he did not brook any criticism against his beloved wife. Despite this, Emily felt that an eyeroll was, at this moment, appropriate.

She knew she'd judged this correctly when Andrew's mouth quirked up into a weary, pained smile.

"Quite," he agreed. "She made no protest about calling the midwife, at least, which is how I knew she was..." he trailed off, then cleared his throat. Emily was not quite brave enough to reach out and squeeze the formidable Duke's hand though she suspected he could have used that as well.

"I just don't want her to be frightened," he said thickly after a long pause. "And she cannot—she cannot die, Emily."

Emily found that she had to swallow hard against the lump in her own throat at those words.

"She's not going to die," she said fiercely when she was certain her voice wouldn't betray her. She promised it, as if speaking it would make it so, when she knew that wasn't true—when she knew that women died during childbirth, when her own mother had died in childbed.

Andrew nodded, clearly desperate to agree with her though the terrified, wan look to his expression did not alter.

Any further interruption was cut off from a sharp, pained cry from upstairs, not quite a scream but clearly lined with distress. Emily watched as Andrew, a man who had essentially shrugged off a bullet wound like it was an inconvenience, physically flinched away from the sound.

The sound was short, but its effect was lasting. When Diana fell silent again, Andrew looked even more haunted.

Emily longed to be with her friend, but she hated to leave him alone like this.

“Do you have anyone you could send for?” she asked delicately. “So you’re not by yourself? Childbirth can be long...” She winced. She didn’t want to remind him of the likely many hours to come when he’d be forced to bear witness to Diana’s pain.

“I’ll be fine,” he said dismissively. This time, Emily stifled her eye roll. That, at least, was the man she was accustomed to.

“Very well,” she said. “If you change your mind, however?—”

She cut herself off. She’d been about to recommend, of all the things in the world, that he call for Benedict. This was obviously ridiculous, given that he likely wouldn’t even come, given their enormous row and would only provide, what, irritable scowls? Not to mention that if Benedict did choose to speak, his stance on emotional attachment in marriage might cause Andrew, today of all days, to haul off and beat Benedict senseless.

Which wasn’t something she wanted to actually happen, even if it was slightly satisfying to imagine, given that he’d been such an utter louse this morning.

“If you change your mind,” she amended, “come and fetch me for a bit. I’ll sit with you. I know you love Diana,” she added when he opened his mouth, obviously intending to argue, “but she loves you, too, and wouldn’t want you to be in distress.”

He closed his mouth and narrowed his eyes, as if accusing her of trapping him—which, of course, she had.

“Fine,” he said. She knew he wouldn’t come knocking, but there wasn’t much else she could do about it. If she knew how to knock hardheaded men out of their stubborn idiocy, she’d be the most popular woman alive and would help with far more than just this day’s events.

Besides, she was nearly desperate to see Diana. She wasn't going to waste any more time convincing a duke he might need—horror of horrors—the comfort of friendship. Not when she wanted to offer the comfort of friendship to his duchess, posthaste.

“Good,” she said, then rushed up the stairs, flying for the Duchess’ chambers.

An invitation to enter quickly followed her knock at the door. When Emily poked her head into the room, she was pleased to find Diana looking sweaty and uncomfortable but otherwise hale, smiling a bit tiredly at her from where she sat propped against innumerable pillows. Frances sat at her side, holding one of her hands, looking determined but overall calm.

The only truly placid person in the room was a middle-aged midwife, who sat in a corner chair, dressed in a sensible cap and dress, humming quietly to herself while she sipped a cup of tea.

“Good morning,” she greeted pleasantly as Emily entered.

“Good morning,” Emily replied, manners making the reciprocity automatic. She turned to where her friends were sitting together on the bed. “Diana, darling, how are you?”

“Oh,” Diana said, her voice a little strained even as her typical biting wit made itself known. “Grand, thanks for asking. I’m going to do this every day from now on. Or, if I’m too busy, perhaps I shall get a horse to stomp on my stomach. It would feel about the same, I gather.”

Frances clucked sympathetically and smoothed Diana’s blonde braid.

“You are doing quite grand, actually,” the midwife offered in a broad country accent. “Coming along nicely, particularly for a first-time mother. You should be right

pleased with yourself.”

Diana shot the woman a quick smile before offering Emily a grimace. “You do not want to know how she knows I’m ‘coming along nicely,’ I assure you. There is no modesty in childbirth, I’m quickly learning.” She tipped her head at the midwife. “Or manners, apparently. Emily, this is Mrs. Gilchrist. She’s apparently delivered—what was it, Mrs. Gilchrist? Seventy-two babies?”

“Seventy-four,” the woman said, beaming proudly. “Yours’ll be seventy-five, Your Grace. And I never lost one of ‘em and don’t plan to break that streak now.”

Emily had to restrain herself from asking if any of the mothers had been lost. It would do neither her nor Diana any good to know.

“Brilliant,” Diana agreed. “And this is my friend Miss Emily—oh wait, no! Lady Emily Hoskins! Emily, you’ve married! And I missed it!”

Her face crumpled, and a few tears leaked out. Emily worried this meant Diana was in the grip of pain again, but when no cries followed the tears, she realized that it was, instead, the curious, mercurial grip that had held Diana’s emotions throughout her pregnancy that inspired this weeping.

“I did,” Emily said, moving to sit on the side of Diana’s bed across from Frances. “And if you even think about apologizing, I shall be very cross with you indeed. And I should so hate to be cross with you on this marvelous day.”

“It might be a marvelous tomorrow,” Diana warned, sounding as if she was reminding herself, too. “Apparently first children like to take their dear, sweet time coming into the world.”

Emily refused to let her face give any indication that she knew all too well that a long

birth meant greater danger for the mother. She channeled that energy, instead, on praying that today was, in fact, a day of joy and joy alone.

In the end, she was right on some counts and wrong on others.

For one, they did not travel into the next day though the sun had long since dipped from the sky by the time Diana's ordeal ended. For another, though it was a day of joy, it was also a day of long, arduous work before that.

The intensity rose gradually as morning slipped into afternoon. Diana's pains gradually became closer and closer together, increasing in duration with each passing hour. Poor Diana, in turn, grew more and more exhausted, the sweat slicking her brow as she was wracked, again and again, by her labor pains. Her ability to converse between waves disappeared, replaced by pleas for Emily or Frances to talk to her, to offer her anything to distract from the seemingly unending ordeal. The two friends nattered on about anything that would divert Diana without causing her any sort of distress—which meant Emily stayed far afield of the state of her new marriage.

When Emily allowed, after several hours, that Andrew really was not going to give in and seek support, she took it upon herself to leave every so often and give him updates, even if they were no more helpful than the midwife's unconcerned assertions that all was going as it should.

"I should have made her have a physician," Andrew lamented when Emily first visited him. He looked as though he wished to be sick. "Shouldn't I have made her have a physician? Not just a midwife? Do you think it's too late?"

"Mrs. Gilchrist is doing a marvelous job," Emily assured him, which had the added benefit of being true. Every time Emily felt her own anxiety rise above what she felt capable of concealing from her friend, she would steal a glance at the unworried expression of the calmly competent midwife, who attended to Diana's every need as



if this was merely a day like any other—which, Emily supposed, was accurate for a woman in Mrs. Gilchrist's profession.

Emily felt soothed by the woman's unflappable calm every time though Diana had been correct—Emily had not liked learning how, precisely, Mrs. Gilchrist confirmed that Diana was “progressing.” Frances had looked like she was going to faint.

But they all held on—Emily, despite her fear and the flickering memories of her mother, and Andrew, despite his aching heart. And Diana, most of all. She held on, fought until she was too exhausted to speak, until her pains seemed to roll one right into the other, until Mrs. Gilchrist was urging her to push, push, Your Grace, yes, you're doing it, let's greet your child, shall we?

And eventually, they did. At twenty-four minutes after ten o'clock in the evening, Grace Victoria Young came into the world, red faced and squalling and as perfect a babe as Emily had ever laid eyes on. She could barely tear herself away from the sight of beatific mother holding her bloody, screaming child as if she'd never seen such a beautiful sight.

But she needed to fetch Andrew. She went down to his study, where she found him, sitting with his head clutched in his hands. This, Emily knew all too well, was a frightening moment for fathers when their wives' cries had ceased, indicating that their pain had ended—though whether by a successful birth or by death, they could not yet know.

He looked up at Emily, face lined with tension. She smiled at him.

“Diana's asking for you, Andrew,” she said, watching the anguish melt into relief and happiness. “She wants you to come meet your daughter.”

And then she politely looked away while the Duke of Hawkins hastily wiped at an

errant tear or two.

Emily and Frances had once, in the early days of Diana's marriage, accidentally walked in upon what had obviously been some sort of precursor to marital relations. It was an incident forever carved into Emily's mind, shockingly embarrassing in its intrusiveness, and yet that moment had felt nowhere near as intimate as watching Andrew gaze down upon his newborn babe, clutched tight at her mother's breast, awe evident in his eyes.

"Beautiful," he murmured into Diana's hair, a shocked laugh coming from him. "Both of you. Perfect. Amazing."

This was, Emily felt, her cue to leave. Catching Frances' eye, she inclined her head towards the door. Frances nodded, and the two began to unobtrusively prepare to leave.

"Wait!" Diana stopped them before they could make themselves entirely scarce. Emily and Frances both paused to look at their friend, who looked exhausted, overwhelmed, and as happy as they'd ever seen her.

"Thank you both," she said, tone thick with sincerity. "Thank you for being here with me today. I don't know that I could have done it without you both."

Emily smiled softly. "You could have—but you'll never need to."

"You know we'll always come when you need us," Frances added.

Diana's smile sharpened. Tired or not, new mother or no, Diana was always Diana.

"Maybe next time I'll get to return the favor," she said slyly. "After all, Em, you are married off now. And baby Grace is going to need a playmate, aren't you my little

darling?”

Fortunately, the lure of baby Grace was strong enough that Diana’s eyes had returned to her daughter before she could see how Emily winced at this comment. She could not hope to assume that Frances had also missed this reaction, so Emily ushered her friend from the room and then the house, hurrying them both off to their respective carriages before Frances could ask any too clever questions.

There was, alas, only one problem with Emily’s efficiency; when she reached the calm and quiet of her own carriage, the peace feeling almost oppressive after the long, noisy, tense day, she was left with nothing to do but consider her own questions about her marriage.

Trite as it felt to admit—after all, she had merely been a witness, not a participant in today’s momentous event—Emily had been changed by what she’d seen today. Not just the arrival of baby Grace into the world though that had been earthshattering in its own way.

No, what had shaken Emily had been the sight of the family together, all three of them, huddled together in a bubble of love that seemed impenetrable from the pains of the outside world. Emily, however, had no such armor, and the realization that she was unlikely to ever have such a moment, unlikely to ever have a husband come to her with adoration in his gaze after she’d delivered them a child—well, it pierced her like a knife.

Things could not stand, not as they were. After all, was Benedict’s ‘no love’ edict supposed to extend to any children they might have? Because Emily knew all too well what life looked like with an uncaring father. She would not subject any child of hers to such a fate, not while she had fight in her to prevent it.

No, she needed to have some very strong words with her husband before things went

any further, she resolved as the carriage clattered through Mayfair, various revelers happily conversing in the streets as they entered and exited this ball or that fete. She could not live in this state of uncertainty any longer. She needed to know.

For good or for ill.

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*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:38 am*

Benedict could recognize that waiting up for his wife to return home was both impractical (giving birth was a protracted affair, was it not? He didn't know, he was a man, and that was women's business) and likely did not send the message he'd been trying to send to his wife in their conversation that morning.

Every time he tried to rouse himself from the library and put himself to bed, however, he found that he failed. He found an excuse to stay where he was, citing the book he hadn't processed a single word of or the correspondence he hadn't so much as opened.

He had plenty of things to do that weren't just sitting around waiting.

And he was doing them. He was.

In fact, he was highly annoyed at the interruption (and not relieved or happy, not a bit) when his wife's form passed by the open library door, her posture suggesting exhaustion. She brushed past the door before he could say anything, and then, before he could make up his mind to go after her (which he did not plan to do), she retreated into the doorway.

"There you are," she said, like she'd been looking for him and not gallivanting off to her friend's bedside.

Benedict reconsidered. Very well, that one had sounded unfair even in his head.

"Here I am," he agreed evenly.

He watched as she crossed to the low settee across from him, the one that he never used because it was too short for a man of his height, and dropped into it with none of her usual grace. He declined to comment. He didn't know what went on in birthing rooms—and, again, did not ever want to know, not beyond the broad sketch of things—but apparently it was as exhausting for the witnesses as for the mother.

“Is Her Grace well?” he asked when Emily blinked at the fire for a few long moments. “And the babe?”

She turned to look at him with a faint air of surprise, like she'd forgotten he was even there. Flattering, that.

“Oh, yes,” she said with a distracted air. “Both. And the baby—she had a daughter. They've named her Grace.” Her tone was already unmistakably fond.

Benedict's lips threatened to twitch in a frown. Not an heir, then. Though, judging by the way Hawkins looked at his wife, he'd not mind that overmuch and would likely look forward to trying for another.

Emily clearly saw his hastily suppressed reaction, for her absent air vanished, replaced by narrowed eyes. Her gaze flickered over his face for a moment, seeking something. Whatever it was, however, she apparently did not find it as she leaned back more heavily against her cushions, a defeated sigh leaving her lips.

He did not care for that, he found.

“What's wrong?” he demanded, more aggression than concern.

Emily squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, like she was trying to block out the world.

“What are we doing wrong?” she asked on a sigh, her tone so, so tired.

“What?” he asked, baffled by this turn. She opened her eyes, her expression as exhausted as her voice had been, and spread her hands in a gesture of helplessness.

“I mean, really. Benedict. What do we plan to do here? We cannot mean to go on as we have been; it’s been less than two days, we’ve spend most of them apart, and we’ve already had a massive quarrel that likely terrified the staff. If we keep it up, one of us will have an apoplexy before the year is out.”

He should, he thought wryly, be glad she seemed to think that that was an unfavorable outcome. Marriage to him at least ranked higher than death.

“I don’t want to fight,” he said. It was the truest thing he could contribute.

It seemed, if Emily’s sagging shoulders were any indication, still not sufficient.

“Me neither,” she said. “At least that’s something we can agree upon. It’s as good a start as any.” A smile flickered across her face at the weak joke, and Benedict mirrored the expression. She sighed again and looked away before continuing, “If it’s truly a marriage of convenience you seek, I suppose I will see fit to provide it. After all, I should not want to ask for more than you are willing to give.”

Benedict thought there was some deeper meaning lingering beneath those words, but he couldn’t quite figure it out.

“But,” she went on, no doubt saving him from saying the wrong thing yet again, “you must at least offer me the benefit of the doubt, Benedict. Not every concession can come from my side.”

He frowned. “I can do that,” he said. That was obvious.

From the way Emily frowned back at him, she did not think it was obvious at all.

“Can you?” she asked. “Because... well, I’m not sure how else to say it, Benedict, but you really seem to not like women at all.”

He reared back like she’d lunged at him. “What on earth are you talking about? I like women just fine.”

Their activities the night prior hadn’t been advisable, but it should have at least proven that much.

“Not that way,” she said, rolling her eyes, evidently detecting the less than innocent cant of his thoughts. “I meant more that you seem to not hold women in very high regard. You know, as people.”

“I—” He wanted to argue, but they had just agreed that they would try not to fight. And Emily didn’t look combative right now; that would have honestly been preferable. She just looked...sad.

“I respect women,” he said carefully. “I know my, ah, indecorous behavior leading to our betrothal was not perhaps the most indicative of this. But you cannot think, Emily, that I would ever shame you by carrying on thusly with another woman. I already said that I do not intend to pursue any affairs outside of our union, and I meant it.”

She looked disappointed in him. Benedict felt that sting more than he ought.

“That’s not it, either,” she said. “I mean, can you not really hear it? You’re discussing gentlemanly behavior, and while I do appreciate that you don’t intend to bed other women, nothing you’ve said suggests you see women as thinking, feeling creatures.” He opened his mouth to protest, but she barreled on before he could. She sounded



more annoyed than resigned now, which he preferred. “You spoke thusly when you talked about seeking a bride as well. You wanted a wife to be like a statue—there but silent. And honestly, I am not sure you are wholly to blame. You don’t have any sisters; your closest friend is not married. And your mother strikes me as a bit...”

She paused, wrinkling her nose as if trying to gather what was the most tactful way to put this.

“Strident,” she said eventually which impressed him both with its generosity and with its bite. “And I know she has been, er, prolific in the Society pages.” Again, this was a masterclass of being both cutting and diplomatic. If Emily had been a tad more heartless, she’d have made a killing as a Society columnist herself.

“Well put,” he commended when she paused, looking at him as if to check to see if she’d crossed a line.

“Right,” she said. “Well, what I mean to say is, I can see where you might get the impression that we are all of a type. And I do not think your impression of that type is a positive one. But—” She spread her hands, showing the whole of herself which he looked at only cautiously, so as not to get caught up in the other way in which he definitely did appreciate women. “—I am my own person, Benedict. We are all of us our own people. And I need you—if this is to work between us, I need you to accept that. I need you to not ask me to pay for others’ sins. I cannot do it. I will not.”

She finished her statement with confidence, pinning him with a look that was not quite defiant. Something in that look arrested him. He’d seen her in her proper, obedient guise; he’d seen her argumentative and heated. He’d seen her, even, melted with passion.

But this was different. This was steady and sure but cool and calm. This was, he thought with a wild, almost giddy sense, the negotiation he should have had before

they wed. Forget marriage contracts; this was what mattered.

Despite how acutely he knew this was important, however, his mind roiled over responses he did not know how to articulate. He did not know how to say that he did not want to believe her right, but thought she might be, anyway. He could not tell her all the frustration, exhaustion, and yes, often hatred that his mother inspired in him, nor could he speak of this unformed, insistent yearning that she just be better. He could not promise her anything, and he could not remind her that love was beyond his reach—could not caution her against trying to make him love her, both for his sake and her own.

He didn't know how to make the words work, so he stood, crossed the space between them, sat at her side, and took her hand in his.

"I will try my very best," he said, the words feeling like a sacrament. "I don't know—" He couldn't explain all that either, so he just repeated himself. "I will try my very best."

And finally—finally—it seemed like he'd said something right. Because Emily smiled at him, and that smile was like the first bloom of spring.

"Thank you," she said, squeezing his fingers. "That's all I ask."

Looking at her was too hard, so he looked down at their intertwined hands. She had, he noted absently, charmingly short fingers, a surprise on a woman who was otherwise so conveniently tall. She'd never be a master of the pianoforte, his Emily. He could not find it in him to consider this a criticism.

He flipped their hands, so her palm was facing upwards, then loosened his grip just enough, so he could press his thumb into her palm. He pressed more firmly when he got to the muscle at the base of her thumb. She made the tiniest noise of appreciation.

Small though the sound was, it made his eyes fly up to her face. She'd leaned her head lazily against the back of the settee, and her eyes were tired, half closed.

He could have borne all that. He really could, no matter how tempting a picture she painted.

But when the side of her mouth tipped up, offering a soft, casual smile, as if she'd gifted him the same expression a thousand times before, his restraint snapped. He'd spent far too long hungering for this woman before him without any relief. He could take it no longer.

He turned his hand slowly, deliberately, until he could reach and wrap his fingers around her wrist. He tightened his grip in an unmistakable message.

When he looked back to her face, her expression was hazy...but no longer from exhaustion.

Yes, he thought. She was so bloody perfect.

He let a note of slyness creep into his tone. "Tell me, wife," he said, tugging her grasped arm towards him slowly as he spoke. "Do you wish to go to sleep?"

He'd chosen his words carefully, but Emily, sharp as a blade, noticed. Of course, she did.

"No," she said, just as slow and deliberate as he. "But I do think that I'd like to go to bed."

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:38 am*

Fortune favored the bold, indeed, Emily thought giddily as her husband practically dragged her down the hall to her bedchamber. All her earlier tiredness had fled as had the anxiety she'd felt over the lingering argument with her husband. Benedict hadn't promised her anything, not really, but in a way, that felt even more comforting than any grandiose vows of perfection might have done.

He said he would try. And somehow, she believed him.

And when the practiced voice of prudence warned that she might be convinced more out of lust than logic, she hushed it. She'd been cautious and careful for far too long. She was tired of it.

Maybe she would never have love. That was fine—she'd never had it before except for the begrudging love her sisters offered, tempered as it was by their continual frustration with her. And her friends loved her, but that was different. And besides—they always would.

So yes, maybe she had to resign herself to a future where the tender scene she'd witnessed in Diana's rooms was never echoed in her own home.

But just because she couldn't have love didn't mean she couldn't have fun.

And judging from the night prior (not to mention the highly indelicate things that Diana had let slip over the course of her marriage), what waited ahead of her would be great fun, indeed.

Even surly Benedict seemed to be enjoying himself if the sly smile she glimpsed

before he pressed her against the inside of her bedchamber door and pressed his mouth to hers was any indication. He leaned his full weight against her, and she let the syrupy feeling—now becoming familiar and honestly addictive—overtake her as he crushed her against the unyielding wood.

They kissed and kissed, a hint of bourbon on his tongue, until he (far too soon in Emily's opinion) pulled back.

"Why!" she demanded, not even caring that she sounded terribly spoiled and petulant.

Benedict apparently did not care either. He grinned.

"I want to try something," he said, the words eager and almost playful for all that they were lit with wicked promise. "Do you trust me?"

What a question! Emily knew it had to be some sort of lust-induced lunacy, but she found herself grinning back at him.

"Yes," she whispered and was rewarded with another deep, probing kiss that, again, ended far too quickly.

The truly mad thing was that she did trust him. Perhaps not with her heart—he'd made it plenty clear, after all, that he had no wish to be trusted with anything so fragile as that. But no matter that they constantly snapped and swiped at one another, like angry cats posturing for the show of the thing, she had never yet been disappointed with his handling of her body.

So, whatever clearly devilish thing he wished to try?

Yes, she trusted him.

“Come,” he ordered, herding her across the room, seemingly unable to remove his hands from her. It took ages longer than it ought to have to cross from her doorway, though the small antechamber, and to her bed itself, their progress interrupted by Benedict’s wandering hands and his playful nips at her neck and shoulders where they were exposed by the neckline of her practical day gown.

“Have I ever mentioned,” he asked as he pressed hot, open-mouthed kisses to the curve of her neck, “how much I adore that you’re tall? Which of your ancestors gave you your height? I’m going to lay flowers on their grave every day of my life.”

She let out a startled laugh, half at his exaggeration, half at the absurdity of his compliment.

“You do not,” she scolded, the effect somewhat ruined by the way her words were slurred with pleasure. “I’m a giantess. Nobody likes their women this tall.”

He stopped his kissing. Rude, that.

She, in a picture of benevolence, decided to forgive him when he snaked one hand down to her belly. He pressed hard against her lower stomach, forcing her back to come more firmly in contact with his body.

With one certain part of his body in particular. One certain part that was unusually pronounced, not that Emily was any great expert.

“Tell me again how I don’t like it,” he growled against her ear, grinding himself against the soft flesh of her derriere. Emily struggled against a moan.

But she told him again anyway because she was obedient and helpful like that...and because she liked how he made his arguments to her very much, indeed.

“You don’t,” she insisted breathlessly. “I’m very, very tall.”

His hands flew to her shoulders, whirling her. In an instant, she was held tightly against him again, only now this time it was her front that was pressed against that prominent part of him. This, she found, was even more to her liking.

He inclined his head slightly, his forehead pressing against hers.

“No,” he corrected, voice vicious in a way that made Emily shiver down to her bones. “I am very, very tall. You are pleasantly tall. I can say this with authority due to my superior tallness. And do you know what’s the most pleasant about how pleasantly tall you are?”

The word tall was starting to sound like nonsense, but Emily muddled through to find the question anyway which was no mean feat, given the blazing lust in her mind.

“No,” she said hoarsely. “What?”

“It’s that I can do this—” He kissed her swiftly, thoroughly, brutally, leaving her breathless. “—without bending at the waist. I am not a young man, darling. Have some pity for my poor back.”

Every time this playful side of him appeared, it set her reeling. She wondered if this was because it mainly occurred when he set her reeling with other affronts to her senses.

“Yes,” she agreed, falling short of insouciance. “You’re ancient. Six and twenty. We’d best arrange for pallbearers posthaste. Who knows how much time you have left to you?”

“Insolence,” he chided, swatting halfheartedly at her behind. The word sounded like a

compliment. “Whatever shall I do with you?”

“I thought,” she said because if they did not get this affair back on track, she was likely to combust right there on the carpet, “you had something you wished to try?”

The gleam in his eye brightened, and Emily was glad the fire still burned high enough that she didn’t miss it.

“Indeed, I do,” he said. Then he grasped her by the hips and maneuvered her so that she was sitting on the edge of her bed.

This, Emily felt, was promising.

“Stay here,” he said.

And then he left.

Emily stared in shock at the door that connected their bedchambers which he’d left open behind him. He was going to come back. He had to come back. She was broadly inclined to follow his order and stay where he’d put her—as following his guidance had thus far been highly beneficial to her, at least in matters of physical pleasure—but if he didn’t come back, she was going to have something to say about it.

Something loud, most likely.

Fortunately for everyone involved, he returned quickly, something clasped in his hand. He came closer on silent feet, and Emily’s mouth dropped open.

“Is that rope?”



“So it is,” Benedict agreed. There was that wicked cant to his expression again, but there was something cautious in his face, too, like he was trying not to spook her. “Here. Take it.”

Fingers trembling, she reached out and took it. The rope wasn’t the usual type—not coarse or scratchy at all. Instead, it felt like woven silk, smooth enough that Emily couldn’t resist running a short length of it through her fingers though she stilled the motion when she noticed that Benedict was watching her with a sharp spark of interest.

“Rope,” she said again, pleased when her voice did not shake.

“Yes,” he said, the word comfortingly firm. “And Emily—understand this. We needn’t do anything with that. Not tonight, not ever. I can return it to my rooms—I can cast it into the fire.” He paused. “But.”

She swallowed hard. “But?” she asked.

Benedict reached out a hand, slowly enough that it would have been easy for her to evade his touch. She didn’t. He wrapped his fingers around hers which were, in turn, wrapped around the silken length of rope.

“But,” he said, looking down at where fingers and fabric looped around and over one another, “some people find that bindings do not always limit them. Some people find, rather, that being held back physically—” His fingers trailed down to the end of the rope which he moved to snake gently around Emily’s wrist; she felt the gentle clasp like an intimate caress. “—allows them the liberation of their pleasure.”

He let her sit with that thought for a moment. Was that how she felt? Part of her wanted to cringe back against the notion. She would have to be perverse, broken in some way, to see bondage as freedom. But another part, the part that kept chiming up

with its irritatingly insistent voice whenever she and Benedict found themselves in an amorous situation, thought that maybe, just maybe, he was right.

She thought of the wall at her back and her hands on the settee. She thought of her arms trapped beneath her, of Benedict's firm hands clamped upon her thighs.

But no. She couldn't. For surely, surely it was unforgivably wanton.

Perhaps her husband sensed her conflicting emotions because he spoke again.

"You needn't say yes, Emily," he murmured. "Or you can say yes and then change your mind. I shan't be cross with you, not at all. But know this: I do not own this rope by happenstance. You would not be the first, nor the only, to derive pleasure from such a thing." She was looking down at her hands, but she could hear the wry smile in his voice. "I don't mean to shock you, but the realm of human pleasure is...surprisingly vast. We are not at sea, my dear. We are merely dipping our toes into the waters."

Despite the ongoing turmoil inside her, Emily felt her own lips quirk into a smile as well.

"And you would," he added, almost as an afterthought, "look so very beautiful."

It wasn't his words that convinced her as much as the way he said them; his voice was nearly a groan, thick and heavy with longing. That hunger made the matter clear. If she was a wanton for finding such a thought appealing—and yes, she admitted, the mere idea made her pulse quicken and her breaths grow shallow—then surely her husband would not object, not when he seemed so wildly compelled by the very same notion.

"Yes," she said, the words falling from her lips like a prayer. "Yes, I think I

would—would like that. Very much.”

She was still looking at their hands, at the rope clasped between them, feeling half hypnotized by the sight. Thus, she startled a bit when Benedict’s fingers came under her chin, his touch gentle, lifting her gaze to his.

“Tell me to stop, and I shall stop at once,” he vowed to her, eyes bright and intense.

She nodded, swallowed, then nodded again. “I trust you,” she whispered.

Something flashed through his expression, but before she could tell what it was, his mouth was back to hers, the hank of rope pulled from her grasp. He pulled her to her feet then quickly turned her, making quick work of the buttons of her gown. She’d dressed simply, was still wearing casual morning attire, having not had time to change while sitting at Diana’s bedside.

This was a blessing, she decided, a nervous giggle threatening to rise from her throat. She bit it back, fearing it would cause her husband to take it as a signal to stop. And she didn’t want him to stop, not when she’d just been thinking how convenient it was that her clothes could be dispensed with so quickly.

Too quickly, she realized when she heard a snick of sound, and her corset suddenly snagged. On instinct, she clasped the garment to her chest, looking over her shoulder at her husband, mouth agape.

“Did you just cut my stays?” she demanded.

If his unrepentant grin didn’t answer her question, the pocketknife he was tossing onto a nearby table would have done so.

“I shall buy you new,” he said without apology. “Now drop the bloody thing; there’s

a good girl.”

She didn’t know if she was more shocked by the disregard for her wardrobe, the swearing, or the phrase good girl. Whatever the cause, her body responded without question, and her ruined corset fell to her feet.

When Benedict’s gaze traveled over her body, scarcely concealed by her thin chemise, she felt her nipples harden in response, making his view even more scandalous.

“Don’t rip this,” she warned, the caution somewhat undermined by the tremble of desire in her tone. “It’s my favorite.” It was, too—perfectly worn and comfortable.

Benedict’s eyebrows raised in a clear challenge.

“Best take it off quickly, then,” he said lazily.

Now her gaze travelled him. “You’re still fully dressed!” she protested.

“I bet it would be fun to rip,” he mused, tapping his chin thoughtfully.

She gasped again, wishing the noise was more affronted than eager. But her hands came to the tie at her neckline, loosening it until the chemise could slip free.

And then she was bare before him except for her stockings. The incongruousness—of his clothing and her nudity, of her bareness except for her simple stockings—made her feel even more exposed. The feeling from the day prior, the one that said she had too much space at her back, threatened to swoop in again.

But Benedict responded before it could, pausing only to tug once, violently at his cravat.

Then he stepped forward, grasped both of her wrists in his, and used his grip to guide her back to the bed. She sat and then, at his urging, laid back, the fine wool of his jacket an obvious rasp against the sensitive skin of her breasts and stomach. He kept pressing her hands up and over her head until they were crossed at the headboard and his weight was, once more, laid out upon her.

It was not even a conscious decision the way she squirmed against him. Benedict briefly let his head drop, his mouth pressed against her temple as he murmured a long, low litany of swears. When he gathered himself enough to look up again, his expression was stern.

“Good Lord, Emily, do not do that,” he ordered. “I have plans for you and won’t let you undo them.”

Emily felt certain she would have found his high-handedness irksome if her bones hadn’t turned to liquid at the word plans. Instead of a protest, it was a whimper that left her mouth.

He didn’t lift his weight from her as he reached for the rope and used it to secure her wrists, lashing them first together then to the head of the bed.

“How does that feel?” he asked, running a finger beneath the rope. His movements were straightforward and competent, and they set Emily aflame.

“Oh,” she said absently. She felt oddly comfortable, given the strangeness of her highly exposed position. “Good.”

“Good,” he murmured back. He pushed back, so he was kneeling upright, his weight on the mattress between Emily’s spread legs. She didn’t even recall spreading them.

Then he began cursing again.

“Fuck, Emily, do you have any idea how perfect you are?”

The old insecurities, Emily found, were so very quiet at this moment. Bound like this, laid out before him, she had no choice but to accept whatever praise he saw fit to bestow upon her. In fact, there was only one thing she wished to change about her present circumstance.

“You’re still dressed,” she observed again. This time it was not an accusation. This time, there was a definitive whine to her voice.

Benedict’s smile was indulgent.

“Does this displease you, My Lady?” he crooned, his voice a caress. “I am ever at your service.”

He was teasing, she was sure, but as his hands went to undo the buttons first on his waistcoat then on his shirt, she decided that a little teasing was a fair trade.

When he shucked his clothing, leaving his torso bare, she felt the briefest flicker of regret that her hands were bound. Benedict’s height gave him the impression of being slender, and he was, to be sure. But with his form bared to her, she could see the impressive strength in him and the rippling muscles of his chest and arms that she wanted to stroke, caress, lick.

It was this third thought that made her blush. When he saw it, Benedict grinned an evil grin.

“Oh, my darling girl,” he murmured, “how you flatter me.” He ran a hand up the length of her thigh, from knee to hipbone, and her legs tried to clasp around them.

Instantly, Emily realized her mistake. Benedict’s hands clamped down firmly on her

thighs and he tsked at her, his expression growing even more deliciously wicked.

“Patience, darling,” he chided gently. He reached for the remaining length of rope and before Emily had fully registered what he was doing, he had removed her stockings and lashed her ankles as well, one to each of the bed’s immovable posts that stood like sentinels at the foot of the mattress.

“Benedict,” she panted, her voice needy, desperate. She didn’t care.

His gaze grew assessing for a moment. “Tell me to stop,” he reminded her.

She shook her head. She didn’t want him to stop. She didn’t know how to phrase what she did want—everything, her mind insisted, give me everything—but she knew she did not want him to stop.

The wicked look returned.

“Well, then,” he said, sounding very, very pleased indeed. “I think I shall take my time with you at my mercy.”

Emily’s chest heaved, the word mercy an echo and a promise in her head.

She did not, as it turned out, know the true meaning of the word.

Benedict—still wearing his trousers, damn the man—did take his sweet time, barely even touching her to start. With gentle hands, he guided her head to one side then the other, plucking hairpins one by one from her coiffure until her curls spread out in all their massive, chaotic glory.

“God, woman, the hair on you,” he murmured, his tone making this unmistakable as anything but the highest praise. “It’s the only part of you that should never be

bound.” He played with a long, dark curl, tugging it straight and then letting it spring back into shape. It grazed along the sensitive curve of her breast as it went, making Emily whimper.

“Benedict, please,” she said. Her hips were the only part of her with any mobility, tied as she was. And though the ropes grounded her in a way nothing else ever had—made her feel as though every inch of here was here and now instead of spiraling off worrying about this or that—it was blisteringly frustrating that she could not reach for him.

Still, she was never once tempted to ask him to release her.

“Please what?” he teased, leaning over her so that his lips grazed hers in the barest of touches.

“Just...please,” she said, exasperated and delighted all at once. “This isn’t lovemaking!”

She was so hungry for him that she didn’t even feel embarrassed saying the word lovemaking.

His mouth grew crooked again. It was so unfair how that crooked look suited him when sternness also made him look so well.

“Isn’t it?” he asked. He traced the trail of the curl along her skin, down her neck, over her shoulders, across her breast, and to the upper ridges of her ribs. “Are you certain?”

Well, no, she wasn’t, but saying so felt as though it would be directly in opposition to her overall goals.



“Then do it more,” she insisted.

And finally, wretched, cursed, wonderful man, he did.

“Oh, very well,” he said lightly. “I suppose I would enjoy it very much as well though I cannot offer any criticism to you the way you are now. Lovely, laid out. All mine.” He caressed down her side as he went, leaving gooseflesh in his wake. He pressed a kiss to her mouth then her neck. Emily fought to stay still, lest she disrupt this very promising change of tactics.

She managed it for approximately three seconds. When his mouth traveled down to press hot, lingering kisses to her breasts, she started to twitch. When he kissed her stomach, she squirmed. When he kissed lower, she arched up toward the divine sensations he was creating, the heat in her stoked like a fire with far, far too much fuel.

When he stopped, she gathered that he was lucky he’d tied her ankles because she could have kicked him.

“What? No, no, Benedict, no,” she pleaded, feeling half mindless with desire. She tugged against her bindings, strangely relieved when they did not give.

“Fuck, darling, no wait,” he gritted out, sounding pained. Good, she thought with a desperate vindictiveness. She was being tortured; he could share in that suffering.

She found herself growing far more forgiving when she realized what he was up to. He pulled off his trousers, tossing them over the end of the bed. When he kneeled up between her legs, it was in his full glory.

He was strong and rugged. Masculine and beautiful. Her gaze lingered on his manhood, shocked to see it extending in front of the rest of his body. She’d felt

a...presence through his trousers, but this was...

Intriguing. There really was no better word for it. Again, her fingers itched with the desire to touch, to feel. She didn't know what she wanted more—to look at him longer or to have him resume touching her.

When one of his hands casually touched his length, she amended that. No, she definitely wanted him to touch her.

“You're a dream,” he growled, dropping to hands and knees, so he could kiss her so thoroughly that she felt lightheaded. “A bloody dream. Do you know that? You clever, brilliant, gorgeous girl?—”

He cut off with a groan as he pressed against her, the pressure alien at first. She'd expected pain—it was nearly the only thing she knew about marital relations that a woman ought to expect pain—but it was a stretch, not an agony, and she was so aroused by his lengthy tormenting of her body that she'd have accepted any amount of discomfort for some release.

Any mild protests that her body put up at his entrance soon yielded, however, both to his firm, sure press forward and to the mounting pleasure that his entry offered. When he was seated fully inside her, his face only inches from hers—and, damn it, Emily was happy with her height, too, in that moment—he paused.

“Benedict,” she said, her voice full of wonder.

“Emily,” he returned, the sound a sigh of relief. When he kissed her then, it was the gentlest kiss he'd ever offered. It was a promise. She let him take and take and then gave back to him in return.

And then, when she could take it no longer, she broke the kiss. “Please move,” she

begged because finally her body knew how to articulate what it needed.

He flashed her another one of those quick smiles before finally obeying her command.

It was a marvelous feeling, strange and new and compelling. She felt him inside her, causing pleasure in a place she hadn't known existed but that she now recognized as the place in which she needed his touch the most. Their words fell silent, their breaths becoming a melody of pants, groans, moans. Dizzily, she admired the flexing motion of his arm, pressed to the side of her head, as he moved and moved.

"Oh," she said after a while because there was something coming, something that she feared would make the previous day's pleasure look laughably simple. "Oh. Benedict."

His head fell forward, his forehead bracing against hers briefly. Then his mouth pressed to the space right below her ear, his breaths puffing against her in gasps that sounded almost pained. He reached one arm in between their bodies and touched his fingers to that sensitive place at the apex of her thighs.

And Emily died. For a moment, she did wonder if she'd truly died because surely such pleasure was an impossibility while still possessing of a human body? Except she must be alive, because the pleasure was clearly in her body, was coursing through her, reaching for her toes and her fingers and the top of her head and her heart?—

Benedict cried out, his hips pressing to hers with one last, fevered push, like he felt he could never get close enough. And then his limbs went liquid in a limpness that was echoed in her own body. She wasn't sure if she was pleased or disappointed that he had the presence of mind to drop to her side instead of directly atop her though she knew that she enjoyed the weight of his heavy arm and leg that still draped over her.

All she knew, really, was the absolute crushing delight of good sensation. Her body felt marvelous. Benedict's body felt marvelous. The bed beneath her felt marvelous. She wasn't sure she'd ever be able to form sentences again, but who cared, really, when the world was this beautiful and built of light?

She didn't move when Benedict sat up, nor when he gently removed the rope from her ankles and wrists. She didn't move when he rubbed softly against the place where the ties had been, nor when he pressed one soft, affectionate kiss to the inside of her right ankle.

She only moved, in fact, when Benedict said, the smallest note of worry in his voice, "Emily? Are you all right?"

Even then, she only cracked one eye, only smiled with one side of her mouth. It was the best she could do. And he, she noted with some satisfaction, looked only marginally less wrecked than she.

"Oh, yes," she said, the words vaguely muddled. "I am wonderful, aren't you?"

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Benedict had to commend himself. He was, as it turned out, an absolute genius.

He'd always known that a marriage of convenience was a good thing, after all. Plenty of people had mocked him—his good friend Evan came to mind—but they were all wrong, and Benedict was right.

Benedict was, actually, even more right than he'd expected. Because he hadn't anticipated the most convenient part of having a wife: that every morning, he woke up with a deliciously rumpled, marvelously tempting woman lying right beside him.

It would have been, he knew, a bit more proper to retire to his own bedchamber after lovemaking. That was really what he was meant to do. But whoever made that rule had neglected to remember that doing so was rather inconvenient which was completely contrary to his purpose.

Also, he allowed, their lovemaking had ended up being rather more vigorous than he'd expected. He was tired. He didn't want to get up and cross to his own room. It just seemed like an awful lot of work.

So, after the first few nights of bedding his wife, he stopped trying to convince himself that he was going to return to his own rooms and instead convinced her that she should just come to his rooms in the first place as his bed was bigger.

Convenient, he thought smugly as he rolled awake one morning to find Emily's face, free of worries in sleep, already tucked pleasantly into his neck.

Her curls were spread out in a wild carpet beneath her head. She'd not braided it the

night before which meant he'd properly tired her out before they'd fallen asleep. He grinned at the thought. She'd no doubt glare and mutter about "insatiable men" as her maid undertook the lengthy process of detangling her mass of hair, but he couldn't feel sorry about it, no matter how much she glowered.

Hair like that should always be down. It made her look like a wild, pagan goddess in a painting that was kept safe from ladies' innocent eyes. He loved her hair down, even though it did sometimes tickle his nose while he slept.

No matter. He loved the smell of her hair, too. It smelled...soft.

Recognizing that his thoughts had grown nonsensical, he disentangled himself from Emily's limbs, leaving her to sleep longer. Time away from her might not be as pleasant as time with her, now that they'd sensibly channeled the strange energy between them into bed sport instead of arguing, but there was convenience, and then there was wasting daylight, and Benedict was veering dangerously towards the latter category.

He commended himself on his sensible nature as he buckled down to several hours of work in his study (tackling correspondence that had gone woefully neglected while he was, ahem, tied up with his wife) and scolded himself for the traitorous jolt of excitement he felt when Emily entered the room near midday.

"Emily, I'm bus—wait, what's wrong?" The objection to the interruption died on his lips as she saw the way his wife was frowning at the papers scrunched in her hand.

"Oh," she said absently, looking up at him, her face pale. "I'm sorry, I—I'm interrupting. I just..." She bit her lip, glancing down again.

Benedict was out from behind his desk before he even registered standing up.

“Come, sit,” he urged leading her to a chair. “What’s wrong? Are you injured?”

She gave him a confused look. “What? No, of course not. I was merely going through the Countess’ parlor as you suggested?—”

He stifled his grimace. He might have represented that suggestion to Emily as a gesture of goodwill, of welcoming her into the home over which she now presided as mistress. He might have neglected to mention that his actual inspiration for doing so had been because he’d known it would annoy his mother, whom he still hadn’t forgiven for her antics on his wedding day.

He had to stifle another grimace when he followed Emily’s gaze towards her lap and put the matter together.

“You found more letters,” he said grimly.

“I found more letters,” she agreed. For a moment they looked at one another in perfect accord, their faces matching masks of dismay, resignation, and the definitive knowledge that this was going to be such a bloody headache.

Then Emily shook herself bodily and tried to stand.

“Apologies,” she said, sounding flustered. “I don’t know why I came in here—it was just instinct to...” She gave her head another little shake. “But this is not your concern, surely. I’ll leave you to your work.”

“Stop,” he said, blocking her path to escape. “Just wait a moment. You were right to come show me this.”

“I was?” she asked, clearly surprised by this response.

Benedict wanted to frown, but he felt this would be sending the wrong message when he was wondering how he'd managed to convince his own wife that she couldn't come to him with matters about the household—about his own family. The rules he'd explained to her hadn't included a dictate to never speak to him, after all. Why did she insist on making things so complicated? A marriage of convenience was not a difficult concept.

But showing his frustration at her inability to instinctually comprehend something so simple as basic guidelines for marital harmony likely would not make him seem any more approachable or agreeable, so he bit down his reaction.

“Yes,” he said, keeping his voice calm but firm. “If my mother has been involved in something, I need to know.”

She sighed heavily and handed over the pile of papers which was, Benedict noticed with relief, considerably smaller than the initial stack he'd found.

“I'm not sure what she has or hasn't done to be honest,” Emily admitted as he scanned the short missives. “As with the other letters, it's more implication and innuendo than anything else. If we didn't already know about Dowling, I don't know that I'd consider them incriminating at all.”

Benedict made a humming sound of agreement.

I can pay Theo, too, my dear, the scrap in his hand read. Emily was right, he realized. If the sexes were reversed, he'd have assumed these letters some coy negotiation between a gentleman and his mistress. It was too much to hope, wasn't it, that illicit sexual encounters were the only thing his mother had gotten up to? Could he dare believe that she'd been blackmailing Dowling over some matter pertaining to their interpersonal matters?



“It really isn’t the contents that are interesting at all,” Emily continued. “It’s the recipient.”

His head jerked up. “What?”

She reached out and took the letters from him, reshuffling until she found the one that she wanted to place on top. It was so short he’d scarcely paid it any mind.

G—I’m growing impatient. –P

Now, he followed Emily’s tapping finger to that first initial.

“G,” he breathed. “Who the hell is G?”

The set of Emily’s mouth was grim. “Your guess is as good as mine—or ours, I should say,” she amended. “There was one letter in the previous bunch addressed to G as well. Frances noticed it when I showed her and Diana the letters.”

Benedict swallowed hard against the instinctive wave of shame that threatened at the news that Lady Frances Johnson and the Duchess of Hawkins both knew about his mother’s perfidy. He shouldn’t have been surprised—if Emily was close enough with the pair that they’d all remained in the Duchess’ bedchamber while she gave birth of all things—but it still stung his pride.

The prickle of discomfort was short lived, however, as it was quickly overshadowed by an idea that clicked into place in his mind. He looked back to the letter he’d been previously exploring.

Yes, this wasn’t a letter to Dowling or Theo as his mother had evidently called the man; it was a letter about Dowling. He’d seen what he expected to see—letters between his mother and her deceased lover—not what was truly there.

“She paid Dowling for something,” he said, showing Emily the letter.

“I can pay Theo, too,” she read. When she looked back up at him, her eyes were bright, keen, and intrigued even as her mouth grew tight with worry. “So she wasn’t just blackmailing Dowling—wasn’t just getting money from him. She was paying him—or paying him off—about something else. But what?”

She frowned to herself, lips pursing in thought. “I wish we could ask Diana,” she muttered to herself. “She’s the one with the head for all of this conniving and scheming. But I suppose it wouldn’t do to pull her away from her baby for what amounts to almost no new knowledge at all. Unless you have an idea what all this was about?”

Emily was looking at him, expression hopeful. He despised himself for not being able to make good on that hope.

Benedict shook his head helplessly, the pleasure he’d experienced in the last few days quickly buried beneath the mountainous rubble of his troubles. God, but his mother was an eternal headache. Even when she was blessedly out of his house, she managed to infect every corner of his life with her miserable presence.

“I don’t know,” he admitted bleakly. “And I don’t have the faintest idea how we could find out.”

It took a mere six days after her marriage for Emily’s sisters to come and find her. When the twins arrived in the Countess’ parlor (which Emily had, thank the good Lord above, cleared of any scandalous letters from the Dowager Countess—the last thing she needed was for Amanda to insert herself into that debacle), Emily jolted in shock.

After the years and years of complaints about how Emily was always overbearing and

underfoot, she'd expected them to last at least a little longer before they came asking for a favor.

And they were clearly here to ask for a favor, she noted wryly to herself. Rose looked too sheepish and Amanda too unconvincingly angelic for the two to have any other purpose.

"Hello, darlings," she said, setting aside her ladies' magazine. It was expected that a new countess would do some redecorating around the house, and Emily intended to do some proper research before making any large changes—though she already knew she'd go for something a bit more understated than the Dowager Countess' taste for the sumptuous.

"Hello, Emmy," Amanda said with a beaming smile. "Aren't you looking well! Marriage really does suit you, you know."

It was blatant flattery. But perhaps marriage had changed Emily because instead of arching a brow and reminding her sister of the merits of honesty, she decided to play along.

After all, there was no rule that said she had to make things easy on her troublesome little sisters, was there?

"Thank you, Amanda," she said graciously. "Have the two of you come to see my new home?"

Rose was standing frozen, clearly trying to figure out the rules of this new game—or deciding if this Emily was some sort of elaborate imposter that had replaced her real sister. Amanda's eye twitched as she looked wildly around the space.

"Er, yes!" she lied brightly. "This room is, um, very nice. Very, very, ah, colorful."

The second descriptor, Emily allowed, was more honest than the first. There had been less of a cohesive theme to the decoration scheme of this parlor than the suggestion that every expensive item that had ever caught the Dowager Countess' eye had been thrown into one space. Emily had removed some of the more headache-inducing objects already, including an enormous gilt mirror. That was how she'd uncovered the second set of letters which had been hastily tucked behind the mirror's frame.

Not that she planned to so much as think about those letters with her sisters present. Emily had never seen proof that her sisters' talent for troublemaking extended to outright clairvoyance, but it was better to be safe than sorry in situations like these.

She'd learned that lesson the hard way with the twins. Many, many times over.

But that didn't mean she couldn't have her fun.

"That's so sweet of you," she said, beaming at her sisters. "Would you like a tour? I'm getting acquainted with the place still myself, of course, so we might get turned around a bit. It took barely more than an hour when the housekeeper first took me, and I'm sure it wouldn't be that much longer for us."

She saw the moment she overplayed her hand. It was evident in the way Rose stopped acting like a startled rabbit, hiding from a predator, her expression instead dropping into a very human, very unimpressed smirk.

"She's toying with us," she told her twin dryly.

Amanda's panicked smile at the thought of an hour-long tour shifted into an expression of abject outrage.

"That's terribly rude, Emmy," she scolded. "It isn't at all nice to tease."

And the irony of that statement was so delicious that Emily had to laugh for several long minutes. Her sisters did their best to maintain their disapproving expressions but didn't last very long. Whatever their flaws, the twins were not opposed to a good joke at their own expense.

"Sorry," Emily wheezed when she'd finally gotten a hold on her laughter. "I couldn't help myself. What do you need, sweets?"

"Well," Rose said delicately, sitting on the settee across from Emily. Amanda dropped onto the chaise with considerably less grace. "We were hoping for some advice."

Emily closed her eyes briefly, relishing her vindication. "One does so love to be proven right," she commented to herself.

"I told you we should have asked someone else," Amanda grumbled.

Rose ignored them both.

"We went to a ball with Papa last night, you see," she explained, sounding as though she were treading very carefully through this conversation. "And I fear that he is not...behaving in the most sensible manner as pertains to your recent marriage."

If Emily hadn't been swearing in her head with all the foul oaths she knew, she might have allowed that Rose would make a fine wife to a diplomat, given how tactfully she'd phrased that.

Instead, it was all she could manage not to let her internal ire become external.

"What did he do?" she asked tiredly.

“He won’t stop bringing it up!” Amanda exclaimed, sitting up sharply. “He seems to have this idea that if everyone is talking about your scandalous tete-a-tete anyway—which, honestly, Emmy, I really don’t think they are because Lady Bowdoin wore the most horrid hat to church on Sunday; truly, she nearly put out Mr. Clayton’s eye with the dangly bits she’d stuck on there?—”

“Amanda,” Emily prodded.

“Right. Well, Papa seems to think that if others are talking about it, he should talk about it first?” Her tone clearly conveyed her doubt as to the wisdom of this strategy.

“He keeps sort of shouting that it’s lovely to have an earl in the family,” Rose explained, wrinkling her nose. “I think he’s trying to make it sound like lovely is the same as love match and that this is the reason for...everything,” she surmised. “But it isn’t really working.”

“I should think not,” Emily muttered, nearly impressed with how dramatically her father had erred. “That will accomplish nothing except extending the talk.”

Rose winced. “There has been something of a...renaissance on the topic.”

“And,” Amanda interjected, sounding deeply aggrieved, “my dance card was scarcely more than half full because of it. Half, Emmy! Can you imagine?”

Emily, in recognition of her sister’s evidently genuine if vaguely silly distress, did not mention that she had never once had a dance card that even came close to being half full.

Besides, dramatic delivery notwithstanding, Amanda did have a legitimate point. Their father was damaging the twins’ social—and therefore marital—prospects. And he was using Emily to do it.

“Right,” Emily said, rubbing her temples. She hadn’t had a full night’s sleep in days, and while she wasn’t precisely complaining about it, a clear head would likely have been helpful at the moment. “Right. Well, clearly we can’t let Papa continue to be your chaperone.”

“I knew you’d solve it,” Amanda said triumphantly, conveniently forgetting that she’d been convinced of no such thing not two minutes prior.

“I suppose,” Emily went on, mind spinning, “that the best thing would be for us—Benedict and myself that is?—”

Amanda paused her crowing to gasp. “She calls him Benedict,” she whispered gleefully to her sister.

Emily ignored this.

“—to gradually return to Society and just act...normal about things. People will see us together, will get their muttered comments out of their systems, and then everything will return to normal.” She looked at Amanda. “Including the fullness of your dance card.”

“Yay,” said Amanda without an ounce of self-consciousness or irony.

Rose’s reaction was more measured but no less heartfelt. “Thank you, Emily,” she said sincerely. “I know we are bothering you while you’re meant to be spending time with your new husband?—”

“Benedict,” Amanda repeated in an awed whisper, and Emily wondered how long it would take before Amanda became bold enough to use Benedict’s Christian name to his face. Unfortunately, it would likely not be long at all.

“—but we really do appreciate it,” Rose concluded. “It has been a touch, ah, challenging with Papa.”

“I understand,” Emily said graciously. “Don’t think on it a minute longer.”

Despite this advice, Emily herself had to think on the matter for many, many more minutes. Making the promise to her sisters had been, after all, the easy part.

Now all she had to do was convince her husband—the man who had organized his entire search for a bride out of his desire to keep his name out of gossipmongers’ mouths—to return to the direct line of scandal.

“That,” he said simply when she’d explained the scheme, “is a terrible idea.”

“Benedict—” she began.

He interrupted her. Lord, but she’d thought they were past all that.

“And,” he added, as if she hadn’t spoken at all, “a waste of time. The whole benefit of being married is that a man no longer has to do the dreadful things he’s compelled to do when trying to get married.”

And she’d thought the interrupting was rude! How lovely to know that she was merely an excuse to avoid Baroness Montman’s Annual Spring Musicale, not, say, an entire human being.

She took a measured breath, reminding herself that she was asking him for a favor, and that shouting at him was unlikely to make her case for her.

“I understand your reticence,” she said evenly. “But Benedict, these are my sisters.”



He had already returned to the papers on his desk which, really, was so dreadfully rude it was going to give her a nosebleed. At her words, however, he looked up at her in faint surprise.

“Well, you are welcome to go, of course,” he said like this settled things. “I am not your jailer, Emily. Do feel free.”

And then he, once again, went back to his work.

Emily clenched her jaw until it hurt.

“It doesn’t work,” she said, her tone now decidedly terse, “unless you are with me. We have to appear normal. Together. Otherwise, the ton will assume that you’re ashamed of me and will continue to talk.”

“That,” he said shortly, “is idiotic.”

She was approximately ninety percent certain that he meant to say that the ton was stupid for assuming such a thing, not that she was stupid for predicting such an assumption. But she’d swallowed down her pride several times already in this conversation, and her patience was apparently at its end.

It was only the issue of patience, she told herself. It was not that her feelings were hurt because he seemed so uninterested in helping her. Not at all.

Whatever the cause, the acid in her voice was apparent.

“Right,” she said, dripping sarcasm. “So, your little maxim about showing a united front in public—that was only when it was something you cared about, then? Because I seem to recall you very stubbornly insisting that you are not a hypocrite, and I cannot say that I believe that in this moment.”

The shift to a fearsome frown was so swift that Emily was briefly transported back to her father's foyer, back to the ballroom where they'd first quarreled.

"Don't be deliberately obtuse," he reprimanded. "This is not a matter of providing a united front in public—you are attempting to coerce me into going into public to demand a united front."

"If you think there is material difference between the two, you are less clever than I thought," she sniped back. "But apparently, I am only good for some things. Good enough for your bedchamber, but not good enough to say that I don't embarrass you?—"

"Benedict! I've returned!"

Of all the people in all the world, there was nobody Emily wished to see less in that moment than the Dowager Countess. Yet there she was, swanning into the room with timing so bad it was farcical.

She ignored Emily entirely.

As did Benedict, Emily noted with an internal shriek of rage. His mother's entrance snapped up every ounce of his attention in an instant. It was not positive attention, she allowed, but still. It was a bitter, ugly reminder of where she stood in his eyes.

"What are you doing here?" he asked flatly as the Dowager Countess swept her skirts dramatically before sitting in an armchair and propping her chin on her fist with an insouciant grin.

"I live here, Benny; don't be silly," the Dowager Countess trilled. She had ignored Emily completely and continued to do so, the gesture becoming more and more obvious in its intentionality as it went on.

“It’s not even been a week,” Benedict growled.

“Hasn’t it?” The Dowager blinked innocently. “No, I’m quite sure it has.”

“You were meant to be gone a month,” he said, now sounding as though he were clenching his teeth very hard. Good, Emily thought sourly. She hoped it was uncomfortable.

“A month!” Priscilla exclaimed as if the very idea were preposterous. “Certainly not. You must have noted it wrong, Benny. Perhaps you ought to write things down. Mixing these things up will make you look terribly foolish, you do know.”

“Do not start with me, Mother,” Benedict warned.

The Dowager, however, spoke over him. Ha. Emily hoped he liked getting that little taste of his own medicine. If the way his face reddened was any indication, he did not.

“Well, I’m back now, so there’s no use worrying over it, is there?” she said, waving a careless wrist. “Besides, I’m sure things have gone entirely to pot without me. Shall I speak to the cook to make sure we’ll have something suitable on the table to eat?”

This was, Emily decided, quite enough. Seeing Benedict’s irritation was not sufficient recompense for listening to this utter nonsense.

She would offer the Dowager one piece of praise, however.

The woman was so dreadfully rude that she let Emily behave just as badly without a single worry over the propriety of it all. It was liberating, Emily thought. Maybe her sisters were on to something.

It was, however, less satisfying than she'd hoped as she turned on her heel, leaving the room without a word—only to hear deafening silence call after her.

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:38 am*

Dinner was agony. Benedict recalled waking that morning and feeling optimistic and wished he could travel back in time and kick that poor, clueless idiot in the head.

It had taken less than a day for his mother to be revealed as the sort that hired a criminal, his wife to become furious with him, and his mother to return weeks earlier than expected.

Just his bloody luck.

It bore mentioning, however, he noted over dinner as he wondered if gulping his wine would make his nascent headache better or worse, that his wife and his mother showed their displeasure in highly different ways.

“This cut of beef feels thinner than usual,” his mother complained loudly, pushing the offending meat around her plate. She had not taken kindly to being told that she should leave the cook alone as managing the house was now Emily’s role, not hers.

Never mind that she’d hated doing it when it was her role, Benedict had thought sourly as his mother had gasped and carried on, decrying the unspeakable pain (though she managed to speak it quite a lot, actually) of being replaced in one’s child’s affections.

“Has someone,” the Dowager went on, cutting a poisonous glance at Emily, “decided we ought to change butchers? We should really return to the old. This cheap cut reeks of economizing.”

“The cook informed me she has been using this butcher for several years,” Emily said

politely, her eyes on her own plate where she was eating her meal in careful, moderated bites. “I could not account for any difference, I’m afraid.”

“The beef is fine, Mother,” Benedict interjected, earning him a quick look of approval from his wife.

Emily had been the very picture of decorum through the first courses of dinner, treating each of his mother’s preposterous complaints as though they were innocuous observations and replying with perfect gentility. In another circumstance, Benedict would have been beside himself with delight over how visibly it rankled his mother that Emily was apparently entirely immune to her histrionics.

But his bride was no more pleased with him, at this moment, than she was with his mother—and wasn’t that unpleasant company to be in.

Emily had been polite to him as well, almost aggressively so. He’d waited to see that flash of temper that she’d yielded against him so many times before, but it never appeared. Instead, her cool demeanor struck him as...resigned.

He hated it. He might even, he allowed, hate it more than his mother’s whining.

“It’s supposedly the same butcher,” Priscilla sniffed. “And we are just to believe words when our senses tell us something else entirely? I fear the great thinkers, in all their bothersome, plodding ways, would call us fools for even considering it.”

“I assure you, My Lady,” Emily replied with perfect equanimity, “I have no reason nor inclination to lie about the household’s butcher.”

He had to find a way to make Emily stop playing this horrid ‘perfect Society wife’ role. If he had to watch her give one more bland smile, he was going to suffer an apoplexy. But how to get his Emily—the real Emily—to show her face again?

“Perhaps not,” sniffed the Dowager. “But who among us can say that we always operate according to reason, hm? There is, in some of us, a perversity that encourages pursuing our own desires, no matter the consequences. Do you not agree, Miss Rutley?”

“I think you will find,” Benedict growled, “that it’s Lady Moore.”

Priscilla ignored him, her gaze intent on Emily. As much as Benedict had disliked his mother ignoring his wife, he found he liked her attention upon Emily even less.

But Emily looked entirely unconcerned.

“Perhaps,” she allows, “though I do endeavor to practice thinking in all my endeavors. I’m sure you understand, My Lady.”

Though her tone was kind, Benedict almost smiled at the tiniest hint of sharpness in the words. Either his mother had to agree with Emily—which she clearly didn’t want to do—or claim that she didn’t understand the value of thinking. She was a tactical menace, his wife.

Still, it rankled that he was still receiving the cool, disaffected Emily as was evident when she turned to him and commented blandly, “The sauce is quite fine this evening, I think.”

“Quite,” he agreed stupidly.

Very well. She had not forgiven him. He thought back to their earlier conversation, the one that had just been dancing on the cusp of becoming a true argument when his mother had barged in. He stifled a wince as he ran back over the conversation. He had been a tad bit harsh with her. He simply hadn’t expected her to be the type of woman to demand constant attendance at Society events.

His mind caught on his own phrasing. The type of woman. It took him back to Emily's earlier accusation, the one she'd made the night he'd first taken her to bed. Her claim that he had painted all women with the same brush as his mother.

He looked at the two women in front of him. There was his mother, petulantly refusing to touch her supper, her face twisted into a sneer. And then there was Emily, upset but not making those feelings a matter of public consumption.

His stomach lurched. Maybe his wife had been right. Maybe he was being a hypocrite. The thought rankled. He'd long prided himself on his fair-mindedness, on the fact that he, unlike his mother, was not a creature of hysterics and emotional manipulation. But he had to now allow, perhaps he had let his own emotions towards his mother have more effect than he'd realized.

Fuck. He was going to have to apologize to his wife.

Now was not the time, though. For one, he would like to make such an apology in private—both in concession to his pride and because he hoped his wife would thank him in a manner that demanded they be alone—but also because his mother was speaking loudly.

"I suppose, then," she said, her tone musing as though she was merely thinking aloud; the malicious glint in her eye said otherwise. "If you are such a thinking creature—a proper bluestocking—that this means you admit you were trying to trap my son into marriage when you seduced him in a hallway?"

Emily's mouth dropped open. Benedict surged to his feet.

"Get out," he said to his mother.

The smug look in Priscilla's face morphed into offended shock.



“Don’t be ridiculous, Benedict,” she said. “After all, what can admitting it hurt now? She’s ensnared you in her little scheme; you are wed. At least, she can still claim a modicum of honor if she confesses.”

“I didn’t—” Emily stammered.

“No one thinks you did,” Benedict interrupted his wife, forcing his tone to softness despite his anger. He could not bear to see her suffer the indignity of having to deny such a thing. “Not even she thinks you did,” he said, cutting a glare at his mother. “She’s merely stirring up trouble.”

“Why, I never!” Priscilla exclaimed with a hand pressed to her throat. “It is a mother’s duty to protect her child, Benedict!”

Benedict ignored her, keeping his eyes locked on his wife until she let out a small huff of air and nodded.

“I may not be perfect, Emily, but I shan’t stand to hear you insulted. Do you understand?”

This time her nod was preceded by the smallest of smiles. It made him feel as though he could lift mountains.

He did not need, however, to do anything so dire as all that. He merely needed to rid their home of a particularly bothersome nuisance.

“Consider this your last warning, Mother,” he said lowly.

“But she—” Priscilla began, pointing dramatically at Emily.

“No,” Benedict interrupted. “No one—and especially not you, given your history,

Mother—will cast aspersions against my wife’s character, morals, or virtue. If anyone behaved improperly that evening, it was I, not she. And I struggle to call it impropriety from this perspective when I have been gifted such an excellent bride for my poor behavior.”

He directed this last comment in Emily’s direction, and her small smile grew bigger.

“I fear to think what it shall do for your character, My Lord, to earn rewards for your malfeasance,” she teased quietly. He let out a wholehearted laugh at that, thrilled to see a hint of her playful side again.

“You’re making a mistake, Benedict,” Priscilla hissed.

Calmly, Benedict sat back down in his chair, spreading his napkin across his lap. “Perhaps I am, in giving you this last warning instead of throwing you out this very evening. I suppose we shall see.”

In a great fluster of dignity, Priscilla got to her feet.

“I cannot eat in these circumstances,” she huffed before storming out of the room. Emily and Benedict watched her go.

“Oh dear,” Emily said tonelessly. “We seem to have lost our dinner companion. Whatever shall we do?”

He only had to grin at her for a few seconds before her affected composure disintegrated, helpless giggles overtaking her.

“I’m sorry,” she said when she caught her breath. “I know she’s your mother; I shouldn’t be so disrespectful.”

“Emily, darling,” he drawled. “You couldn’t have matched her for disrespect if you’d clobbered her over the head with a candelabra. Merely offering a dry comment or two is positively angelic of you.”

Her lips twitched again. “Still,” she said, looking at him with softness in her gaze. He had the foolish urge to sit up straighter. “Thank you for defending me.”

“I will always defend you,” he swore. Then he reached out and grasped her hand. “And I think I must admit that you were right.”

Her eyebrows raised though her eyes continued to spark with good humor. “Uh oh,” she said. “Don’t injure yourself.”

“Minx,” he said, aiming a playful nip at the back of her knuckles. She giggled again and tried to pull her hand back, but he held on tight.

Sobering again, he said, “I feel grotesque admitting it, but you might have been correct that I...overgeneralized about the nature of women due to my mother’s tendencies.”

“Positively angelic,” she murmured, recalling his earlier words about tepid retaliation.

“What I mean to say is,” he said, needing to keep himself on task before her delightful playfulness distracted him. It had only been a few hours, but goodness, he’d missed it. Missed her. “I am sorry. I reacted extremely and unkindly when you requested my aid in chaperoning your sisters. I was wrong, and I apologize.”

Her light demeanor vanished as she stared at him with wide eyes. “I—thank you, Benedict. That means a lot.”

“I cannot promise to attend all the events that your, ah, rather spirited sisters might like to grace with their presence,” he amended, his temples already starting to throb at the mere thought. Whoever had decided that the Season ought to run so long should be taken out back and shot in Benedict’s opinion. It was merely too much.

Emily was looking at him with a knowing—and dare he say fond?—look.

“I understand completely,” she said seriously.

“Balls are just so very crowded and loud,” he said by way of explanation, knowing it came off more as complaint. “There are just such a great number of...people. Everywhere.”

He suspected his wife might be trying not to laugh at him. “As a former wallflower, I am no stranger to your dislike of Society events.”

“Good—wait, a former wallflower? Are gentlemen badgering you now? Who are they? Have they said anything untoward?”

Had his wife’s concern about gossip damaging her sisters’ prospects been a ruse? Was she being hurt by the chatter? He’d call out any man who made her feel unwelcome, just see if he didn’t?—

“No, you impossible man,” she laughed, cutting off his internal scheming. “I simply meant that one is not typically considered a ‘wallflower’ after marriage though I suppose one could debate the point,” she added musingly.

“You’re certain?” he asked, eyeing her carefully. Perhaps he would have to start attending events if other men thought they could paw all over Benedict’s wife.

“I am certain,” she said indulgently. “Now stop being foolish and let me forgive you

properly, shall you?”

As she reached out her arms to pull him into an embrace, Benedict couldn't help but reflect on the truth of his earlier words. In finding Emily he had been, after all, a very lucky man, indeed.

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:38 am*

In all her planning and convincing her husband, Emily managed to forget, right up until she was preparing to go to the first ball since her marriage, one very important thing.

She hated Society events.

Well, she allowed as a whisper of movement alerted her to her husband's presence in his bedchamber, perhaps hatred was strong. Her husband really hated Society events.

He'd clearly been trying for her sake. When she'd mentioned that she planned to chaperone her sisters that evening, he'd offered to accompany her, despite the expression on his face saying that he'd rather eat his own hat. She'd taken pity on him.

"Let me see what's happening before I drag you into it," she'd said soothingly as he tried not to look drastically relieved. "Then we can strategize how to quash gossip without you having to attend too many of these evenings."

"If you're sure, dear," said his mouth. Thank you forever, said his eyes.

Now, hearing him move in his bedchamber while she sat at her vanity, fretting that she would never have enough hairpins to keep her coiffure steady, she regretted that decision. She'd much rather have him with her that evening—or, even better, stay home here with him.

When he caught her watching him through the open doorway, he paused and smiled.

“You look beautiful,” he complimented, lounging in the doorway.

They’d taken to leaving the door between their bedchambers open, something that had scandalized Emily’s maid speechless when she’d first seen it. It was only practical, though, Emily reasoned, for all that it was unconventional. They slept together nightly in Benedict’s chambers, but Emily’s things were still in this room.

“Thank you,” she said, forcing herself to drop her hands despite the temptation to endlessly fuss with her curls. “Though I think you’re a bit premature. I’m only half dressed. I know it’s only been a few weeks, but somehow it feels like a lifetime since I’ve worn a proper ballgown.” She gestured down at where she wore her dressing gown over her chemise.

Benedict’s gaze turned thoughtful, assessing. “You’re nervous,” he observed.

She shrugged one shoulder. It was foolish, certainly. She was a married woman now. And, yes, there would no doubt be some measure of gossip, given what her father was apparently up to, but there had been gossip before her marriage, too, and she’d survived.

It wasn’t, she realized with a start, that she was uncommonly nervous for a Society event. It was, instead, that she’d been uncommonly relaxed in her new home, so the difference was just starker than usual. That made for strange thoughts, piled one atop the other, that she had been uncomfortable in her father’s house for all those years and that she no longer felt that stress here.

The idea was all the more remarkable considering that Priscilla had not warmed in the slightest to Emily over the last several days. She’d kept her comments to herself, apparently heeding Benedict’s threat of expulsion from the house. She had not contained, however, the disapproving sniffs she gave whenever she and Emily happened to cross paths. Emily had pointedly not reacted, even as the sniffs had

gotten louder and louder.

And if she got a childish thrill out of knowing that her nonreaction was driving the Dowager mad...well, Emily felt she could be forgiven this lapse.

“I might be slightly nervous,” she allowed.

“You could stay home,” he suggested, sounding entirely too hopeful at the idea, coming up behind her to lay his hands on her shoulders.

Reaching backward, she swatted lightly at his fingers. “I could not,” she scolded. “I promised my sisters.”

He leaned down to speak close to her ear. “But I am so very good at distracting you from your nerves when you’re here,” he purred.

She didn’t know what made her shiver more, the sensation of his breath against her cheek or the promise in his words.

It didn’t matter, she reminded herself, because she was going out.

“You are not as tempting as you believe yourself to be,” she lied.

He laughed and pressed a kiss to her cheek. “You can’t blame a man for trying.”

She smiled at him through the mirror. “No, I suppose not.” Then she sighed. “I really should keep getting dressed, though. I haven’t much time left, and donning one of those dratted gowns takes an age.”

Her gaze wandered over to a nearby armchair, her corset draped across it and waiting. Benedict followed her look.



And then he got a very, very intriguing look in his eyes.

“Do you know what I think, my dear wife?” he asked, sliding his hands down from her shoulders all the way to her wrists. The movement brought his front to nestle firmly against her back, his arms wrapped around her in a tight embrace.

After so many subsequent days and nights of lovemaking, Emily’s body was primed to respond instantly to this kind of binding embrace.

“What’s what?” she asked, instantly breathless. Lord, he had better not ask her again to skip that evening’s ball. This time, she was liable to agree. Her poor sisters would be furious.

“I think,” he murmured, trailing featherlight kisses up from her ear, “that it is my duty as your husband to help you get dressed for a night out. Don’t you agree?”

Emily wasn’t sure what he meant with this offer; as far as she knew, the proper way to don a ballgown was not the standard part of an earl’s education. But she knew with even greater certainty that she would have agreed to anything her husband suggested in that tone of voice.

“Quite,” she agreed, her voice coming out breathless. She met his gaze in the mirror and had a wild flash of certainty that he could see more than her reflection revealed. That, somehow, he could see into the depths of her, into parts of her soul that perhaps even she did not fully comprehend.

Though that was foolishness, certainly, she chided herself.

Benedict gave her wrists one firm squeeze before releasing them, leaving behind ghosts of his touch even as he crossed and grasped her waiting corset. She eyed him with bemused expectation.

“On your feet,” he guided gently as he returned to her. When she was standing steadily, he whisked away her chair, so she was standing in front of the mirror with no barrier between them.

He plucked at the sleeve of her dressing gown. “Remove this, darling,” he urged.

Emily could not have disobeyed if she tried. She let the heavy fabric drop until it pooled at her feet.

Emily had been naked before her husband scores of times by this point. He’d seen her in all manner of ways that made her blush if she dared to think of them too long. And he’d praised every inch of her, even the ones she felt reasonably certain could not be nearly as lovely as he claimed.

Somehow, however, she felt utterly revealed standing before him in her thin chemise. Something about the way the fabric scarcely revealed the jut of her nipples as they hardened under his gaze, the way it only hinted at the shadowy space between her legs—this made Emily feel more exposed than simple nudity might have done.

The feeling made her blush though not in an unpleasant way. The hungry look in her husband’s face only made this sensation increase.

“Damn,” he murmured, ghosting a hand down her side, not quite touching her but nevertheless leaving gooseflesh in his wake. “You are divine, my darling.”

Then he shook himself, as if remembering his purpose, and hefted the unlaced stays in his hands.

“I am meant to be helping you, not admiring your beauty. Lift your arms for me, if you please.”

She obeyed, and he pulled the corset into place around her.

“Can you hold it in place?” he asked.

“Yes, but—” she paused, adjusting the fit. “Yes. There.”

There was no need for quiet, but her voice had dropped instinctively into a whisper, one that quickly shifted into a soft moan when Benedict began, with surprising acumen, to lace her corset strings.

Emily, like any proper young lady, had been wearing stays since her adolescence. They were not typically her favorite item of clothing; even when fitted and worn correctly, they were not particularly comfortable.

But this, now, was unlike anything she’d experienced before. No, that wasn’t quite true—this was quite like when Benedict bound her to their bed, safe and open and laid out before him. Her body did not seem to care that he was lacing her into her clothes instead of taking her out of them.

Benedict’s fingers paused. “Not too tight?” he asked.

She shook her head, not daring to risk her voice in response. She feared it would come out in a terrible whine of desire.

Yet her husband seemed to understand her perfectly. Now that the lacing had begun, and the stays would stay in place without her constant attention, he reached up and guided her hands to the edge of her dressing table. It was, Emily realized with a flash, an inverse of the way he’d positioned her that day in her family’s drawing room, the movement bending her forward instead of back.

Her breath hitched as he pressed a lingering, hot kiss to the back of her neck. “Watch

yourself,” he commanded.

It was a herculean effort to raise her head. But Emily did so, watching her reflection as Benedict, with painstaking movements, laced her stays around her.

The more he tied, however, the laces rasping through the eyelets with quiet hisses that brushed along Emily’s every nerve, the more the image before her shifted. After all, this woman before her, with eyes bright with longing, cheeks bright with pleasure—this woman was lovely. She couldn’t be Emily, could she? And how could that tower of a man, straight backed and somber even as his breaths grew more labored, fighting the weight of his own desire—how could this man truly be hers?

By the time he tied off the laces, she was struggling to breathe, not because he’d tied her too tightly but because she knew she’d be feeling his hands on her all night long, even when half of Mayfair separated them. She felt brave, light as a feather, and utterly safe.

Not to mention hideously aroused. It would be an exercise in temperance, behaving normally all evening instead of rushing home and into her husband’s arms.

With hands on her waist, Benedict guided her to standing. “All right?” he asked, mouth near her ear.

“Yes,” she gasped, not even bothering to hide how drunk with pleasure she felt. “I feel—thank you, Benedict.”

Despite her stumbling words, he clearly understood her. It was so utterly bizarre how he always seemed to understand the core of her. She didn’t understand how it was possible, given how frequently they butted heads, yet it remained undeniable.

“Always,” he said, the words a promise.

As a timid knock announced the arrival of Emily's maid, Benedict released her waist, stepping back. She felt his absence far less than she might have otherwise, not with the way the remnants of his touch clung so tightly to her ribs.

"Oh!" her maid said, struggling to hide her surprise. "You've your stays on already, My Lady. Right." Benedict was quietly retreating to his own bedchamber. "Shall we help you into your gown, then?"

Emily drew her attention away from her husband. "Yes," she said, trying not to sound utterly distracted. "Yes, let's."

It was perhaps another half hour before Emily was ready to leave, her gown fixed in place, her jewelry polished to a shine, her coiffure triple checked against escaping curls. She took in a deep breath, taking comfort in the way her chest expanded against the boning of her corset, then stood.

"Ready to go?"

Her husband's words nearly made her jump out of her skin.

There Benedict stood in the doorway, perfectly dressed for an evening out.

Emily frowned. "I thought you were staying in tonight."

Benedict scowled back, but there was no heat in it. "A man can change his mind, can't he? Do come along, Emily, we shouldn't want to be late." And, without waiting for her response, he headed for the door.

Emily bit back a smile as she followed meekly behind. Very well, she would permit him his pride. But she knew—and suspected he did, as well—the real reason why he had suddenly taken an interest in the haut ton this evening.

Benedict supposed he could admit that he was having a marginally less awful time than he'd anticipated. He might have attributed this comparative enjoyment to his lack of a headache or the fact that he'd been given carte blanche to scowl irritably at any wagging tongues.

But the truth, he had to admit, was that he was just happy being with Emily.

He'd never imagined the difference between attending Society events before and after his marriage because he'd never imagined deigning to attend another Society event once he was wed. But there was a surprisingly pleasant difference between seeking eligible young women upon whom he intended to pin all his hopes for the future and watching the woman who was his actual future diffuse the cloud of gossip with seeming effortlessness.

"Oh, my poor Papa," Emily laughed to an elderly matron wearing a truly heinous piece of headwear. "I think he is merely struggling to adjust to the reality of having one of his daughters wed. Mothers prepare for such things, you know, but fathers..." She trailed off suggestively.

The woman chuckled indulgently. "So it is, so it is, my dear. Why when my own Lord Bowdoin—who was quite the stern fellow indeed—walked our eldest daughter to the altar, he very nearly shed a tear! Gentlemen can be most trying, can they not?"

Emily pressed a hand to her chest. "You shan't catch me out, Lady Bowdoin; agreeing with you now would make it seem as though I am anything less than delighted with my own matrimonial state. But I will confirm that fathers can be trying; will that satisfy?"

At this, Lady Bowdoin glanced over at Benedict, the many feathers in her headpiece bobbing furiously as she took him in.

“Yes, dear girl, I can see why you might wish to make that distinction.”

Emily deftly turned the conversation to the woman’s children and from there to various other topics that concerned Benedict not a whit.

“She’s terribly talented at all that, isn’t she?” A voice at his elbow drew Benedict’s attention to his new sister by marriage. Amanda, wearing a more thoughtful smile than he was accustomed to seeing from her, watched her elder sister. “At managing others, I mean.”

Benedict frowned. “She is dispelling gossip to preserve you and your sister’s reputations,” he reminded the younger woman. “At your request, I might add.”

Amanda looked up, first in surprise, then in chagrin. “Yes—of course. I didn’t mean it as an insult, you see. I find...” She sighed. “I find myself with a new appreciation for Emmy’s way of doing things.”

Benedict was reasonably sure that he was meant to ask further questions about what she meant. Should he be offering...some sort of brotherly advice? He was pretty sure, given his history of saying the precise wrong things to his wife, that he’d muck that one up right quick.

“Is that so?” he offered cautiously.

Amanda’s lips quirked, the motion oddly reminiscent of her sister, as if she knew what he was doing.

It seemed impossible to Benedict that, not long ago, he’d considered this woman a viable candidate for marriage. Oh, yes, he knew that technically she was—such was the role of debutantes and all that. But even now, when she was acting with more maturity than he’d before experienced from her, she seemed so terribly young.

“It is so,” she said pertly, “since you seem so terribly interested in knowing.”

He couldn’t help but chuckle. She would have made a highly inappropriate wife for him, that much was now evident, but he could not at all say he regretted having Amanda Rutley as a sister.

“Though you may also be fascinated to hear that I did not actually approach to seek your counsel; I have come to talk to Emmy.”

“Blessings upon you,” he said with feeling as she grinned.

“Talk to Emmy about what?” This was Emily, who had disentangled herself from the dreadful hat and its chatty owner.

As her sister appeared, Amanda let her grin drop into a dramatic pout.

“Rose has a suitor,” she said in the same tone that one might use to announce a painful and untreatable illness.

It fascinated Benedict to realize that, though her expression scarcely changed, he could practically read Emily’s thoughts in her eyes. As she drew in a breath, he saw her desire to intervene. When she blew it briefly out again, he recognized her holding herself in check against any hasty action. And when she drew back her shoulders, it was to gather the fortitude to discuss this reasonably (always a fraught concept with Amanda) with her sister.

“Right,” she said shortly. “Well, Amanda, you do realize that is the whole purpose of this?” She waved a hand at the swirling ball behind her.

Amanda’s pout intensified.



“But she really likes him!” Amanda made this, too, sound like a hideous fate.

He struggled not to smile as Emily practically twitched, clearly desperate to demand details.

“Again,” she said, measured, “you do recognize that this is positive, yes?”

Amanda crossed her arms sourly, and Benedict quickly sought out several of his most irritating Parliamentary opponents to stop himself from laughing.

“I suppose,” Amanda said with extreme reluctance. Then, in a much smaller voice, she added, “But what if Rosie leaves, too?”

“Oh, darling.” Emily’s sigh was laden with love as she stepped forward to hook arms with her sister. “Even if she does marry this suitor of hers, Rosie won’t be leaving you. And I haven’t left you, either.” She squeezed the younger girl closer. “I’m right here. And even if Rose decamps to live in—oh, I don’t know—the hinterlands of Scotland, we shall visit and write and love her perfectly well from afar.”

As if she were much younger than her actual years, Amanda leaned over and laid her head on Emily’s shoulder briefly.

“I know,” she said, sounding more accepting this time around. “I just wanted you both with me to do all the fun things of being out. Dancing, flirting, that sort of thing. Now, you’re married already, and Rosie is just such a sweetheart that no doubt she’ll be snapped up next, and then I’ll have to have fun all on my own—which is no fun at all, really.”

When Benedict glanced back towards the sisters, he saw Emily looking straight at him, mirth in her gaze. It was nice, he decided, being the one she looked to when sharing a private joke.

“Well, my dear girl, I am three and twenty,” Emily reminded Amanda. “I’m not sure you can call it ‘already’ when I was half on the shelf.”

“No, you weren’t,” objected Benedict and Amanda in unison. This time, it was the younger sister who shot him an amused, conspiratorial glance, and he found he liked that, too. Who knew that family could be a boon rather than merely a millstone around one’s neck?

“And,” Emily went on as if they hadn’t spoken, “neither Rose nor I was ever going to go in much for flirting.”

Thank the saints and all the martyrs, Benedict thought pleasantly, feeling smugly superior to all the idiot men that had been stupid enough to overlook his Emily.

“No, I guess not,” Amanda agreed, lifting her head until she stood upright again. “The two of you are dreadfully boring in that way.”

“Thanks ever so,” Emily said dryly.

“And it’s not as though Rose would disappear.” Now it was Amanda’s turn to act like her sister hadn’t spoken. To an only son like Benedict, it was like a trip to the menagerie, watching how the siblings had, over their lives, affected one another. “The gentleman is a Londoner, I believe. A Mr. Lionel Cartwright?”

“Oh,” Benedict said, surprised to find himself with something to contribute. “I know him. Fine fellow. A bit on the old side for Rose—thirty, perhaps? But shy and retiring more than anything else, not the kind of man who has spent his bachelor years gadding about.”

“Yes,” Emily agreed thoughtfully. “I have danced with him several times over the years. He’d make a good fit for Rose as far as I know.”

Benedict retracted his compliments. Cartwright was a louse who should have kept his grubby fingers far away from Benedict's wife. Any logic that might have suggested that Emily had not been his wife at the time declined to make itself known.

"They did have quite a lot to say to one another about books," Amanda said without enthusiasm. Then she perked up. "Although, if Rosie marries him, then she probably won't make me talk about books quite so much anymore."

Emily lost her battle with laughter. "Yes, as you see, there's a silver lining to all things."

Amanda nodded smartly, clearly satisfied with this turn of events.

Even with his limited knowledge of the younger woman, Benedict might have expected her to flit off at this point. Amanda was not so much unkind as easily distractable; she was always seeking something new and engaging for her clearly clever mind to turn over and over. Instead, however, she took a half step sideways, so she was pressed more closely against Emily.

"We miss you at home, Emmy," she said quietly. Benedict turned his gaze to look out over the room, offering the sisters a modicum of privacy. "I know I've complained dreadfully over the years about how you hovered over us, but, well...I suppose now that it's gone, I miss it just a bit."

"Oh, sweet—" Emily began, but Amanda gently interrupted her.

"Shush, Emmy, let me finish. I am being terribly mature; don't ruin it." Emily chuckled quietly. "As I was saying, it's much less fun without you home, and though I'm dreadfully happy for you and all that other guff, I miss you lots. You were the best mother I could have asked for. And I forgive you for all the times you were even more boring than you needed to be."

When it was clear Amanda was finished, Emily pressed a quick kiss to her cheek.

“Thank you, my darling girl. I love you very much, you know.”

Amanda rolled her eyes. “Of course, I love you, too, you goose. Don’t be maudlin. Oh! I have also decided that I’m not going to miss you any longer. I am simply going to visit all the time. You’ll be positively sick of me.”

“Never,” Emily promised.

“What about him?” Amanda prodded. Benedict took this as his sign.

“Certainly not,” he said. “You shall always be welcome.”

The grin he got from his sister by marriage was fleeting, but the beaming smile he received from his wife did not fade, not even after her sister had left on the arm of her next dance partner.

He could feel the happiness practically coming off his wife in waves as she stepped up beside him, looping her arm in his.

“She said they missed me,” she said in a happy whisper. He was fairly certain she was talking to herself, but he didn’t mind that, either. He liked being part of her private sphere.

“Of course, they do,” he said simply. “How could they not?”

“And she said she loved me,” Emily said boastfully, this time speaking more directly to him.

How could they not? He almost asked the question again, but the words died on his

lips. He feared it would reveal too much, would awaken something he wished to let slumber.

Fortunately, Emily was too lost in her familial triumph to catch the way he'd clumsily cut himself off.

"She did call me boring," she went on with a laugh, "but then, I'd have to fear she was an imposter merely posing as Amanda if she hadn't." Her expression changed as she caught sight of someone. "Drat. There's Mrs. Marchmain. She's eyeing us with a great deal of intrigue. Quick, look as though you are positively enamored of me."

Benedict bent his head down to do as she'd asked, even as he feared that his face had already been showing such an emotion, quite of its own accord.

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:38 am*

Living with two highly spirited sisters had left Emily with an abiding appreciation for the merits of minding one's own business when appropriate. In the case of her sisters, this had sadly not been appropriate most of the time, which had led Emily to deliver such lectures as "Do not try to put a saddle on the cat," (twins: age six), "You cannot poke through other people's homes while they are not there, no, not even if those homes seem highly interesting to you," (twins: age nine), and "Lord help me, if the two of you jump out of a dark place again, I am going to suffer a heart attack and die, and then where will you be, did you ever think of that?" (twins: age sixteen, which was, in Emily's opinion, far too late for such a discussion).

In the case of Priscilla, however, who was storming around somewhere upstairs, the stamping of her feet interspersed with the occasional shriek of frustration, Emily was perfectly entitled to look at the ceiling, say, "Hm. Poor thing seems to be having a hard day," and return to her book.

And so, she did, enjoying an interesting description of the clothing worn in Ancient Egypt instead of wondering or worrying over whatever nonsense her mother-in-law was up to.

Or at least she did so right up until the Dowager appeared, like an angry specter, in the doorway of what was now Emily's own parlor.

"Goodness," Emily said, jumping a bit. "Are you all right?"

For all the that the Dowager was a sharp-tongued harridan, she generally at least looked the part of a genteel aristocratic woman. This was no longer the case. The older woman looked frazzled, wisps of hair escaping her coiffure and threatening the

entire structure of her updo, spots of bright red on her cheeks.

“You,” she seethed, pointing an accusatory finger at Emily. “You did this.”

Emily barely resisted the urge to look around the room, as if there might be someone else nearby who knew what on Earth was going on.

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about,” she said, finding it uncommonly difficult to maintain her composure. Usually, she was well-practiced in remaining calm even when faced with someone in dramatically high spirits. Now, however, faced with Priscilla’s apparent fury instead of the chaotic but ultimately well-meaning incidents her sisters tended to cause, she found herself feeling remarkably shaken.

“No,” sneered Priscilla viciously. “No, I’m so certain you don’t. After all, women like you never do, do you? You think yourselves eternal, don’t you, young and whorish like you are.”

Emily gasped at the insult which only made Priscilla’s expression twist more violently.

“No, I suppose you aren’t that young, though, are you? Just a plain, boring harlot, too old and bland to attract a man with anything besides what’s between your legs.” Priscilla laughed bitterly. “You’ll see soon enough. And you’ll be worse off than me. At least I’ve beauty and charms, the kind you could only ever dream about.” She gave Emily a long look. “Although you managed to snatch yourself a wealthy man, I suppose. No accounting for taste.”

It took Emily a moment to move beyond the shock of being so addressed—and by a woman! And in her own home! But once she did, the rage rose swift and hot inside her. She pushed to her feet; she towered over Priscilla, and, in this moment, she was darkly pleased by it.

“How dare you?” she spat. Her hands were shaking so she clenched them into fists. “You awful, awful wretch of a woman.” Priscilla opened her mouth to speak again, but Emily was unstoppable. “You are repulsive. I have given you no reason—no reason at all—to behave like this. You don’t like that I married Benedict? Well, too bad; it’s done. I am finished making allowances for you. You will speak to me respectfully.”

Priscilla tossed her head dramatically. “This is my house. I don’t have to?—”

“This is my house,” Emily interjected, voice strong and furious. “You may rail and whine, but it changes nothing. I am the Countess now. And as my husband, the Earl, has pointed out to you more than once, if you cannot behave properly, you will be asked to leave. Since I daresay that this little spectacle is unlikely to fit his definition of ‘proper behavior,’ I would suggest you cease these insults at once—before I am tempted to tell him what has occurred here.”

Emily was, frankly, shocked at herself. Shocked, but not sorry. This was, without a doubt, the harshest she’d ever been with a person—and yet she could not help but believe her reaction fair, given the vicious insults that the Dowager Countess had thrown, entirely unprovoked, in her direction.

Despite the forcefulness of her words—and the full-throated anger with which she’d hurled them—Emily had not really expected them to have much effect.

She was thus doubly shocked when the Dowager collapsed onto a settee, buried her face in her hands, and broke into noisy, wracking sobs.

Emily paused, feeling quite at a loss on how to handle this turn of events. She was nearly certain that she’d never seen someone of the Dowager’s age cry. Really, this was the kind of thing Diana was poised to handle—Diana’s mother was prone to this kind of histrionics.



“Um,” she said. Was she meant to comfort her? Normally, Emily would say certainly...but she had been the one to cause these tears. Also, she thought stubbornly, the older woman had deserved it.

In the end, however, her sympathy wore out over her reluctance. Feeling entirely unequipped to manage this spectacle—which was really saying something as Emily had managed no shortage of spectacles in her day—she gingerly sat down next to the Dowager, reached out a hand to pat her on the shoulder, there, there already springing to her lips?—

Crack!

It all happened so quickly that the first thing Emily realized was that she was leaning back against the settee’s cushions. Her hand was touching her cheek which smarted and stung.

The bloody woman had slapped her.

Another half instant and Emily was responding, entirely automatically. She took in the sneer on the Dowager’s face and thrust out her arm to protect herself against another blow, should it come, and?—

“What the hell is going on here?”

Benedict’s voice was a clap of thunder. And, like lightning, Priscilla’s expression morphed from one of rage to one of terror.

“Oh, Benny!” she cried. “Thank goodness you’re here! The little wretch attacked me!”

In horror, Emily took in the scene around her—the tears on the Dowager’s cheeks,

the way her own arm was extended as if in aggression—and realized that, no matter how fraudulent, the accusation was compelling.

But not even the tiniest flicker of doubt entered her husband's face.

"No," he said flatly. "She did not. I do not believe you, and I am sick of your lies. You are no longer welcome here. You are leaving this house, and you will not return. Gather your things; I'll give you an hour. After that, I shall have you removed—by force if necessary."

"But, Benny," the Dowager cried, reaching for her son, "you cannot cast me out into the streets?—"

Benedict knocked her hands aside, not roughly, but with clear intent, before his mother could grasp him.

"No," he agreed. "Though I'm not sure you wouldn't deserve it. You will live in the Dowager's property from now on—as is appropriate. I would hurry, though; your hour has already begun."

The calculation in Priscilla's face was evident, the way she paused to consider the merits of trying another sympathetic approach. Whether she decided against this by means of logic or by cause of emotional excess, Emily could not divine. Yet the transformation was clear. Gone was the sorrowful mother, begging for sympathy. Before them now stood a woman who felt herself unjustly scorned—and was spitting mad about it.

"Coward!" she screeched. "You're a coward—just like your worthless father before you! Just like all men." She grabbed a cushion from the settee and hurled it at Benedict, who deflected it easily. "You all think yourselves so powerful, so justified, when you are nothing but abandoners. Abandoners!"

“You are acting like a child,” Benedict said coldly. This was true but had no effect.

“You will regret this!” Priscilla railed. Her face was red and splotchy and entirely unbecoming. “You don’t think I have any power; I see it in your eyes. But just you wait. I know how to make men regret their sins against me. Just ask Theodore.”

Priscilla shouldered roughly past where her son’s broad frame took up most of the doorway, continuing to rant and rail as she stormed towards her rooms, presumably to pack her things.

A bitter, vindictive part of Emily almost hoped that her mother-in-law wasted her allotted hour though she recognized that this was a touch unfair. She wanted the woman out of the house, not wearing rags as she floated, alone through the house like a ghost from a story.

But Emily wouldn’t shed a tear if Priscilla didn’t get to keep all her favorite things. She felt that wasn’t too spiteful.

“Jesus Christ.” Benedict’s muttered swear caught Emily’s attention. In two long strides, he crossed the room to sit beside her. Careful fingers left the tiniest brush against her heated cheek. “God, Emily, you’ve a bloody handprint on your face. Are you all right? She didn’t harm you too terribly, did she?”

With a smile, Emily reached out and took his hovering hand and placed it against her cheek. The skin there did still smart a bit, but the tiny sting was worth the pleasure of his caress.

“No,” she reassured him. “More took me by surprise than anything. I’m quite all right.”

Benedict did not look convinced. He held her chin as if he feared she might break,

tilting her head to the side to get a better look.

“Perhaps you should lie down,” he said doubtfully.

She laughed, suddenly struck by the absurd loveliness of his care—and by how effortlessly he’d believed in her when faced with his mother’s lies.

“I’m fine,” she said. “I don’t need to?—”

Her words were cut off as he scooped her under her arms and knees and rose to his feet as if she weighed nothing at all.

“Benedict!” she exclaimed. She was no featherweight of a woman—she was tall and substantial. “Stop this! I can certainly walk.”

“Hm,” he grunted then kept walking towards the rear staircase without putting her down.

Emily, left with little other choice, clung laughingly to his neck as he began to carry her up the stairs, ducking her head bashfully when a housemaid passed them, clearly intent on not making anything resembling eye contact.

Benedict apparently suffered from no embarrassment regarding his outlandish overprotectiveness.

“Please fetch Her Ladyship a cool compress,” he ordered the maid as they breezed past.

“Yes, My Lord,” the girl squeaked.

Emily batted his shoulder, a sure sign of her faith in his strong grip.

“Benedict, that’s for headaches,” she chided. “I am fine.”

“A compress won’t make you any less fine,” he grumbled as he kicked open the door to his bedchamber, bypassing her rooms entirely. He placed her down atop the counterpane with the utmost delicacy which Emily might have been tempted to find a promising event, except for how he immediately turned to fuss with the pillows behind her rather than, say, ravish her furiously.

She sighed. Life was so very full of disappointments, alas.

There was one thing she could say for Benedict’s clucking and fussing, however: it cleared up her mind enough to fully process what the Dowager had said as she’d stalked away from the parlor.

She sat up with a gasp.

“Emily, I have something to tel—what are you doing?” Whatever her husband had been saying was lost in his panicked exclamation. Emily, however, was too caught up in her realization to pay him much mind.

“Just ask Theodore,” she said, then clarified as Benedict gave her a look that said he worried her head injury was even worse than he’d suspected. “That’s what your mother said, I mean. She said she was good at getting revenge on men and said, ‘Just ask Theodore.’”

His motions stilled, a faraway look overtaking him as he thought through this.

“I don’t—” he began, breaking off and then pausing. He blinked at Emily. “We know she paid Dowling for something.”

She nodded. “And then blackmailed him for something—the same thing? Something

different?”

“But the blackmail never came to fruition, did it?” Benedict mused. “My mother didn’t reveal his perfidy to the world—the Duchess of Hawkins did, along with her husband. No, Dowling gave in to my mother’s commands. Is that what he would regret?”

Emily scrunched her nose. “It seems plausible that he might regret giving in, but I’m not sure your mother would see it that way—I suspect she’d be blinded by the triumph of getting what she wanted.”

“You’re likely right about that,” her husband agreed. “She would only see Dowling as regretting something she saw valuable. And he did end up losing his life.”

A terrible, terrible idea was starting to grow within Emily. She didn’t want to speak it aloud. Didn’t want to make it real. But there was no use in burying her head in the sand—not for herself, nor for her husband.

“Losing his life,” she echoed quietly, “and being known as a murderer.”

The dreadful implication hung in the air. Was being known as a murderer the same as actually being one? Except the question was no question at all—from the late Duke of Hawkins, Andrew’s father, they knew perfectly well that reputation was not the same as reality, not in his horrible, ever-unspooling tragedy.

Benedict looked sick. “I don’t want to believe it,” he said softly. “I never thought her violent, only dramatic and self-obsessed. But today...”

Today she’d struck Emily at the slightest provocation. What would a woman like that do if she felt there was a real slight against her?

“We don’t know that she did it,” she said, instinctively avoiding labelling the act as Benedict had done.

“But we don’t know that she didn’t,” he said, closing his eyes briefly, as if he needed a moment to himself, to reset and become ready for this world in which he had reason to suspect his mother a murderess.

When he opened his eyes, he looked resigned in a way that pained Emily to her core. She reached out and grasped his hand, needing to offer him some comfort, no matter how paltry.

“We need more information,” she said, tending to the practical concerns because the emotional ones were too unruly to handle.

She also knew they would not be dismissed—the look in Benedict’s face told her clearly enough that he could not rest easy until he had an answer. She knew that look all too well—it was one Diana had worn for years while she’d insisted, despite nobody believing her, that there was more to Grace’s murder than they’d ever suspected.

Oh, Lord, Diana, she thought with a pang. How would her friend react to learning that the final incident with Dowling—which had led to her husband being shot—had possibly been due to the machinations of one horrible, scorned Dowager?

But Emily couldn’t worry about that, not now. She needed to follow her own advice—she needed to gather more information.

Benedict, too, was nodding along to the suggestion. “My mother certainly won’t tell us anything,” he said grimly, and Emily’s heart went out to the boy who had grown up with such a miserable force in his home, motherly love denied to him not by the force of death but merely because the woman seemed incapable of loving anyone

besides herself.

“No,” Emily agreed. “I think we shall—and trust me, I hear how absurd it sounds—have to look for clues.”

He gave a humorless chuckle. “I fear we have gone far past ‘absurdity’ today, my dear.” Emily wanted to blush over the endearment, given at a time when no physical intimacy greater than held hands occurred between them, but Benedict continued speaking, a furrow creasing his brow. “But she’s leaving—she’s leaving now. Our window to learn more is rapidly closing.”

“Blast!” she said with feeling. His mouth quirked in wry recognition.

Down the hall, a door slammed with undue force, and the Dowager’s furious voice, muffled by the closed doors between them, echoed as she stormed toward the front stairs then descended.

Emily stared at Benedict; Benedict stared at Emily. And the same truly terrible idea lit in both of their eyes.

“We could,” he said slowly, “preempt her.”

This was obviously ludicrous, and Emily should say so. No matter how badly Priscilla had behaved, one did not go snooping through someone else’s chambers. This was likely more true, not less, when that person was suspected of having taken part in a murder. The rationale shifted from simple decorum to self-preservation, to be sure, but it was still there.

Emily ought to chide her husband for his hypothetical recklessness and let him apply a cool compress to her forehead even though he was the one making insane suggestions.



“We could,” she agreed instead.

And as those words passed her lips, Emily felt an instinctive and heretofore dormant identification with her sisters. There was a giddy sort of glee at doing something foolish, even when it was dangerous—perhaps even because it was dangerous.

“Right,” Benedict said, nodding smartly. “Good. You stay here, and I’ll?—”

“Not on your life,” she interrupted, pushing to her feet. “We’re in this together, Benedict Hoskins, or not at all.”

She expected him to argue, to use her supposed frailty after being slapped as an excuse. Instead, he smiled, like this was precisely what he’d wished to hear but hadn’t known as much until he’d heard it.

“Very well,” he said, holding out his hand to her. “Together.”

Hand in hand they crept down the hallway, which was silly, really, as it was their own house, and they were perfectly entitled to move around within it. But the action felt appropriate, made Emily feel as though this was just one more thread in the ever-growing web tying them together.

They could hear the various shouts and screeches from the Dowager as she moved about on the ground floor, likely trying to pilfer any number of household possessions before she was ejected from the building. Emily could not focus on this potential theft, nor on remaining silent, when Benedict pushed open the door to the Dowager Countess’ now-former bedchamber.

Emily gasped. The room looked as though it had been looted—or perhaps struck by some sort of cyclone. There were articles of clothing strewn everywhere, papers scattered about, one shoe, lying upside down, only inches from the door.

“Is this from her packing in such a hurry,” Emily asked her husband, who was looking just as gob smacked as she, “or does she merely always live like this?” It seemed an impossible level of mess for the short period the Dowager had been given to gather her belongings—and a highly inefficient way of finding what she wished to take as well.

Benedict looked at her helplessly. “How would I know?” he asked. “I hardly spend much time poking around my mother’s bedchambers. I’m not best pleased to be doing it now.”

That was...a fair enough point and reminded them of their mission to boot.

“Right,” she said briskly. “You take this side, and I’ll take that one?”

He nodded, and they separated, the intermittent banging from the broader house useful in keeping them apprised of the Dowager’s whereabouts. Emily began at the woman’s dressing table—the rooms did not contain anything remotely resembling a writing table; no doubt that would have made things too easy—and almost immediately stuck her hand in spilled pot of some kind of cream.

“Ugh,” she said in disgust, wiping her hand on a nearby handkerchief which she sincerely hoped was clean. She took considerably more caution as she returned to searching the table.

The top of the vanity was filled with detritus of cosmetics and hairpins, scattered so randomly that Emily felt compelled to send up a prayer for the Dowager’s maid, who no doubt deserved triple her regular salary. The first set of drawers she checked were similar, filled to bursting with hairpins, several unpaired gloves, a loose handful of pennies.

It was the table’s bottom drawer where Emily found the papers, loose and crumpled,

clearly thrust inside with no regard for order. She pulled a crinkling stack into her lap and began to read.

Many were bills—the amount the woman spent at the milliners alone was honestly staggering—others clipped articles from gossip rags, frequently making oblique references to the Dowager Countess herself. Each time Emily came across a letter, her heart leapt, but skimming revealed them to be correspondence with Priscilla's small group of friends, each of whom worked to outdo the others in terms of cruel observations about other members of the ton.

Emily was just beginning to give up hope when she found a small, worn piece of paper far at the bottom of the drawer, lingering beneath the other discarded papers where it had no doubt sat for years.

The Dowager's handwriting, never the neatest, was cramped and scrawled in a way that seemed to indicate her rage during the writing. Several things were crossed out and amended, this particular paper evidently a draft of whatever letter would eventually be sent. Even so...

"Benedict," Emily called quietly. "I think I have something."

He was at her side in a moment and together they read the halting, incoherent missive.

G—

You are making a mistake. Please come back If you do not heed me, you will regret it. I know Believe me, If you do not listen, I can take everything from you. Everything you love, everything that matters. You have hurt Wait until you see what I can wreak. Your life will be a living hell. Your family, your career, it will all disappear, and then you will be left with no choice but to turn back to me. The truth

will come out. I know you still love me. Let our love be known! My darling, we cannot hide in the darkness any longer. Your title Our reputations will recover, but my heart will not. Cast me aside, and I will ensure you suffer the same pain as I do. Nobody will ever

The paper cut off then, the frayed edges leaving the last few words illegible. Benedict swore.

“This doesn’t give us any more information than we had,” he gritted out in frustration.

Emily didn’t answer, her eyes scanning over the page again and again. There was something—something there that niggled at the back of her mind, that she knew would burst into an idea, into understanding, if only she could grasp at it.

And then she did.

Your family, your career, the letter said. And then, crossed out, Your title. And, the final nail in the mental coffin, Our reputations.

After all, what did a man with a family have to fear of his reputation for dallying with a widow? Even if he was married, such a thing would make for little more than idle gossip though it might make the fellow’s marriage uncomfortable. But fearing for one’s reputation was a woman’s burden...

Unless the career that was mentioned was one that relied upon reputation. A career that let a man—a titled man, a man called G—rely upon his good name, upon his reputation, upon the notion that he was a respectable man with a respectable family.

“Graham,” she whispered in shock.

Benedict, who had been about to return to his own search, whipped around to look at her.

“What?”

“Graham,” she said again, the pieces falling more firmly into place as she spoke. “This letter is threatening the Duke of Graham—a man with a family, a career, and a title whose reputation would be damaged by a scandalous affair.”

Benedict’s face was shocked then grim then resigned.

“And Grace Miller’s father,” he said with a quiet, horrible finality.

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Benedict was grateful that, in the end, he did not have to order his mother to be bodily hauled from the house. He would have done it—he could not remember ever being so angry in his entire life as when he saw that handprint written in stark red against the pallor of his wife’s shocked face.

But he was grateful that the need did not arise. He’d had more than enough conflict with his mother for a lifetime.

And yet, it seemed unlikely that conflict was at an end, given what he and Emily had discovered the day prior in his mother’s papers. They’d sat up late into the night, discussing what to do from there.

“I do wish you’d let me go with you,” Emily fretted now as he shrugged into his jacket and accepted his hat and walking stick from the butler.

“I know,” he said gently, transferring his affects to one hand, so he could reach out and stop her from anxiously twisting her fingers with the other. “But there truly isn’t a rational reason that I could offer. Coming to Graham myself for a business meeting makes sense—we aren’t opposed to one another politically, and he’s a big name. But if I brought you along with me, he’d know I was there for something else before we even got in a room together, and I don’t want him to be prepared. I want to see how he genuinely reacts when I ask him about the letter from my mother.”

“I know,” she returned, abandoning her handwringing to nibble at that plush bottom lip of hers. “I do know, really. We discussed it all. It’s just?—”

“Worrisome?” he offered when she cut herself off. She nodded miserably, and he

smiled. He was a cad, no doubt, for enjoying it while his wife was clearly so distressed, but there was no denying that he was flattered by her concern on his behalf.

“There’s nothing worrisome about it,” he reminded her. “If anything, Graham is the one you should be worried over. He’s about to learn something that will doubtless shock him terribly.”

“I suppose that is true,” she allowed, not sounding terribly convinced. “But you will be careful, won’t you? And you will come back at once and tell me everything?”

“Of course,” he assured her. Returning to her had quickly become the very top of his list of priorities. It had come upon him almost without his noticing, but he trusted her implicitly, and that was so comforting—so safe—a feeling that he wanted to have it as much as possible.

He’d realized it when he’d seen the altercation between Emily and his mother and known, in an instant, without the vaguest doubt, that Emily was not to blame. She hadn’t even needed to deny it. Her face said everything, and she hadn’t ever lied to him—not by word or by deed.

In fact, he thought with an inward chuckle as he kissed her swiftly goodbye, his initial complaint against her had been an excess of honesty, particularly regarding how she felt about him and his attitude.

Even as their interactions had grown less fraught and more pleasurable, she’d not gotten any less forthright, not even when she was angry with him. She’d not been vindictive, either. Instead, she’d laid her concerns simply and plainly at his door. And she’d been right to make those complaints, by and large. He had been holding his mother’s actions against all the members of her sex. He had been ungenerous when initially refusing to help chaperone her sisters.

It was annoying to admit, but it was true. Or, rather, he found it didn't even annoy him that much, not when he saw the gratitude in his wife's expression when she thanked him for his apologies or when she praised his willingness to rethink his perspective on things for her benefit.

Emily's sweet smiles made it all worth it, he'd found.

He spent the short ride over to the Duke of Graham's residence thinking about his wife's smiles—and the other delightful expressions she made while he pleased her in their bedchamber—finding such musings infinitely preferable to the task he was set to undertake.

It was only when he arrived at the Millers' home and presented his card to the butler that he forced his mind back to the subject at hand.

It was not Frederick, the Duke, who first greeted Benedict, however; it was his son, Evan.

"It is you!" Evan exclaimed, crossing the parlor where Benedict had been instructed to wait so he could clap his friend affectionately on the shoulder. "When Dobson said you were here, I couldn't believe it, let alone when he said you came to see my father. Were you actually looking for me? How did you even know to find me here? I just stopped in for tea."

Benedict swallowed hard, certain his smile looked more like a grimace. Evan, like many young noblemen whose fathers were in good health and unlikely to shuffle off this mortal coil any time soon, preferred not to abide indefinitely under his parents' roof and instead let a small suite of rooms in the boarding houses maintained for the bachelors of the ton who lacked their own properties.

"I'm afraid the rumors are true, Ockley," Benedict said, striving for lightness in his



tone but not quite managing the thing. “I’m here to see your father. Matter of business.”

He cursed his stupidity at not considering that Evan might be here. Telling the Duke that Priscilla had possibly been involved in his daughter’s death was bad enough—but telling his oldest and dearest friend that a member of Benedict’s family had led to the loss of his beloved little sister? It was unthinkable.

A shadow crossed Evan’s usually affable face, and for a moment, Benedict feared that he’d somehow given himself away. But the flicker was only passing.

“Right,” Evan said, early ebullience notably muted. “Of course. I just— Do be careful, Benedict,” he said, the rare use of his given name making Benedict take note. “Politics can take over one’s life if you let it.” He smiled, clearly trying to force his joviality to return. “And Emily’s a grand girl, but I don’t know that she’s cut out to be a political wife.”

“You’d be surprised,” Benedict returned without thinking about it. “And don’t call her by her given name, you blackguard. Show some bloody respect.”

This made Evan’s grin shift, the coercion leaving behind an effortless entertainment.

“I knew it would be like that,” he said smugly.

Before Benedict could push his friend to explain himself—and before he could argue with the voice in his head that said he knew exactly what his friend meant—the Duke of Graham entered the room, an air of immovable confidence surrounding him. This sense of his, the notion that the man in front of Benedict could accomplish anything he set his mind to, had made Graham an unparalleled politician, one who had more access to the Crown than any other parliamentarian save the Prime Minister himself.

“Lord Moore,” he said, inclining his head briefly, his voice smooth and unbothered by the unexpected intrusion into his home from a near stranger. “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

Evan’s expression had, once again, grown strained. “I’ll leave you two to it,” he muttered, already making his way toward the door. The Duke scarcely acknowledged his son and heir. Benedict allowed that it likely could not be easy to live with a man whom the whole of Britian regarded as a force to be reckoned with.

But now was not the time for Benedict to fret over his friend; he had graver matters to attend to than the troubles that went on between fathers and sons. Not when his own parent had caused as enormous wreckage as she’d apparently done.

“Your Grace,” he said with an exacting bow, “thank you so much for seeing me on such short notice.”

“Of course, of course, my boy,” the Duke said affably, waving Benedict over to a seat. Benedict tried not to wince at being called a ‘boy’ at his age; perhaps it was natural for the Duke, given that he had a son who was Benedict’s contemporary. “What can I do for you? Have you a bill you’re planning to put forth this session?”

Benedict inclined his head slightly, offering a faint, apologetic grimace.

“I’m afraid that I’m here on rather a more personal matter, Your Grace,” he said. The Duke raised a curious eyebrow but did not otherwise react. “Am I correct in saying that you know my mother?” he asked, aiming for delicacy. As this was not his natural way of doing things, the words felt clumsy in his mouth.

No doubt it was because he was a consummate politician that the Duke did not react to any detected awkwardness.

“Priscilla Hoskins? I do know her,” he allowed casually, no hint of discomfort in his features. “Though I cannot say I know her particularly well. I know her more in the way that one knows a contemporary; we travel in the same circles, have attended many of the same parties, but have no close personal acquaintance.”

Oh good, Benedict thought sardonically. He had so hoped to be forced to explain every sordid detail.

“Well,” he said, feeling as uncomfortable as he ever had in the whole of his life, “you are aware that she was, er, associated with Theodore Dowling?”

At the mention of the dead villain’s name, a shadow of pain crossed the Duke’s face. He turned aside for a moment, as if he needed to pause to collect himself. When he spoke, however, his voice was steady.

“I did hear of that,” he said. “I gather she was taken in by the rogue. Poor thing,” he added, indicating that he truly didn’t know Priscilla as nobody who knew her—not even those who liked her—would refer to her as a poor thing.

The Duke turned back to face Benedict fully. “I am afraid that I don’t see why you have brought this to me, Sir,” he said, not unkindly, though his voice was stiffer than it had been previously. “As you may imagine, I still find it...difficult to discuss the terrible events that took my daughter from us.”

“Of course,” Benedict murmured. “And do let me express how very sorry I am to drag this matter back into the present. I know that Lady Grace’s loss is extremely painful for your family. Ockley still speaks of her fondly and often.”

The Duke’s expression flickered, too quickly for Benedict to fully parse his reaction. Again, he wondered what was going on between father and child that would make a mere reference discomfit this polished man.

“Forgive me for indelicacy, but—do get to the point, My Lord.”

“Yes, of course,” Benedict said again, clearing his throat. “The thing is, I have uncovered letters between yourself and my mother that are...indelicate.”

The Duke’s brows arched in the picture of surprise. “Do you know what?” he muttered, eyes darting as he thought. “I had nearly forgotten about that.” His gaze cleared, became piercing. “Yes. There was an incident, several years ago. Your mother—and I beg your pardon for speaking so unflatteringly about her—approached me for a liaison. I rebuffed her. She did not take kindly to the rejection.”

Benedict huffed a humorless laugh. No, she wouldn’t, would she?

“May I assume,” the Duke went on, “that this is the indelicacy to which you refer?”

“I do not relish speaking so frankly,” Benedict began. He really, really did not. He would have preferred almost any conversation under the sun to this one. “But, to clarify, the letter we found was more threatening than, ah, intimate.”

The Duke’s brow furrowed. “Yes,” he said. “I remember such a thing. ‘You’ll regret turning me down’ and the like?” Benedict nodded, and the older man sighed. “She did send something like that; after the first missive, I returned the others, unopened. Eventually, she stopped sending them, and I assume she’d moved on...” He trailed off, then looked at Benedict with wide, wide eyes. “And she did. To Dowling. I remember being relieved at seeing them together as I thought it meant that she had forgotten all about me. And I quickly moved to other concerns because it was only a month or so after that when Grace—” He broke off, clearing his throat violently.

There was a long, painful moment where the Duke remained silent. He was uncharacteristically hoarse when he spoke again.

“I never thought the two incidents were related, but... Well, we assumed it was Hawkins, you see? And then by the time we learned it was Dowling, learned that we’d all been tricked by him, it had been so long since I’d heard from Priscilla, so I never thought...”

This time he trailed off so slowly that Benedict wondered if the other man had forgotten he was not alone. Benedict was just about to stammer an awkward apology and leave when the Duke whipped his head back around.

“But you think,” he said, a faint note of accusation in the words. “You think she had something to do with it. With my daughter.”

Benedict sighed. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “I suspect. I have learned that my mother was apparently blackmailing Dowling, and when we discovered her letters to you as well...” This time it was Benedict’s turn to trail off. “The coincidences seemed too great,” he finished.

The Duke’s laugh was shockingly bitter. “Coincidences,” he echoed. “Coincidences and clues and hints. It was supposed to be over,” he said savagely. “With Hawkins. They hanged Hawkins, and we were meant to have time to heal—not that a parent can ever come back from that sort of thing, you understand. To lose a child at all is an unspeakable tragedy, but to lose a daughter like my Grace—a shining example of a girl who had been protected and coddled and adored by all—to have that child snatched out from under your nose when she it meant to be safe?” He shook his head. “It defies comprehension.”

Benedict understood how the Duke had gotten such an ardent political following. Even his regular conversation carried the cadences of a rehearsed speech. The man was visibly bereft and utterly sympathetic.

“I am sorry,” Benedict said. “Not just for speaking of this painful matter, but for my

mother. I should have?—”

“No,” the Duke interrupted gently. “You are not responsible for what others do. You are your own man, Moore. That is all you can be.”

“You are too generous.”

The Duke shot him a bittersweet smile. “For all that I have suffered great tragedy, I have been blessed enough to see generosity from a hundred different sources. It is no recompense for what I have lost, of course, but the sympathy of others, their kindnesses, has proven a great solace in hard times.”

It was painful to watch an upright man like this one relive the most dreadful thing that he must have ever experienced. Benedict, certain he would get no more answers from this avenue, felt suddenly desperate to leave, to hold his wife close to him and offer prayers of thanks that she had not been snatched away.

“I’m going to confront my mother,” he promised the Duke. “I’m going to find out the truth.”

The Duke’s eyes flashed a warning. “Do be careful,” he cautioned. “Someone who could commit such a hideous crime, someone who could manage to hide it for years, leaving two men dead for a crime they never committed...someone like that would be very, very dangerous, indeed.”

This seemed, to Benedict, to be an expression of grief leeching through Graham’s good sense. Benedict was going to confront his own mother, after all, not a madman wielding a cutlass. Even if she was guilty of these dreadful sins against Lady Grace and her family—and he suspected she was—she’d not dirtied her hands herself.

But correcting the Duke seemed pointless as well as unkind, so Benedict let the

matter lie. He stood, offering a polite bow.

“I thank you for your concern,” he said. “I apologize again for intruding on your day; I shall be happy to see myself out.”

And then he left, finding himself counting the seconds until he saw Emily again.

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Fidgeting was terribly unladylike, but Emily could not stop her knee from bouncing restlessly the entire time Benedict was gone. It was silliness, she knew—he was headed off to have an uncomfortable conversation, not to march off to war—but she couldn't help it. She would not feel right again until he was back home where he belonged.

So she bounced and paced and squirmed, throwing decorum to the wind, not even stopping when it started to clearly make the footmen twitchy.

And she cared not a whit for propriety when, upon seeing her husband cross the threshold, she threw herself directly into his arms.

To her mild surprise, and in contrast to the reassurances he'd given her before he'd left, perhaps an hour or so earlier (though it had felt like a year to Emily's anxious mind), he clutched her with equal fervor.

When she pulled back to look at his face, she saw his heavy brows drawn down in a clear expression of distress.

“Was it so very dreadful then?” she asked quietly.

He huffed a ghost of a laugh. “It was that,” he confirmed. “But let us go inside, so we can speak in comfort and in privacy.”

Benedict's idea of ‘comfort and privacy’ turned out to mean sitting upon the bed, Emily nestled between his outstretched legs, her back leaning heavily against his front, his arm around her waist. She had no objections to the position though she did



struggle to keep her attention off the place where his manhood, evident in his well-tailored breeches, pressed nicely against the round of her backside.

That was for later, she told herself sternly. They had more important matters to deal with for now.

“So your mother did threaten him,” she summarized when Benedict reached the end of his recounting. As he’d spent the entire time rubbing his thumb hypnotically against the curve of her stomach, she felt it best to place a checkpoint on her comprehension. “But after he saw the first one, read it was a threat, he started sending them back directly?”

“So I gathered,” Benedict confirmed. Point one for Emily’s higher mental faculties even when beguilingly tempted.

“That means the timing is correct,” she mused. The scrap of paper in Priscilla’s drawer hadn’t been dated; they’d been relying on its depth in the drawer to suggest its age. “All of this coincides with Grace’s murder.”

Even after all these years, the words Grace’s murder burned in her throat.

“It’s damning evidence,” Benedict said with a sigh.

“If she hadn’t turned the thing around into violence, I’d almost feel bad for her,” Emily mused. “Not that I do,” she added hastily when Benedict made a strangled noise of protest. “But there was this one bit in the letter where she wrote ‘You still love me’ and then crossed out the ‘still.’ It’s almost like she realized, no matter how deep she got into her fantasy of the thing, that he’d never loved her to begin with, so she couldn’t argue that it was ongoing. It’s really rather sad.”

“I’d be more inclined to sympathy if she didn’t hire a murderer in revenge—and

strike you in the face,” Benedict said acerbically.

“Well, one of those is rather different in scope than the other,” Emily pointed out reasonably, “but yes, I take your point.”

They sat in silence for a long, quiet moment, each seeming to understand implicitly that they needed to draw strength and comfort from the other. Benedict continued to stroke his thumb over Emily’s middle, slowly moving toward her hip, the move at once soothing and arousing.

“I hate her for this,” Benedict said lowly, his voice agonized. “I hate that I’ve only just gotten up the wherewithal to send her away, and now, I have to go back. I hate that she is the kind of person who I could even suspect of such a thing, let alone one who likely did it. I hate her for not being better when she has scarcely ever been presented with a reason to be so selfish, so conniving, so awful.”

Emily turned her head, so she was nestled more firmly into the crook of his neck, and breathed in the warm, masculine scent of him.

“Will you be angry if I say I hate her, too?” she asked, her lips caressing his pulse. “I hate that she was not what you deserved, and I hate that her petty jealousy likely stole my beloved friend from me.”

“No,” he murmured. “I’m not angry with you. Never with you.” He reached up, pressed his fingers beneath her chin, and tipped her until he could press his mouth to hers.

Emily wanted to say more, wanted to say that she, too, could not be angry with him, not any longer, wanted to say that he’d stolen her heart despite his commandments to keep it safe, wanted to ask him if there was any hope that he might come to care for her in return. Didn’t it feel as though he did when he spoke to her thusly? When he

kissed her thusly?

But the words were frightening, and his kiss was drugging, so Emily let her questions fall back down deep inside her, let herself be tugged away by pleasure until there was nothing left but the effortless joy of being held in Benedict's arms.

Benedict squared his shoulders and held his wife's hand firmly in his.

"I shouldn't have brought you with me for this," he muttered for about the dozenth time. "It's no place for a lady."

She gave him an unimpressed look. "It's a dower house, Benedict. It is quite literally designed for ladies. Besides, we've been over this."

"Hmph," he said sourly.

The truth was, he was pleased to have Emily beside him. She was smart, adept at managing difficult people, and might see things that Benedict missed, blinded as he could be by the years of animosity between himself and his mother. Not to mention that she, too, deserved answers; it was her friend who had been the helpless victim of Priscilla's cruel machinations.

And, he admitted privately, he felt stronger with her at his side. He had to be capable not only for his own sake but for hers, too. It was a responsibility he took seriously and one that, he had been surprised to find, brought him a great deal of happiness.

"Let's go," Emily said, tugging lightly on his hand. "No sense drawing out the unpleasantness."

"Very well," he agreed, not without some lingering reluctance. He approached the door, keeping Emily angled slightly behind him just in case, and knocked at the front

door.

The maid who opened the door looked enormously surprised to see him, which Benedict supposed was fair. Despite Priscilla's ranting about being thrown out into the cold, friendless streets of London, the dower house was a highly respectable property in a fashionable neighborhood that was staffed by a small party of servants. It was not the robust staff that Benedict enjoyed at Moore Manor, but Priscilla was far from needing to cook and clean for herself.

The staff here had all worked originally at Moore Manor, however, which meant they all knew perfectly well the animosity between the Dowager Countess and her son, the Earl.

"My Lord," she greeted, quickly blinking away her shock. "And My Lady. Oh, pardon me, the footmen are shifting furniture. But do come in, please."

Benedict gave the girl an encouraging smile, even though he was inwardly wincing at her nervous attitude. He hadn't considered that his mother would take her ire out on the staff though of course he should have. Priscilla had always loved to bully others.

Well, that was another oversight he intended to correct today. And perhaps he'd send all the servants who had been exiled, however temporarily, to the dower house on a short, paid holiday as thanks for their suffering.

"That's quite all right," he reassured the girl as she led them to the parlor. "Can you please fetch my mother at once?"

"Of course, Your Lordship, Your Ladyship," squeaked the girl, bobbing a hasty curtsy before scurrying off to do as she was told.

The Earl and Countess of Moore waited in cautious, unified silence for the arrival of

Priscilla Hoskins, suspected murderess.

They didn't have to wait long. The furious rustling of skirts announced Priscilla's arrival seconds before the woman swept into the room, nose high in the air.

"When that mousy little girl told me my son was in the parlor, I nearly asked her which one before remembering that there was only one in this little hovel," she complained. Damn it, but Benedict's headache was already forming.

"But I suppose you are here to finally admit that you've wronged me and return me to my rightful place. Have you grown tired of that odious little bluestocking already?" She did a dramatic double take, as if just seeing Emily for the first time. "Oh," Priscilla said flatly, "you've brought her along."

"For what it's worth," Emily offered mildly, "I don't think I'm quite learned enough to be a bluestocking. Though I thank you for the compliment to my intellect."

Priscilla looked like she wanted to spit. As much as Benedict got a perverse thrill out of how easily Emily irritated his mother, he wanted to get this over and done with.

"Mother," he said, putting on his most authoritative tone, "sit." He gestured at a settee.

"I don't know why you think you can order me about," Priscilla sneered. "This isn't even your house; it's mine."

Property laws being what they were, this absolutely was Benedict's house, but as his mother sat anyway, he decided not to press the issue. Not when there were so many more significant things to address.

Though, he noted without humor, his mother did elect to sit in an armchair rather than

taking the spot he'd indicated. She would be difficult in the most minor ways, of course. Bloody typical.

He remained standing, using his height to his advantage as Emily sat in the place he'd initially indicated for his mother. As she passed him, she reached out slightly so that her fingers brushed his hand. The gesture did not go unnoticed by Priscilla, who looked disgusted.

"So is this what you're here for?" she scoffed. "To flaunt your little union before me? I'm sure you're pleased with yourself; you've got him wrapped around your finger," she said to Emily.

Emily, whose capacity for cool headedness (with all opponents excepting Benedict) was truly a marvel, shrugged a shoulder.

"I'm quite pleased though not in the way you're implying," she said easily.

"That's not why we're here," Benedict interjected. He didn't like his mother's attention on Emily. He really should have left her home, not that she'd have allowed it. "We're here to discuss your threats against the Duke of Graham."

This visibly surprised Priscilla, who reared back in surprise before covering up her reaction with a blandly haughty look. "Graham? I don't know what you're talking about," she said primly. "I scarcely know the man."

"That is not true," Benedict corrected. "You see, I've spoken to the Duke?—"

"You spoke to Graham?" Priscilla asked eagerly before frowning as she realized that this undermined her claims of innocence.

"—and he confirms that you sent him threatening letters when he rejected your

advances,” Benedict went on, speaking over her.

If she’d looked surprised before, Priscilla now looked as though she’d been slapped. “Rejected my advances? Is that what he said? That I pursued him—that nothing ever came of it? That’s not true, not at all. He went after me; we carried on a passionate affair. We loved one another! And then he threw me aside like I was nothing.”

Benedict glanced over at his wife, who was looking at Priscilla with a distinct look of pity, her lips pressed into a thin line.

“We have a copy of your letter threatening him,” Emily said, the words nearly gentle. “Threatening to harm his career, his reputation—his family,” she said with the finality of a magistrate’s hammer striking a life sentence.

Priscilla was looking wildly between Emily and Benedict now. The look was dramatic, to be certain, but it lacked the usual self-consciousness of most of the Dowager’s acts of martyrdom. She seemed genuinely distressed. Benedict was beginning to see Emily’s side of things—this was a bit sad. His mother had apparently invented some elaborate narrative in her head that was entirely in conflict with the facts.

“He was meant to come back to me,” she whined. “He was mine.”

“He’s married,” Benedict said shortly. “He was never yours. And he certainly would never have deigned to look your way again after you had his daughter killed.”

“I didn’t kill her!” Priscilla shrieked. “Theo killed her!”

“At your command!” Benedict insisted. “And then when another man swung for the crime, you blackmailed Dowling because you knew who had really killed Lady Grace Miller.”

“Yes, I knew!” the Dowager snapped, looking more and more unraveled every second. She barely resembled the woman Benedict had long known now, appearing like a cornered wild animal, snapping pointlessly as it was pursued by hunters. “And if I blackmailed Theo into coming back to me, what did it matter? Hawkins was already dead. The Miller chit was already dead. There was nobody who stood to lose more—nobody except me.”

“How can you say that?” Emily asked, sounding horrified. “How can you make this about you when my friend was murdered for nothing but petty jealousy?”

There was a mad glint in Priscilla’s eye as she looked at Emily. It made Benedict want to sidle between them, to block Emily from his mother’s gaze, but he didn’t want to discourage whatever further admission she seemed on the brink of making.

“Nothing? Nothing you say. You don’t know how right you are; Lady Grace was nothing. All you shiny girls are nothing. You’re born to be nothing, bred to be pawns. You’re fattened up like calves destined for slaughter, fed stories of love and happiness. But I tell you—none of it is real. None of it. If you ask me, the Miller girl was lucky. She left this world while she was still the ton’s brightest, shiniest star. She didn’t see what it was like to be cast aside, used up, forgotten.”

Benedict was disgusted. “You won’t be forgotten now,” he said, the words low and pained. The truth had to come out, much as the part of him that abhorred scandal hated to admit it. But he could not hide it. Not this.

Priscilla did not heed his words; she was still fixed on Emily.

“You’ve already seen it,” she said, a bitter smile around her lips. “You were a wallflower, a reject, and outcast. You had to become a slattern just to secure yourself a husband. You don’t deserve a merciful ending...but you don’t deserve your happiness, either.”



And then, before Benedict could fully process the implications of these words, his mother plunged her hand down into the side of her chair, the one she'd insisted on sitting upon despite Benedict's direction. She pulled out a stiletto, its long, thin blade glinting in the light.

And then, in a flash, she threw herself at Emily, knife held out before her.

The world slowed, eternities passing between each heartbeat. Benedict lunged in turn, but he was too far away, too slow. He watched, his body alight with anguish, as Emily's eyes went wide, as she screamed. Her hands came out in a defensive position; she lurched to the side, away from the attack.

And then Priscilla was atop her, and Benedict, that one, crucial moment too late, got his hands around his mother, grabbing her skirts and her arm to haul her backward, away from his wife.

He'd moved urgently, without finesse; when he yanked his mother back, he did so with sufficient force to send them both toppling to the ground. Benedict slammed his shoulder into the hardwood with enough vigor that it threatened to go numb, but he pushed his own discomfort away. He couldn't let go, couldn't let her hurt Emily. Not his Emily.

It was only when the guards he'd left waiting outside stormed in, summoned by the screaming, that he realized he'd been calling for his wife, again and again, in a hoarse, desperate tone while his mother struggled for freedom atop him.

Firm hands grasped the writhing Priscilla. "It's a'right, My Lord," a gruff, east-accented voice told him. "We've got 'er."

The instant his mother was remanded into the custody of two neatly dressed but enormously burly men, another body collapsed atop Benedict's.

“Benedict!” Emily cried, and her worried voice made his heart begin to beat again.  
“Are you all right?”

He wanted to clutch her, to never let her go, but he needed to see her, too.

“Let me up,” he urged, his hands traveling over her back, her waist, trying to ascertain as quickly as possible that she was whole and hale, not the brutal victim of his mother’s knife. Emily seemed to find it equally difficult to pull herself from his arms but allowed him to lean her until they were both sitting up.

Priscilla’s furious shrieking faded into the background as Benedict took in his wife. Her face was pale, save for the bright, angry splotches of red on her cheeks. But she was mobile, was alert, was checking him over with the same feverishness with which he inspected her. In fact, she seemed entirely unharmed, except...

His eyes froze on the thin scratch above Emily’s collarbone, so small it might have been made by a seamstress’ careless pinning, rather than a near-miss from a deadly blade. He blazed with fury as he saw where a single, precious drop of blood had welled up.

Emily followed the line of his gaze.

“Oh,” she said, craning her neck but proving unable to see the spot, which she traced with her fingers. The drop of blood smudged, already half dried. “Did she get me, then?”

The casual air with which she asked the question made Benedict want to laugh—or weep or perhaps lose his lunch. He wasn’t sure which. He drew her hand away from the spot and grasped her at the back of the neck, pulling her forehead to press firmly against his.

If Priscilla's knife hand landed a few centimeters down or to the left, Emily wouldn't be safe and secure in his arms; she'd be bleeding out, another victim in his mother's wretched quest to make herself important to the men she relentlessly pursued.

"You're all right," he murmured, trying to make the knowledge break through the relentless pounding of his heart, the panicked rush of his blood through him, the fear he could not shake—the likes of which he'd never before known.

"I'm all right," she assured him, her fingertips cool and grounding against his cheek.

Benedict would have been content to stay there for hours, no matter the hard floor beneath them or the insistent throbbing from his bruised shoulder. But a polite clearing of a throat reminded Benedict that there was more to be done before he bundled his wife off home where he intended to not let her out of his sight for at least a week. Likely longer.

Inspector Drummond, an ambitious young member of the London constabulary, gave Benedict and Emily a frown that was both apologetic and businesslike.

"Sorry to pull you away from your lady, My Lord, when you've both just had a fright. But we've remaining business to attend to before we consider this matter dealt with."

"Right," Benedict said, trying to remember that he was an earl, not just Emily's fearful husband. "Yes, of course. I beg your pardon."

He got to his feet then extended a hand to help Emily do the same, trying not to let his gaze linger on where a frayed hole had been punched into the back of the settee, a stark reminder that his mother had attempted to punch such a hole in Benedict's wife.

"What is going on?" Priscilla screamed. The two orderlies were holding her securely,

looking as though they were perfectly comfortable doing such a thing all day, even as Priscilla thrashed to and fro. “Who are these men, Benedict? Release me at once.”

Benedict gave his wife a last squeeze before he let his arm drop from around her, the reassurance more for his own sake than for hers. Emily was, after all, still pale, but the look she was giving the Dowager Countess wasn’t lined with fear but rather disdain.

He stepped in front of his mother.

“You have admitted to conspiring to kill Lady Grace Miller,” he said, keeping his tone carefully emotionless. “As she was the daughter of a powerful peer, that could well be considered a capital offense. I suspect the Crown would perhaps hesitate to hang an aristocratic woman—” After everything, he could not deign to give his mother the title of lady. “—but you would be looking at a lifetime spent in a miserable, dank prison. I have arranged with Inspector Drummond here—” He tipped his head toward the man, who gave a sharp nod in response. “—to have you sequestered in a respectable asylum, instead. These gentlemen—” This time his gesture was to the orderlies. “—will escort you there.”

“Bedlam?” Priscilla shrieked, the noise so loud and so high that it took all of Benedict’s self-control not to cover his ears like a child. The orderlies didn’t so much as blink. Perhaps a strong constitution in the face of furious hysteria was, like endless strength, a requirement for the position. “You’re sending me to bedlam?”

“It is a respectable asylum,” he reiterated. “And, frankly, it’s better than you deserve. Unless you’d prefer prison?”

For the first time in several long minutes, Priscilla fell silent, her chin jutting out mulishly.

“I suspected as much,” Benedict said, a hint of anger creeping into his tone. This was permissible, he felt, as what he really wished to do was scream how could you? until he was blue in the face.

Still, when Emily’s hand pressed gently against his elbow, he let himself bask in the fortifying sensation.

“The inspector will explain your circumstances to you more fully along the way,” Benedict explained. “But this is the last time we will see each other. Goodbye, Mother.”

“Wait, Benedict, wait!” she cried as the orderlies began to pull her inexorably toward the door. “You can’t do this! Stop! Stop!” When they didn’t stop, a snarl of anger crossed her face once more. “You don’t know who you’re dealing with!” she shrieked just before the doors closed on her blotchy red complexion and her disheveled hair.

And then the heavy oak door clicked into place, and her words became too muffled to parse before disappearing completely as the orderlies and inspector took her away.

Not that Benedict was paying any attention. The moment his duty to see this thing through was discharged, he cleared his mind of everything except Emily.

He whirled, crushing her to him as she hugged him back with the same intensity. That blessed, gorgeous height of hers meant that this embrace put pressure on his bruised shoulder; when he let out a little grunt, she pulled back in alarm.

“You’re hurt!” she exclaimed.

“I’m fine,” he said, reaching for her again. “It’s just a bruise.” She danced out of his reach. “Emily, be serious.”

“I am being serious,” she retorted. “That horrible woman injured you.”

“She stabbed you,” he exclaimed. He would have thrown up his hands in exasperation, but, well, his shoulder did hurt.

Emily gave him a pitying look. “I’ve had papercuts worse than this,” she scoffed.

“Was the paper trying to kill you?” he shot back. He couldn’t believe they were having this argument.

Well, he could, actually. Hadn’t they always been like this? Except, unlike when they’d first met, he no longer saw their sparring as an annoyance. Instead, seeing Emily before him, irritable, stubborn, and alive, he felt himself vibrate with that emotion that had been creeping into him for weeks now, the thing he hadn’t dared recognize, let alone name.

Its identity seemed obvious now. Leaving it unspoken would be the act of a fool, and Benedict might be stubborn, but he was no fool.

Even if he did, every so often, let himself be a bit ridiculous over his wife. But who could blame him, really?

“You’re speaking to a physician,” she told him imperiously.

He scoffed—which was, incidentally, the same reaction a physician would have if a man like Benedict came to him over a mere bump on the arm.

“You are speaking to a physician,” he countered. “You’ve been stabbed.”

“I was scratched!”

“Scratches,” he said, “can grow infected.”

She rolled her eyes, the little minx. “So, next time I prick my finger on an embroidery needle, should I seek immediate medical attention?” Her tone was smug, as if this was a deciding answer.

“Splendid idea,” Benedict returned with a saccharine smile. “So glad you’ve suggested it.”

“You are not funny,” she informed him.

“I’m not joking. Step to, now. Let’s go home and summon the doctor.”

“I shall see a doctor if you do as well,” she wheedled.

“Done,” Benedict said, leading her out of the parlor and towards the front door. The servants of the household had abandoned any pretense of doing their jobs, instead just staring, slack-jawed at the exiting lord and lady. Benedict supposed he couldn’t blame them. “But you’re going first.”

“Not on your life!” Emily exclaimed. “You’re going first.”

“I am not; you are.”

They boarded their carriage, and the Earl and Countess of Moore returned home, happily arguing the entire way.

Benedict won, in the end.

“I find it best,” murmured Doctor Forrester kindly as he dabbed at the scratch on Emily’s collarbone while Benedict watched gloweringly on, “in the case of an overwrought husband, just to give in. Consider it my medical advice. Men do like to fuss when they are smitten, but they rarely have any practice in how to do it properly.”

Emily, who had been focused on giving her husband a decidedly unimpressed look, startled and blinked at the doctor. “No, that’s not—he isn’t smitten.”

“Hm,” said the doctor. Then he pulled back. “There you go. It’s too small to bandage, but I’ve cleaned it now, so you should be safe from any threat of infection.” He glanced over his shoulder to where Benedict considered to glower.

The doctor cast his eyes to the heavens, as if seeking divine patience...but Emily noticed that he waited until Benedict couldn’t see him to do so.

“Perhaps avoid any needlessly dirty locations until it’s healed. Tomorrow, or perhaps the day after,” he added with a clearly patronizing air.

Emily stifled her smile.

She could not help but gloat the tiniest bit, however, when Benedict ended up with orders to keep his shoulder in a sling for at least a week. Preferably two.

It was only her inherent grace and tact that kept her from rubbing that in her



husband's face with far more force. The poor dear was injured, after all.

When Doctor Forrester left, looking like a man who did not at all consider his time well spent, Emily pasted on the expression of a doting, concerned wife.

“Oh, stop it,” Benedict said. “I can see what you’re thinking.”

“Merely of your speedy recovery and good health, husband,” she said sweetly.

He fixed her with a look.

“Come on, then,” he urged, beckoning her forward. “I shan’t rest until I’ve checked you out myself, never mind what that doctor said. I did not feel he was suitably concerned for your health.”

She assumed this was a transparent excuse to get her to snuggle up beside him right up until she was snuggled up beside him, and he used his good arm to push her back, so he could probe delicately at her scratch with the fingers on his good hand.

“It doesn’t hurt?” he asked worriedly.

Something about the tenderness in his face, the way his expression crumpled inward to peer with intensity, the way those heavy, dark brows became unspeakably soft as they looked at her—it made her heart shatter in a way she feared she’d never be able to repair.

“Stop,” she said brusquely, pushing his hands away roughly. “It doesn’t hurt. I’m fine.” She stood, crossing to the small collection of decanters he kept to one side of his study. “It’s been a difficult day. Shall I pour you a drink?”

“No,” he said slowly, seeming confused. “Emily, what?—”

But he broke off when she poured a drink anyway then brought it to her lips and knocked it back without so much as a shudder at the sharp taste of whiskey.

“Emily,” he said again, this time his voice heavy with concern. “Come back here. Please.”

It was the please that did her in. She couldn’t refuse him when he looked faintly hurt, when he held out his hand to her beseechingly.

She crossed the room and put her hand in his, even when it felt like the simple act ripped her in two.

“My darling,” he murmured, drawing her again into his embrace. “What’s wrong?”

She pressed her hand to her mouth, failing to stifle a sob. Benedict’s expression quickly became alarmed.

“My sweet girl, what is it?” he pleaded, cradling her close. She put up a feeble resistance even as she sank into his embrace. And wasn’t that the problem? That he gave her reason to hope even as he’d made himself quite clear...

“Please stop,” she wept. “I can’t bear it.”

“Can’t bear what?” he asked, reaching up to wipe tears from her eyes. “What’s wrong? Tell me, please.”

“Can’t bear,” she said, her voice catching and hiccupping as she tried to speak through her tears, “you coddling me and being so sweet when we have those wretched, blasted rules in place!”

Benedict’s brows were at their most expressive today; now they were, again, painting

a picture of confused concern.

“Rules?” he echoed.

“Yes!” she burst out. She was starting to feel rather angry, now, which she frankly preferred. It was easier than wading through the deep, sucking sadness that threatened to pull her underwater. “You forbade me to allow any love between us, and I cannot do it!”

For a moment, the words, which she’d practically shouted, hung between them, echoing through the space. Benedict, likewise, looked momentarily frozen, and Emily feared that this was the end of any loveliness between them. They’d return to that distant, stiff way of interacting with one another, would be husband and wife in name only.

And it would be so, so much more painful than it had been before since now she knew how good it could feel to have him close, to see his smiles, to know his mind.

Though perhaps she did not know his mind at all because when his surprise faded, he smiled.

“Emily, my love,” he said, gazing at her with such warmth, “those rules are the bloody stupidest thing I’ve ever let leave my mouth.”

This was plain English; the words themselves made sense. Yet Emily could not for the life of her parse their meaning.

“I—what?” she said. Confusion was a nice respite, she decided, from anger and grief. She oughtn’t have asked him to clarify then she might have stayed pleasantly baffled forever.

“What I mean to say,” he continued, his voice steady and calm, “is that I made those rules thinking I could not trust you because I had thought I could not trust any woman. You were right, what you said to me—I had allowed my mother’s poison to affect how I viewed all women. That was unfair, as you said. And when I realized that I’d been wrong about that, it made me realize that I was wrong about other things as well.”

He raised his uninjured arm, bringing his palm to cradle her cheek. And even though she wasn’t yet certain what he was really saying, even though she still felt terrified that her heart was destined to be broken by this man, Emily could not resist leaning into the touch.

“I’ll never trust my mother, darling. She’s broken that—not only today but for years and years before that. But those are her crimes, her sins. And you—” He leaned in to press a lingering kiss to the cheek he wasn’t still caressing. “You, my wonderful, marvelous girl, are nothing like her. You, I trust.”

Emily’s chest was heaving with exertion despite sitting still. His trust was not nothing—on the contrary, it meant the world to her. But it wasn’t what she longed for, not what she truly needed.

“My heart knew it before my head did.” He was stroking his thumb against her cheekbone. It made her want to cry. “When my mother accused you of attacking her, I knew instantly it wasn’t true. My lazy mind got on board then,” he said with a chuckle. “But it made me realize that my feelings for you go deeper than trust.”

“They do?” she asked, the words the barest exhalation, as if speaking too loudly would blow away the feathery blossoms of hope that were beginning to sprout within her.

“They do,” he confirmed. “You must know—and I know I’m remiss for not saying it

before now—Emily, I love you.”

And Emily burst into loud, noisy tears.

Benedict looked like he was on the cusp of apoplexy.

“What!” he yelped. “No, Emily, darling—it isn’t bad! It’s fine if you don’t feel the same—well, not fine, I’d prefer if you did, of course—but you needn’t cry?—”

“Of course, I love you too,” she said through her tears. “I’m just so happy I can hardly stand it.”

“You do?”

“I do,” she sobbed.

“And so you’re crying,” he muttered apparently to himself. “I shall never understand women.” Even so, he let her snuffle through her reaction for as long as he could bear—which was, ultimately, not very long indeed—before gathering her against him again.

“Come now,” he soothed. “Enough of that.”

Slowly, she managed to get herself under control then shot her husband a watery smile. “I love you,” she said again, feeling that he deserved to hear it while she wasn’t dampening his jacket.

“I love you, too,” he repeated. “Now, come here, would you?” He grabbed her—with both arms—and tried to hike her onto his lap.

“Benedict, your shoulder!” she exclaimed.

“Fuck my shoulder,” he said, settling her astride him. “I have more important things to worry about.”

And then he kissed her soundly until arguing with him was the furthest thing from her mind.

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:38 am*

“Whoever decided that weddings have to be boring?” Amanda groused as she watched her twin exit the church with her new husband to the customary polite smattering of applause. “If I were organizing things, they’d be a great deal more fun.”

“Rose had a nice time as did Mr. Cartwright. By the by, remind me to be present for every single second of your wedding planning,” Emily remarked mildly as she beamed at her little sister, who practically glowed with happiness.

Amanda (who was at least offering some light clapping of her own) snorted.

“Don’t hold your breath. I have no intention of following you and Rosie down the aisle anytime soon, no matter how much the two of you look so sickeningly happy all the time.”

“I wouldn’t call it ‘sickening,’” Emily retorted as the guests at the very rear of the church began to shuffle about, gathering their possessions and preparing to leave. As family to the bride, she, Amanda, and Benedict were in the frontmost pew and would not have room to depart for some time yet. Emily wasn’t worried; even if Rose and the besotted Mr. Cartwright beat them to Moore Manor, where the wedding breakfast was set to be held, the staff had everything well in hand.

“I would,” Amanda returned with feeling. “The other day, when Rosie and I were over to tea, and you were all—” She affected a high falsetto that Emily felt was not an authentic representation. “Benedict is so wonderful; he’s such a good husband; I adore him so much.” She gave a full body shudder. “Repulsive.”

Benedict, who towered easily over Amanda, stuck his head into the conversation. “I’d

love to hear more of this, little sister; please, go on.”

Of all the things that Emily had not expected from her marriage, top of the list was perhaps the quick rapport that had blossomed between her husband and her most mischievous sister. Given the way Emily and Benedict had come together, this could have been a situation rife with jealousy or awkwardness, but instead, the two had fallen into such an easy sibling relationship that it was hard to imagine they’d ever interacted in any other capacity.

Or, rather, it would have been hard to imagine if Amanda didn’t remind Benedict of it endlessly, hoping to make him flustered. It had worked once or twice, but once he’d figured out her game, he’d started merely giving her an imperious, arched eyebrow in response.

Amanda found this perfectly hilarious.

“Pff, no,” Amanda told him dismissively. “Your ego is quite big enough, thank you very much. You don’t need any help from me.”

He frowned at Emily. “I think my ego is fine.”

“It is,” she reassured him.

“That,” Amanda said, pointing at Emily, “is why your ego is outsized. You’ve got this one eternally puffing you up.”

Benedict gave her an indulgent look. “I’m sorry; weren’t you talking about how you plan to have an unconventionally fun wedding? Apologies for distracting you from that fascinating topic.”

Emily glared. You traitor, she said silently.



His eyes grew wide. It's every man for himself with your sister, he replied, also without words.

"No," Amanda corrected, rolling her eyes with fond exasperation. "We were talking about how I don't intend to get married for quite some time as I plan to have all sort of other kinds of fun, first."

"As your elder sister, I am not remotely comforted by this notion," Emily murmured.

But she was smiling. Amanda often reminded her of Grace, a comparison that was less painful now that they finally knew the whole truth behind Grace's disappearance. Thinking of Amanda that way also helped Emily remain calm in the face of some of her sister's more creative antics.

Whatever response Amanda opened her mouth to make (which would no doubt make Emily nervous, especially to hear it uttered while they were in church) was cut short by their opportunity to shuffle out into the late spring sunshine. They hurried to return to Moore Manor for the wedding breakfast which was a delightful, lighthearted affair despite the way Emily's father kept grumbling about Mr. Cartwright's lack of title.

Lord Drowton ignored his eldest daughter's covert efforts to get him to stop with this line of conversation—it was hardly appropriate anywhere, let alone at the couple's wedding celebration—but was not nearly so dismissive of whatever his son-in-law said to him in a quiet, aside moment.

"Thank you," Emily whispered when her husband returned to her side.

Benedict gave her a tight-lipped smile. "You're welcome, my love. I can't say I care for the fact that your father won't listen to you without me having to interfere, but you know I am always happy to stand at your side whenever I'm needed."

Emily didn't have anything to say that Amanda wouldn't have categorized as nauseating, so she merely slipped her hand into his and gave it a squeeze. That said all she really needed to say, anyway.

Benedict, in any case, was gazing placidly out at the center of the party where Rose was talking happily with an attendee and Lionel, at her side, was gazing at his new wife with naked adoration.

"Besides, Cartwright might not have a title, but he's far from insolvent. Beneath that bookish exterior is a brilliant mind for business. Not to mention that he clearly would throw down his life for your sister. I'm not sure I've ever seen the man smile before today, and now, he can't seem to stop," Benedict observed.

"And Rosie seems so happy, too," Emily said in agreement. Marriage had offered a bit of maturity to her sister...

Though, she noted as she saw the twins exchange a glance that spoke of mischief, it had not erased Rosie's spirited personality. The Terror Twins would continue their reign, apparently.

Emily could not be sorry about it.

"And you, Lady Moore?" Benedict asked, pulling Emily from her thoughts about how dearly she loved her sisters.

"And me?"

"Are you very happy?"

She scarcely had to tilt her head back to look up at him, something she'd come to love. "I daresay Amanda is right, and you are getting quite an ego if you're fishing

for compliments that transparently,” she teased. “But I shall indulge you. Yes, I am wretchedly happy. You see, I once bumped into this simply awful man on a ballroom floor?—”

Her joking recitation was cut off with a laugh as Benedict stepped around her and tugged her by the hand out onto this room’s dance floor just as the musicians started to play.

“Dance with me now,” he ordered. “Tell the rest of the story later. After all, I already suspect it has a happy ending.”

“It does indeed,” she murmured and let herself be folded lovingly into his embrace.

The End?

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:38 am*

"What is happening?" Violet cried desperately as the collectors seemed to tear through the house like a hurricane. "Paul, I do not understand. You need to be honest with me."

Could her brother not see the tears in her eyes? Did he not care about the utterly dreadful impact that he was having on her? Violet was starting to worry that she was never going to be able to get through to her brother, just as she had never been able to make her father understand the damage that his gambling addiction had on the family, and on her.

"That was Mother's!" Violet cried as the men carried out a vase that had always held red roses. A symbol to the mother she had lost at three years of age. "They cannot take that. Paul, you must stop them."

But Paul said nothing. He simply rolled his eyes. "Oh come on, I do not think our parents need any of those things anymore. Our parents have passed away. They will not miss a thing."

Violet gasped in horror at his heartlessness. "That does not make it right, Paul. You cannot say such things. You have not been here for years, you have been gallivanting abroad, leaving me to care for Father. Your returning to London was supposed to be a good thing. I thought I would get help, but look..." She made a sweeping gesture with her hands. "You have made everything so much worse. Your gambling habit is worse than Father's was."

Paul had inherited a lot, including debts, but he clearly did not have a clue how bad things truly were. Their father must have been lying to him about how bad things had

become.

But now Paul was lying to himself and it was making Violet's life even messier.

"It is under control," Paul half whispered, using the mantra that he seemed to live by these days, even if it was not the truth. "I have it under control."

The fact that he had no color in his cheeks and he was not fighting as the last of the family valuables were taken away told Violet everything she needed to know.

Not only did he not have a single thing under control, he had no idea what was going to happen next. Everything that they had left was at risk, and there was not a damn thing that Violet could do about it. Even as her favorite painting was taken away, and the vase collection that belonged to her mother, which she had always treasured, vanished in front of her very eyes.

"Look, Paul," Violet demanded, trying one last time to make him understand. "Please, see what is happening. Dad's antique furniture is being taken. Even he never managed to lose that. You must hear me out when I try to discuss the family finances with you."

"You know nothing about the family finances," Paul growled, his mood switching to pure unbridled rage, which he had clearly decided to direct at the wrong person. "You are a woman. What could you possibly know about anything happening here?"

"I am the one who has been here, Paul." Violet banged her hand hard against her chest. "I am the one who has seen this pattern before, with Father..."

"Do not speak of him." The way Paul acted, it was as if he was the only one allowed to grieve. It was ridiculous. At times like this, Violet found her brother selfish and very immature. "You do not get to speak of Father. Not today."

Violet threw her hands in the air in frustration. "So, what are we supposed to do then? Just be grateful that I still have a roof over my head? Is that it?"

"Stop talking, Violet. Now. I cannot stand to hear your voice any longer."

Paul's sour mood was only going to get worse, and if Violet was not careful, she would be on the unpleasant receiving end of his temper. Usually that would be enough to stop her, but today he had pushed her too far.

"I might have somewhere to live, Paul, but it is not a haven. You can see that. This estate was once blooming and wonderful. Our family has had visitors clamoring to visit Eagleton Manor. But look at it now. It has almost gone to ruin. The building is dilapidated and we do not have the funds or the staff for the upkeep. Now you are emptying out our home, so soon it shall be just a shell that we merely exist in. Is that what you want?"

Paul's eyes glazed over. This was something that he often did when he did not want to hear what was being said to him. This was irritating enough when it came to childhood rules that he did not want to obey, but now their livelihood was at stake.

He was going to have to start paying attention soon.

"I..." He started to speak, but much to Violet's frustration, he seemed to change his mind at the last minute. He cowardly prevented himself from saying anything useful which only riled Violet up further. Why was she always left as the responsible one? It did not seem right. Especially since she was not the one to inherit anything. Nor did she have any real power.

It was as if she had been given all the negatives to deal with while her brother put his head in the sand and acted like they were swimming in positives.

"Paul, I really need you to tell me what is happening here. You have to help me to understand. It is not fair for you to put me in this situation when I have no idea what has gone wrong." She had her suspicions, but if she did not make him admit it, then they would never move forwards. "So, what happened? Why is this happening now?"

Paul hung his head low. He looked like a kid again who would do anything to prevent being told off by their father. There were many times when he had shifted the blame on to other people to save his own neck, but unlike their father, Violet would not let that happen.

But before Paul got the chance to answer her, Violet was interrupted by a light tapping on her shoulder.

"Ivy," she said wearily to the one remaining member of staff Eagleton Manor had managed to hold on to. Although it was clear that Ivy was reaching the end of her tether with the place. Who knew how long they would be able to hang on to her? "Is everything alright?"

"I just..." Ivy bit down coyly on her bottom lip as her cheeks shone pink. As if this whole mess was not awkward enough. "I wanted to know where you would like me to begin today. With all of these visitors in the home..."

Violet cringed. "Perhaps the bedrooms? I have already made up the beds."

It might not have been typical for a woman of her standing to help with the housework, but Violet did not live a typical life. She had to do whatever she could to help Ivy keep the house as presentable as possible, with food always on the table to keep up appearances.

She was currently livid, with anger bubbling underneath her surface, but this was not Ivy's fault. She was not like Paul, she did not take her rage out on the wrong person.

"I will come with you," Violet said with a sigh. There was no point in continuing arguing with Paul because it was not getting anywhere. He would not hear her, he did not want to listen to a single word that she had to say. "I will help you figure this out..."

But before she could get anywhere, Paul surprised her by resting a hand on her arm to silently stop her from going anywhere.

"Wait," he murmured, with an edge of desperation lacing her tone. "I think you need to sit down, Violet. I need to talk to you. Please, stay with me for just a moment."

Her heart skipped a beat.

Was Paul really about to be honest with her? For the first time ever. She did not quite know how to stomach this. Of course she needed to listen to whatever he had to say, this was what she had been asking for, but now that he was seemingly about to tell her the truth, she was not sure that she was ready for it.

"Ivy, I will follow you up the stairs to give you a hand," she said, while keeping her eyes firmly fixed on her brother. "I will meet you in my bedchambers."

Her heart was absolutely thundering against her rib cage as she took a seat in the midst of all this chaos. Paul paced up and down for a couple of moments before he took a seat opposite her. There was a storm raging in his eyes, but this one was melancholy, not anger filled which was much more unnerving. Why did he look so filled with guilt?

"Violet, you are right about the family finances. They are not good."

Of course Violet already knew this, but to hear those words coming from her brother, to have him finally admit that everything was bleaker than it seemed, was shocking.



She did not quite know how to respond to him. Her lips parted, but quickly fell closed once more.

"The debt that I have inherited from Father is overwhelming." Paul's eyes fell on the floor as he continued to talk. "A missive came yesterday from the collectors and everyone that is owed money, and it made me panic. I have never worried quite so much."

Violet swallowed hard. "Paul what did you do?"

"I... I went out last night." His eyes slid closed. "And I gambled. Big."

Violet's heart sunk and her stomach dropped all in one fell swoop.

Paul was worse than their father for gambling because he did not ever win. At least there were times with their father when he would be flush with money, happy, and ready to spoil everyone for a little while. Until it all vanished again.

But that never happened to Paul.

All he seemed to do was lose.

"Is that why everyone is here today? Taking all of our family belongings away?"

Paul nodded, but there still seemed to be an intense weight pressing down on his shoulders. Despite the oppressive air surrounding them, and the desperate need to finally get some air into her lungs, Violet waited where she was to see if there was anything else.

It was not like Paul to tell the truth, so if she was actually going to get anything out of him then she needed to wait as patiently as she could until he was ready.

Even if all this patience was absolutely killing her.

"There is something else."

The hairs on the back of Violet's neck stood up. She clasped her hands together tightly, twisting them around as the anxiety got the better of her.

"Last night, I gambled big. I was trying to win enough to make everything all right again, Violet. I was convinced that I would be able to make everything better. I thought I would be able to save us..."

"But what did you do, Paul?" Violet asked, now warning him that she was about to lose herself. "You need to tell me what's going on..."

"It is the house."

Violet's blood ran ice cold.

Did she just hear that?

She had just been raving on about how they at least had a roof over their head. But now it seemed like that was at risk too? Violet did not even know that a house could be gambled away.

"I lost the house, Violet."

As if she needed that confirmation.

"What do you mean?" Violet begged as she clutched onto her stomach which was now turning like crazy.

"I mean the house is gone. It now belongs to the Duke of Hoskins, a man known for his lack of empathy and compassion. I do not know what we are going to do now."

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:38 am*

"Eagleton Manor is something that we will need to consider," William's land manager commented. "Because we need to see what it will add to your portfolio, Your Grace."

"Mmm, yes," William murmured back, struggling to feign any interest. He was too busy watching the world whiz by.

The carriage started to rumble along the more cobbled roads as it drew nearer to William's manor, which was just outside of London. Hoskins Estate stood as a testament to both opulence and refined taste and commanded a sprawling landscape that seamlessly blended natural beauty with architectural splendor.

The building itself, a magnificent Georgian mansion, boasted a facade adorned with intricately carved stone detailing. Tall, stately columns framed the entrance, leading to a massive front door that opened into a grand foyer. The exterior walls, constructed from a warm, honey colored stone, exuded a timeless elegance that hinted at the estate's enduring legacy.

The expansive grounds surrounding the manor were a masterpiece of landscaping. Immaculate gardens unfolded in a symphony of colors, meticulously manicured lawns sprawled beneath ancient trees, and winding paths led to hidden alcoves and serene ponds. Seasonal flowers painted the landscape with vibrant hues, creating a kaleidoscope of nature's beauty.

"I do not think you want people to be made aware of how you got your hands on the property," Tobias continued, clearly not affected by William's lack of interest.

He was too busy looking at the network of gravel pathways meandering through the

gardens, inviting strolls amidst the fragrance of blooming roses and lavender. Tall hedges, carefully trimmed into intricate patterns, created private alcoves where one could find solace and contemplation. Elegant statues adorned strategic points, paying homage to classical aesthetics.

At the rear of the manor, a terrace overlooked the expansive gardens, offering a breathtaking view of the meticulously designed landscape. The terrace, adorned with wrought iron furniture and draped in climbing vines, served as an idyllic retreat where one could unwind and enjoy the tranquility of the estate.

The back of the manor opened onto a vast expanse of rolling hills, creating a seamless transition from the curated gardens to the untamed beauty of nature. Beyond the manicured lawns, a small, meandering river added a touch of rustic charm, reflecting the manor's commitment to preserving the harmony between manmade elegance and the untamed wilderness.

"Gambling is not something befitting a man of your title, am I right, Your Grace?"

The words tumbled off William. He could hardly hear a thing anymore.

It was William's happy place, he adored his home, but at the same time he could not deny how expansive and empty it felt without his sister there. Since their mother was always sickly and withdrawn as they were growing up, and their father spent most of his time in a bar or a gambling den, William practically raised Catherine.

It had always felt like they were alone, so when both their parent's died it did not make too much of a difference. But Catherine marrying for love and moving out last year had truly left the house feeling much too big and far too empty. It was hard to be there.

"Your Grace, are you listening to me?" All of a sudden, Tobias reminded William

that he was not alone. "We must talk about this new addition to your portfolio in detail."

"Yes, I know," he agreed. "Let us go inside to talk."

But as they left the carriage and approached the building, they were both surprised to see a young lady on the door step, talking to William's butler. And not in a pleasant way, they seemed to be disagreeing about something fiercely.

"Perhaps we should talk later, Tobias," William said distractedly. Possibly a little dismissively, but he was too intrigued by what was happening in front of him. "I need to sort this out."

"Yes, I see." Tobias did not seem too impressed by this idea, but there was no way that he would be able to get William's attention now. "I will head back to the office, and we will meet up to talk about this at the right time."

William barely paid any attention to Tobias as he left. He was too busy moving closer to the woman and his butler, trying to overhear what was happening without them spotting him. He figured he might be able to understand this argument if no one knew he was there.

"...please," the woman begged. "I need to talk to His Grace, the Duke of Hoskins immediately, it is important."

"Like I have said to you, Miss, the Duke is not in the house at the moment, so there is nothing that I can do to help you."

Hastings often used this excuse, even if William was inside, so it did not surprise William to hear this. Especially as it was the truth. William could only assume that Hastings was not impressed with the young lady either. She might have been dressed

in finery, with the stance of a member of the ton, but she was being demanding and unpleasant.

Hastings did not like to be spoken to badly, especially by strangers.

"You do not understand. I need to see the duke as soon as possible."

Much as William was intrigued to let this play out, he knew he should not. Not if he did not wish to let things get out of hand. So, he let out a little cough and stepped closer to the pair, allowing them to know that he was there.

But they clearly were not expecting him, because they both jumped and looked his way.

"Your Grace, you are home at last..." Hasting said at once, all reverence. But the young lady standing in front of him did not seem to get the message.

"Your Grace, thank goodness you are here. I must speak with you right away."

William narrowed his eyes at the woman, noting the intense sparkle in her green piercing eyes. She ran her fingers through her dirty blonde hair before resting her hands on her curvy hips. William was sure that he had no idea who this woman was because he would have remembered that beautiful smattering of freckles across her nose.

He could have quite easily turned her away, since he had no idea who she was, but there was something desperately intriguing about her. She ignited a flame of interest in him that he did not want to dim just yet. He wanted to know more about her.

"You may come to speak with me in my study," he offered. "If this business is quite as important as you suggest it is."

"Oh, I am not exaggerating, Your Grace. This is essential."

William could not help but notice as she shot Hastings a look, displaying that she was pleased with herself for getting what she wanted. Who was this fiery woman? He could not wait to find out more about her. William could not recall a time when anyone had intrigued him quite as much as this stranger.

They walked to his study, and William took a seat behind his mahogany desk and waited for the woman to begin talking.

"I am Miss Violet Lambourne," she said with a cocked eyebrow as if that name was supposed to mean anything to him. He tried to place it, but he could not. "My brother's name is Paul Lambourne, Baron Eagleton. I believe you met him in the gambling den last night, and he gambled away our home. Eagleton Manor..."

It clicked in William's head. He had not remembered the name of the gentleman that he was gambling with the previous night, but he knew that he had won the manor in the bet. Not that he was ever really planning to follow through on taking the house since he had no need for it, despite what Tobias wanted him to think.

But now... well, things had changed a little because he had the very beautiful Miss Lambourne standing in front of him. He was not about to be distracted by her beauty when he was actually a little upset with her. Why had she come and not Paul himself? He had pegged the man for a coward the night before, but this was on another level.

To send his sister in his place, to make her beg for him not to seize the house, it was crazy. It angered William. It was not up to Violet to clean up Paul's mess.

Perhaps there was a way that he could teach Paul a lesson for this, while also making sure that Violet was all right. If William did not take Eagleton Manor, then there was a chance that he would gamble it away again to someone who was not as kindhearted.



Who would not only take the house away, but would also make life for the siblings unbearable.

Perhaps Paul deserved that, but Violet most certainly did not. She clearly had nothing to do with the family finances and the gambling.

"I do not see what the problem is," William replied, feigning ignorance. "I did win last night while playing cards with your brother, and yes, I did win the house. Your brother should not have gambled something he could not afford to lose. Everyone knows that, it is the first rule of gambling."

Violet sighed heavily. Her shoulders slumped forwards ever so slightly as the weight of all of this absolutely crushed her. Instantly, William felt guilty about the way that he was behaving, but it seemed to be the right thing to do. It was the best way he could teach Paul a lesson, to prevent him from making things worse for himself and his family.

"I am here to negotiate," Violet declared, suddenly jutting her chin out with a confidence that perhaps she did not really feel. "About the house, and about us. See, we have nowhere to go and no one that we can stay with."

William shook his head. "I see, and this is something you want to discuss with me? Would it not be better for you to find someone to marry."

That would get her out of the house and somewhere safe. If she married the right man, then she would not have to worry about money troubles for the rest of her days.

"That may take some time," she confessed. "But I am working on it. I do have a few ideas in mind. There is a match maker that I can use, and I do have some leads I could follow..." She sighed sadly. "I had more opportunities before my father died, of course. I debuted and had offers..." William watched as her words trailed off. "I

know it will not be the same now. I am very aware, but I would still like the chance to try."

William leaned back in his chair. "And what will you do if you are not able to find someone? How long am I supposed to give you for this?"

Surprise flashed across Violet's face. It was clear she was not expecting such questions. Perhaps she did not think that she would get this far with him. "I... I am not sure. I am sure it will not take me very long..."

"You are remembering your brother in this?" William asked wryly. "And your family situation as well. It might not be so easy..."

Violet's cheeks reddened. "I will make it my mission to ensure that I am married before it becomes a problem to you. I should not need more than...a month."

The time scale must have popped out of her mouth before she really thought about what she was saying. Betrothals and marriage moved quickly, but without a proposal on the cards it was unlikely to be that fast.

William chuckled. He was enjoying this moment and wanted to tease her further. "So you will not need longer than a month to get yourself a husband?"

"Right," she replied with a fierce determination. "I have no doubt."

While William might not have been as confident as Violet was, it was fun to see the determination glinting in her eyes. Perhaps she truly was one of those people who could achieve whatever she put her mind to. Perhaps he would be proven wrong by her.

"And what if I do not wish to wait for a month?" William asked as he rose up from

his seat to join Violet on the other side of the desk. "What if I wish to claim the prize that I won fair and square right away? It is only right..."

"A month is not too long to wait, to give me a chance to sort my life out after my brother has made a mess of it. I did not ask for this."

William stood in front of his desk, leaning up against it. He had somehow managed to position himself between Violet and the desk without even meaning to. She just had this burning energy that he could not resist. He wanted to experience all of it.

"I guess since you are not the one to inherit your home..."

"Of course I was not the one to inherit Eagleton Manor," she snapped back, the rage flying off of her tongue with every single word. "I am my father's daughter. I cannot inherit anything. If I was born male, then everything would be different. We would not be in this mess now."

William did not doubt it. While Paul was a coward, Violet clearly had the heart of a lion. She was smarter, more switched on to the world, she seemed far superior to Paul. It truly was a shame that she was not the one who had inherited the estate.

"You are being relentless," Violet finally declared as she threw her hands in the air in frustration. "I am starting to see that you will never understand." She rose to her feet with flashes of angry lighting in her eyes. "You are well within your rights to do what you are, I understand that my brother lost Eagleton Manor to you. I just thought that you might have a heart. That you might give me a bit of a chance to sort my life out. But if you are happy to cast me out over something that has nothing to do with me, then I guess it is best for me to depart. I will not continue with a lost cause."

It took all of William's strength not to laugh as Violet stormed towards the door frame in an attempt to get away from him. Of course he was not going to allow her to leave

like this. Not when he desired to be even closer to her...

The only way to get closer to this woman, to see how strong the sizzling tension between them could become, he offered her a life line.

"I will give you time."

William's words halted Violet in her tracks. She turned to face him with open mouthed shock. She was speechless, which William enjoyed. He could not resist following her and standing a little too close to her as she leaned up against the door frame.

He was not expecting to be so struck himself, but as he breathed the scent of her in, he was intoxicated by her. He wanted more, possibly even a little taste of her, so without really thinking about what he was doing, he dipped his head lower until their lips were almost brushing.

Violet clearly did not know what was happening. Her eyes remained firmly fixed on his, but he could see that she was hardly breathing. The tension had her stiff with fear.

With a sly smile playing on his lips, William talked quietly, in a low and husky voice.

"I do, however, have one condition."

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"You did what?" Frederick exclaimed, half in shock, but definitely a little bit in horror as well. "So, you won the manor in a bet, and then you went on to make a deal with the lady of the house so you do not need to receive your winnings right away?"

Frederick Jones always had a smile, no matter what was going on around him. William often thought that he was the complete opposite to himself, yet somehow their friendship worked. It had stood the test of time, since they had met in their childhood years and never had a falling out. His visits were always welcome.

But today, as his friend stared at him in utter shock, it was hard for William not to laugh. He could not recall a time that he had ever seen Frederick look like this.

"That is right," William agreed. "That is exactly what I said."

"I am struggling to understand your motives, William. This makes little sense to me."

"Well, it is not like I need the property," he replied with a one shouldered shrug. "I was not the one who gambled it in a bet. I do not need it right away."

Frederick gave him a knowing look. "That is not the reason, I do not buy that. So, come on. Even if you are unable to tell anyone else your reasoning, you can tell me."

William relented, mostly because he did actually want to talk about what was happening in his life. He needed his best friend to understand him a little.

"I saw the same sickness in Lord Eagleton's face as we were gambling as I saw in my father's eyes. There is an addiction there for sure, which is not Violet's fault. She is

hopeless, a little like Catherine and I were during our childhood."

"But Miss Lambourne is not a child anymore..."

"Yes, Frederick, I know that. But that does not mean she was prepared to lose her home at the last minute like this. It is the least that I can do."

"You are going to great lengths to look after this woman. Is there something more there?"

William shook his head, but that was not exactly the truth. There was certainly something in the way that Violet looked at him which had his heart racing faster. The closer that he got to her, the more intrigued by her he became.

He would not tell Frederick everything, especially the part where he was excited to spend more time with her. His friend would get the wrong idea and assume that he harbored some kind of feelings for her. That was not what was going on here, William would not open up his heart to love because he knew it would not get him anywhere. Just because it suited his sister, being in love was not for everyone. This was just a bit of fun for him. Some entertainment, that was all. No one needed to read too much into it.

"I cannot believe you!"

Paul's voice reverberated loudly around the breakfast table. It was lucky really that they were the only ones in the room, and that Ivy was upstairs so she did not have to witness this. Violet knew that Paul would be unhappy, but she was not prepared for this.

"Why did you do this, Violet? What are you trying to do to me? Why on earth would you think it a good idea to meet with the Duke of Hoskins without me?"

"I already told you, Paul. Because I thought the man might have some heart in him. I thought I might be able to help this situation before it gets out of hand. What was I supposed to do? Just let us be thrown out on the streets with nowhere to go?"

Paul tutted. He did not look impressed at all. "It is not up to you."

"Oh, and what exactly were you doing last night, Paul? How have you been helping things? Because I do not think that I have seen you do a positive thing. I have managed to strike a deal which allows us some much-needed time to get everything sorted."

Paul's cheeks shone red with anger. "You do not need to know where I have been, Violet. I do not need to tell you a single thing. What I do is up to me. I am trying to handle things in my own way. Why can you not see that?"

Violet scoffed. "Gambling is what got you into this mess, Paul. I do not think it will get you out of it. If you are so concerned with making things right, then why did you not go to see the duke yourself? Perhaps you could have been the one to strike a deal with him. I even suggested that you should, but you shut me down and outright refused. Someone has to face the actual problem, Paul. We cannot all sit around and do nothing."

Paul banged his fists down hard on the breakfast table. "Do not speak to me that way, Violet. In case you have forgotten, I am the man of the house now. I am the one who makes all of the decisions. I do not need you interfering."

Violet scoffed, about to snap back a retort just as cutting, when she was interrupted by Ivy standing timidly in the door. She just about managed to catch a glimpse of her out the corner of her eye. Clearly, the maid did not want to direct any of the emotions flooding the room her way.

"Yes, Ivy? Is there something I can help you with?" Violet asked, trying her hardest

to keep her tone even. None of this was Ivy's fault. There was a chance that she would end up homeless and jobless after all of this as well, which was not fair.

"There is a visitor at the door, waiting to speak with you."

Panicked, Violet glanced at her brother. This was a highly irregular time for a visitor anyway, but that was made even worse by the fact that Paul was in such a terrible mood. The last thing the Lambourne's needed was for Paul to be rude to a guest, sullyng their name further. Paul looked irritated, but that fell away once Ivy continued talking.

"It is the Duke of Hoskins. I believe he wants to speak with you both."

Paul paled. "Tell him we will meet with him in the drawing room."

Violet was shocked as she watched Paul rise to his feet. It was obvious that he was trembling with nerves. She had been worried about what had happened in the gambling hall between the duke and her brother, wondering if this was why he did not want to visit William.

She had not sensed that while she was talking with the duke herself, but seeing Paul like this had her panicked all over again.

It was not easy to control things with William when she was alone with him. With her heartbeat rising and her breath getting stuck in her throat. She almost had to leave his study without any deal in place. But she was a lot more certain that it would be harder with Paul in the room.

Especially with her head all over the place, and a shudder of something new and undeniably exciting tearing down her spine.

Still, she had no choice but to follow her brother into the bare bones of the drawing



room, where they would talk with the duke. It was always sad being in this room, remembering what it once was, but knowing that William was about to enter only made the coldness of the room that much starker.

He had an opulent estate. William's office was filled with books and artwork. His home looked like it was lived in. Eagleton Manor had not really looked that way for a long time.

"What was the deal?" Paul suddenly asked Violet sharply. "You never told me."

Panic shot through Violet like lightning. Paul had jumped down her throat so fast that she had not been able to tell her brother everything, and now it was too late to do so. She could already hear footsteps coming towards the drawing room.

William was here. There was no time to say anything.

"Good morning, Lord Eagleton and Miss Lambourne," William declared as he swept into the room. He immediately looked out of place, far too fancy for this room, but he did not bat an eye. It was almost as if he did not see how terrible the room surrounding him was. "Thank you for meeting with me at such short notice. I know it is an unusual hour, but it seems like we have a lot to organize, do you not think?"

Violet smiled thinly. She should have told Paul what the agreement was.

Now, when he found out because William told him, there was no way that Paul would take it well. Chances were, he was going to lose his mind.

"Anyway, what room has been prepared for me?"

William darted his eyes between Violet and Paul, but Violet could only look to her brother, to see what his reaction was going to be.

Paul's face remained blank.

"Ah, I see. Miss Lambourne did not have time to explain what is happening in between your histrionics." Paul clearly stiffened at this, but William continued, taking his silence as an opening to carry on talking. "I will stay here for a month, during which time you will all make arrangements for where you are going to go next. I do not wish for you to be left out on the streets, but obviously after I won the house in the game of cards, you cannot stay here."

It still hurt Violet to hear those words. To know that she was going to lose her home in Eagleton Manor. Much as it was not much of a home, it was the same roof over her head that she had always been lucky enough to have.

But there was no way to change what had happened now. At least she had managed to arrange something to keep her and Paul away from destitution.

But Paul did not look too grateful. He paled and nodded, seemingly accepting this as the best solution for everyone. He was white as a sheet, and Violet was worried that he might vomit, but she was glad that he was not yelling.

The lack of reaction was honestly surprising, but much better than things could have been.

She knew that this was the time to step forward, and to try and make this a little easier for everyone while they got used to it.

"Your Grace, I will show you to your room. Please, come with me."

It was going to be humiliating, taking a duke to the only spare room which had a bed left within in, but Violet had no choice. There was nowhere else that he could stay. Well, aside from his own home of course, but he seemed utterly determined to be here so there was nothing that she could do.

"This shall be your room," she said with a small smile as she made a sweeping gesture with her hands. "I do hope that there is everything you need inside. But please, let me know if there is anything else I can help you with. Anything at all."

Violet would take on that responsibility. She was not going to make Ivy's life more challenging than it already was. It was hard enough for her to keep on top of the whole estate as it was, without Violet giving her more to do. Anything to make this easier for everyone else, she would do.

But instead of turning his nose up at the room, William smiled as if he were very content. Happy almost. "Oh I am sure that I will have everything I need, Miss Lambourne. It is unlikely that I will have to be here for a long time anyway, since you will have a wealthy husband soon enough."

Violet bristled. He did not need to mock her mission quite like this. She could feel his teasing and it was not nice to have someone distrusting her.

"It has only been a couple of days. I am sure I will be quite fine."

"Oh, I see." William smirked. "I thought that you would find a suitable gentleman the moment you took a look into the marriage market. I am surprised it is taking so long."

"Surely, you do not already expect me to have a suitor. You are being silly..."

She let her words fall apart when she realized that no matter what she said, William was going to continue to tease her. But that did not stop her from staring him down as best she could. She wanted him to know that while he held all the power, she would not subside so easily. She would not simply let him walk all over her.

Violet knew that she was going to have to be especially strong because Paul was faltering. The regret for where gambling had left him this time seemed to be silencing him for once. The fact that he had finally lost absolutely everything meant he did not

know what to say anymore.

Violet had never known her brother not to have a lot to say, so this was a real novelty.

Not that she was doing too great at holding her own. There was something about the intensity of William's stare which made her actually lose her balance for a moment.

No one had ever looked at her that way before.

It was hard for her to keep standing tall, but she did it. Defiance was the only way that she was going to be able to handle this whole mess.

William stepped closer to her. Again. It was hard for Violet to breathe when he did that, which she was sure he knew. The last time his lips almost grazed against hers, she nearly lost her mind. Never had a gentleman invaded her personal space like that. And never had she found herself wanting to have a man invade her more...

The air around her became thick and heavy, so warm that she could hardly stand it. A part of her wanted to run away from this man before he made her do something crazy, but another part of her wanted to wrap around William, to explore this feeling further, to know what it would mean. Even if it got them both in endless trouble.

"The month has just started," William told her in a gravelly, husky voice which sent an intense shudder tearing down her spine. Her knees felt weaker than ever, it was almost impossible not to tumble to the ground, making a real fool out of herself, especially with the light brush of his lips to her ear.

"The clock is ticking. You better get that husband ready sooner rather than later..."