



Her Notorious Rake

(Courtships of Acceptance #2)

Author: *Emily Barnet*

Category: Historical

Description: They warned me about him. But I ignored it all, thinking I saw something real. Was I blinded by my own foolish dreams or did I truly see a man worth saving?

Miss Gemma Hayesworth arrives in glamorous London from her sleepy countryside home, eager to temporarily escape her mundane life and experience one dazzling social Season sponsored by her estranged aunt. Craving adventure, can a starry-eyed newcomer find her perfect match amidst the whirlwind of high society—or court scandal when daring to trust the wrong gentleman?

Lord Dalton Blake, jaded rake, numbs his hidden grief behind a daringly reckless facade. He never expects a mysterious lady from the remote countryside to see past his aloof armor. Soon the cynical rogue is risking further notoriety through clandestine meetings with the unconventional lady under the stars. For the first time since tragedy struck, Dalton secretly dreams of embracing reform, hope, and a future full of possibility if only society would allow him to dare reach for the light.

Despite warnings ringing in her ears, Gemma discovers she is helpless against falling for the brooding lord who shares her long-held passion for astronomy. As salacious gossip erupts, Gemma must decide whether her bruised heart can withstand believing that Dalton's sweet words are meant only for her—or if the sinful scoundrel will break yet another innocent heart when the fleeting Season ends.

With time running out, two lost souls trapped between opposite worlds must grasp for trust and everlasting love or else sacrifice a destined bond. Can this star-crossed pair find redemption under the glittering London night skies?

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“Gemma! Gemma, where are you?”

Iris Hayesworth’s voice rang out across the meadow, startling Gemma from her perch on the low tree branch and sending the two kittens on her lap scattering.

“Here, Mama,” she closed her book, *The Castle of Otranto*, with a sigh and swung her legs over the branch, sliding off it into the dew-sparkling grass. Isabella had just fled the wealthy Manfred with the help of a handsome peasant, Theodore, and Gemma could hardly read fast enough. But she had been avoiding the inevitable all morning. Cleaning the house.

Her mother appeared in the garden gate that led to their little cottage, her lips pursed with exasperation. “Gemma, come.” As Gemma hurried up, Iris added, “I’ve just made some biscuits, far too many of them I’m afraid. Once we’ve finished tidying about the house, we ought to take some of the excess over to the vicarage.”

Gemma barely refrained from rolling her eyes. Lovely. Another afternoon of Iris striving to make a very ill-suited match between the young vicar and her, Joseph Jennings. There was nothing particularly wrong with Vicar Jennings, but he was culpable of one very grave sin. Dullness.

Gemma followed Iris inside. The cottage was but an eighth of the size of their London house, and yet, in the past four years, Gemma had come to love every inch of it, from the sun-soaked parlor to the kitchen that always smelled of baked bread, to the garden path where so many cats sunbathed every day. She’d come to adore the garden, the bowers of ivy and jasmine and honeysuckle that on a spring morning smelled like heaven.

“Gemma!”

“Yes, Mama?”

“Did you hear a thing I said?”

Gemma ducked her head sheepishly. “No, Mama.”

Iris huffed. “I was saying that that dreadful Eliza Gardiner is bent upon mortifying herself, trying to set that daughter of hers up with Vicar Jennings. He is a grave man, and I can’t imagine him finding anything particularly...becoming about Margaret Gardiner.” She glanced around as if Margaret and Eliza Gardiner might be just around the corner, ready to spring out.

“On the contrary, Mama. I think that Margaret would be precisely the sort of girl who would suit the vicar.”

Iris stared at her, aghast. “I hardly think so,” she sniffed. “Now, why don’t you run along and make the beds, and I shall sweep in the kitchen—it’s in dreadful need of it. And then we can set off on our walk.”

“Yes, Mama,” Gemma clenched her jaw but forced a cheery smile before hurrying up the stairs to tidy her and her mother’s respective bedrooms. The one thing she missed about the London house was the library, and the telescope that Father bought her for her sixteenth birthday. But of course, the telescope had been sold along with everything else, and Gemma’s heart still ached to think of it. She set her book down on her bed and scurried to and fro, making the beds, stepping over kittens, and becoming distracted with peering out her bedroom window. It afforded a perfect look at the stars on a summer night.

“Gemma?” Iris’s voice rang through the little cottage. “Are you ready? It’s near half-

past eleven and I'd prefer if we made it home for tea."

"Coming, Mama," Gemma called back. She paused to scratch little Udolpho under his black furry chin, and darted downstairs.

"Good heavens, my dear. You would think we live in the American colonies, the way you run about so."

"They aren't colonies anymore, Mama."

Iris waved her hand, scoffing. "All the same, some days I fear you've utterly forgotten your upbringing. Come now, let us be off."

Every time they left the cottage, Gemma could see the flicker of disappointment in her mother's eyes when nary a footman appeared to open the doors and draw a carriage to await them. It had been four years, and Iris Hayworth remained bent upon pretending that they were only here in Willow Grove for but a temporary stay, that any day now, the carriages would return to take them home to London, and that it had all been a terrible dream.

Iris straightened her shoulders, settling a basket of excess biscuits on her arm, and together, she and Gemma set off towards the vicarage. Gemma's dread mounted with every step, until she'd come to a complete stop at the turn of the road that led to Vicar Jennings' abode.

"Gemma, come!" Iris cried.

Gemma took in a deep breath and began to walk again, until they could see the vicar himself working in the garden in front of his cottage. He was tall and tow-headed, with a beak for a nose and perpetually pursed lips.

He could be some sort of praying mantis, stooped over in the dirt, tending his beloved Lady's Glove flower bed. Gemma did not fault anyone for adoring flowers and plants—hardly. She enjoyed a singular passion for the stars and spent night after night gazing up at them. But Vicar Jennings' mind revolved around his garden, much in the way the sun turned about the earth year after year.

Or perhaps, it was the way he ate, spraying crumbs this way and that. Perhaps Gemma should have brought her coat. Most of all, it was the way that the vicar declared novel reading a grave sin every chance he was afforded. And expected her to find this charming.

"Good day, Vicar Jennings!" Iris smiled brightly at the man kneeling in his flower bed.

"A pleasure to see you, Mrs. Hayesworth," He reached up to wipe away the sweat off his brow. His eyes landed on Gemma and his smile broadened. "Miss Hayesworth."

Iris turned her head ever so slightly, sending Gemma a glance that read, "Do be cordial. Or I shall toss your beloved Castle of Otranto into the pond."

"Good day, Vicar Jennings," Gemma chirped sweetly, twisting her hands behind her back.

"May I say, you are looking very well this morning. Very well indeed."

Gemma dipped in a polite curtsy.

"Well, Vicar Jennings, I must tell you. Our cook has prepared pheasant, and it's far too much for just Gemma and I. Really, we would be indebted to you should you come by and join us for dinner." Of course, the fictional cook Iris had devised. She was too mortified to admit to anyone, even the villagers of Willow Grove, that she

ever cooked her own supper. “And she has also prepared far too many biscuits. I must insist you take these.” She held out the basket on her arm which Vicar Jennings took obligingly.

“Ah!” His eyebrows lifted, and his glance flickered to Gemma, hopeful. “I should be delighted to join you for dinner, Mrs. Hayesworth. Miss Hayesworth.”

“Divine. Then, we shall see you at six this evening?”

Gemma grabbed her mother by the arm as they turned and hurried on down the road. “Mama!” she hissed, once they were reasonably out of the vicar’s earshot. “The last time you invited Vicar Jennings to dinner, I cleaned the floors of his crumbs for days. And his laugh—it scares the cats.”

“Gemma,” Iris’s voice was low but no less firm. “When will you understand that a matrimony between Vicar Jennings and you would be most fruitful in more ways than one? I am certain that you only mean to oppose me in this to vex me and fray my nerves.”

“Mama—”

“Enough, Gemma. He will join us for dinner,” Iris peered over her shoulder to be sure that nobody was close by. “And you will be cordial and everything else I raised you to be.” She waved her hand, scoffing. “And I am not certain why you protest so much. You both love books.”

“Very different books. He prefers Fordyce’s sermons, and I read novels. And you’ve heard the way he rails against them at church.”

“Because novels are frivolous. Now, let’s go home and pick out a dress for you to wear. It must be demure, but becoming. Striking, but modest.”

Gemma nearly groaned aloud. But she followed her mother back along the path to their cottage, steeling herself for an agonizing evening ahead.

Dinner dragged on for an abominable three hours, most of which were filled with Gemma trying to make polite conversation, and then suffering through a droning monologue about the principles of sobriety. And although Gemma had never much cared for wine, tonight she considered getting up, finding her mother's bottle of Madeira from the London days, and taking a long draught of it in front of Vicar Jennings.

When it was at last over, and the vicar had gone home, and Gemma had finished putting everything in the larder or in the pig-sty bucket, she retreated to the solitude of her bedroom, changed into her bedclothes, and perched on the window seat that overlooked the garden below. She drew her knees up to her chin, and Udolpho curled up at her feet. Gemma leaned her head against the window frame, taking in a deep breath. She fixed her eyes on the constellation Lyra, a small harp delineated by twinkling stars.

Gemma leaned forward to stroke Udolpho, and he began to purr, blinking at her hazily.

"This can't be all there is," she whispered to him. She told Udolpho everything. It was better than having a diary, because Iris couldn't sneak about and read it. "I don't want to be a vicar's wife. Or, maybe I do...but not this vicar. I know he would throw out all my novels, and I would die an early death of boredom."

Udolpho meowed in concurrence.

"I knew you would agree," Gemma smiled. "Perhaps, perhaps if there was a way for

me to return to London...Mama would like that. And she would forget all about Vicar Jennings.” Gemma leaned down and pressed a kiss to Udolpho’s forehead. “Of course I shall bring you with me. I know Puck and you don’t get on well.”

Across the room, the large, orange Puck rose and stretched, as if he knew he’d been mentioned.

Perhaps wishing upon a star was only meant for fairy-tales. But Gemma couldn’t resist a moment of whimsy. She never could.

His skull might split open any moment. Viscount Dalton Blakemore was certain of it. He swallowed down bile and rolled into a sitting position on the edge of his bed, waiting a few moments for the nausea to pass before he rose to his feet, pressing a palm to his pounding temple. He let out a curse before sinking back down onto the plush mattress.

When someone knocked on the door, Dalton doubled over, digging his fingers into his hair, praying for it to stop.

Presently, a familiar voice reached through the fog swirling in his head. His valet, Wilson, stood at the end of his bed. “Your mother is asking for you, my Lord.”

Dalton blinked several times, trying to clear the haze from his vision. “Pray, convey to her that I shall arrive in no less than five or ten minutes.”

“Of course.” Wilson strode over to the bedroom’s double doors and informed the footman waiting outside, so he could relay the information to Dalton’s mother across the house. And then he returned to assist Dalton with dressing and readying himself.

Dalton stepped over to the dressing table adorned with a mirror to examine himself and paused in surprise at the sight of his reflection. His eyes were bloodshot, more deep-set than he remembered, his face pale and shiny with sweat. He hardly recognized himself.

And he could smell the stench of brandy and gin with every breath he took. The scent seemed tattooed into his very flesh. He'd need a bath before visiting Mother.

"A bath, sir?" Wilson, Dalton suspected, could read minds.

"Yes," he muttered, pouring some water from the ewer. He splashed some on his face and hoped it would improve his reflection. But it did no such thing.

Mother couldn't see him like this. She simply couldn't. Dalton did everything in his power to conceal his flagrant life from her, to shield her from what he had become. It would hurt her too much, especially in her delicate condition, and he needed her to remain in high spirits. Two footmen entered the bedroom, carrying hot water to fill the tub for his bath.

Once the hot water had been poured in, Dalton was divested of his garments and climbed in, sinking into the delicious heat, letting it wash away the night before. He let out a heavy sigh, closing his eyes. For a few blissful moments he dozed before Wilson approached with a bucket to douse him in, and the water coursing on his head cleared away some of the fog in his mind. Not all of it, but enough.

When he had finished with his bath, Wilson handed him a disgusting concoction containing raw eggs, that nearly made Dalton gag. He'd mastered the technique of grinning and bearing through anything, however, as he did now, hoping the remedial effects of the revolting drink would set in soon enough.

"How is my mother, Wilson?" he murmured, handing the glass back to his valet.

“She is doing most well, my Lord. In fact, so well that she is to join you and your uncle at breakfast.”

“She is?” Dalton held out his arms as Wilson set about dressing him, first in his large cotton undershirt, and then his neckerchief. Wilson next slid on his waistcoat and handed him a pair of stockings and starched breeches.

“Indeed. Lady Blakemore’s physician has prescribed her a new tonic, I understand. It seems to have worked wonders on her spirits this morning.”

“A new tonic,” Dalton murmured, as Wilson set about buttoning up his waistcoat and dusting every particle of lint and dust from his overcoat. Finally, it was time for the nearly knee-high boots, which Wilson always ensured remained polished and spotless. He steeled himself for all the scents he’d face in the dining room, praying that his nausea didn’t overcome him.

And then he hurried downstairs, Wilson on his heels.

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“Dalton,” Lady Adelaide Blake, the Viscountess Blakemore and chronic invalid, rose from her seat at the table and rushed over to kiss her son on the cheek. She cupped his cheek in her thin hand, her blue eyes curving into a smile. He managed a feeble smile back. Wilson should really tell cook to abandon embroiling cabbage. “You seem tired, my dear.” She tilted her head, and for a moment, he caught a glimpse of melancholy lurking just beneath the surface.

He reached up and took her hand in his, trying to liven himself up. “A little,” he said lightly. “Nothing that won’t lift as the day continues.”

“My stalwart son,” she beamed, and kissed him on the cheek again.

“Look what the dog dragged in,” Uncle Ernest joked from his seat at the table, lifting his toddy glass in the air. He hardly looked pleased to see Dalton, and Dalton sometimes wondered if Uncle Ernest hoped he would asphyxiate in his sleep one day.

One less complication for him to worry about.

“Uncle Ernest,” Dalton shot him a tight smile and joined Mother at the table. His uncle waved a letter in the air.

“I was just telling your mother news I’ve received of Celeste. She has completed a year at Worthington, and she will be attending the upcoming season here in London. I daresay I will scarcely recognize her. Worthington is very good—they are adept at polishing the unpolished.”

“Celeste?” Dalton squinted, waiting as one of the footmen heaped some pie onto his

plate.

“Celeste, my cousin’s daughter,” Uncle Ernest snapped.

“Ah, right. Your cousin’s daughter?”

“And your distant cousin,” Uncle Ernest added pointedly, his scowl deepening.

“Of course. My distant cousin.”

“I feel as if it has been so long that I’ve taken breakfast in here,” Mother spoke up just then. “I forgot how this room overlooks the gardens so well.”

“And here’s to many more breakfasts such as this one,” Uncle Ernest held up his toddy in a toast.

Mother laughed, and it was such a girlish sound, her eyes sparkling with a light that Dalton had missed.

“You saw your physician?”

“Yes—”

“It is miraculous, this new tonic her physician devised. Magnificent. She’s an entirely new person. You’ve not been in such good spirits since—”

“Mother, how often must you take this tonic?”

“Only a little bit in the morning, and my spirits are wonderfully lifted for the rest of the day. This is my first morning taking it, and already, the difference is remarkable.”

Dalton forced another smile, for his mother's sake. "Perhaps it's time we take a trip to the sea. You always feel better after such occasions."

"Ah, but the season will be in full swing. I must be here to support Celeste," Mother raised her own glass to her lips. "She needs as much fortitude as possible, and with my melancholia gone, I can offer her encouragement."

"Perhaps in late summer," Uncle Ernest smirked.

Dalton shot him a hard look and returned to picking at the food on his plate. He didn't get down more than three bites and excused quickly himself to get a breath of fresh air. Perhaps he should venture over to the fencing court on Old Bond Street.

He thought that it would lift his spirits to see his old friend, Lord Theodore Longworth. A glance at his pocket watch told him that he had just enough time to make it before Theodore's routine fencing practice ended. Theodore followed a strict daily regimen that did not include a night of carousing and drinking until the wee hours of the morning.

Afterward, he would improve with reading, and would then go shooting for a time. Once upon a time, he had joined Dalton in the throes of London sousing, but as of late, he'd taken a more serious turn of mind, and eschewed such wild behavior from his life completely.

Sure enough, Dalton found Theodore engaged in a fencing match with Lord Neville, an elderly gentleman who insisted on frequenting the fencing courts, despite his pitiable lack of agility.

Lord Neville sagged against the wall, wheezing, as Theodore turned at the sound of Dalton's greeting, pulling off his fencing cover. "Blakemore! Have you come to contest me?"

Dalton nearly grimaced, but as wretched as fencing sounded, he would not let a night of carousing get the best of him. “I certainly have.”

Several footmen helped him get ready, and once he was ready, he headed out to face Theodore waiting for him. The match began, but it was over sooner than usual. Dalton gave his head a shake, willing the ache in his head to go away. It didn’t.

“Again,” he told Theodore. The match started again, but it ended when Dalton’s head began to spin, and Theodore managed to strike the winning move.

“Good Lord, Blakemore. I’m afraid your excessive pursuits have made you a poor fencing partner.”

“Forgive me,” Dalton panted, as Wilson supplied him with a towel. “Just, give me a moment.”

“You’re as white as a sheet.”

Dalton shot him a look. “It will pass. I’m just a touch under the weather.”

Theodore rolled his eyes. “Enough. Walk with me,” he jerked his chin towards the nearby doors. “You’re on the verge of passing out. Some fresh air will do you good.”

Once outside, walking the gravel path towards the nearby hedge-maze, Theodore adopted a stern tone. “I fret about you, Blakemore.”

“Fret about me?”

“Now, I beg you to not take offense. But as your oldest—and only—friend, I feel it is my duty to address a concerning matter. The drinking, the gambling. The reveling at that gentleman’s club. It’s going to be your death.”

Dalton set his features into a smooth, unreadable expression, swinging his cane in the air. He clenched his jaw, turning to watch a butterfly dance along in the breeze.

“I know it is all a result of your father, and your dear mother, God bless her. But you are ruining yourself. Abominably. And I shall be accursed if I remain silent and allow such a thing to transpire without voicing my discontent.”

“Longworth, I shall be fine.”

“Verily, you shall find yourself beneath the earth. Or so drowned in debt that you might as well be.”

“I’m not going into debt. I know when to sit out a game.”

“And what of the drinking? You will be apoplectic.”

Trust Theodore to bring brutal honesty to any conversation. Dalton preferred that sort of honesty, but just now he wished his friend would hold off. “Longworth. I shall be fine,” he spoke in a low, measured voice, but to his credit, Theodore dropped the matter. Albeit with a sigh.

“Now who do you suppose that is?” Gemma wondered aloud to no one in particular. She watched a strangely grand carriage pull to a halt on the road in front of the cottage, and a tall, imposing woman emerged from it draped in shimmering silk. She set down her broom with a clatter and hurried out back into the garden, where Iris was pruning some of the rose bushes. “Mama! We have a guest!”

Iris nearly dropped the shears in her haste. She all but ran to the window just as the guest knocked on the door. “Did you see who it was?” she demanded of Gemma in a

whisper.

“She was tall, well-dressed. There’s her carriage,” Gemma pointed at the vehicle. It reminded her of London carriages, which she didn’t even know she missed.

Iris flung the door open and then let out a gasp as she stared, wide-eyed, at the woman standing on their doorstep.

“Iris,” the woman said coolly. She knew Mother?

“Philippa,” Iris stuttered. “We weren’t expecting you.” She let out a shrill laugh, the one she used when she became nervous.

“Well,” the woman plucked at her gloves, straightening them. “That’s hardly a surprise since you likely never read any of my letters. I expect that they’ve all been burnt.” She nodded to the fire blazing in the nearby hearth.

“No—not at all. But I’m afraid you’re—”

“I’m not mistaken. I’ve been writing letters this entire time, and not a word from my own brother’s wife.”

“Brother’s wife,” Gemma echoed, something clicking in her head. “ You are Aunt Philippa? Father used to speak of you often.”

Philippa hurried over to her, beaming. “You have his eyes. Almost an exact likeness.” And his mouth. That is a Hayesworth mouth if I ever saw one.”

“What are you doing here, Philippa?” Iris spoke up behind them.

“Why, I’ve come for tea, of course.”

“Let me go have our cook—”

“Iris, please. We all know there is no cook.”

“But—” Iris sputtered. “But of course there is. I don’t know what you mean.”

“Once you’ve asked your mythical cook to prepare us tea and biscuits, I would like to speak to the two of you about a particular matter.”

“Of course. Yes. I’ll be right back.” Iris’s face was bright red as she scurried off.

Now, it was just Gemma and Philippa.

“I don’t think I’ve met you since I was a small child,” Gemma smiled.

“It is a pity, isn’t it? Now, with your mother out of the room, I must know. Have you received any letters from me? Even once?”

“No, we haven’t.”

“I might have known,” Philippa murmured.

When Iris at last returned, the three women sat around the parlor, sipping their tea and nibbling on biscuits. At last, Philippa cleared her throat. “So, it is my understanding that none of my letters reached you, Gemma. And it is no one’s fault but Iris’s. Be that as it may, the sins of the mother are not shared by the daughter. And I have a proposal that I think you would find most interesting. I would like to sponsor you this season in London. You will stay with me, and I will feed and clothe you, and everything else necessary to make you an eye-catching flower on the marriage mart.”

“You want to sponsor me?”

Philippa looked around. “Didn’t I just tell you that?”

“For a spring season in London?”

“Yes. I will spare no expense. It is about time I mend the ties between our families since my brother’s passing. And what better way than to sponsor my niece.”

Gemma’s vision blurred and she toyed with her sleeves. “You want me to come out into London Society?”

“You are a beautiful young woman—comely, in certain ways. No doubt you would get your share of suitors. Perhaps some exceedingly wealthy ones. Send your letter of acceptance to my address,” and Philippa handed them a piece of paper with her address scrawled upon it in elegant penmanship.

Iris and Gemma exchanged a look.

After a sip of tea, Philippa rose from her table to take leave. “Won’t you stay longer?” Iris asked timidly.

“I’m afraid not. And I don’t rest,” Philippa called. And then she was gone, the carriage rolling out of sight.

But the night dragged on. Gemma and Iris taking their usual spots in front of the fire. Gemma wondered if she would crawl out of her skin. She sprang to her feet, the chair nearly toppling behind her. “What letters? What letters has Aunt Philippa been sending to me? And why are you hiding them from me?”

Iris’s eyes flooded with tears. “I was simply attempting to do the right thing for you.”

She lowered her head, as if ashamed. Gemma closed her eyes, trying to keep her temper tamped down. “What has she been writing you about?”

“I don’t know,” Iris wept.

“Where are they?”

“Burnt.”

“So you did burn them,” Gemma cried. She sprang to her feet and rushed out of the room, up the stairs, and finally into her bedroom, where she sank onto her favorite window seat to once again search for the Lyra constellation in the tangle of stars above her. Regardless of her mother’s intentions, Gemma couldn’t believe she’d been lied to all this time. She had once told Gemma that Aunt Philippa had never wanted to see them again, that she wanted nothing to do with them. And yet, was that all just a fib?

She closed her eyes, trying to steady her breathing, waiting for a cool breeze to brush through the window and relieve her warm skin. It was early spring, but today was unseasonably warm.

And then Gemma sat up, wild-eyed. A slow smile spread across her face and she drank in the sweet, jasmine infused air. I could at last be a London debut. And if I find a wealthy husband, there will be no place for the vicar.

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“Tonight’s ball will be essential in establishing your foothold in this season’s marriage mart,” Aunt Philippa drawled as she circled around Gemma. “And that means perfection. If you can help it, do not rattle on about novels, or the opera. Or anything else, for that matter. Let everything you say leave them wanting more .”

Already, Gemma wondered if she’d just traded in one matchmaking aficionado with another. She straightened her back, lifting her chin and hoping she wouldn’t do anything to earn her aunt’s censure tonight. Though she probably would.

At her feet, Udolpho arched his back, purring loudly.

“I still don’t know what you find charming about that mangy little thing,” Aunt Philippa sighed.

“Udolpho,” Gemma picked the cat up, placing a kiss on his forehead, “Udolpho is my companion. I simply couldn’t leave him in Willow Grove. Mama doesn’t understand him.”

Aunt Philippa raised an eyebrow, and did not return Gemma’s grin. “Put him down, and show me your walk.”

Gemma sighed and put down Udolpho, and began to promenade across the bedroom, doing her best to balance in her uncomfortable shoes.

“That will suffice, I suppose.”

“How many people will be in attendance?”

Aunt Philippa gave her dress a tug, causing Gemma to gasp. “Everyone who matters in London society. I am very well connected. Now, let Rose arrange your hair and put on the finishing touches. I’m going to see how everything is coming along downstairs.”

Gemma sighed with relief when her Aunt Philippa swept out, the very epitome of pomp and circumstance. Rose, the chatty young maid her aunt assigned her, hurried over and began to work on Gemma’s dark hair, arranging it in a becoming style, curling the tendrils around Gemma’s temples and cheeks for embellishment. She nestled brilliants in the coil atop Gemma’s head, and proceeded to apply the slightest bit of colour and touch of balm on the lips.

Gemma blew out a shaky breath, leaning forward slightly to examine herself, tilting her head this way and that. She’d gotten thinner since arriving in London, and she owed this mostly to nervousness, and busyness. She had already attended a handful of smaller parties with her aunt, but they had been with only her aunt’s closest friends, and a whist party here and there. Other than that, she had yet to truly see the social scene that London had to offer.

Udolpho meowed, nudging his head against Gemma’s leg, and she bent down to gather him in her arms. A ball in my honour . Which meant that she would be the center of attention. Gemma’s stomach twisted and she closed her eyes. “I wish you could come with me, Udolpho,” she whispered. In the mirror reflection, she watched Rose smile softly as she lay out her shawl on the bed.

“You will do very well, Miss,” Rose spoke up in her thick accent.

“I would not be surprised if I tripped on my way down the stairs,” Gemma stood, her legs wobbly.

Rose’s mouth twitched. “I doubt you will, Miss.”

“Do stop fidgeting, Gemma,” Aunt Philippa whispered, without even glancing in Gemma’s direction. Gemma straightened at once, locking her arms at her side. She hoped to achieve her aunt’s majestic stance, straight back, a languid way of looking around, as if nothing in the world could cow her. The first of the guests began to filter into the room, and the reception line began to build.

“This is Duke and Duchess Elmore,” Aunt Philippa began with the first couple, a finely-dressed pair. Lady Elmore wore glistening silk and jewels at her throat that glistened in the candlelight. Both of them studied Gemma closely when Aunt Philippa introduced her, and she might have been a pinned butterfly in a glass case, the way they stared. Too freely, too critically. She wanted to run up to her room and hide in there all of a sudden rather than stay here next to her aunt, and endure an evening full of artifice and scrutinizing. Everything about her first debut came rushing back to her in a dizzying fashion, and her thoughts began to run together.

The last time she’d been at a party like this, in a room like this one, she’d just found out about her father’s failing health. His dark moods had begun to manifest, and he’d started to lock himself away for days upon days.

Gemma took a deep breath to center herself. She couldn’t let herself think about that.

“Is something amiss, my dear? You look pale.” Aunt Philippa whispered, before transforming her tone abruptly to greet a young man, “A pleasure to see you, Viscount Standridge. Permit me to introduce my niece, Gemma Hayesworth.”

Gemma just barely remembered in time that she was meant to curtsy.

Viscount Standridge bowed low over her hand, and she didn’t miss the way his gaze flickered over her. Oh yes, she distinctly remembered despising it when men did that

during her debut season.

She offered him a pasted-on smile as the viscount moved on, and Aunt Philippa leaned close to her, whispering, “He makes eight thousand pounds per year.”

Gemma tried to maintain her smile. Eight-thousand pounds or not, he possessed a countenance she did not admire.

Gemma spent what must have been an eternity greeting strangers, trying to remember names, trying to come up with some excuse to return to her bedchamber, to fetch something—anything, really. To powder her nose, perhaps? Or re-apply color to her lips?

She was just about to sink into the crowd, after the last introduction, when her aunt touched her arm. “Oh, come now. I must introduce you to a dear friend of mine. Lord Colin Neville.”

Gemma turned to stare up into an older gentleman’s brown eyes, which crinkled in a soft smile.

“Lord Neville, my long-lost niece, Gemma Hayesworth. She’s been hiding away in the country.”

“Ah yes, the humble little country dweller.” Crow’s feet appeared at the corners of his eyes as his smile broadened. At his temples, she noted touches of gray hair, indicating that he must be well over twenty years her senior. Perhaps even older than Aunt Philippa.

“Oh, Lord Neville,” Aunt Philippa chortled, fluttering her fan. “Do not jest.”

Gemma’s face heated at the man’s rather odd remark. She tried to smile, dipping in a

small curtsy.

“It appears that the merrymaking has begun,” Lord Neville murmured as the ensemble started to play. He turned to Gemma, and bowed again. “Might I have the honour of this dance, Miss Hayesworth?”

Gemma glanced at Aunt Philippa, who gave a small nod, as if hissing, “Do accept his invitation.” She could only imagine Aunt Philippa’s expression should she attempt to refuse.

“It would be an honour.” She curtsied again, and took Lord Neville’s proffered hand, allowing him to lead her onto the dance floor. She crossed the shiny floor to assume her place in the row of women waiting for the dance to begin.

“It is my understanding, Miss Hayesworth, that you have entered London society once before?”

“Ah—yes. Well over four years ago.”

“It is a shame about your father. Permit me to extend my sincerest regrets. Your father was an estimable man.”

“Thank you,” Gemma’s throat closed. She attempted to change the subject. “What is it that you enjoy as leisure, Lord Neville?”

“I thoroughly enjoy a good ride, or a walk about Hyde Park.”

The dancing began, and Gemma tried to remember the steps she’d been relearning over the past few days. Aunt Philippa had been kind enough to bring in a dancing instructor, but the instructor had been wildly exasperated by Gemma’s lack of grace while dancing.

She moved forward, focusing on the placement of each foot, and as she circled with Lord Neville, her hand in his, she held her breath, hoping she didn't trip. So distracted was she by the art of dancing that she didn't hear a word her partner spoke until he addressed her, in an uncertain tone. "Miss Hayesworth?"

Gemma flinched. "Oh, yes." She could do one of two things: pretend as if she'd heard him, or simply ask him to reiterate. "How lovely."

"Lovely?" Lord Neville's pale eyebrows drew together and Gemma's stomach dropped.

"Forgive me," Gemma was thankful for the opportunity to turn away from him, sure that her face had gone beet red.

He offered her a slight smile when she circled back to face him. One step forward, two steps forward, three steps forward...and back.

"Ah," he let out a soft chuckle, something like dismay tugging at his features. "I see that I am boring you. Droning on and on..." he managed a polite smile when she drew close to him again. "Forgive me."

"No, no—forgive me," Gemma blurted. "I truly did not design to ignore you or disregard our conversation. It is merely—I mean—" her face burned hotter until it might have outshone the candelabra hanging high above their heads.

"Never mind," Lord Neville grasped her hand, leading her forwards in the dance procession. "Let us turn to other more diverting subjects. How have you found London this season? Your aunt tells me she means to take you to a concert promptly."

"Indeed she does. She hopes for me to see an Italian opera."

“Pray, have you attended such a concert before.”

Once, with Father. “Yes—but it has been a considerable length of time since then.”

“Well, I pray that you find it a pleasurable experience.”

The dance drew to a close, and Lord Neville bowed low, Gemma curtsying. He had not led her off the floor but for a moment when several young men cornered them, and each asked Gemma for a dance. Her card filled up rapidly, the last dance reserved again by Lord Neville. Gemma found this astonishing, as she had likely insulted him by her inattention. But Aunt Philippa might be pleased, since she evidently held Lord Neville in high-esteem. Her pointed glances when he’d approached earlier indicated she hoped to make a match of Gemma and Lord Neville.

And sure enough, her aunt bustled up to her, drawing Gemma towards the refreshments. She snatched Gemma’s card to examine it. “Lord Neville again?” she gasped.

“Aye,” Gemma smiled, hoping that the evening would take a turn for the better. She just needed to make it through without utterly mortifying her generous aunt or causing her to regret ever bringing Gemma back to London.

“I beg you to refrain from using aye in conversation , ” Aunt Philippa whispered. “Heavens, you’ve been in the country perhaps too long.”

Gemma’s stomach twisted. It was not exactly desirable for us either, to sell Father’s estate, his things, and most of his books. But we were afforded no choice.

A server passed carrying glasses of Madeira—Aunt Philippa adored Madeira, as she’d declared last evening. She plucked one off the tray and handed it to Gemma, before taking one for herself. “Come, now, I see the Nelsons over there. They are

most eager to learn more about you.”

The rest of the hour passed lost in the labyrinth that was conversation with some of London’s premier socialites. The Nelsons were a younger, handsome couple, around Aunt Philippa’s age, and they adored the opera and travel to Venice. They told her all about the Carnevale , before it had been abolished in 1797, although private masked events were still held throughout the city every year.

Gemma wished that such an event could be held here in London. The thought of hiding behind a mask. The sting of her missteps and misapprehensions would be dulled by the anonymity of a face covering. She turned her head and through the crowd spotted a young woman standing near the wall, beside an older man and woman, presumably her parents. She looked as lost and alone as Gemma felt, and at last, she managed to extricate herself from Aunt Philippa and the Nelsons, slipping across the room to exchange her wine for lemonade. The room had become rather stuffy, and she’d prefer ice-cold lemonade to the slightly warm Madeira.

The young woman, it took her a moment to recall, had to be Miss Prudence Harcourt, who she’d met earlier at the reception line. At least, she prayed that she remembered her name correctly. She approached the young woman, whose blond curls were crimped perfectly around her rosy, round cheeks, giving her a cherubic look. Her eyes were lowered to the ground as she sipped her own glass of lemonade beside her parents. They hardly seemed to remember her presence, so absorbed were they in sloshing wine and gossiping with several others.

“Good evening, Miss Harcourt,” Gemma offered Prudence her warmest smile. She dipped in a curtsy, and Prudence returned the gesture, nervousness in her glance.

“Good evening, Miss Hayesworth,” she said in a rush.

Gemma’s mind raced as she searched for something to converse about with Prudence.

“Is this your first season?” She inquired.

“Oh, no. ‘It is my third.’”

“My second,” Gemma told her.

“The marriage mart can be...tempestuous,” Prudence sighed.

“I do think Lady Kenway is in need of diversion these days. I can’t think why else she would think to invite Lord Oliver Hayesworth’s daughter,” A woman’s tinny voice caught Gemma’s attention, and Prudence must have heard too, for her eyes went wide.

“Family or not, it truly is generous of her to put so much time into the girl.”

“As I said, she seeks diversion. The Hayesworth girl is her pet.”

Gemma stiffened, unable to meet Prudence’s eyes. Her face and eyes burned. And suddenly, her stays squeezed into her ribcage, digging into her lungs it seemed. She whispered to Prudence an apology and excused herself, slipping through the guests till she finally reached the doors leading to Aunt Philippa’s extensive gardens.

The kiss of the evening air greeted her, and she closed the door behind her quietly, squeezing her eyes shut. Tears leaked down her cheeks.

And then she tore herself off the wall and hurried down the stone steps into the tunnel of bowers that led from the terrace to the hedge maze.

The nausea of panic rose in the back of her throat, and she struggled to breathe in and out, her heart pounding so hard it made her dizzy. Compose yourself, she told herself severely.

She began to recite in a shaky whisper, “Lyra, Vega, Orion, Andromeda, Cepheus, Cassiopeia...” Gemma closed her eyes, her voice trailing off as memories of Mother frantically telling her to send a servant for the doctor...Gemma telling Mother that all the servants were gone...Mother screaming at Gemma to get a doctor herself then...

She started to recite anew, frantic to keep herself from bursting into sobs. “Lyra...Vega...Orion...Andromeda...” Gemma’s thoughts swam, and she couldn’t seem to summon the next name.

“Cepheus and Cassiopeia.”

She let out a cry when she turned to see the tall figure of a man peeking from around the corner of the bower. He stepped out into the faint light from the house. He extended his hand—a handkerchief, she discerned in the shadows of dusk.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am

Dalton Blakemore breathed a prayer of thanks when he found the terrace, and neighboring garden empty, not a soul in sight.

He hurried down the steps into a tunnel lined by bowers and pergolas that overlooked the nearby pond, fishing in his pocket for his pipe. He needed a smoke, needed to breathe. If he stayed one more moment in that crowded room, full of apoplectic social climbers, he might very well go mad. With a grimace, he at last came to a pause in a bower where the scent of roses hung heavy in the air. The cool spring air against his face was a balm, and he managed to inhale and exhale. He'd been out too late last night. Drank too much.

His stomach still roiled and balked at the thought of food. He stuck his pipe between his lips, holding it there as he pulled out a tinderbox to help light it up.

“ You're going to drive yourself to an early grave, Blakemore.” Theodore's voice echoed through his head.

He grimaced as he lit his pipe, the golden spark blazing vibrantly in the dim garden. Dalton took several draws before exhaling a cloud of smoke through his teeth. As much as he hated to admit it to himself, Theodore was right. It seemed as though each time he went out nowadays, he suffered more than he used to the morning after. As if his body was attempting to give protest. He was weaker these days, always angry it seemed. Always wanting to drive his fist into somebody, anybody.

And last night, he finally had. He had not attended one in years, but someone at a party had invited him—who, he couldn't remember. But it had been a relieving endeavor, somehow, to expend himself not on wine or girls but on driving his fists in

round after round until he was slammed into the floor.

His chin was still rather tender, but perhaps he would attend another. Uncle had been most displeased to see his bruised face this morning. Although he ought to be grateful for those fights. It meant that Dalton wasn't driving a fist into his face.

He tilted his head back, closing his eyes. Guilt pricked inside him as he thought of Celeste, his distant cousin, who he had all but abandoned inside. Uncle Ernest would be most indignant.

A soft tearful voice reached him from nearby, and he waved away some of the pipe smoke, listening closely.
“Lyra...Vega...Orion...Andromeda...Cepheus...Cassiopeia...”

The voice paused, and then he heard a watery sigh. The voice began to recite the names again. Constellations . He'd recognize those names anywhere. Father had instilled in him a love for the stars since his boyhood.

Without thinking, he spoke aloud when the voice paused at Andromeda. “Cepheus and Cassiopeia,” he supplied, and stepped around the edge of the bower to see a young woman standing there against the wall of roses, her face glistening in the dim lantern lighting.

She gasped and drew back when she turned and saw him, her delicate face blanching.

Without even thinking, he reached into his chest-pocket and withdrew his handkerchief. He held it out to her, holding his breath. Her eyes were big, wet, her lips pink, forming a small “o” as she stared at his offered handkerchief for a moment. And at last, she reached out, taking it from him with a soft, shaky breath. When her fingers brushed his hand, a shiver coursed through Dalton, causing his mind to blank. He hastily stepped back, clearing his throat.

He studied her, trying to place her despite the fog hanging thickly over his head. But it was far too dark.

Her doe-like eyes, golden in the dim light, gave him a sense of virginal innocence, and—he ought to take leave. It would not do to taint her reputation, lingering out in this dark garden without a chaperone. But a desire surged within him sharply, like molten gold in the depths of his stomach. He took another step back, before pivoting on his heel and striding deeper into the garden. The last thing he wanted or needed was to be thrust into a hasty marriage.

Gemma slipped back inside the ballroom, her legs still shaking. But her little fit of nerves had ended abruptly when that kind gentleman had appeared and offered his handkerchief. He'd dissolved into the dark garden before she could speak a word to him, attempt to converse, and in retrospect, it was perhaps for the best. But she could still see the delineations of angular, almost hawkish features, piercing eyes beneath dark brows.

Gemma's heartbeat thudded faster as the memory of his fingers grazing her wrist sent shivers through her.

She began to scan the room for a glimpse of him, hoping that somehow, she'd recognize the man from the garden.

Aunt Philippa descended on her before she could. "Where have you been?" Aunt Philippa whispered tautly.

"I—I just needed some fresh air."

"Fresh air? There is much to be done this evening. Come!"

Gemma let her aunt draw her along towards a cluster of people near the grand hearth that roared merrily, dispelling the early spring chill.

The night droned on for what must have been two hours, full of dancing and chatter, small-talk mostly involving this season's concerts and upcoming parties. She learned that one singular case of good fortune had made its rapid rounds through London gossip, regarding a certain beauty of the Ton, who, in the first week, received three proposals of marriage.

"Three," Lady Mary Reid huffed, shaking her head. She was younger than Gemma, but this would be her second season out. Her curls bounced against her flushed cheeks. Her blue eyes flashed. "Can you believe that?"

"And her parents are intolerably pleased, as you can imagine," added Miss Clara Gable beside Prudence. She scoffed under her breath. "They'd regale every soul in England with the news if they could."

A titter rippled through the circle.

"Well, I daresay. Their eldest daughter is an inveterate spinster," retorted Miss Olivia Benson. More laughter.

The word spinster made Gemma wince. Mother had called her this on more than one occasion—at twenty-two, she could hardly be considered ripe for the marriage mart. No, if she were to continue with the analogy, she'd liken herself to a withering flower on the vine.

She turned her head, scanning the crowd for a sign of Aunt Philippa, who chatted nearby with a large circle, the feathers in her hair twitching with every turn of the head.

And then, Gemma froze. There—through the blurring crowd she glimpsed a tall man, perhaps as tall as the man in the garden, dark-haired, severe eyes that flashed into hers. Her head spun, her knees turning to water. It was over as soon as it began, as he pulled his gaze from hers, and the room began to move again. Gemma blinked, shaking herself free of her daze.

Perhaps Aunt Philippa would know who he was.

She managed to extricate her aunt from her circle. “Is something amiss, my dear?” Aunt Philippa whispered behind her fan.

“Forgive me for intruding, but I was—” Gemma glanced over, and found the man again, a glass of wine in his hand now. “I was wondering if you could tell me again who that gentleman is.” Noticing Aunt Philippa’s exasperated expression, she added hastily, “Forgive me. There were ever so many people that I can hardly keep up with everyone’s names.”

“Viscount Blakemore. And do try to memorize as much as you can. It wouldn’t do to have your forgetfulness offending a member of the Ton.”

“Blakemore,” Gemma repeated in a whisper before she could catch herself.

Aunt Philippa frowned. “A veritable rake. He is only here due to his stature and his family.”

“A rake?” Gemma stole another glance in the tall man’s direction. Black hair and heavy brows. A sharp jawline. Vivid blue eyes that had pierced into her in the garden lantern-light.

“Run along now. I see that you are forming connections with the other ladies of the Ton. Heed everything I’ve taught you.”

Everything she'd taught Gemma? She'd rambled on forever about the do's and don'ts of London society, much of it unknown to Gemma. She'd entered society too early, and due to tight finances, Mother and Father had never been able to afford a governess. Which made her something of an outlier amongst people of this ilk.

Balled up in her fist, she still held Viscount Blakemore's handkerchief.

"The gossips are most appalled that you left dear Celeste all alone this evening." Uncle Ernest flashed Dalton a humorless smile, rapping the roof of the carriage to signal they were ready to leave.

Beside him, Celeste made a face and Dalton couldn't help but grin.

"Let the gossips do what they do best," he told his uncle.

It was too dark to tell for sure, but Uncle Ernest must have turned red with irritation.

"Hush," he snapped. "Is everything beneath you? Even keeping Celeste company?"

"I needed a moment. It was rather warm tonight indoors."

"Warm," Uncle Ernest snorted. "You were sick, weren't you?" He smirked when Dalton stiffened. "Yes, yes. The servants tell me things. They tell me you're out at all hours of the night, carousing—"

"Uncle!" Celeste cried.

Uncle Ernest's mouth pinched. He pointed a gnarled finger at Dalton. "I will not have you grieving my sister in law," he spat.

Dalton glared at him. This carriage ride couldn't end soon enough.

Celeste endeavored to dissolve the foul mood, asking Dalton about a popular opera that had just opened this season, a reenactment of Mozart's Marriage of Figaro.

She adored everything about the opera. Dalton forced himself to humor her. It wasn't her fault her uncle was such a...

Be Christian, Mother's voice sighed through his head.

He didn't go out that night when they returned home from Lady Kenway's ball. Instead, he went to bed early, to Wilson's astonishment.

"Bed?" he repeated blankly when Dalton rapped out an order to prepare his bedclothes.

"Wilson."

"Ah—yes, of course. Your bedclothes," And Wilson scurried to oblige.

But once in bed, he yearned for a stiff drink of brandy. Dalton tossed and turned, his mind continuously returning to the young woman he'd met in the garden tonight. Who could she be?

The next morning, Dalton woke as the first rays of morning sun peeked through the curtains, spilling onto his brocade bed cover. For the first time in what must have been an eternity, he roused from sleep without a headache.

After having breakfast he met Theodore at the fencing courts again, and managed to carry on a full match without tiring early.

“You aren’t as pale as the other morning,” Theodore joked. “You seem in much better spirits today.”

“Perhaps a little. I slept well last night.”

“Last night?” Theodore and he paused their fight to wipe at their faces shiny with perspiration. “Did you attend Lady Kenway’s ball?”

“My uncle wished me to be there. To dance with his cousin’s daughter.”

“The scandal sheets are rife with mentions of Lady Kenway’s niece, a Miss Hayesworth. Did you see her?”

Miss Hayesworth...Gemma Hayesworth. Of course—he’d glimpsed her throughout the evening, flanking Lady Kenway most of the time. She was willowy, a bit older than other girls in their second season, but no doubt beautiful, with curly dark hair and—

He froze. Could it be? Had it been Miss Hayesworth in the garden?

The young woman who had taken his handkerchief was slight, just as willowy as Miss Hayesworth, with the same curly hair that clung to her tear-stained cheeks. His heart jolted as he remembered the thrill that had surged through him when her hand brushed his. Her recitation of the constellations...

“Ah—yes. I did make her acquaintance.”

“I expect her aunt has put her back on the marriage mart?”

“It would seem” Dalton managed in a casual tone.

Lady Philippa Kenway has taken a country dweller under her wing. Will Miss Gemma Hayesworth secure a husband this season? Or will she return to her burrow a spinster?

Gemma reread the scandal sheet several times, her heartbeat thudding heavily in her throat. Just as she began to read it for the fifth time, Aunt Philippa, who she had not even noticed enter the room, plucked the sheet from her hands and ripped it into several shreds before discarding it in the fireplace. “It would be most advisable to refrain from reading these rags,” she sighed, patting her hair into place. “You shall only grieve yourself should you continue to do so.”

“Yes. Yes, of course,” Gemma murmured. But her eyes pricked as her mind replayed the exact words she’d read on the sheet.

“I have dwelt in London for many years, and if there is one thing that I’ve learned, it is that people will always crave gossip, something to gasp about. But you must learn to take no heed to any of it. Or else, you shall drive yourself mad.”

Gemma gulped but nodded. “Yes, Aunt Philippa.”

Her mind returned to Lord Blakemore though, she’d tossed and turned all night thinking about him, about his gentle kindness with her in the garden, and how that flew in the face of Aunt Philippa’s evident distaste for him. He’d known the constellations Cepheus and Cassiopeia, and perhaps he too enjoyed astronomy like she did. She scrambled off the settee and begged for pardon from her aunt, that she meant to take a walk in the garden.

Once outside in the fresh morning air, she darted back down the row of bowers to where she’d paused last night in the throes of apprehension, trying to compose herself

desperately. And then, Lord Blakemore had emerged from the shadows, if only for a moment. But in her pocket she'd tucked his handkerchief, and now, in the shadow of the rose arbor, she pulled it out and unfolded it in her palm to stare down at the delicately embroidered initials of D.B.

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Two days later, Gemma had just stepped inside after taking another brisk walk out in the garden. Aunt Philippa swept in, two of her maids on her heels.

“How should you like to attend a Venetian breakfast? They are quite popular here, and your mother wrote me that you have never attended one. But of course, your last season was so brief.” Aunt Philippa’s tone turned softer, a bit jarring from her usual brusque demeanor.

Gemma managed a smile, smoothing her skirts as she rose. “I should like that very much.” Taking walks in the garden helped to stave off the little bursts of homesickness that would descend, usually at night, although having Udolpho here helped considerably. He slept with her every night and when she shed bitter tears at the thought that she wouldn’t see her mother for a good while yet, Udolpho crept into her arms, nuzzling his face against hers.

Even if Mother persisted in thinking she would make a good match with Vicar Jennings, Gemma longed to run into her arms, tell her about the stinging words in those scandal sheets...sit in the garden on these crisp spring evenings, with the kittens tumbling and playing at her feet, gazing at the stars, which seemed harder to see in London.

One of Aunt Philippa’s footmen opened the drawing room doors, announcing the arrival of Lord Neville.

Aunt Philippa and Gemma exchanged glances just before Lord Neville himself appeared. He first bowed to Aunt Philippa, greeting her warmly, and then he turned to Gemma. She extended her hand for him to press his lips briefly. When he looked

up, his cheeks were flushed, his eyes bright as he studied her with little attempt to veil admiration.

Gemma's own face heated as she turned to glance at her aunt whose smile was undoubtedly...delighted. As if something of her own design was unfolding before her very eyes.

"I pray you are well this morning?" Lord Neville inquired in an anxious tone, remembering rather late to release Gemma's hand.

"Indeed I am, Lord Neville," she offered him a kind smile, for Aunt Philippa's sake. It wasn't that Lord Neville was particularly odious, or as lackluster as the vicar back in Willow Grove. It was merely that something lacked in her interactions with him, and she could not very well put her finger on it. Though, she knew that Aunt Philippa would hardly find this amusing. "And how do you fare, sir?"

"Very well indeed. I cannot complain, as the weather has been fair this spring thus far, nary a rainy day to be had as of the past fortnight."

Aunt Philippa nodded to the settees before the fireplace and Gemma nearly sighed, realizing that her aunt wished for her to entertain Lord Neville. But then, Gemma knew that she ought to. Aunt Philippa's generosity had been considerable, and the least she could do was make polite conversation with the older man. Perhaps it was his nasal voice, or the way he studied her so fixedly, as if she already belonged to him. As if Aunt Philippa had promised Gemma to him...

She managed, regardless, and they kept up a lively discussion about the weather, the rain, and he plied her for information about the planting season back in Willow Grove. As much as Gemma loved gardening and missed the garden surrounding the cottage, she struggled to fully enjoy any of the conversation with her visitor.

“I’m afraid I am...uninformed about the farming habits in Willow Grove,” she admitted, when he waited for her to answer a question about the current popular amongst farmers.

Lord Neville chuckled, giving his head a small shake. “Forgive me. I am not certain how, but as of late I’ve been intrigued about purchasing a home in the country, and there find leisure in the art of farming. And yes, I indeed consider farming to be an art.”

“Well, that is quite...admirable, Lord Neville.”

“We take so much from the terra firma that I am inclined to believe that we ought to recompense it to the best of our power. Now, enough about farming. I must ask, Miss Gemma. Would you care to see an opera? The Marriage of Figaro perchance?”

“Well, I—I should like that very much.” Gemma’s mind failed her and did not provide any sort of adequate excuses, anything to say to extricate herself from such an invitation. And moreover, she did not wish to vex Aunt Philippa. An opera would be enjoyable, regardless of who I accompany, she told herself sternly.

“Capital,” Lord Neville grinned.

He departed soon after that, promising he would send a carriage for her and her aunt, and when he had gone, Philippa turned to her, eyes glowing. “Your mother can put to bed her arrangements between that country vicar and you,” she beamed. “Lord Neville is from a very old, very prestigious family, and to connect yourself to them by marriage, why it would be a boon , Gemma.”

Gemma forced a bright smile and stood, excusing herself. “I should like to get some rest for a little while.”

Aunt Philippa nodded. “Of course, of course. Very wise of you. Tomorrow the Venetian breakfast will last much of the day, so there won’t be time for much rest.”

As soon as she reached her bedroom, Gemma exhaled a sigh of relief and sank down into the chair at her vanity, where she began to scribble out a letter to Mother. She told her all about the first fortnight of her time in London, from the parties and whist games to the new friend she’d found in Prudence. She did not include anything about the scandal rags and their flagrant gossip. Should Mother learn what was being printed about her, she might attempt to call her back home. Despite the current state of the family estate, Mother always declared that she could not abide censure, that she would not let the name of Hayesworth go to utter ruin.

Gemma paused in her writing to gaze out the window, her mind wandering back to the formidable man she’d encountered in the garden, with his low, deep voice and piercing eyes.

Dalton pushed open the door of the ill-used study in a quiet corner of the Blakemore estate.

It was large, spacious, but crammed full of his father’s things. He strode directly to one chest he knew by heart, and with a glance over his shoulder, he pressed the key from his pocket into the lock. He lifted the top of the trunk to find within a motley remainder of his father’s passion for Astronomy. He ran his fingers over the mahogany length of the telescope, books and books on everything about the stars, the skies, and mythology. With a sigh, Dalton picked one up and carried it over to a dusty chair by the curtained window. Drawing it open, he was able to clearly read the book in his hands, a detailed codex on the constellation namesakes.

Cepheus, Cassiopeia...

He reached up to push back a strand of black hair from his forehead, taking in a deep breath. The young woman in the garden had seemed to use the constellation names as a means of calming herself, as overwhelmed perhaps as he had felt that night. Too many people, all artifice and pretense, and he'd needed somewhere to flee.

But his throat closed as he flipped through the pages of the book in his lap. He was hardly the same person he had been back when Father taught him the stars, taught him the stories behind each of the constellations. Cassiopeia and her boasting...Cepheus, the Aethiopian king...Orion, the hunter...

If Father were to see who he'd become...Dalton wondered if Father would even recognize that individual. If he would be bewildered by the man he'd turned into. A weak, drunken wastrel, a sot. A layabout who sought escape, who watched his mother sink deeper and deeper into a mire of ambivalence and solitude. Who stood by passively as Uncle Ernest took control of the estate.

But it wasn't that he didn't care. He did. And yet, nothing could ever be simple and straightforward.

Once, Father had declared hedonism to be the root of all evil. Would he turn over in his grave to know that his very own son had adopted such a lifestyle?

Dalton closed his eyes. He itched for a drink, to find respite from these sobering thoughts.

But one drink would lead to another, and he needed...well, Dalton could not be certain what it was that he needed, precisely. He just knew that he yearned to feel himself once again, to not linger adrift as if on an open sea, unaware of which direction the winds and waves would send him. Only the stars to guide him...

And the stars had tied him in a single moment to that young woman, Gemma

Hayesworth, in the quiet bowers. Her soft voice repeating the constellation names haunted him in his dreams.

He was lonely, that was the short of it. It was the only explanation for his fleeting kinship with Miss Hayesworth, for the wild draw to her that made it difficult to breathe.

Perhaps his days of hedonism had run their course. Perhaps...his mind and soul and body pled with him for a change. For something more.

When he returned to the sitting room later that afternoon, he found Mother sitting in there already. Another surprise. He had been shaken by the sight of her at breakfast the other day. Perhaps her doctor's tonic really did have the magic touch.

She sprang to her feet upon his entrance, darting over to him and grasping his arm. "My boy, may I ask something of you?"

His chest tightened apprehensively. "But of course, my dear Mother." He pecked a kiss to her cheek, and she frowned.

"I miss when you called me Mama," she sighed, and Dalton couldn't help but exhale a small laugh.

"Mama," he corrected himself, and she beamed approvingly.

"You might be otherwise engaged. But if you are not, I should be delighted if you were to accompany me to the Venetian breakfast tomorrow."

Dalton stared. He couldn't recall the last time his mother had expressed any desire to attend a social event, much less a Venetian breakfast, which could be tiresome events that lasted the majority of the day.

“But Mother, are you certain? I would not wish for you to tax yourself.”

Mother waved her hand. “I beg you to not fret over my constitution, my dear. It is high time I endeavour to leave the walls of this home, see old friends and acquaintances. Now, you have yet to answer my inquiry.” She cupped his cheek in her small, cold hand.

“But—but of course, Mother. I would love to accompany you.”

“Wonderful,” Mother’s eyes danced. She held up a finger. “And no forgetting. I know you hardly have a chance for repose as of late, but perhaps this would afford you some leisure. You look weary, my dear.”

Dalton tried to laugh. “It is somewhat trying to attempt to manage Father’s estates while at the same time keeping up with this season’s madness.” “Well, I must say that you manage splendidly.”

Dalton kissed his mother’s cheek again, just as Uncle Ernest and his distant cousin Celeste sashayed through the drawing room doors.

“Has your mother, by chance, mentioned a Venetian breakfast?” Ernest wondered aloud, stroking his chin. Dalton nearly rolled his eyes.

“As a matter of fact, she did. It would seem that Mother would like to attend one tomorrow.”

“I must say, my dear Adelaide. It is a pleasure to see you in such improved spirits,” declared Uncle Ernest.

Celeste nodded, her blue eyes bright and sincere. Dalton ignored the prick of guilt for abandoning her the other night.

“And we have just returned with four tickets to the opera. A performance of the ‘Marriage of Figaro.’ That will make a delightful family outing.”

“One of my favourites,” Mother sighed, clasping her hands together in girlish excitement. “Come Celeste, let us find something for you to wear that night.”

Celeste ducked her head, smiling shyly, and the two women left Uncle Ernest and Dalton to themselves.

“Well I daresay we ought to rejoice for this brief, but cherished, renewal of your mother’s spirits.”

“I ought to depart. Meeting my friend, Lord Longworth.”

“I pray we shall eventually become friends. After all, we are family,” Uncle Ernest’s words stopped Dalton in his tracks.

He flashed his uncle a cold smile. “Indeed we are. A pity,” he muttered, before continuing out into the hall, and then out the front door.

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The knots in Gemma's stomach loosened when she caught sight of Prudence in the crowd. She and Aunt Philippa had just arrived at the Venetian Breakfast, held in the home of a prestigious family of the Ton. Many of the men present were holed up in the Billiard rooms, gambling and playing billiards, and Gemma's mouth fell open at the sight of all the food, piles of it covering the tables. Women in colorful gowns flitted about, and soft music played throughout the house. She and Prudence clasped hands, and Gemma's heart lifted. She'd been down since yesterday, her homesickness reaching a terrible crescendo.

But upon seeing her new friend, and chatting with her about books, the delectable flavors of the feast spreading across her tongue, Gemma's mood began to turn.

The room fell silent just as Prudence began to tell her about a new, popular novel about a pirate and his passionate bride.

Around them, people began to whisper, and Gemma heard the word Blakemore bandied in an undertone. Some spoke with a lift of excitement, while others with a hint of derision. It would seem that Blakemore was well known about the Ton. She even heard someone hiss, "Rake!"

She and Prudence exchanged looks and peered as best they could to catch a glimpse of the tall, solemn-faced Viscount Blakemore, on his arm an older woman garbed in black silk. She was pale and slightly built, her mouth as severe as her son's, her features pointed and angular like his as well.

Gemma glanced at Prudence, wondering if she ought to tell her what had happened the other night in the garden. But it was so inconsequential, and she doubted her aunt

would be pleased to hear her bandying about that she'd been alone with a man in a dark garden.

It could scar her reputation, and with the scandal rags talking about her as it was, perhaps it wouldn't be wise to say a word. Not that Prudence would go and gossip, but one could never be too sure in a city like London.

She twisted her fingers in the fabric of her skirt, inhaling sharply when the viscount turned his head, and his eyes met hers. Time stood still, the voices around her fading into the ether as the music reached a euphoric height.

Gemma couldn't breathe.

And then, the moment passed, and he strode forward at his mother's side, leading her towards the host and hostess, Lord and Lady Dunne, for a greeting.

The room remained quiet as they spoke, Lady Dunne's exclamation ringing about the room like a silver bell, "It is a true honour to receive you this morning, Lady Blakemore."

"This is the viscount's melancholic mother," Prudence whispered to Gemma. "It is an astonishment to see her in society today. She rarely leaves her home these days."

Gemma's eyebrows lifted, still reeling from that moment she'd locked eyes with the viscount.

"Why is she melancholic?" she whispered back to her friend.

"Ever since her husband passed, Lady Blakemore has suffered terrible bouts of low spirits and poor nerves. The physicians have tried everything, but she has not shown improvement. Until as of late I suppose."

Behind Viscount Blakemore and his mother walked an elderly man, rather stooped and wearing a wig, and on his arm, a fair young woman. The Viscount's uncle and distant cousin. They had attended Aunt Philippa's ball honoring Gemma.

Lady Dunne announced to the room that breakfast would commence, and everyone began to find seats at the long tables set up in the adjacent dining hall.

The seating was pre-arranged, and Gemma found her place soon enough, thankfully just diagonal to Prudence and Aunt Philippa was seated further down the table. At least she would not be alone, stranded amongst utter strangers. The footmen drew out the chairs for the guests and Gemma lowered herself down, praying she did not somehow make a fool of herself, drop food, or accidentally clatter her fork on the plate. Mother had once declared her perhaps the clumsiest girl in England.

The chair beside her screeched as it was pulled out, and she turned to see Viscount Blakemore lowering himself into the chair beside her. A footman helped him ease himself closer to the table.

Heat flooded Gemma's cheeks as he looked up into her eyes, his lips parting almost in surprise.

Or perhaps, she was simply imagining things.

He gave her a slight smile, as beside him, his mother took her own seat, her profile strikingly similar to her son's.

Gemma stared down at her plate, her heart thudding in her ears.

The breakfast began, footmen carrying platters from those heavily-laden tables and serving them to each guest. Gemma wondered if she'd be able to eat much, her stomach once again becoming a tangle of knots.

“Miss Hayesworth.” His deep voice was but a murmur, yet he was close enough—mere inches from her. Gemma steadied herself and turned to him. He was truly speaking to her? Did he recollect meeting her in the garden? Or did he even know it had been her?

“Viscount Blakemore,” Gemma replied, offering a smile.

Dalton gestured to Mother. “Permit me to introduce my mother, Lady Adelaide Blakemore. I’m afraid she was not in attendance the night of your aunt’s ball.”

“Good day, Miss Hayesworth,” Mother smiled at the young woman. “It is a pleasure to have you back in London this year. How do you find it after being away?”

Gemma flushed, her large eyes a bewitching shade of hazel. “I have missed it, my lady.”

Dalton resisted the urge to reach up and tug at his cravat—it constricted his throat, somewhat. Or had the room just grown warmer?

A footman moved forward, serving each of them a plateful of delicious food. But it was not from excess the previous evening that had subdued Dalton’s appetite at the present moment.

The young woman beside him proved utterly distracting.

She began to nibble on a little piece of cake, and Dalton pulled his gaze back to his plate. When Mother became occupied in conversation with the guests across the table, he spoke to the young woman beside him. “I confess Miss Hayesworth, that I was privy to your recitation of the constellations. The night of your aunt’s ball.”

He heard Gemma inhale softly and he at last lifted his eyes to her. “Did you?” she

murmured.

Dalton dipped his chin in a slight nod, studying her delicate profile, olive skin sun-kissed by too much time outdoors without a bonnet or parasol. The faintest scattering of freckles on the bridge of her nose which he found charming in the extreme.

“My father instilled in me a fondness of the stars,” Gemma continued, with a soft, rather nervous laugh.

Something in him wrenched at her mention of her father. He understood the gutting pain of losing one’s father and watching one’s world crumble as a result. Dalton suspected that his younger self would hardly recognize the person he’d become since.

What would Gemma think if she were to learn of his own passion for the stars?

The meal passed in a blur before the orchestra began to play again and people began to swarm into the adjoining hall, where dancing would begin.

As he and Mother rose, so did Miss Hayesworth, and an idea sparked in Dalton’s head. “Miss Hayesworth,” he turned to her, catching his breath. “Might I have the pleasure of a dance with you?”

Gemma’s eyes widened and she nodded. “It would be an honour, my Lord.” She dipped in a brusque curtsy, and Mother’s eyes pierced into Dalton.

But she stepped back, and when he did manage a glance in her direction, her mouth was curved in an amused smile.

Dalton held out his arm to Gemma and his pulse quickened when her hand slid over his arm, her touch burning through the fabric of his coat. The dance began and they circled one another, her gaze locking with his again, the warmth of her hand in his

sending heat flooding through him. He scolded himself, reminding himself to focus on the dance, to say something.

“So your father instructed you in astronomy. Did you ever use a telescope?”

Her cheeks darkened again, and she pulled her gaze from his once more. “We used to own one.”

“But no longer?”

She gave her head a small shake. “Alas, no. But I will read anything I can about astronomy.”

A shiver ran down Dalton’s spine. He had never met anyone with a matching singular interest in the stars like himself. He took in a deep breath, circling with her again, so close that she had to tilt her chin to look him in the eye. “And you knew the constellations by heart. You spoke the names to me that night.”

Dalton couldn’t help but smile. “Indeed. I have always possessed an interest in that subject.”

Gemma’s lips curved. “Then do you mean to become a Grand Amateur of astronomy?”

“Why—perhaps I should,” Dalton chuckled. “It would be a pleasant diversion.”

Gemma’s expression turned almost dreamy. “Perhaps you shall become this season’s William Herschel.”

Dalton’s heart missed a beat. “Herschel is a fellow I deeply admire. His work advanced Astronomical study by leaps and bounds.”

Her eyes widened. “You don’t mean that!” she cried. “I have always held him in great esteem.” She let out a laugh.

The dance ended, and Dalton blinked, startled that the time had rushed by. He couldn’t recall ever enjoying a dance as he did today.

Gemma curtsied and he bowed, but as she straightened, their eyes locked again and something deep inside him ached. He reminded himself to release her hand, and bid her a good day, before turning on his heel and hastening to the far side of the room. He needed some fresh air.

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Gemma floated off the dance floor, hardly noticing where she walked. Her mind kept replaying those moments she'd rotated within inches of Lord Blakemore, his heated stare, his mouth open as he danced with her. Even his touch had sent comet-like sparks through her, and her head spun as she walked towards Prudence near the refreshment table. Before she could reach her friend, however, Aunt Philippa intercepted her, dragging her towards a quieter alcove.

"Aunt Philippa!" Gemma gasped in surprise. "Is something amiss?"

"I must beg you, my dear, to take heed to what I'm about to say. I understand how perfectly natural it is to be enchanted by a man like Lord Blakemore. But as I advised you the other night, Lord Blakemore is a..." and here her aunt glanced around, her eyes wide, before she lowered her voice even more, "...he is a rake. And I cannot stand by and let you, my dear niece, fall prey to his wiles. You would do well to guard yourself, to not only protect your heart but your reputation as well. You have a promising season ahead of you, with your name, and your beauty to recommend you. But should you attach yourself to Blakemore, well..."

Aunt Philippa sighed heavily, shaking her head. "It would be a great pity, that is all I mean to say."

Gemma took in a shaky breath. Aunt Philippa would know more about Blakemore and London gossip than she could even begin to comprehend. More than ever, mortification flooded her, a hot tide that left her almost sick to her stomach, her head reeling too fast. Lord Blakemore was a puzzle—no, more than a puzzle. He was like some blurry and indistinct star she caught in the sights of her telescope, who she couldn't quite bring into focus. There was the rake he was supposed to be, according

to Aunt Philippa. But then, there was the quiet man who danced with her, a deep sadness behind those eyes that piqued her curiosity.

“Yes, Aunt Philippa,” she whispered, setting her jaw. She was in no position to argue her aunt’s view on Lord Blakemore. She’d only met him twice.

It was unwise to think in such a manner of a man she’d only just met. But more than ever, she wanted to learn more about him.

“Understood, love?” Aunt Philippa asked in a soft but steely undertone.

Gemma dipped her chin in a brief nod. “Yes, Aunt Philippa,” she whispered.

“Very good.” Aunt Philippa patted her cheek. “Now, let us go and try some of that delicious French pasty they’re serving tonight. Lady Dunne is ardent about French food.”

Gemma trailed after her, joined by Prudence who leaned over and whispered, “You danced with Lord Blakemore? Have you heard what he’s called?”

Check to see that her aunt was occupied, Gemma and Prudence drifted to one of the big windows, affording themselves a bit more privacy.

“He is the rake of the Ton, of course,” Prudence whispered urgently. “Half the girls in London swoon over him.”

“Does he ever swoon over anyone?”

“Not that I know of. Presumably, he possesses a heart of ice. He leads ever so many girls into thinking he will court them, and yet he never does. What did the two of you speak of during the dance?”

“Astronomy,” she murmured.

“Astronomy? Do you mean, the study of the stars?”

“Yes.”

“Why should you and he speak of that?” Prudence furrowed her porcelain forehead, tilting her head.

“He knows about William Herschel.”

“Who?”

“Oh,” Gemma shook herself from her daze. “Nothing.”

“I just implore you to take care.”

Gemma smiled at her new friend. “And for that I truly thank you, Prudence.”

Dalton welcomed the cool air against his skin as he walked down the grassy bank to stare at the water. It sparkled in the moonlight, almost mesmerizing. But not enough so that he forgot about Gemma Hayesworth. He couldn't remember experiencing this sort of mad, fluttering sensation bursting to life in his stomach. And he certainly couldn't as of yet remember meeting a young woman who knew of William Herschel. Herschel was of course a popular member of the astrological community. But Dalton hardly expected the girl hailing from deep in the country to know much about such things.

He took a drag of his pipe, exhaling the smoke into the chilly air of the spring night.

His own frosted breath melded with the smoke, rising up into the sky. It drew his attention to the stars there, only partially visible tonight. He tugged at his cravat, hoping to ease the tightness there. Despite the cool air, he was still sweating under his coat. Why, he couldn't be certain.

Grimacing, he lowered onto the grass, sitting on his coattails as he listened to the nightingales singing in the trees and hedges all around.

He eased out a shaky breath and placed the pipe back in his mouth for more of the soothing haze. Maybe he ought to leave early. Join his friends for a night carousing. It had been a week since his last time—something of a record for him these days.

Perhaps this was his body's way of protesting that. Theodore could say what he liked. The chap was something of a prude—always had been. Even in their school days.

But his mother wasn't abed most days, letting her melancholy drain what was left of her health away. His father had not died under strange and disturbing circumstances. So he couldn't possibly understand Dalton's need for such diversion. It simply confounded Theodore, and that explained why he spoke of it in such a condemning manner.

Of course, Dalton used to be a prude as well, once upon a time. But as the years passed since his father's death, he'd watched Mother plunge deeper and deeper into that despair and wondered how soon he would lose his only remaining parent. One night—he couldn't recall exactly when, but he'd had one drink too many, and before he knew it, he'd been careening, lost and drifting.

He lowered his head into his clammy palm. He centered his attention on taking deep breaths and letting them out. That night—it still eluded him how it had all happened, but he must have been out of his senses. He just knew that he craved the numbness it brought him.

Gemma's voice echoed through his head. This season's William Herschel. This, with her eyes sparkling in the candelabra remained in his thoughts. Pink lips curved into a smile that wrenched him. Something so guileless and good in her eyes that he wanted to cry out. Untouched by man or life...

Dalton rose to his feet, flexing his hand at the memory of her fingers twining with his, before returning inside, to pay the required pleasantries to the hosts. His legs ached for a good walk. These days he walked some, but mostly rode—by horseback or carriage. He just needed to stretch his legs, maybe. If he so happened to end up at a place he should not, then so be it.

He needed to forget about Gemma Hayesworth. That was for certain. He tossed out the ashes remaining in his pipe and pocketed it, stamping the glowing sparks on the ground.

He trudged up the slope, pausing for a moment on the terrace to peer inside the room at the glowing faces, searching for a glimpse of that one face...

There.

His breath hitched, and he stepped forward. Through the sheen of gossamer curtains that hung over the windows, he watched Gemma laughing as she wove in and out of the other dancers, her eyes crinkled up, her hair clinging to her forehead in little delicate tendrils. Something about her...he felt himself drawn to her like a bee to honey.

He slipped inside, remaining along the edge of the room. He picked up a glass of wine from a passing footman's tray and took a long sip. His stomach knotted strangely as he watched Gemma get passed from one partner to the next, each one making it no secret that they found her alluring. Who wouldn't, Dalton asked himself.

She was a newcomer amidst the seasoned circles of society, wholly unaccustomed to the intricacies and intrigues that awaited her and he feared they'd tear her to pieces with their gossip, their superficiality, their artifice. Why, they would taint her with it, stain her with their disparaging looks.

London could make even the most glorious hot-house flower wither. He took another sip of his drink, unable to tear his eyes from the girl, hazel eyes flashing into his. The rest of the room faded in that moment, a hazy backdrop against which they alone stood in sharp relief. The only thing he could think to do was tip his chin, lifting his glass in a tacit toast meant for her and her alone.

Her eyes remained locked with his, something in her gaze that stirred him. He managed a shaky smile, inhaling sharply. Forget Gemma Hayesworth? He could only hope it was possible.

When Gemma finished the reel, he slipped through the crowd, intercepting her before someone else could pull her into the next dance. For a moment, her eyes widened with surprise. And then a slow smile spread across her heart-shaped face.

"Lord Blakemore," she let out a breathless laugh, her eyebrows lifting in surprise. "To what do I owe the pleasure of another dance?"

"I hoped to learn what else you knew of William Herschel. I confess myself rather astonished that you've heard of him."

"Pray, why is that?" Gemma tilted her head as she passed him in the next dance, a minuet.

Dalton drew in a deep breath, circling round with her in the complicated steps. She performed them all nearly to perfection, with a fumble now and again. She dug her teeth into her lower lip, for a moment caught up in centering her attention on the

steps. He fought a smile.

When he circled back to her side again, he replied. “My intrigue is owed to the fact that it is uncommon to meet a lady such as yourself...with a singular passion for the stars.”

“A lady such as myself?” her dark eyebrows rose. Good Lord, he was fumbling at this. Which was even more disturbing. What was it about her that left him so...discomposed? So at a loss? He could feel himself flushing.

“I mean—” he stammered. “I mean to say—” they parted again for several agonizing moments, Gemma’s brow furrowed, a thoughtful smile curving her lips. When she returned before him, he tried again. “I have been in London nearly my entire life. And only once or twice, I have come into acquaintance with only one or two members of the fairer sex who took such a...particular interest in astronomy. At least, of those I encountered who visited the salons. And I must confess, they were many years my senior, and their husbands had been scholars in the field. So, I can imagine that is from whence their interest commences.”

“Or perhaps, they truly delight in the study of the stars. That is too a possibility, is it not, Lord Blakemore?”

“Of course,” Dalton allowed. His face had to be crimson at this point.

She shifted the direction of the conversation then, to his relief, inquiring after the Royal Society salons around the city, most often held at Somerset House.

“You ought to attend. If you take pleasure in the study of astronomy, you will find a number of scholars who frequent Somerset House. I must warn you, however. They are eager to secure a patron for their studies. They may attempt to waylay you.”

“I shall have to keep that in mind,” Gemma replied, circling back around to take his hand. He led her forward, and then backwards, as the music floated around them softly. He knew the steps by heart, affording him the opportunity to watch Gemma dance, her laughter contagious as she misstepped once or twice.

Before he knew it, the dance was over. Two dances in one night. Usually, he avoided parties like these if he could help it. With Mother out of society these days, except for lately, he kept his distance from this part of London social life. He preferred the philosophical salons, the gentlemen’s clubs, or the fencing courts. He was hardly the same person he had been several years ago. Until Gemma had arrived in town, the world had been colorless, intolerably tedious. And now...

It had become a sparkling thing once again.

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Ernest Blakemore held up his looking glass, watching his nephew lead this season's country dweller off the floor. He'd chuckled over that bit in the scandal sheets not too long ago, but he had not realized that this giddy little bumpkin had arrested his nephew so extraordinarily.

So, that was what had rendered Dalton so distracted the last few days. Surely he didn't intend to court her? But this was the first time in months he'd seen Dalton at a party like this, much less engaging in a dance with your run-of-the-mill inept person on the marriage mart.

And of course, it should happen now that Celeste was freshly returned from finishing school. Ernest's hand tightened around the glass of port he'd been sipping throughout the evening. Well, should he even be surprised? Dalton was a habitual hedonist.

The most ludicrous thing? Adelaide was utterly blind to it. Of course, she could never see her son as anything but the duplicate of her husband. Dear, dead brother. Always such a dreamer, hardly capable of running an estate. Father had made such a grave mistake, entrusting it to him rather than Ernest.

Turning his head, Ernest surveyed the room, searching for a glimpse of his sister-in-law, and of course, Celeste. Adelaide sat at one of the tables, engaged in lively conversation. And Celeste, the sweet girl was proving to be a disappointment. However polished finishing school made her, it could never transform her vapid personality. She was speaking with several other young women, not even attempting to dance with any of the dozens of eligible bachelors flooding this season's marriage mart. He nearly sighed aloud. Not even golden curls and a fair face could offset a bland temperament.

Not a whit like her mother—both a beauty and a shrewd, remarkable woman. Ernest pulled his mind in another direction, though. He did not need to be distracted. Not by Sophie.

He wondered if Dalton would slip out shortly after, go on another of his late-night sprees. Instead, his nephew lingered, his gaze following Gemma Hayesworth about the room.

He joined Ernest, Adelaide, and Celeste in the carriage once the party finished, taking a seat beside his mother.

Adelaide grasped her son's arm. "I could not help but note that you danced not once, but twice with that sweet Miss Hayesworth we met at dinner."

From his corner of the coach, Ernest studied Dalton's expression. In the flickering moonlight slanting in through the window, he watched his nephew lower his eyes to the floor, his mouth twitching with a foolish smile.

"She is a very kind girl," Celeste spoke up, gratingly blithe. "Very sweet temperament."

"Very," exclaimed Adelaide.

If only you were aware that your beloved, model son is wiling his life away at gentlemen's clubs. I wouldn't be surprised if he had his own courtesan somewhere. Sapping the estate of everything it could be, of everything I could make it.

Ernest ground his teeth, drumming his fingers over the head of his cane and pursing his lips.

"Tasted something gone bad, Uncle?" Dalton was eyeing him, that infuriatingly

sardonic smile replacing his dreamy one. He could never seem to speak to Ernest without that edge of derision lacing each word.

He knows . The thought was lightning quick across Ernest's mind, and he shook it away, a chill going down his spine. "Well, I must confess I was rather disconcerted by the state of the repast this evening. The Dunnes continually present themselves as ardent epicures, yet their offerings were decidedly lacking in both substance and finesse."

Adelaide let out a soft laugh that was more polite than anything.

Celeste shook her head, her golden curls glinting. "I found the pudding delectable, Uncle. I wouldn't call it wanting."

Ernest patted his niece's gloved arm, flashing his nephew a pointed smile. "How very agreeable of you to observe, my dear. Finishing school becomes you."

Celeste's laughter died away, but Ernest didn't regret his bluntness. She ought to remember not to take her education for granted. It had certainly cost a pretty penny of the estate. And he would see to it that her finishing paid off.

If anything he had witnessed this evening had demonstrated something, it was that he could not squander another moment in hesitation. He would speak to Celeste in private as soon as they reached the Blakemore estate.

At last, the coach rolled to a stop, and once inside, Ernest ushered Celeste into the library. As much as he'd like to watch his nephew sneak out to gallivant about London, he needed to enlighten his cousin's daughter on his designs for the future.

"Is something amiss, Uncle?" Celeste frowned as he firmly led her to a dark alcove in the stately library.

He held a finger to his lips. "I must address a matter of considerable weight, my dear, and I beg you not to interrupt until I've finished."

Celeste's eyes widened, and she drew back, her lips parting in an apprehensive gasp. "Of course, Uncle," she whispered.

"Now, this is a delicate matter, so let this remain between us. I trust that you have noticed your cousin's...poor spirits...since you returned?"

"Lord Blakemore...poor spirits? Why, this evening he seemed much improved. He and Miss Hayesworth appeared most affable with one another. In fact, he smiled a great deal in her company. Aunt seems very pleased."

Ernest tutted at Celeste. "Let me finish," he held up a hand. "It is all a ruse, dear Celeste. You must know that, surely. His mother is...how shall we say this...contriving this little flirtation between Miss Hayesworth and your distant cousin. She is of the mind, I am certain, that you and your cousin would make a sublime pair."

Celeste's eyes went round now, her cheeks turning pink. "Cousin Dalton? And I?"

"Now, hush, and let me finish. You and Dalton would be an ideal match. You and he are quite cordial, are you not? He is handsome, you are sweet and lovely. The two of you would take the city by storm, undoubtedly."

"But Uncle—" Ernest held a finger to his niece's mouth.

"Ah, ah, ah. Aside from the perfection of a union between you and my nephew, it would also secure you—and I—a place in the Blakemore estate. Otherwise, we will be presently compelled to decamp to a hovel."

“Hovel,” Celeste echoed, her voice small, full of horror. She shuddered. Ever since her father died his cousin Ernest was the one taking care of her and that meant that her life depended on him .

“I do not mean to distress you. But these are simply the facts of the matter. Should your cousin marry some other eligible girl on the marriage mart, we shall be at the mercy of other, less prosperous relations.”

“But Uncle—I should hate to impose upon any sort of courtship between Cousin and Miss—”

“I beg you not to utter her name. And to listen,” Ernest snapped. “There is nothing between them. It is naught but a ruse. Dalton and you would make a handsome pair, no doubt of it.”

“And I beg you not to mortify your aunt by speaking of it. Let her play her game and do your best to play along. Before long, you shall have Lord Blakemore seeking every minute you can afford him.

“Cousin and I. Lord Blakemore and I.” Celeste hummed thoughtfully to herself for a moment. Her expression was dazed, and he could see it all fall into place. Flattered intrigue. Exhilaration. As he had expected.

Celeste could not recall why, very likely, but Ernest had a plan ready for years now. The moment that Celeste had admitted to him she found young Lord Blakemore considerably handsome, an idea had been born. It had been so simple, and yet, elegant. And now, at last, he could put it into motion. This was the tipping point.

He squeezed his niece’s hand tightly, beaming at her. “Is he not a handsome boy?”

In the dim library, he could still see Celeste’s expression darken, as she ducked her

head. “I could scarcely call him a boy, Uncle,” she whispered and then her eyes went wide. As if she’d just realized what she admitted aloud.

Ernest pulled her into a quick embrace before stepping away, grinning to himself.

“What’s so amusing, Uncle?” Celeste’s eyes narrowed.

“Nothing—nothing.” He batted away the fleeting humor. “You care for him, I can see it.” He patted her silky cheek.

“Uncle,” she sighed, but smiled regardless.

“I shall arrange it all,” he grasped her by the arms, directing her attention back to him.

Celeste shook her head. “Uncle...” but each time she spoke, he could hear the resolve in her tone weakening. Replaced by deep uncertainty, and longing. Excellent. Most excellent.

“It is in our best interest. And of course, yours. Your heart is a great concern of mine.”

Celeste wrung her hands, lowering her eyes in a refreshing show of artful demureness. “I must beg my thanks, Uncle.”

“I love you,” he whispered, pecking her cheek with a kiss.

She whispered it back before retiring to bed. When her gentle footsteps echoed upon the nearby staircase, and when she finally disappeared, he inquired of a footman whether Mr. Dalton had taken his leave since their arrival.

“A little while ago, sir.”

Ernest nearly swore but caught himself in time. He retreated to his bedroom, sinking into one of the upholstered chairs by the big window. He sat there a good while, considering his plan. Now, all that remained would be the execution of it. Celeste was willing, and surely Dalton would be too, once he overcame his native stubbornness.

In a haze, Gemma entered her bedchamber, and once the door clicked shut, she leaned back against it, taking a deep breath. As she sank onto her bed, Udolpho hurried over, stretching his back legs. He'd been sleeping all evening in the center of her large bed, but she barely registered his purrs and insistent meows as he arched against her, giving her another nudge.

She perched in a big chair by the window, Udolpho curling up on her lap, and she stared up at the constellations. Cassiopeia...Cepheus.

What would Mama say of Lord Blakemore? Would she disapprove as much as Aunt Philippa did?

She tilted her head, leaning her forehead against the frosty glass. As much as Gemma appreciated Aunt Philippa's guidance and advice, she wondered at her aunt's declaration, calling Lord Blakemore a rake. He hardly seems like a rake...

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The Italian soprano's voice floated through the room, so beautiful that Gemma's eyes pricked with tears. When she turned her head, her eyes met Lord Blakemore's, where he sat across the room with his mother, uncle, and distant cousin. He pulled his gaze from hers momentarily, before his gaze flickered back, his eyebrows lifting subtly.

Her face warming, Gemma ducked her head, fighting a smile of her own. Mama would be ever so jealous right now. That Gemma enjoyed a performance by a true Italian opera singer, her warbling voice dulcet and causing gooseflesh to erupt on Gemma's skin.

At last, the performance ended, and Gemma and Aunt Philippa rose. The intercession began, and guests visited the tables laden with sweets and fruit, an orchestra playing faint music.

Prudence bustled over to Gemma, and at an approving nod from Aunt Philippa, Gemma and Prudence crossed the room to the refreshments.

Gemma's chest squeezed when she glimpsed Lord Blakemore through the crowd, his mother holding one arm, his cousin Celeste grasping the other.

But whispering pulled her attention from the young bachelor. Bits and pieces of a conversation seamed themselves together, and Gemma's mouth went dry as the words sank in. Their voices lifted, and Blakemore, drifting closer with his mother and cousin, could clearly hear as well. Most in Gemma's proximity could discern the young ladies behind her tittering and murmuring about her lineage, how Aunt Philippa regarded her as a charming little companion, a mere plaything for the Season.

Gemma's stomach twisted, and Prudence grasped her arm, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

Lord Blakemore extricated himself from his mother and cousin and strode over to where Prudence and Gemma stood, sipping punch. Oh, he's coming over, Gemma's stomach began to flutter. Lord Blakemore bowed to both Prudence and her.

"I pray you are well, Miss Hayesworth?"

"Oh, y-yes." Gemma's cheeks burned. "I am in excellent health and spirits."

"Lord Blakemore." The whispering girls behind Gemma approached, fluttering their fans. One of them, a fair-haired beauty of London, daughter of a wealthy aristocrat, paused beside Gemma. She let out an airy laugh and she adopted a teasing tone as she addressed Lord Blakemore. "I profess myself astonished to see you here this evening." Her gaze darted to Gemma, and when it did, her mouth tightened. Gemma didn't know where to look. "I hardly imagined you delighted in...opera."

"It all depends on the company—that chiefly determines my pleasure in an opera, Miss Elderidge."

"Ah," Miss Elderidge tilted her head, her smile freezing. She cast her friends an exasperated look. And then she seemed to recover herself, addressing Gemma again. "Have you ever attended a musicale, Miss Hayesworth?"

"I confess that I have not," Gemma gave her a cordial smile. "At least, not in several years."

"Oh? And shall we fault your...place of residence for that?" Miss Elderidge's mouth twitched into a smirk that plucked at a cord inside Gemma.

She nearly bristled but calmed herself in time. And returned the smile. “I suppose that is fair.”

Miss Elderidge’s expression froze, though she managed a cool laugh.

“I imagine there are advantages to a residence in the country. A chance to cultivate a love for the natural sciences. The sky is more easily perceived outside of the city, I have found.” Dalton met Gemma’s curious look. “I take rather too much leisure time stargazing at my family’s country estate.”

Miss Elderidge let out an airy laugh. “Stargazing, Lord Blakemore?” She angled her body directly towards him, as if to exclude Gemma from the entire conversation.

But instead of replying directly to her, Lord Blakemore locked eyes with Gemma. “Do you commiserate with me, Miss Hayesworth?”

Gemma’s heart stuttered. She couldn’t help but grin. “I’m afraid that should I answer that question, I would expose myself as a stargazing zealot.”

Lord Blakemore’s mouth twitched, and his eyes darkened. “A zealot?” he murmured, his voice lilting with humor.

Miss Elderidge huffed, lowering her fan. Exasperation tightened her delicate features. “Ah—I must beg you to excuse me, Lord Blakemore. Lady Seymour is beckoning me now. Good evening,” she dipped in a brusque curtsy, and Lord Blakemore scarcely afforded her a bow before she and the other girls she’d been whispering with swept off across the room.

Gemma was compelled to tilt her head to look Lord Blakemore in the eye, and the butterflies in her belly stirred. She resisted the urge to fidget with her gloves. His gaze was piercing, intent. Almost...concerned? Had he intended to come to her

rescue just now? Was that his plan?

“Are you finding enjoyment in the music?” he inquired softly, before she could think of something else to say. Before she could manage to thank him.

“I am,” she nodded. “It’s almost unearthly. Like the voice of an angel, I’d imagine.”

Lord Blakemore tilted his head slightly, as if studying her. As if he found her singular. She said as much, and this earned a low chuckle from him.

“Would that be a misfortune?”

“I—I don’t know,” Gemma blurted. Mama would deem it one, surely. She was always scolding Gemma for her whimsical comments, for saying things that she was certain a respectable man might find...odd. Well, Gemma had come to accept long ago that she was odd. She read too much, for one thing—Mama said that a great deal as well. And she wasn’t wrong.

But never had a man given her that look, like he found her the most fascinating person in the universe.

“Perhaps there is a want for...singular individuals in society,” he murmured. “I’ve certainly found that to be the case.”

“As have I,” Gemma laughed softly.

An announcement was made, signaling the end of the refreshment interlude. Gemma dipped in a curtsy, but before she turned, Lord Blakemore offered her another one of those smiles, those smiles that made her weak in the knees. She returned to her seat beside Aunt Philippa, and her aunt shot her a severe look. Gemma fought a grin, assuming her aunt’s posture, the prim way she folded her hands in her lap and did not

fidget with her gloves.

It was astonishing that Aunt Philippa had not yet insisted she be sent off to a finishing school like Prudence.

She stole a look in Lord Blakemore's direction, and when her eyes landed on his, he turned his head. Her mouth went dry, and she centered her attention back on the Italian singer, trilling the most exquisite songs. The dim room filled once again with her song, and Gemma closed her eyes to take it in.

To be able to sing with such angelic perfection would be wonderful. Gemma sang, of course, all around Willow Grove. On her walks, as she tended to the garden. As she cooked and cleaned about the cottage. Mamma always declared it a pity she'd never received formal tutoring in the art of singing. The song reached its crescendo, but the shiver running down Gemma's spine was not from the aria. Lord Blakemore stared from his place across the aisle, that curious expression back on his face—the same one he'd worn when she had compared the singing to the voice of an angel.

The singer's voice faded into the background as Dalton's eyes continued to stray towards Gemma, her profile cutting a delicate silhouette against the candlelight. His mouth was dry, his body restless, as he tried to draw his attention back time and again to the performance. But he was thankful when it ended, and he escorted his mother back to the refreshment table, seeing to it that she ate enough to sustain herself.

One of his mother's friends, an older woman, approached them and began to converse with them, and Dalton hastily bowed out to take a moment, to catch a breath. He needed to clear his head, and another walk should do the trick. It had the other night after the Venetian breakfast. Something about Gemma sent his head reeling, his pulse skipping too fast, and he could scarcely understand it.

“Cousin,” a young woman’s voice caused him to turn, and there stood Celeste, a glass in her hand, a strange smile curving her mouth.

He bowed. “How do you fare this evening?”

“Most excellently,” Celeste murmured, advancing closer until she was rather too close for Dalton’s taste. He could smell the wine on her breath.

“How do you find the marriage mart this season?” he asked, in an effort to break the strange silence between them.

Celeste tilted her head, lowering her eyes as if to feign shyness. “Oh, it is tolerable. There are a great many fine men in London this year.”

For the last day or two, Celeste had taken great care to linger in his presence, to engage in coy banter that he prayed stemmed from mere familial attachment. Although, before this they had spoken but a handful of times despite living in the same home. He pretended not to mind, but it rather alarmed him, that Celeste should endeavor to flirt with him. He did not see her in any light other than familial, and he did not care to rebuff her severely. Instead, he hoped she would receive the message that he did not wish to form any sort of romantic inclination betwixt the two of them.

“Tolerable,” he echoed, taking a sip of his drink. “Only tolerable?”

Celeste let out an airy laugh that was nothing but artificial. The sound plucked at Dalton’s nerves. “Is that unjust of me to say?”

“Perhaps you merely have yet to meet the ideal suitor?” he inquired politely.

“Perhaps. Or, perhaps, by chance, I have.” Celeste’s blue eyes flashed into his, almost challenging. Dalton decided that he had best take leave of this conversation before it

went further. This had gone in a decidedly discomfiting direction, and he needed to consider the meaning behind Celeste's words. Though he wasn't sure if he truly wanted to. What had provoked her coquettish demeanor? Surely he had not done something to mislead her?

As he turned to walk away, his eyes landed on Uncle Ernest skulking in the corner with several gentlemen, some of them members of parliament. Uncle Ernest's mouth tilted in a smile that brought Dalton to a halt. What does he have up his sleeve?

He found the terrace, just off the concert hall where the performance had been held. It overlooked a small garden, but in Dalton's estimation, any refuge from the machinations of his uncle or his flirtatious cousin was welcome. Tonight, however, he did not withdraw his pipe from his coat pocket.

He merely sipped at his drink, recalling how his walk the other night had refreshed him more than a wanton night at a gentleman's club ever could. And he kept his gaze trained on the constellation Orion, just barely visible through the clouds overhead. They glistened like tiny jewels in the sky. What is Gemma's favorite constellation? He wandered over to one of the windows in a dark portion of the terrace, and paused there, peering inside for a glimpse of Gemma. Something about her calmed him, drew him like gravity rooted him to the earth. But a glance gave him no sign of Gemma within. Had she already departed with her aunt?

The creak of a door opening alerted him, and he retreated to the shadowy corner of the terrace, watching from there as Gemma Hayesworth, the object of his fascination, hurried out onto the terrace as well, tightening the scarf around her shoulders with gloved fingers, the evening breeze tossing tendrils of her hair about her face.

He should alert her to his presence, but something brought him up short. Perhaps it was the way she tilted her head back to observe the sky, just as he had done moments before. Or the soft sigh that escaped her lips as she looked.

Return inside, Blakemore. For she is unchaperoned.

But he could not compel himself to move.

Gemma let out a gasp when she heard a scraping sound behind her, that of boots scraping the ground. Turning, she caught her breath at the sight of a tall, angular figure, immediately recognizable. Lord Blakemore. Gemma's heart lurched, and perhaps she should be worried about finding herself alone, without a chaperone, in his presence. Though of course, this wouldn't be the first time.

"Forgive me, I didn't mean to impose upon--"

But Lord Blakemore lifted his hand, brushing away her apology as he joined her at the balcony, though he maintained a polite distance from her. "Are you too seeking refuge?" he inquired, a sardonic smile tilting his mouth.

Gemma bit her lip, planting her hands on the balustrade in front of her, more as a means of grounding herself. "I confess I am. Sometimes I think the best way to listen to such music is to do so while observing the stars above us." She hesitated for a moment before asking, "Who taught you the stars, Lord Blakemore?"

Lord Blakemore's chest rose and fell as with a sharp intake of breath, and he turned his gaze from hers, as if attempting to conceal his expression. "My father passed onto me his penchant for stargazing."

He didn't look at her still, his jaw tightening.

"It would seem that both of our fathers bestowed us with their astronomical inclinations," she murmured.

Lord Blakemore did not reply, but his eyes widened as her words seemed to sink in, his lips parting as if he meant to speak. Gemma caught her breath, wondering if she had been presumptuous to align herself with him in such a way, despite their shared love of the stars. Fine work, Gemma, she told herself severely.

And then, Lord Blakemore's lips curved into a smile, with this wry edge that Gemma recognized. He employed that smile often, she'd noticed. "I ought to take leave. It would be most untoward of us to linger out here. Unchaperoned," and he glanced about meaningfully, causing a flush to rise up Gemma's neck. Yes, she had misspoken, grievously. And it was a pity, as she had come to fancy his company—she enjoyed his conversation.

There was no denying that he was different from every other man she had met thus far in London. Within him lay a sea of complexities, ones which at times seemed to contradict the other. She truly did not know how to reconcile the whispers of his caddish ways with the somber, pensive man standing beside her.

She dipped her head in a nod. "Lord Blakemore, if I spoke too boldly--"

He wagged his head, and her heart lurched when his eyes wandered down, ever so fleeting to her lips, before darting away. "Not in the least, Miss Hayesworth. I beg you not to trouble yourself over it. Now, if you will excuse me..."

Gemma dug her fingers into the stone balustrade she'd leaned upon, watching as he strode back inside. Heart sinking, she frowned to herself. But I must have been presumptuous. What an utterly bewildering man.

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“I beg you to refrain from vanishing as you did last evening,” Aunt Philippa cast Gemma a searching look as she examined herself in the looking glass, patting a loose strand of hair into place. “I was attempting to introduce you to Duke Ashton and his wife. They are most eager to meet you. But woefully, I looked about and you’d disappeared.”

“Forgive me, Aunt Philippa,” Gemma wrung her hands behind her back. She was apologizing to her long-suffering aunt a considerable amount these days, it would seem.

But what would she think of Miss Elderidge’s comments, her barbed words? Would she dismiss them? Already she had told her to ignore the scandal sheets. But it was difficult to when everywhere she went, people whispered behind gloved hands and fans, glancing at one another with derisive smiles.

Aunt Philippa turned, scanning her up and down approvingly. “I was just writing your mother what a lovely girl you are. How I can make you the most desirable girl of the season. But you must not cross lines and bounds that are set in place, for propriety’s sake. You must not disregard my counsel,” she grasped Gemma’s hand in hers, giving it a soft pat.

Gemma nodded, unable to speak.

“I saw you speaking with Lord Blakemore.” Aunt Philippa turned about, as a footman carried forward her coat, setting it on her shoulders.

Gemma’s heart tripped. “Only for a few moments, Aunt Philippa.”

Aunt Philippa raised an eyebrow, as if she didn't believe this. Once they were outside, walking down the steps to Lord Neville's awaiting coach, Aunt Philippa muttered, "And you were not on the terrace with him? Pray, inform me if I am mistaken, but I believe I espied him emerge from the terrace, and you as well shortly after."

Gemma's face heated. "I stepped out for a moment of reprieve and discovered him already there. He was hasty to take leave."

Aunt Philippa harrumphed as Lord Neville absconded from the carriage, bowing to each, but lingering over Gemma's hand. Gemma offered him her warmest smile, to which he responded with a blush and one of his own, a peck to her hand that was altogether courteous and genteel. Gemma glanced over to see Aunt Philippa beaming approvingly, and it all brought back the memories of Mama attempting to match her with Vicar Jennings. She bristled, but replied to Lord Neville's inquiries about her time thus far in London and if she had very much enjoyed the concert the night before.

"It has been..." she searched for the right word, "...exhilarating."

"Exhilarating," Lord Neville repeated, stepping aside for Aunt Philippa and her to board the carriage. "Well, that is delightful." As they sat down on one side of the carriage, he sat on the other, directly across from Gemma. His pale eyes bore into her, and she turned her head to gaze out the window, a bit unnerved. It was quite clear what was happening here. Aunt Philippa intended on making a match between Gemma and the kindly, but dull, Lord Neville, and as much as she appreciated her aunt's generosity and kindness thus far, she could not abide the thought of letting herself get paired off with a gentleman of someone else's choosing. But there was no doubt that Aunt Philippa would be just as dismissive about the idea of marrying for love as Mama was.

Gemma dug her nails into her palm, taking in a deep breath as the carriage rumbled forward.

“My box at the opera is afforded, in my estimation, the finest views in the theater, as well as the best acoustical advantage,” Lord Neville declared as the carriage withdrew from the steps of Aunt Philippa’s home and onto the main thoroughfare.

Gemma managed a tight smile, wrapping her arms about herself until Aunt Philippa nudged her, a signal she’d adopted to remind Gemma to amend her posture.

Gemma straightened, clenching her teeth. Oh, but to be able to fly far, far way, and land on a star. And dwell upon it. If only to be free of these societal expectations. Her stomach turned at the idea of becoming Lord Neville’s bride. Of course, he was a good, gentle soul. Always smiling, always cheery. But something lacked.

At last, the carriage arrived at the opera—after what must have been an eternity. Gemma exhaled a breath of relief when she could escape from beneath the steady gaze of the man sitting across from her, and she fell behind her Aunt Philippa and Lord Neville as they advanced up the steps to the pillared opera building. People thronged about, chatting in the cool evening air. It looked as if it would rain any moment, and they hastened up and into the building, where footmen received their cloaks and coats and Lord Neville’s hat.

To Gemma’s dismay, he fell back to match her pace as they ascended the steps to the second floor, where they would find their box. He peered at her almost shyly, his mouth curving into a smile, and Gemma watched as her aunt hurried on ahead, with a coy glance over her shoulder. She couldn’t be more discreet than a cat trying to steal cream from the larder.

Gemma set her jaw.

“You are in for a wondrous pleasure this evening. The Countess Rosina Almaviva is to be played by a famous Italian opera singer.”

Gemma nodded, offering him a bright smile, and he continued to ply her with little-known considerations about the performance, most of which she scarcely heard as she tried to take in the crowd bustling around them on the stairs and below them in the main atrium, almost holding her breath until at last, she glimpsed him, just entering through the main doors downstairs. Could it truly be? Lord Blakemore?

He was tall enough to be easily noticed above the crowd between them, but on his arm walked a stately young woman—his distant cousin, Gemma recalled, Celeste. They followed behind his mother who he did not escort this evening. Rather, his mother entered on his uncle’s arm. Gemma stiffened as Celeste cast a doe-eyed look at Lord Blakemore. She leaned over and whispered something to him, earning a chuckle from him.

“Miss Hayesworth? Come, just a little further. My box is this way.”

She pulled her gaze from Lord Blakemore and his cousin, and turned to hurry on up the rest of the steps, where Lord Neville and Aunt Philippa waited. Aunt Philippa cast her a questioning frown, which Gemma did not know how to respond to. They followed Lord Neville to his box, furthest at the end of the corridor due to its placement nearly above the stage.

Gemma caught her breath as she entered the box on the heels of her aunt, unable to decide on where to look first. It was all very grand, even more so than the front atrium. Red velvet everywhere she looked, the low hum of people entering and finding their seats reverberating around the vast room. A massive chandelier hung far above their heads, and they did indeed enjoy a good view of the stage. Gemma caught her breath, her eyes drawn to the painting on the ceiling, that of stars and cherubs, beating their angel wings across the blue expanse.

“Is it not resplendent?” Lord Neville asked in her ear, rather too close for Gemma’s liking. She did not wish to slight him, but she could not abide the feel of his breath against her face. It sent a shudder through her.

“Oh, indeed it is,” she managed, casting her aunt an uncertain look. But Aunt Philippa hardly seemed to notice, as she spoke to another couple in the neighboring box.

Gemma turned her head and her eyes landed on the box across the way, where, her heart leaping, she could see Lord Blakemore’s party enter the box.

He had not yet seen her, and nor would he, Gemma told herself sternly. She centered her attention instead on the stage, its curtains still drawn. Lord Neville plied her about her plans for the rest of the week, and she tried to recall every event Aunt Phillipa had mentioned lately, trying to make it seem as if she would be most busy. Perhaps it would deter him.

“And yourself, Lord Neville?” Aunt Philippa said when she had finished, her expression one of barely veiled exasperation.

His reply faded into the back of her mind as she tried to listen to the soft music played by the orchestra. But her eyes kept stealing in the direction of the box across. Lord Blakemore was seated beside his cousin, and she was gesturing to the orchestra, telling him something, which he politely leaned over to hear. He replied, and she threw back her head, laughing. The sound rang like a bell through the air.

“Why, she would adore it! Wouldn’t she?” Aunt Philippa’s voice cut into her thoughts.

Gemma turned quickly. “Ah, forgive me. I did not happen to hear.”

Behind Lord Neville, her aunt gave her head a shake, making no attempt to hide a glance of chagrin towards Gemma.

“There is a new exhibition at the Pall Mall, that I think you would take great pleasure in. I should be most honoured if you were to accompany me, Miss Hayesworth.” He watched her eagerly, awaiting her answer. “Ah—why—” she stopped, her aunt bobbing her head up and down behind Lord Neville.

With an inward sigh, Gemma smiled and nodded. “I should like that.”

“Excellent,” Lord Neville breathed.

The theater rapidly filled until at last footmen emerged, dimming the lights everywhere, and the music swelled. And once the curtains drew back, the opera beginning, Gemma was treated to Lord Neville’s attentive, whispered explanations throughout, scarcely permitting her to hear most of the actual singing.

And here, Aunt Philippa seemed to take mercy on her, observing that Gemma strained to hear the opera to no avail, and took liberty to divert Lord Neville’s attention, asking him questions of her own about the performance, to which he eagerly supplied answers.

Gemma lifted her eyes slowly, and nearly started to find herself meeting the gaze of Lord Blakemore from his shadowy box. His expression was unreadable at first, but when he realized she’d noticed him, his mouth tilted again, and Gemma was half-inclined to wonder if it was a smile he reserved for her and her alone. Silly thought, Gemma, she rebuked herself. But it seemed almost like a secret he was sharing with her, intended for her and her alone. Is this why he is deemed a rake?

But another warring thought occurred to her. Perhaps he is merely indulging you, the country dweller? Amusing himself at your expense.

Gemma straightened, withdrawing her gaze from his, and returned her attention to the performance. Her lungs would not work properly, and she found it difficult to draw breath, to steady her whirling mind. A strange, autonomous response that she could not make sense of. And yet, she knew it was diametrically opposed to the mild revulsion that filled her at the thought of Vicar Jennings or Lord Neville beside her.

She would not let herself look back towards Lord Blakemore for the rest of the performance. She resolved against it, her breath tripping in her throat, her hands clasped so tight in her lap that her bones ached. She felt rather too warm, flushed, and considered exiting to catch some fresh air. Instead, she trained her attention upon the current singer, her voice ringing out through the theater with such majesty that thrilled Gemma to the core. She closed her eyes, focusing on the rich, soprano tones that the Countess Rosina Almaviva effortlessly trilled to her husband across the stage.

Gemma watched Earl Almaviva chase a servant girl across the stage, and wondered if any girl who married a rake like Lord Blakemore would endure such a life. A life with a husband who chased other girls outside of matrimony.

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Dalton's gaze continued to wander over to Gemma for the rest of the first part of Marriage of Figaro. Celeste leaned over and murmured, "I find the singer's performance to far exceed any praise given her in the papers. Do you find it the same?"

"Indeed," Dalton nodded, forcing his attention back to his cousin beside him, angling herself towards him, fluttering her long eyelashes at him. He gave her a smile. "Indeed I do."

Celeste followed his glance, and her expression shifted subtly. He read exasperation. "She comports herself as though she has not been to an opera yet, doesn't she?"

Irritation pricked in Dalton's chest but he didn't let his smile waver. "She is, after all, freshly arrived from Derbyshire, is she not?"

"But of course. I merely meant to say that her fascination with the performance is rather...droll." Celeste's let out a soft, grating laugh.

He didn't reply, catching his breath as he tried not to let his glance stray again in Gemma's direction. But it proved difficult. She stood out in the theater, her rapt gaze fixed upon the players on stage, her eyes widened ever so slightly, lips parted. Beside her sat Lord Neville, the musty but kindly gentleman Dalton had watched Theodore best in fencing the other day. He kept leaning in towards Gemma, whispering sweet nothings to her, and Dalton's stomach turned, indignation stirring low in his stomach.

It was clear to him that Gemma did not much care for her companion, that she would rather him not speak a word to her and leave her be. But of course, Neville did not

notice. How could one so well-bred be at the same time so utterly dense?

“I’ve heard that Lady Kenway is intent upon making a match between Gemma and Lord Neville. And he hardly seems opposed, does he not? Most arrested by the little country dweller.” Celeste smirked.

Dalton bit his tongue before he could rebuke Celeste for using that ridiculous name from the scandal sheets. Instead, he cast her a hard look that made her wither in the chair beside him, letting out a nervous laugh and fluttering her fan again more vigorously.

Once again, the night before, he had avoided the billiard rooms and clubs that he had frequented only until recently. But ever since he had met Gemma, his taste for such repast had languished away, and he couldn’t find any true enjoyment as he once had. Instead, he walked and walked. He’d spent himself walking earlier that day in Hyde Park, walked until his legs protested. And then retired to the fencing courts to burn away the last traces of his energy. Tonight, it was a wonder his legs supported him yet, with the intensive exercise habits he had begun to adopt.

Gemma’s delicate profile was turned towards the stage, her eyes glistening during the particularly heartfelt aria performed by the aggrieved countess, watching her husband pursue a maid. That was one thing Dalton respected in his late father, his devotion to Mother. He had shown Dalton that fidelity within marriage was utterly critical, that a man should only have eyes for his wife. Of course, if one could ever find love. And love was not exactly a luxury Dalton could afford himself. At least, he’d believed so. Now, he wasn’t so sure. And of course, he scarcely knew the girl. But he yearned to know her more, and as of yet he had not experienced such a longing for any young woman. Ever since his father’s death, he had contented himself with brief liaisons that would never last, eager to fill that void.

And what did he have to show for it? A gaping emptiness that would not be filled, not

even by the prettiest, most charming courtesan.

At last, the intermission began, and Dalton rose, excusing himself from the booth. He needed a good smoke to soothe his roiling turmoil of emotions.

Keep your distance from the girl, Blakemore.

However, when he returned outside after taking a few draws of his pipe, he stopped short, finding Gemma, her aunt, and Neville, caught up in conversation with Duke Ashton and his wife, the Duchess. Dalton was drawn to Gemma like a bee to a flower, and as if by instinct, moved towards her, positioning himself in the group directly behind her, so that he and she stood back to back.

Turning his head, he peered at her, and as the rest of her group carried on their conversation, he addressed her. “You seem enraptured by the performance, Miss Hayesworth.”

He watched her start and turn, mouth falling open as she stared up at him out of the corner of her eye. “Indeed. It has been too long since my last opera. I’ve been dreaming of attending one for the last few years since quitting the city.”

“Ah? Dreaming of it? And pray tell, what else do you dream of?”

Color rose into those sun-kissed cheeks, her lashes lowering. “I possess an abundance of dreams, which I could scarcely confess even to my own mother, much less to—” her cheeks flushed a deeper hue, and a startled laugh escaped her lips. She raised her chin, as though in defiance. “You cannot reasonably expect me to acknowledge such a tender matter without first being afforded the same degree of candour from you.”

“A reasonable consideration,” Dalton allowed, fighting a smile and failing. A chuckle rumbled in his chest. “My dreams are vast, I confess, and perhaps specious in some

respects. And I am indebted to you for reminding me of one.”

Her back stiffened, as if with a sharp intake of breath.

She turned further, fully meeting his glance now. Her pink lips curved, a mixture of confusion and amusement playing across her features, as well as something else entirely—something that set alight a strange fluttering in his stomach. His head spun.

“And which one is that?” she breathed, soft enough for only him to hear.

“If you recall mentioning William Herschel—”

“Cousin!”

Dalton paused turning to see Celeste and Uncle Ernest pressing through the crowd until they’d reached him. As Uncle Ernest graciously greeted the rest of the group, Celeste bustled alongside Dalton, slipping her arm in his again. “We began to fret about you. You’ve been gone from the box ever so long,” she beamed sweetly. Saccharine sweet, Dalton decided. That was one word to describe Celeste, with her gold-spun hair, large, wet blue eyes and cupid’s bow lips. He had half a mind to draw from her grasp, but noted Uncle Ernest’s glare just before he did. He gave his uncle the most derisive smile he could manage before paying his excuses to the group, and more quietly to Gemma. Then, he led Celeste back towards their box, Uncle Ernest trailing behind. “Your mother is unattended,” he huffed scathingly, shooting Dalton a hard glare. “You’ve spent near the entire intermission apart from your own party.”

“I needed some air,” Dalton retorted.

“And you needed to shamelessly flirt with Lady Kenway’s impecunious niece,” muttered Uncle Ernest.

Dalton clenched his jaw, temper flaring. “I must insist, uncle, that you refrain from such injunctions.”

Uncle Ernest scoffed. “I speak merely out of concern for your mother. She was anxious about your whereabouts to such a degree that we were compelled to set out and find you.”

Dalton ignored him, hurrying on ahead, Celeste clinging to his arm. If his uncle was so worried about Mother, he shouldn’t have left her alone. But Uncle Ernest seemed eager to keep a close eye on him, and that realization rankled in Dalton’s chest. He took his seat, and Celeste hers, and she continued to encroach upon his space, pointing out one of the stagehands struggling to pull a sandbag behind the curtain high into the rafters.

Gemma was thankful for a moment alone when Lord Neville excused himself to pay respects to an elderly Viscountess, bedecked in an array of glimmering jewels and pearls, the very picture of refinement. She extended a hand, eyes half-shut, and he nearly fell on his face in his eagerness to bow low, extraordinarily low, pressing his lips to her hand. It would be comedic if she was not endeavoring to make sense of Lord Blakemore, their moment of congress whilst trying to engage in two separate conversations. Though of course, everything else faded away whenever he spoke to her. It was something that happened all too frequently when in his company.

But now that Lord Blakemore had gone, fetched by Celeste who gazed up at him with evident admiration, Gemma tried to catch her breath. Tried to make sense of the warring impressions rising to the forefront of her mind. She did not have much time to think, for Aunt Philippa grabbed her arm, so tight that Gemma winced, and hurried her into a quiet alcove under the stairs.

Aunt Philippa's blue eyes flashed—yes, she was very vexed. “I am doing everything in my power to maintain my patience. But at every opportunity, you gravitate towards that Lord Blakemore, despite my caveats.”

Gemma's eyes stung. She despised the thought of disappointing or upsetting her aunt, who had been so generous to her thus far. But she ought to know, Gemma had always balked against others attempting to arrange her life to their liking.

And so, here she was again, disappointing the woman who had put so much faith into her, who dedicated so much of her home and money and time to Gemma's becoming, into Gemma's success on the marriage mart. Would Father be disappointed? Surely, he would be grieved. And that thought caused Gemma's throat to close. To her surprise, Aunt Philippa breathed, voice hardened, “Your father would be distraught by your conduct.”

“Forgive me, Aunt Philippa,” Gemma whispered, voice shaking. Tears threatened to spill down her cheeks.

“We will speak of it later. Come now.”

Halfway up the stairs, they turned when Lord Neville called out and hastened up the steps to join them. He extended his arm to Gemma and she took it, batting away her tears and refusing to reach up and brush them away.

“Why, are you unwell?” Lord Neville demanded, so loudly that people nearby turned to stare.

Gemma wanted to melt into the floor and she nodded vigorously. “Simply moved to tears by the countess's sorrow,” she told him—a lie. In the opera box, she sat quietly, watching the stage, seeking glimpses of the performers hurrying to and fro behind the curtains. Her ears perked up when she heard Lord Blakemore mentioned one booth

over.

“...But of course, he is a decided cad...”

“...I heard he does not frequent the gentlemen’s clubs as of late...”

“...Oh? What’s this you say...”

Gemma’s head reeled. Gentlemen’s clubs?

She turned, and found Aunt Philippa with her mouth twisted grimly. Her glance said everything she didn’t speak aloud. Lord Neville was none the wiser, rambling about the career of the singer, of the upcoming operas to be held here in the city.

Gemma’s head swam and she tried to make sense of what she’d just overheard. How it was simply a reminder of who exactly Lord Blakemore was. His charm recommended him, but his reputation preceded him. It seemed everyone knew of it but her.

She stared down at her clasped hands in her lap, swallowing in a mouthful of air.

As the performance commenced, she did not let herself look in Lord Blakemore’s direction but for once or twice, and then she managed to do so whilst his attention was diverted. Lord Neville continued to murmur in her ear, facts about the opera he declared little known, details about the composer Mozart, a man of considerable musical genius, and Gemma acknowledged his comments with such finesse that Aunt Philippa ought to be proud.

As the score swelled throughout the theater, her heart twisted in her chest, thoughts wandering again and again over what those women in the neighboring booth had said about Lord Blakemore. He was not one for marriage, they had declared. He would

not settle down and court one young woman, instead carrying on about London at these gentlemen's clubs.

Gemma's face went hot as she wondered what sorts of things went on in such places. What sort of women were entertained there?

Her stomach sank and she felt so utterly foolish. Aunt Philippa was right. She ought to put distance between Lord Blakemore and herself, lest he lead her on, play the part of an attentive suitor, and then discard her like chattel.

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The next morning, Gemma pled out of attending the Pall Mall exhibit with Aunt Philippa and Lord Neville, claiming herself to be unwell, and to her relief, Aunt Philippa took pity on her. She sighed, gazing with concern at Gemma languishing in the bed, and clucked her tongue. “Perhaps it is for the best that you remain here today. I should not like for you to weary yourself so much that you catch your death. It is raining today anyway, and you would be in danger of falling ill in this damp weather.”

Gemma nodded, exhaling with relief. “Thank you, Aunt Philippa. I pray that you enjoy the exhibit. And do send my regards to Lord Neville.” She added generously, “Thank him for his attention and the great considerations he’s paid me.”

“But of course,” Aunt Philippa peered out the window. “Ah! My carriage has been brought ‘round.” She bustled over to the door, pausing to offer what Gemma considered to be her warmest smile yet.

“Rest well, my dear,” she said, before disappearing, and shutting the door behind her.

When the door closed, Gemma sighed, closing her eyes as she rested her arm over her eyes. She would retire to the library for the rest of the morning, bury herself in Aunt Philippa’s extensive collection, some of which Father had been bequeathed from Philippa’s and his father. Although, he had sold most other books he’d been given in an attempt to pay his debts.

Gemma nestled in the armchair within the library, read for what must’ve been hours, until a footman opened the door, and announced that Prudence had called.

Gemma set aside her book and rose, hurrying down the hall to the sitting room where she found Prudence, perched on the settee in orange silk that suited her well.

She rose when Gemma entered, and Gemma couldn't help but beam at her newfound friend. "Prudence!" she exclaimed, hurrying over, grasping the other young woman's hands. "How good it is to see you."

"Are you alone here?" inquired Prudence, looking about for Aunt Philippa.

"Indeed. She departed earlier for the Pall Mall." Gemma sank onto the settee beside Prudence.

"Are you unwell?" Prudence inquired, frowning.

"Somewhat," Gemma admitted. "I needed a day to rest. We've been running about London from one party to the next. Aunt Philippa deemed me vulnerable to falling sick."

"Ah," Prudence nodded.

"May I ask you something?"

"Of course," Prudence nodded, her eyes widening at Gemma's low, serious tone.

"I find myself torn," Gemma confessed. "My aunt is bent upon Lord Neville and me making a match. But I confess that, while I find him a goodly man, quite decent and honorable in every sense, something...lacks."

Understanding passed over Prudence's face. "You mean to say," she glanced around to ensure they were alone, "You mean to say that, while you do believe him to be a worthy gentleman, you do not see him in a...romantic sense?"

“Precisely,” Gemma gasped. “But he is good, and does not have any sort of faults, if only that he is rather dull in conversation. But should I not overlook this? He has everything to recommend him—manners, wealth, temperament. But—” she shook her head, closing her eyes tightly as a nervous laugh bubbled in her throat. “I cannot abide the thought of him courting me. Though it would seem my aunt is determined to arrange such a union. She practically thrusts us together every chance she gets.”

She bit her lip, guilt prickling in her chest. “Of course, she has done so much for me, inviting me to stay with her, ordering new gowns for me...and for that, I am utterly grateful. I do not wish to seem an ingrate.”

“Does this perhaps...have to do with Lord Blakemore?” Prudence whispered.

Gemma’s throat closed and she stared down into her lap. “No, no,” she lied. “I hardly even know the gentleman.”

Prudence eyed her, as if disbelieving Gemma’s response.

“He is a notable rake, is he not?”

“Perhaps. Well, at least he was.” Prudence leaned closer, to whisper in Gemma’s ear, “As I told you, many think he possesses a heart of ice. He seems to avoid any sort of attachment to any young woman. I am inclined to believe that he shies from marriage to pursue...” she shook her head, her curls bouncing about her rosy cheeks. “Well, I shan’t say it. ‘It is not for us to speak of such things.’”

“He frequents the gentlemen’s clubs?” Gemma blurted, unable to contain her curiosity anymore.

“So it has been said.”

Gemma nodded, lowering her gaze to the floor, tracing her eyes over the floor. The lump in her throat wouldn't go away. She gave her head a shake, sighing. She needed to change the subject. "What am I to do about my aunt's determined scheming? To see Lord Neville and myself become betrothed?"

Prudence smiled sympathetically. "My mother and father did not marry for love, and yet, they care for each other very much."

"That is just it," Gemma sighed. "I cannot abide the thought of being content with...amicable indifference, or even tolerance."

"Some can abide it, but if you cannot, then you must not force yourself to endure."

"If I refuse..." Gemma closed her eyes. She had yearned to return to London, as much as she loved the cottage in Willow Grove. But she had evidently fled one unpleasant arrangement and traded it for another. But there was no telling how Aunt Philippa and Mama would respond should she flatly resist.

Her legs shook, stomach tossing, until at last the panic subsided and she took in another mouthful of air.

"Do you intend to wed for love?"

"Oh, I would wish to. But not everyone can rebuff a proposal. My parents count on me to marry well. And that may very well mean I will not marry he who has won my affection, but he who is the most eligible match."

"How should we bear it? To be trapped in a marriage without tenderness, passion...warmth?" Gemma shuddered.

Prudence shrugged. "A great many have borne it well. Although, I would not be

astonished should you decide to let your heart guide you.”

“My heart,” Gemma patted her chest. “My heart is my north star.”

Prudence frowned at that, confused. But before she could reply, Aunt Philippa swept in, stopping short at the sight of Gemma sitting beside Prudence on the settee.

“Good day, Miss Harcourt,” she nodded to Prudence. She sailed forth, and lowered herself onto the settee across from them. “Gemma.”

“Lady Kenway,” Prudence smiled politely.

“How do you fare, Gemma?”

“Better than this morning. Thank you, for permitting me to remain here.”

“But of course,” Aunt Philippa nodded, mouth tightening. “Your colour has returned,” she added, holding up a monocle to her eye, examining Gemma through it.

“How was the exhibit?” Gemma hurried to divert the subject.

“Wondrous, in a word. ‘It was everything I’d hoped. Though, of course, Lord Neville was disappointed by your absence.”

Gemma resisted the urge to shoot Prudence a look. Instead, she bit her lip, nodding.

“What sort of paintings did you see?”

Aunt Philippa waved her hand. “I’ll tell all in a moment. Now, Prudence, do you have any prospective suitors?”

Prudence’s shoulders sagged. “I am afraid not.”

“Why ever not?” Aunt Philippa cried. “You inherited your mother’s complexion and eyes. Your father’s hair. A delightful combination. Before long, you will have a dozen suitors falling at your feet, eager for your attention.”

Prudence ducked her head. “You are too kind, Lady Kenway.”

“As for the paintings, you missed out on a treat, my dear,” Aunt Philippa turned to Gemma. “We saw such a vast assortment of pieces, most from Italy, an excellent collection lent by a famed patron of the arts here in our own London.” She lifted a thin brow, leaning forward as if about to divulge a secret. “I did see Lord Blakemore there. He was paying his cousin a great deal of attention, as he was the night of the opera. It would not surprise me if his uncle intended to make a match of them.”

She deliberately misread Gemma’s aghast expression, letting out a tinkling laugh. “If, of course, Lord Blakemore lets himself be committed to another in a conjugal fashion.”

Gemma tried to swallow and couldn’t. Of course, this should come as no surprise. She would put him from her mind, determine not to think of him again. Regardless of how much he fascinated her, drawing her like the needle on a compass towards true north. The way the planets were destined to encircle the earth in a never-ending parade. Such was her interest in Lord Blakemore, however ill-placed.

After Prudence departed, and Aunt Philippa retired for a rest before dinner, Gemma returned to the library, browsing its shelves for a book on the subject of astronomy. But alas—most of the books in Aunt Philippa’s collections were of poetry or religion, and a few pertaining to her late husband’s role as a minister in Parliament. There were law books, and history tomes, thick and covered in dust. At last, she perched on the window sill, a smile playing at her lips when Udolpho entered the library, trotting up to her to join her on the ledge.

“Perhaps it was a great mistake to come here, Udolpho,” she murmured, tilting her head back against the paneled wall. Udolpho curled up in her lap, and for a wild moment, Gemma considered retiring to her room, writing to Mother and telling her she meant to return home, posthaste.

She’d been so foolish. So foolish. To let herself imagine that Lord Blakemore could possibly see her in the same light she had seen him. That he found her interesting, that they had truly connected over a shared love of the stars. Clearly, she had been blinded by his charm, that bewildering pensiveness in those blue eyes. Anger slashed through her, quick and hot, like a bolt of lightning. Childish. You’ve been childish, she told herself, tears pricking her eyes. Rain began to fall as twilight drew closer, and she listened to the clang of church bells from the chapel down the street.

I should have never come. Never.

A footman rapped on the library door. “Miss, dinner will be served in an hour.”

Gemma clambered to her feet, and with a meow of protest, Udolpho slipped to the floor, darting out between the footman’s legs. Gemma stifled a grin as she hurried past to her room, to change into a proper evening dress. Upstairs, she paused before the looking glass. She was hardly a Celeste. Celeste was tall, elegant, with perfect pointed features and the clearest eyes. No, Gemma was small. Rather plain. Eyes too big for her face. Lips that were too full. Dull hazel eyes. Hair that would never be tamed.

With a sigh, she hurried to the wardrobe and withdrew a deep blue gown, that made her skin look paler than it was. She missed running barefoot through the garden in nothing but a light frock, sometimes in an apron, reading books for hours, cooking with Mama.

“Miss, it is dinner time?” A maid stood at her door, and Gemma nodded, slipping her

feet into her shoes and following the maid out into the hall.

Downstairs in the dining room, Gemma picked at her food, until Aunt Philippa set her fork down with a clatter, frowning across the table at her.

“Are you unwell, my dear?”

“Perhaps a little,” Gemma whispered, blinking away the sting in her eyes.

Aunt Philippa motioned for a footman to take Gemma’s plate. “We have a lively day tomorrow. Do get some rest. As you ought to have earlier rather than gossiping with Miss Harcourt.”

Gemma flushed but nodded. “Yes, Aunt Philippa. Goodnight.”

Once she reached her room again, she flung herself on the bed and let the tears come. She cried and cried, a sinking sense in the pit of her stomach.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am

Ernest Blakemore stared down into the fire in the hearth, his grip around the head of his cane tightening until his knuckles ached. Where is that girl? He turned to glance over his shoulder, but still there was no sign of Celeste. What was delaying her?

He needed to speak with her, urgently. It seemed that every time his nephew encountered that Hayesworth girl, he became increasingly smitten with her. The signs were all there, and it was dismaying, for Ernest had not any of them until now. Until Gemma Hayesworth.

He'd watched the boy flirt his way through a ball, through numbers of parties and dinners and operas. But never had he seen him take to a girl quite the way he took to this young woman fresh from the countryside. Everything about her wanted. Her figure. Her manners. Her polish. Her wealth, most of all.

Ernest ground his teeth. He would not stand by and watch it. Watch his fool brother's son marry someone who did not bring wealth of her own into the marriage.

He would make sure that the Blakemore name and fortune be united with another equally formidable lineage. And Gemma Hayesworth's family had been ruined—her father had squandered everything away, and creditors had picked him clean.

He had left his wife and daughter with nothing. And now, that daughter designed to wile her way into Dalton's heart.

The sound of the door clicking shut brought Ernest back to the present, and he turned to see Celeste standing there, her eyes wide, face pale, as she regarded him curiously. "Is something amiss, Uncle?"

He hurried over, pulled open the door, looked about the hall outside, and then closed the door again. Turning to her, he guided her to the other end of the room in front of the fireplace. “I did not send you off to finishing school for nothing,” he hissed. “You must heighten your affections for Lord Blakemore. Charm him. You are hardly plain. And your wiles are at your disposal. Yet—yet each time he sees her, he grows more besotted with Miss Hayesworth.”

Celeste shrank back, her face paling even more. “Uncle—”

He grasped her by the arm, sighing heavily. “He is on the precipice, don’t you see? You must lead him to the edge, enthrall him so that he cannot refuse...and when you’ve got him in your grasp, I shall declare his behaviour an affront to your reputation. That he must marry you if he means to remain respectable.”

“Uncle—you don’t mean—you don’t mean that we are to—”

“To snare him. If we do not, we are lost, my dear niece.”

“Lost,” Celeste breathed.

“Yes. All of this. He will tire of us, and turn us out, but only as long as he does not attach himself to you. Then you will not lose all your pretty dresses, your fine carriages.”

Celeste hummed softly, twining a golden curl around her finger. “He wouldn’t do such a thing to us, would he? We are his family.”

“Hardly. He knows that his father and I never got along. And he holds it against me, I am certain.”

“Surely not,” Celeste cried.

“It is so.”

“Oh, Uncle—”

“You must, as soon as you can.”

“Uncle—”

“Celeste? Ernest?” Adelaide’s voice was soft, full of bewilderment. Almost slurring.

Ernest jumped, casting his niece a frantic look. Had his sister-in-law heard everything? How long had she been in here?

He surveyed her, from her white face to her glassy eyes. It would seem she’d just dosed herself again with the tonic. The tonic Ernest had only just managed to bribe the physician into giving her. But everyone, Ernest knew, could be bought. It just depended on learning their price.

Adelaide pressed a hand to her face, blinking rapidly. “What—what are you doing in here?” she stammered.

Ernest swore inwardly, nearly grimacing. Perhaps he would be required to have her served a hearty spoonful of the tonic in her mulled wine. It would render her catatonic within the hour. His dear brother had sought that same tonic before his own untimely death. And once again, it would prove mercifully rewarding. The poor woman was beside herself with grief, of course. And Ernest’s tonic was a wondrous relief for her sleepless nights, or the ones wracked by night terrors.

The tonic assuaged her torment. Was that not a boon?

“Dear Lord, you must get some rest,” he cried, hastening towards her and escorting

her from the room. “Hastings!” he barked out, and Adelaide’s maid hastened down the hall.

“Forgive me, my lord. She must have slipped from her room.”

“Did I not tell you to keep a close watch on her as she slept? She is prone to night terrors, as you know,” Ernest said severely.

The young woman flinched. “But of course, my Lord. Forgive me, my Lord. ‘It will not happen again.’”

“I should hope not!” Ernest straightened his coat, watching as the maid guided Adelaide up hall towards the stairs.

“When should I attempt to...ah...” Celeste’s voice shook.

“Tomorrow. We must not waste any time. Now, give me a kiss and go on to bed.”

“Yes, Uncle.” Celeste darted over, pressing a kiss to his cheek, and hastened out of the small, back parlor. It was close to the door leading to the garden, and it did not see frequent use. But it proved a perfect place to speak with his niece in private—at least until tonight. But Adelaide walked as if she were half-asleep. The maid must have given her some of the tonic again. They would have to increase the dosage, as Adelaide’s tolerance to it must have risen.

He sank into the chair in front of the blazing fire, staring into the dancing flames. If it came to it, he would dispatch his sister-in-law, and nobody would suspect it. She’d been wilting away since his brother passed.

Everyone would believe that her health had at last slipped away. And it wouldn’t be too far-fetched.

Ernest knew one thing for certain. He did not need Adelaide encouraging Dalton's interest in Gemma. So, it would not be the worst thing if she should pass quietly and painlessly.

Dalton lay on his bed, staring up at the canopy hanging above his bed. He slowly closed his eyes, his stomach churning. The glass of brandy he'd poured earlier sat, untouched, on his bedside table. He didn't want it, even though he'd asked for it. Instead, he lay, his mind racing to the night of the opera, the alarming feelings Gemma stirred in him, like a swarm of writhing snakes in his belly. He couldn't think of another way to describe it. It was unnerving, made him feel out of control. His head spun, his thoughts straying beyond his grasp. His mind continuously returned to Gemma, the memory of her smile, her laugh. The way her eyes sparkled up into his.

He rested his arm across his eyes, drawing in a deep breath. He scarcely knew the girl. But oh heavens, he wanted to. He wanted to more than anything he'd wanted before. He felt himself coming to life, like the garden after a long winter. Something in him ached for her. Ached in a way that would not be soothed, not by liquor or the charms of a courtesan. Not by the satisfying weariness after a particularly long walk. He stood and paced across the room, before pausing with a sigh. He washed his face, splashing the water over his hot skin. At last he straightened, grasping the towel hanging nearby, and patted his face dry. Tossing the towel away, he stared at himself in the mirror.

"You could be this season's William Herschel." Her voice echoed through his head. He truly yearned to be. Or at least, he used to. Before Father's passing, he'd enjoyed a great many ambitions, he had cared. He had once striven to be the best fencer, the best scholar at Oxford. The best boxer. And now here he was, wasting away his health, his leisure, his mind.

Wasting himself on women he'd never remember. Closing his eyes, he pictured Gemma in his mind, her large hazel eyes, lips parted as she gazed over at him at the opera, his pulse leaping beneath her gaze. Once, years ago, as a mere boy, he had been entranced in a similar manner. It had been brief, perfunctory. A boyish fancy. But it had passed.

Now, leaning over his bed, he wondered if this would pass. Deep down, something told him it wouldn't, at least not without effort.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am

“Here it is!” Prudence tugged on Gemma’s arm, and together they slipped inside the bookshop, a spacious spread of shelves crammed full of books. Gemma’s heart began to race. Perhaps, some of father’s books had ended up here. Perhaps, she would find his large blue book about astronomy, the one Gemma had once poured over, curled up in the big armchair in her father’s library...

Her fingers tightened around a silken drawstring bag, containing the allowance Aunt Philippa had generously bequeathed her.

She began to peruse the shelves one by one, until Prudence exclaimed, “What are you searching for so assiduously, Gemma?”

Gemma chewed on her lower lip, frowning as she finished searching through one side of the shop. “A book on the stars,” she murmured. “It once belonged to my father.”

“Your father? Then why would it be here?” Prudence asked.

Gemma caught her breath, pausing. She sighed, and drew Prudence into a quiet corner, out of sight and hopefully the earshot of the shopkeeper.

“When I was eighteen, my father fell into trouble—he was careless and he—” she swallowed, a lump returning to her throat. Her mind shrank away from the memory that always surfaced when she spoke of Father. She would not recall that right now. “He was careless. When he passed,” and here she paused again.

She attempted to shake herself free. “When he passed, most of what we owned was seized by creditors, sold off.” Taking a deep breath, she added, “Most of his books

sold as well, of course. I could not keep that particular book, the one I'm searching for today."

"Oh, Gemma," Prudence breathed. "I am so sorry. Forgive me for even broaching the subject"

"Never mind," Gemma turned away and began to scan the shelves again. No avail. She did not spy the desired tome, thick and swathed in blue, with intricate golden lettering across it. Her throat and nose prickled and she ran a gloved finger over the nearest row of books, face hot. She had not spoken to anyone outside her Mama and Aunt Philippa about Father, about those dark days surrounding his death. How everything had been so desolate, so hopeless, watching Mama crumple beneath the weight of grief and shame.

Gemma steeled herself, and stepped behind the case to ask the shopkeeper, "Do you happen to have David Gregory's book on astronomy?"

"I'm afraid not, Miss," the shopkeeper said with a tight smile. He'd been glaring at them since they'd spent the past half-hour perusing the shelves to no avail. "That book is rarely printed these days. It's scarce seen, so I've heard."

Gemma's heart sank. She should have hidden it away in her things, so the creditors would not take it. But it had all happened so fast. Too fast. Mother had been weeping inconsolably, and she had tried to comfort her as best she could.

"We shall search through every bookshop in the city," Prudence told her in a low voice, clasping her hand tightly. "Do not despair, Gemma."

Gemma nodded, sniffing.

"There's another not two streets from here," Prudence covered her mouth when the

bookshop owner scowled, clearly overhearing their plan.

Prudence and Gemma exchanged sheepish smiles and dissolved into laughter they tried their best to stifle behind their gloved hands and fans. “I think he’s wearied of us,” Gemma whispered.

“Indeed,” Prudence giggled. “Come, let us depart. We can visit every bookshop on this side of London if we make haste.”

Dalton and Theodore found a private corner of the coffee room in a curtained alcove, where they retired with steaming cups of the foaming coffee and tea. After a few sips, the dull ache in Dalton’s temples eased, and he closed his eyes for a moment, savoring this relief.

“I’ve been hearing whispers about you,” Theodore said from across the table, taking a sip of his tea. For of course, the fellow was as strict with himself about coffee as he was about abstaining from drink.

“Pray, enlighten me,” Dalton sighed, drumming his fingers on the table.

“Well, a bird informed me that you are abandoning your rakish ways.”

Dalton took another sip of his coffee, mouth twitching.

“You certainly seem more lively at the courts.”

“It is merely due to my reluctance to be one of those old boors with gout, who bray at everyone around them.”

“Well, I’m afraid you are still in danger of that,” Theodore chuckled.

Dalton snorted, shaking his head.

“Tell me, does this have to do with a certain...country dweller?”

Dalton’s eyes flashed, and he nearly bit out a reproach. But he kept his lips pursed, leaning back in his seat. “What would give you that impression?”

“Oh, perhaps it would be due to your evident fascination with her.”

Dalton scoffed under his breath.

“Come, it is certainly no coincidence that the moment you met Miss Hayesworth, you lost taste for your old ways.”

“And perhaps it is mere chance?”

“I don’t believe it,” Theodore shrugged.

They sat in silence for another few moments, until at last Dalton broke the silence, attempting to change the subject. “My uncle means to see me...marry my distant cousin, Celeste.”

Theodore’s eyebrows rose. “How vulgar.”

“She is a sweet girl, of course. But he must think me a fool.”

“Then marry Miss Hayesworth.”

Dalton nearly sputtered his last sip of coffee. He cast his old friend a hard look. “For

heaven's sake—”

Theodore waved his hand. “I jest, I jest.”

Dalton sighed, running a hand over his face. “My reputation is hardly what it could be. It wants for decency, and no respectable family would care to see their sweet daughter tied to a rake like myself.”

“But you aren't a rake,” Theodore tilted his head. “Are you?”

Dalton scowled. “Not a—why, of course I am.”

“It is a part you play. ‘All the world's a stage’...”

“Pray, don't go and—” Dalton gestured wildly in the air. “Don't go and attempt to philosophize about my intentions. It is a fruitless matter.”

“I hardly think so. And I hold true to my statement. It is a part you play.”

They lingered in the coffee shop for another half-hour until they withdrew, together striding through the streets, enjoying the fair weather. As they hurried down the walk, the door of a bookshop just ahead opened and two young women exited, one of whom he at once recognized. Gemma. He caught his breath, pulse leaping.

She stopped short as well, her eyes going wide, and the young woman arm-in-arm beside her, ducked her head as if to hide a smile.

Dalton reached up, touched the brim of his hat and bowed. Gemma and her companion curtsied, and it took much longer than it should have for Dalton to recall what he ought to say next, to recall what propriety dictated. “Miss Hayesworth, permit me to introduce you to my good friend, Lord Longworth. We've known one

another since our university days.”

Gemma curtsied again, and Theodore bowed.

She blinked, and seemed to shake herself, before gesturing to the young woman beside her. “And I must introduce my friend, Miss Harcourt.” Prudence curtsied as well, smiling shyly.

Dalton couldn’t help but note the dark smudges under Gemma’s eyes, as if she’d been exerting herself far too much. “Did you find what you seek?” He nodded to the bookshop door.

Gemma’s features shadowed, and she shook her head slightly. “Regretfully, we have not.”

“And pray, what book is it that you wish to find?” Theodore spoke up, studying Gemma with a crease between his brows.

She flushed. “A book that is evidently rare and scarcely in print anymore. On astronomy, by David Gregory.”

Dalton’s heartbeat skipped. “I am in fact in possession of that very title, Miss Hayesworth.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh?” There was a tremble in her tone. “You dare?”

“Indeed. And I should very much wish for you to have it, for as long as you should require it.”

“Sir, I couldn’t—”

“I must insist,” Dalton held up his hand.

Gemma shook her head. “Truly?” her eyes began to sparkle with unshed tears, and Dalton couldn’t suppress a soft smile. “But of course. I shall have it delivered to your aunt’s home at once.”

Gemma brought a hand to her lips. “Lord Blakemore. You are truly too kind.”

“It is my pleasure,” Dalton murmured, breathless.

Gemma’s chest rose and fell with a shaky inhalation, and he pretended not to notice. He relished the unrestrained joy lighting her features, the exhilarated smile playing at her pink lips. His heart began to beat faster.

“Well,” Theodore interrupted after a long pause in which Dalton lost himself in Gemma’s eyes. “Shall we depart, old friend?”

He swallowed hard, and nodded. “Of course, of course. I bid you a good day, Miss Hayesworth.”

“And I bid you a good day as well.” Gemma dipped in a brief curtsy and they parted ways, Gemma and Prudence hurrying in the opposite direction. Dalton forgot himself, gazing after Gemma, soft dark hair fluttering about her cheeks. In his mind’s eye he continued to relive the moment he told her that he would send his own copy of the desired title. His chest squeezed, and he struggled to catch his breath.

“I beg you to refrain from speaking,” he muttered. This earned a chuckle from Theodore.

Once he had returned home, he hurried to the library, a large room in the home afforded to his father’s extensive library. Father had taken such pride in his collection

of books, and he'd been lauded for it considerably. It was no wonder, Dalton thought, as he hurried through the rows of shelves until he reached one corner of the room. He ascended the little step ladder to reach the shelf, and glided his fingers over the familiar spines until at last he reached the very book he'd been seeking. The same that Gemma had seemed so put out over. He would have a servant deliver it to her at once, and make no delay. He found a footman in the hall and entrusted the tome to him, demanding a swift delivery to Miss Gemma Hayesworth.

"Of course, my Lord," the footman nodded.

Once he'd gone, Dalton retreated once again into the library, breathing in the scent of vellum and parchment, leather binding it all together. At least a thousand books sat upon these shelves, though he was certain the true number exceeded that estimation. He sank into one of the armchairs in a less drafty corner of the library, rubbing the bridge of his nose as he considered the rest of his day. Around this time, he would be preparing to depart for his usual night carousing about town. But right now, in the bowels of this room, wherein he'd spent so many hours as a boy on his father's heels...the very thought of going out turned his stomach.

He dozed but for a moment, and when he blinked hazily he started at the sight of his mother, pale and slight. His heart ached at the sight of her, a mere wisp of the vital person she had once been. Unease stirred low in his belly as she stared at him, a haunted look bright in her heavy-lidded eyes.

"Oh, my boy," she whispered, gliding over to him. She reached out a frail, thin hand, touching his face.

His chest tightened, as he recalled the mother he'd grown up with. Always lively, effervescent. A magnificent host. Father would be heartbroken to see her in her current state.

“I must beg you to forgive me,” she murmured, a tear rolling down her cheek. “I have been a dreadful mother to you.”

“No, no”

“Please, let me speak. I have been squandering our time together, I’ve been so thoughtless. All I’ve done since...since we lost...” Her voice broke here. “I’ve been losing myself. And it never stops. I don’t know how to—” she choked down a sob. “I don’t know how to find myself again.”

“And you,” she lifted his chin with the tip of her finger. “You have been doing precisely the same thing, haven’t you?”

Dalton couldn’t speak.

“You hide behind this mask, my boy. This mask of carelessness and heedless pleasures. We both strive to flee the memory of what we lost.”

“Mother, I—”

“Hush. Your heart aches as mine. For your late father.”

Dalton’s eyes stung.

At last Mother drew back, twisting her mouth and reaching up to dab away her tears. She turned from him, breathing in deeply, and took a step towards the door. Then she paused, and over her shoulder inquired, “Why do you despise your uncle so, my boy?”

Dalton dug his fingers into the arm of the chair. “Despise him?” he tried to laugh. The man is a leech.

“He is your father’s brother. Your uncle. It is pleasant to have Celeste and him here.”

Dalton rose, knees watery. “Uncle Ernest hated Father. Heavens, he still does, though the man is dead.”

Mother’s eyes widened, her face draining of color somehow even more. “How could you say such a thing?” her voice shook.

Dalton clenched his hands into fists. “Didn’t you ever see that?”

Closing her eyes, Mother pinched the bridge of her nose. “Let us speak of something else. This whole matter is confusing, I can’t think of it right now.”

With a swallow, Dalton nodded. “Of course. Forgive me, Mother.” He hurried to her, heart squeezing as she trembled in his arms. She began to weep, softly at first, and then bitterly. “Hastings!” he called.

His mother’s maid, who had been waiting in the hall, swept in and took her by the arm. “Come, my lady.”

Dalton sank back down into the chair, covering his face in his hands.

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Gemma was thankful to be alone when a delivery arrived at Aunt Philippa's house. For Gemma herself, the footman announced, placing it in her hands. Tears blurring her eyes, she stared down at the book in her hands, with the same cover as the one she had once read over and over again. She caught her breath, tracing her fingers over the gilt letters upon it, and opened to the heavy vellum pages that she almost knew by heart.

True to his word, Lord Blakemore had sent the book. She had half-expected him to forget. To apologize, make excuses at the next ball. But he had indeed remembered. And she sat staring at the proof of it, of his consideration, his thoughtfulness. Her throat tight, she began to flip through the worn pages, and it was as if she were walking a path she'd strolled down a thousand times before. She snapped it shut and hugged it close to her chest, a sob wracking her.

For a moment, her grief lessened, and it was as if Father were there, right beside her on the settee. Reading aloud a section on the comets. She would lean her head against his shoulder, listening intently. And so many days she had stolen into his library, curled up on the windowsill, a kitten napping on her feet, and read the book from cover to cover.

Taking in a deep breath to compose herself, Gemma opened her eyes and rose, smoothing her skirts. She would take it upstairs at once. As she was about to climb the stairs to her room, the butler, Gibbons, stopped her. "Miss. You have just received a letter. From Willow Grove."

Gemma caught her breath. A letter from Mama.

“Thank you, Gibbons,” she smiled, receiving the envelope. She hurried up the stairs with her book and now her letter, and once inside her room she set the book down carefully before tearing open the envelope. The lump returned to her throat as she read the first line on the page, My darling Gemma.

Homesickness swelled inside her, and she sank down onto her bed, flopping back upon it in a most unladylike way as she read.

Her mother wrote that she missed Gemma desperately, that the cottage was hardly the same without her. Vicar Jennings is quite melancholy about your departure. He calls frequently, inquiring about your season in London. I do believe that he is anxious for your return. Should he, there is no doubt you might secure a proposal of marriage.

Gemma lowered the letter, grimacing. The kindly vicar was certainly of a pleasant temperament, but she could not imagine a life tied to him as husband and wife.

It was the same thing with Lord Neville, who her aunt evidently sought for on Gemma’s behalf.

She huffed out an exasperated sigh. As much as she missed Mama, if she were to return to Willow Grove, she would need to be forthcoming about not wishing to marry for anything but love. Although, something told her that Mama would find such a sentiment ridiculous. Impractical.

So be it , Gemma told herself. If it means remaining true to myself.

Someone rapped on the door and Gemma sat up, calling, “Come in.”

Aunt Philippa swept in, casting her a pointed look. Gemma straightened correcting her posture.

“Better,” Aunt Philippa approved. “Tonight, I shall hold a dinner party. Does that sound agreeable?”

“Oh, very!” Gemma scrambled to her feet, heart pounding. Perhaps she could invite Lord Blakemore, thank him in person for the book.

But before she could speak, Aunt Philippa declared, “Lord Neville shall attend. He’s quite taken with you.” So is Vicar Jennings, evidently.

Gemma tried to smile.

“Now, let me decide upon your gown. Ah, this red suits your complexion very well. It almost exactly matches the colour of your lips. Come, come!”

Gemma hastened over and Aunt Philippa handed her the dress. “Begin to change, I will call in Rose!” she practically screeched, causing Gemma to start.

Rose hastened into the bedroom. “Help Miss Hayesworth into her gown, and there are several others she will be trying as well. Such as...this emerald. It would suit your complexion and your hair.”

“Aunt, it seems that this evening bears more significance in your estimation. May I inquire as to why?”

“Why, Lord Neville, of course. He is London’s most eligible gentleman on the marriage mart. He is older, so I do not imagine he carouses as most younger men do. And his wealth cannot recommend him more.”

“But,” Gemma shook her head, “what if I do not wish to wed him?”

Aunt Philippa began to laugh boisterously. “You do not wish to wed—” she wagged

her head. “How ludicrous? Why ever not? I promised your Mama I would see you wed to the most eligible bachelor in London, and that is precisely what I’ve done. If I do not, you will be resigned to marrying a country vicar. But surely you do not wish for that misalignment, do you?”

“No, I—”

“Then Lord Neville it is. You shall be afforded a beautiful home in Manchester Square, everything yours should you wish it...you could not find a man more devoted than Lord Neville.”

Gemma couldn’t speak, staring at her reflection in the mirror as another maid entered, and began to help Rose arrange her hair.

Gemma descended the grand, front staircase, trailing her hand down the banister as she went. Below, Lord Neville stood, smiling up at her. His blond hair with a touch of grey shone like spun gold in the candlelight.

He bowed to her when she paused at the bottom of the stairs. “Good evening, Miss Hayesworth. You are most exquisite.”

Gemma flushed, dropping her eyes to the ground as she curtsied, and then took his proffered hand. He escorted her to the sitting room with the rest of the guests, who Aunt Philippa ushered along, telling the Ashtons what she had selected for the primary course. “Venison! The best cook could find at the butchers.” Gemma held her breath as she hurried forth on Lord Neville’s arm, his gaze trained upon her.

To her alarm, he led her to the window, everyone’s eyes upon them, and turned to her once they reached it, his hand still clasping hers. “Miss Hayesworth, I should be

honoured if you were to accompany me to Vauxhall Gardens.”

The rest of the room waited quietly for Gemma’s reply. She took in a deep breath, and nodded. “I would be delighted to, Lord Neville.”

He smiled broadly. “You would?”

Gemma nodded, just barely refraining from shooting her aunt a glare across the room. Aunt Philippa must have known he meant to do this. She must have planned it. Clenching her jaw, Gemma offered Lord Neville her thanks for his generosity, to which he chuckled softly, swaying closer. His eyes lit into hers, his chuckle fading, and for one terrible moment, Gemma feared he meant to steal a kiss. Of course, he didn’t. To do so would be an affront, an egregious misstep. But his eyes did wander to her lips, and she forced another smile. “I am in want of a drink,” she told him. But he shook his head, hurrying past her. “Please, Miss Hayesworth. Permit me.”

Gemma sank back against the wall just behind her, staring out the window. This evening couldn’t end soon enough. Guilt bit beneath her skin. I could not do better than Lord Neville. Prudence would delight to have such a suitor. But I cannot fathom wedding him.

“Gemma,” Aunt Philippa hissed, just at her elbow. “He has just made it known to all in attendance that he means to court you. Isn’t that simply marvelous?”

“But of course,” Gemma choked.

“Come, now. You are to remain on his arm. Make haste.”

Gemma was whisked back to Lord Neville and wound her arm with his. She stared at a point on the wall, wishing for the night to be over.

The following evening, Lord Neville send his carriage for Gemma and Aunt Philippa, along with Gemma's maid, Rose. That at least would be a comfort, to have the kindly Rose nearby throughout the evening. Gemma had never visited Vauxhall Gardens before, so she plied Rose with questions as the maid arranged her hair as well as a necklace she'd fastened around Gemma's throat.

"It is something of a fair, with rope-walkers and fire-eating men," Rose informed her, smiling at Gemma in the mirror. She went on to describe the fantastical shows that were performed all over Vauxhall, the stalls of food, the bustling crowd. Gemma's eyes opened wider and for the first time that day, excitement stirred in her stomach. Even if she didn't enjoy the fawning nature of her companion, it would still be a delightful experience. She couldn't find fault in that. So, as she sank into her seat in Lord Neville's carriage, averting her eyes from his adoring gaze, she reminded herself that the excursion would at the very least be interesting.

Aunt Philippa persisted in drawing her back into the conversation when she tried to slip out of it. And each time she did, her mouth grew thinner and tighter. Gemma nearly laughed aloud at the sight.

At last, the carriage rumbled to a stop at the banks of the Thames, where their boat would take them to the gardens, and Lord Neville climbed out first to help them each from the cabin.

Dalton stared out the window of the carriage, certain that if he turned back to face the rest of the passengers, Celeste would attempt to chatter his ear off.

At last, the carriage slowed and then stopped at the appointed place where the boats

set off for Vauxhall Gardens. Dalton climbed out first and then helped Mother and Celeste down the carriage steps. Celeste's foot slipped on one of the steps and she fell with a cry. Dalton lurched forward, catching her in his arm, and she lifted her chin, blinking up at him coyly. Dalton gave her a taut smile and withdrew once her feet touched the ground. She pouted. "Cousin, won't you take my arm?"

Dalton could barely refrain from groaning, but he nodded and hooked his arm with hers. She laughed softly, gratified.

Ignoring his mother's frown, Dalton led Celeste towards the dock where their commissioned boat awaited. Another party approached. They must have commissioned the same boat. Dalton nearly stumbled, however, when his eyes landed on a familiar face. Gemma. He nearly gasped, staring.

A cloak swirled around her, and beneath that he glimpsed a silken red. His throat went tight, and he took in a shuddering breath. She walked arm-in-arm with that stodgy Neville.

And she was...exquisite. Her eyes starry, curls tumbling elegantly about her rosy cheeks. And she stared back at him, lips parting. He nodded, the rest of the world melting away as her throat moved, as if she'd just swallowed. "Miss Hayesworth," he whispered.

Her lips curved, and she returned his nod. "Lord Blakemore."

Her aunt bustled over, grasping Gemma's arm, shooting Dalton a withering look. And then she hastened her niece onto the boat. Dalton raised an eyebrow. Philippa Kenway made it no secret that she believed the rumors about him. Well, the veritable rumors, that was.

Her party fled to the other side of the boat, and Dalton extricated himself from

Celeste, retreating to the boat railing to watch the banks. The sound of voices drew his attention, and he turned his head, espied none other than Gemma and Lord Neville. Clearly, they'd been possessed of the same notion, and found their way to the railing. Gemma turned her head, and her eyes locked with his. A slow smile spread across her face, and Dalton's pulse raced.

He reached up, touched the brim of his hat, warmth spreading up his chest and throat.

Oh, heavens, he ached for her. He wished it was he at her side, her hand on his arm. Knees locking, he leaned more heavily on the railing, unable to pull his gaze from hers. The air thickened round them, his pulse thudding heavily in his ears. Her face flushed a faint shade of pink, those red lips falling open as if in a soft gasp. Lord Neville beside her was occupied, engaged in a conversation with Gemma's aunt on his other side.

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Dalton welcomed the cool breeze that cooled his feverish skin. It was a balm, and he savored it. He withdrew his gaze when her aunt leaned forward, shooting him a scathing look. “Gemma!” he heard her huff, “Lord Neville, do tell my niece again what you’ve just told me. Gemma .”

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Gemma start and acquiesce. “Forgive me, Aunt Philippa.”

His stomach turned at her deferential tone. All of London spoke of Miss Hayesworth’s burgeoning courtship with Lord Neville, how the old fellow was hopelessly besotted. Clenching his jaw, he withdrew his pipe and lit it, taking several deep draws. Down the boat, Aunt Philippa’s voice rang out. “Pipe-smoking—such a revolting habit.” She had fully intended for him to hear that. He stared down into the deep green waters of the Thames, wondering how many debtors rested in the river’s bed. A gruesome thought, no doubt. But he could ascribe that to his melancholy as of late.

At last the boat docked at the Vauxhall Gardens, and everyone debarked. Uncle Ernest hurried Dalton and Celeste down the path to a private dinner box he had reserved, and once within it, servers arrived with platters of food. Today, Mother’s poor spirits plagued her, and she had remained abed, her voice back to that thin whisper, her vitality of a few days earlier drained away. Not for the first time, Dalton wondered if he should simply turn his uncle and cousin out of the house. But his mother’s tearful eyes flickered through his mind, her rebuke of his ill-faith in Uncle Ernest. He’s your father’s brother, my dear , she had once scolded him.

And perhaps he was a relation. It didn’t excuse what he might have done, to seize the

estate, to claim what he'd always believed to be his. Even though he had not drank for several days, his stomach churned as he jerked away from that train of thought. If he dwelt on it too much, he would go mad. He would suffer nightmares again. And he had just got those under control. Though the bursts of agitation returned time and again. Nothing the physician could do, unless he wished for laudanum. But Dalton did not wish for that.

Father had always instructed him to forbear the drink and medicinal soothing. Dalton had succumbed to drink, but he would not take laudanum. At the very least he could manage that.

Gemma could hardly eat, her stomach flipping over and over again as she sat beside Lord Neville in the dinner box he had reserved. The food would have been delightful if it weren't for her glaring aunt across her, chattering with the Ashtons, who had joined their party by another boat.

"What should you think of seeing elephants?" Lord Neville murmured close to her ear. Too close.

"I should be most intrigued."

"Capital!" Lord Neville sipped his wine. "We shall depart once we have finished dining, then."

"I shall remain here," Aunt Philippa called over, undoubtedly straining to hear every word spoken between them.

"Are you very certain, Lady Kenway?" Lord Neville inquired, though Gemma could tell he was pleased by her aunt's eagerness to give them privacy.

“Oh, but of course. I have ever so much to catch up on with Lady Ashton.”

Gemma forced herself to swallow a bite of food.

“The beasts are but a short distance from our box,” Lord Neville informed her softly, searching her eyes closely. Gemma lowered her gaze again, hoping it appeared demure rather than avoidant. “And after that, I must entreat you to a dance in the Pavillion.”

Gemma nodded, and dazedly stirred her fork through the rest of her food. She didn’t have the appetite for another bite. Every second, her fate drew closer and closer. Her fate decided for her by Lord Neville, and Mama, and Aunt Philippa. The rest of the world faded away and she strove to retreat within herself, scarcely uttering a word until Lord Neville rose, extended his hand, and led her towards the elephants.

But Lord Neville was most eager to dance with her, and after briefly viewing the elephants, great lumbering creatures with flapping ears and trumpets for snouts, he led her back to the Pavillion. There, he led her in the dance, and the candle lights hanging overhead spun faster and faster. She tried to pretend they were stars, and like her life, they spiraled too quickly to grasp, to hold onto. Gemma tried to smile up at Lord Neville but something caught her attention across the Pavilion. Lord Blakemore and his cousin Celeste danced as well, her golden hair glinting under the candle light and faint sun glowing through the clouds.

They made a very handsome pair, Gemma thought dismally, as Lord Neville guided her away from them.

Her heart leapt when Lord Blakemore turned and espied her, his face flushing. His vivid eyes remained locked with hers as the dance commenced, and Gemma was dizzy now, not from getting rushed about the floor by Lord Neville, but from Lord Blakemore’s stare across the room.

“Does something trouble you, Miss Hayesworth?”

“Oh, no. Not a bit.” What troubled her was her inability to escape Neville. She just wished to be in Lord Blakemore’s arms. That was what she longed for.

“No?” Lord Neville smiled softly. “I just can’t help but think that you are leagues away apart from me. In an entirely different universe.”

“Perhaps a bit. I think,” Gemma murmured, “I think I need a bit of fresh air.”

“Ah, certainly. Certainly.” Taking her hand, he led her off the stage towards the grass knoll nearby, where he led her closely in a stroll.

“Suitable?” he inquired.

Gemma nodded. “Very. I thank you.”

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At last, Dalton noticed Gemma return to the Pavilion to dance with Lord Neville once again. It turned his stomach to see her so often in the other man's arms, and he began to calculate the best point at which to take her as his own partner in the dance.

He suffered Celeste's pouts when he turned down her sly request for another round, and waited until the opportune moment. And then, he interrupted Lord Neville and Gemma's dance, whirling away with her in his arms, and her breath caught as she lifted bright eyes to his. Once again the air grew heavy around them, his heart thundering in his ears as the music rose to a new height. Her fingers lacing in his, he guided her into another spin, and as they circled each other, he could hear her hitched breath, her red lips that matched her dress so well falling open in a charming manner. He couldn't stifle the silly grin that tugged at the corners of his mouth, and he found it impossible to release her as the dance came to a close. Her breath came quickly as she stared up at him. "Would you do me the honour of this next dance?" he whispered.

She nodded, her throat moving as she swallowed.

His mouth dry, he led her into place, and began again the procession down the pavilion, cool breezes cooling his fevered face. He ached when her hand slipped from his at each parting in the dance, until she was returned to him again several steps later. He had not danced with her for what seemed so long, though it had been but a week.

The rest of the world melted into the ether until at last it all came sweeping back in harsh relief as the music faded, and her aunt hastened over, grasping her by the arm. Dalton strode off the Pavillion towards the guided walks, the Vauxhall Garden

wildernesses, for a reprieve from his clinging cousin.

Under a large tree, he paused and withdrew his pipe, lighting it, and began to draw on it, closing his eyes as a new calm washed over him. A soft drizzle began sputtering on and off, until it at last faded into a fine mist that hung over the city. The candle lights glowed far across the stretch of greenery, reaching him through the oncoming fog. It was late afternoon now, and it would be dark before long. The pale luster of twilight had just begun to wash over the hedgerows and bowers of roses, the towering trees and waving ferns rustling all around.

How long he lingered here, inhaling and exhaling deep puffs of tobacco smoke, Dalton couldn't be sure. But his eyes opened when a twig snapped nearby, and he turned to see Gemma herself, under a tree not several paces from his own. He nearly dropped his pipe, and pocketed it once he'd snuffed it out. She stepped towards him, and his heart leapt into his throat. "Miss Hayesworth," he choked.

"Lord Blakemore," she curtsied. "I did not mean to—"

"No, no. Please," he gestured, indicating that she join him under the shelter of the tree.

She did so, slow, careful. Her eyes were large in her flushed face.

"I did not realise you were out here," she rushed to explain. "Forgive me if I am intruding..."

He shook his head, smiling. "I am pleased to see you, Miss Hayesworth."

"You—you are?"

He huffed out a hoarse laugh. "I'm afraid it is the truth."

She folded her hands in front of her, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. “I wished to express my considerable regard for bestowing me the book from your collection. It has meant more than I can say, to once again turn through its pages. I cannot begin to express just how...deeply I cherish it, how enraptured I am to have it in my hands again.”

Dalton grinned. “And I am pleased to hear it.” Without thinking, he took a step towards her, but she stiffened. He took another one, unable to breathe, and then he stopped. Oh, how he longed to hold her in his arms...

To his astonishment, she swayed towards him, until suddenly, in the shadows of the tree, he took her in his arms. She lifted her mouth to him, and if he stepped closer, he would be able to kiss her. But he kept himself rooted in place. He would not tarnish her by putting his hands upon her. He could not do that to her.

“Gemma!” A young woman called nearby. Gemma stepped back with a gasp.

“I must go,” she whispered. Dalton swallowed thickly, nodding.

When she turned, he slipped into the shadows, pushing through the boughs to extricate himself from her magnetic draw.

Gemma paused and glanced back over her shoulder towards Dalton, only to find him vanished, like some sort of phantom. Rose grasped her arm, and she pulled her gaze away. “Miss Gemma, where did you go? Lady Kenway has been looking for you everywhere.”

Gemma winced. Aunt Philippa would likely be annoyed with her for disappearing without a word, without Rose chaperoning. She inwardly braced herself for a tongue

lashing from her aunt. Rose led her back to their dinner box, where Lord Neville and her aunt waited. A tense silence hung over the box as Gemma hurried in after Rose.

“Ah, there you are my dear. Come, you’ve scarcely touched your food!” Aunt Philippa smiled at her, though it was clear her smile was forced.

She seated herself beside her aunt, across from Lord Neville. Another awkward pause drawled onward until at last Aunt Philippa spoke. “You are rather flushed. I expect it is most crowded down on the walk.”

“Quite. I needed some fresh air. Thank you for waiting for me.”

“But of course, Miss Hayesworth,” Lord Neville said cheerily, raising his glass.

Gemma nearly sighed aloud when Aunt Philippa began to chat with Lord Neville about the performances held this season in Vauxhall Garden. Lord Neville said something to her but she didn’t hear until he repeated her name. “Miss Hayesworth?” He exchanged glances with Aunt Philippa, and Gemma began to twist the fabric of her skirt around her fingers beneath the table. She knew it was unladylike to fidget, but she couldn’t help it. She glanced over at Rose, whose bowed head and worried glance told her that she’d just made a grave misstep, at least as far as her aunt was concerned.

“The fireworks shall begin soon,” Aunt Philippa announced, peering up at the sky. “It is now well-past sunset. Any minute now, I believe.”

And sure enough, a few minutes later they heard the shrill cry of the rockets as they launched into the dark sky, lighting it with red and gold sparks.

Gemma caught her breath, rising slightly and crossing to the balustrade that bordered the dinner box. Staring up at the sky, she watched, mesmerized as the sparks

showered down upon the park. It was breathtaking to watch.

She could hear people gasping and exclaiming in the neighboring boxes, the whistle of the rockets as they flew towards the stars. The sparks looked like falling stars, and she gripped the balustrade, heart thundering in her chest.

It was over too soon, but just as the final rockets flared, she turned her head, glancing across the park and as the fireworks lit the sky, she locked eyes with Lord Blakemore.

He didn't smile, just gazed back, his expression unreadable. Gemma's heart lurched and she couldn't bring herself to look away. Instead, she cast him a slight smile, trying to catch her breath. As the last firework lit the sky and the park, she found he'd vanished once again.

"You are fond of fireworks?" Lord Neville joined her at the railing of the box, leaning out like she was, to see the full breadth of the sky.

"Very," Gemma told him in her politest voice. But the last thing she wanted right now was to make small talk with him. This evening couldn't end soon enough.

Dalton berated himself inwardly as he turned away from Gemma, where she stood peering out the window of her dinner box and strode back towards his own family's box. He didn't want to watch that musty fellow, Neville, attempt to wrest her into inane chatter. Still, it hardly excused his own travesty not half an hour before.

What possessed you, Blakemore?

He'd been overcome—that was the only reason he could give to explain how close he'd been to kissing her, on the darkened wilderness walk. Likely, he'd already done

damage enough to her reputation, if anyone took notice that they'd slipped away to that notorious side of the park.

Wincing, he paused under a tree, running a trembling hand over his face. He was certainly not immune to her her sweet guileless allure that somehow counterbalanced sharp intellect.

It was an irresistible combination.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am

“Where have you been off to?” Uncle Ernest demanded of him when Dalton at last reached their box. Celeste sat beside him, her eyes red, her pout unmistakable, and Dalton’s heart sank.

“A smoke,” he told his uncle flatly, reaching up to tug at his cravat. It had begun to feel too tight.

Uncle Ernest grunted, almost as if huffing out a laugh of disbelief. “You missed the fireworks. Celeste was rather grieved by your absence during those. You know how much she adores fireworks.”

“My sincerest apologies, dear cousin. Uncle.” Dalton leaned against the dinner box wall that overlooked the rest of their section of the gardens. He exhaled heavily, still fidgeting with his cravat.

In his mind’s eye, the memory of Gemma across the walk, in her box, lingered in his mind’s eye. Wonder had filled her expression, her lips parted in awe of the glorious display over their heads.

“Dalton!”

He jerked, shaken from his reverie. “Yes, uncle?” he drawled in his most bored tone.

“We are leaving. Celeste has a dreadful headache.”

At Dalton’s glance, Celeste tilted her head, letting out a nervous, tearful titter. “My head is pounding wretchedly.”

Dalton refrained from rolling his eyes to the ceiling and nodded. Well, it was for the best. He would rather not suffer another hour under his uncle's watchful eye. It was easier to come and go as he pleased at home, where he could slip away unnoticed, where he could retreat to his bedroom should he desire relief from his relatives. Besides, he wanted to check on Mother, check in on her when he returned home. He had sent a runner for the physician, and Dalton would like to hear what he had to say about Mother's slip back into low spirits.

He accompanied Uncle Ernest and Celeste back to the boats on the Thames, where he searched for a glimpse of Gemma and her party. But it appeared that they had either taken a different boat or would linger at the gardens longer still. He resumed his place on the railing of the boat, watching the stars far above, twinkling away, though not as visible as he'd like here in the city.

Self-loathing filled him, making his stomach turn. How could he be such a fool? Gemma might be drawn to him, but it would not be in her best interest. And yet, the idea of Neville and her?

It was perplexing, how his soul revolted at such a notion.

He needed a stiff drink. A good one. But in his thoughts as he boarded the coach taking him out to drink, he grimaced at the thought of visiting one of those salons where courtesans would vie for his attention, strutting like colorful birds.

At last the boat reached Westminster where everyone debarked, stepping onto the carriage. Several times throughout the coach ride back to Blakemore Manor, Dalton turned from the window to find Uncle Ernest studying him, his small eyes cold and shrewd.

Each time Dalton offered him a stiff smile in return. Celeste's sniffing filled the silent carriage. What is she so distraught about?

As the carriage rolled through the darkened streets of London, Dalton reminded himself that he was playing a dangerous game with Miss Hayesworth. He was rapidly coming to realize that perhaps all this time he had been searching for her in those hazy nights he couldn't even remember any longer. He was tired of returning home, his head foggy, an empty void yawning inside him. He did not want to face the self-reproach that gnawed at his soul after nights like this.

He hurried up the front steps of the manor and headed towards his mother's wing. He expected her to be asleep already, but instead, he discovered her standing in the window of her bedroom which overlooked the gardens, a candle clutched in her thin hands. She turned when she heard the bedroom door creak open, and extended an arm, entreating him to come closer. "My son," she sighed, smiling sadly.

Dalton's heart ached. What had happened to the mother he'd grown up with? The mother who had once been so full of life, so vital?

As he came to a stop before her, she reached out, clasping his hand in her cold one. "How were the gardens?" she murmured, something wistful in her eyes.

"Rather crowded," Dalton leaned forward, kissing her on the cheek. When he drew back, he found tears in her eyes. She reached up, running the pad of her thumb over the dark circles under his eyes.

"Oh, my boy. You find little joy these days."

"I worry for you, Mother." A lump formed in his throat.

"Don't, please. I will be in better spirits one of these days. Those tonics given by the physician, he just needed to adjust the dosage."

"Mother, perhaps we should take a trip to the sea. Just you and I."

“I told you, I wish to remain here, in society. And Celeste—”

“But it would lift your spirits so. And your health—your old physician always instructed visits to the sea, before—”

“That was before your father passed. A sterner course needed to be taken. And Ernest was so kind to recommend this physician. I should hate to wound him by returning to Doctor Jensen.”

Dalton closed his eyes, nodding. Mother would not be swayed about this, that much was evident. He leaned forward, pressing a kiss to her cheek, before bidding her goodnight. “Rest well, Mother.”

“And you. You seem wearied by this evening.”

“I will be better after a good night’s sleep.” Dalton returned to her bedroom doorway before he paused, considering. A part of him longed to share his burgeoning feelings for Gemma Hayesworth with his mother, get her advice about the whole matter. But at the same time, he worried she would mention it to Uncle Ernest. And he did not wish for any sort of battle with the man. Especially not now. His patience with the man was short as it was. But should Uncle Ernest speak to him again of Gemma, or utter her name in that pompous voice of his...

Dalton lifted his hand in farewell, but Mother had already turned back to gaze out the window. So, he slipped out without another word, and in the hall, he leaned back against the wall in the dark corridor.

A soft humming started up, his mother singing to herself. He listened for a few minutes, a flare of anger starting in his chest towards his father. For dying, leaving Mother and him. Mother had always been a delicate soul, and Father’s passing...it was heartbreaking for her. Deeply.

Ernest found his niece pouting in her bedroom, in a big chair by the window. She'd been in a petulant mood all evening, since he'd roundly scolded her for her pitiful attempts to charm her cousin Dalton.

She had protested his chastisements. "Uncle, he is smitten by Miss Hayesworth. I'm doing everything in my power, but it is evident that he will not be moved. Didn't you see him this evening at the Pavilion, cutting in to steal her away from Lord Neville?"

Ernest's anger had sparked. "Of course I saw that," he spat. "How could anyone miss it? The lad is out of control. But Philippa Kenway knows of his reputation, and will have none of it. That is where you have a keen advantage, my dear. Do not forget that, I beg you."

"What advantage could I possibly have when I am not Gemma Hayesworth?"

"Gemma Hayesworth this, Gemma Hayesworth that—I am sick hearing that name," Ernest had exploded. His mood had only worsened when the boy vanished for a good half-hour following that ridiculous dance. And then, Gemma Hayesworth had disappeared as well. And Ernest knew, in his soul, that they must have fled to the privacy of the Vauxhall wilderness. His blood had boiled. And it was still boiling, as he approached Celeste. She lifted her head, noting his expression, and recoiled slightly, eyes widened.

He loomed over her, heart pounding. "Do you wish to live on the streets? To be a wench pleading for two-pence on the corner? I paid for your finishing school and I have been paying ever since your father-my cousin- fell sick and died, for heaven's sake. And what do you have to show for it?"

Celeste's blue eyes flooded with tears again as she shrank back into the couch on

which she sat. “Uncle! How can you be so cruel to me?”

“Cruel? You know nothing of cruelty. Of how cruel this world can be,” he snarled.

She shot to her feet, lips trembling. “I’m doing everything I can. But he shows me nothing but contempt.”

“Because you bore him. You must learn him. Learn what interests him, study him. You have done nothing of the sort as of yet, and your connection with him suffers as a result.”

“And he bores me,” Celeste cried. “He is so serious, and stern. And always gazing at everyone and everything with such contempt. Except for Miss—”

Ernest held up a trembling finger. “I pray that you do not say that woman’s name again.”

“Miss Hayesworth,” Celeste sneered. “He’s in love with Miss Hayesworth. And I’m tired of this ruse, Uncle.” She leapt to her feet, stamping her foot.

“You are tired of this ruse?” Ernest balled his hands into fists. The girl was a dullard, no doubt of that. No foresight, no vision. No true understanding of how dire a situation it was that they found themselves in. He lowered his voice to a harsh whisper. “This ruse is to secure you a place in London Society. To secure your offspring a place. Or would you prefer to wed a destitute merchant who barely scrapes a living together.” He grasped her face between his hands, holding it up firmly so she could not move away. “Do you not understand that, girl?”

She began to sob anew. He released her and she staggered to her bed, throwing herself upon it. “Quiet,” he whispered urgently. “Do you wish to wake the whole house?”

“Oh, Uncle. What if I should fail?”

“You shan’t.” He crossed the room, perching on the edge of her bed. Stroked her golden curls. He closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose with a heavy sigh. He would have to employ more ruthless tactics, if he was to see a union between Celeste and Dalton.

“We must take a more...severe...approach, I am afraid.”

Celeste trembled beneath his hand, and lifted her head at last. “You truly mean—”

“To entrap him. He cannot possibly refuse if he is seen in a compromising position. Even better, it would behoove us for the rustic Miss Hayesworth to witness it. He would never be able to reconcile with her should she behold you and him...” Ernest searched for the right word, “...embracing.”

“Oh Uncle, I—”

Ernest placed a finger against his niece’s lips to hush her. “Destitute? Or Blakemore Manor, with a country estate in Derbyshire, and trips to Bath every year?”

Celeste drew in a shaking breath and closed her eyes. And she nodded. “I cannot abide being destitute,” she said faintly. “The mere thought of it makes me ill.”

“Very well then. Before long we will secure him.” He patted her hand, with its whitened knuckles, gripping the bed coverlet.

Celeste sniffled, sitting up, and wiped her eyes. “Yes, Uncle.”

“Good girl,” he kissed her cheek and rose to depart. “You get some sleep. Tomorrow is a new day. We shall start again. Understood?”

“Yes, Uncle,” Celeste stared down at the coverlet, her face flushed from her violent weeping.

Ernest hurried out into the corridor, shutting the door softly behind him. He would need to strike at the precisely perfect moment. The moment that would deliver the most impressive impact. In the meantime, Ernest needed to send the physician a note regarding Adelaide. More severe measures needed to be taken with her. Lately, he’d been waiting on tenterhooks for her to bring up the other day, when she’d surprised him in the library.

A stronger tonic would keep her in a subdued, confused state. This close to his objective, he couldn’t risk it all fleeing from his grasp.

Dalton set out on a walk, although the sun had set hours ago, and it wasn’t exactly safe for a gentleman of his stature. But he carried with him a chalcedony cane, with its dagger hidden in its core. Perfect for walks such as these. Anyhow, a constable was always out and about in this neighborhood, so he didn’t need to fear much. He set out without a destination in mind, but at the juncture where he usually turned to the left to head towards the West End, where he’d find some of the finer drinking places in London, tonight he turned right instead.

He walked blindly, feet pounding the cobblestones fast and hard as he rambled onward, candle lamps blurring past. The rumble of carriages on the road faded into the back of his consciousness, and he bumped into passers-by several times, earning their exasperated glances and exclamations.

Muttering apologies, he moved onward. Gemma haunted him. Her bright hazel eyes, her sweet smile, her wit. He wanted to cry out.

When he at last slowed his pace and came to a stop, he realized he'd reached Theodore's home. He pulled his silver watch from his pocket to check the hour. Nearly midnight. He's certainly asleep.

But Dalton needed to speak to someone about this. About the whirling confusion within surrounding his draw to Gemma. He had never counted on this happening, and certainly not with someone like her. In fact, he hardly knew girls like her existed. The epitome of everything he'd been searching for, everything he didn't know he wanted.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am

Theodore rubbed his eyes as he appeared in the drawing room doorway after ten minutes with tousled hair and wrinkled shirt paired with a black silk waistcoat and house slippers. He squinted at Dalton, who had been shown in by the butler. “Good heavens, Dalton! What are you doing up and about at this hour? Don’t tell me you’ve been—”

“I’ve just come from Vauxhall Gardens,” Dalton waved his hand. “Do you have any whiskey on hand?”

“Just coffee,” Theodore sighed. He’d obviously resigned himself to this impromptu visit.

“That will do. I must have a word with you, friend.”

“Heavens,” Theodore shook his head, like a dog shaking off water. He turned to the butler. “Please have a pot of coffee prepared.”

“Of course, my Lord,” the heavysset butler bowed, and disappeared into the hall.

Theodore sank onto one of the settees before the hearth, and Dalton followed suit, before shooting to his feet and stalking over to the mantle, leaning against it. He gazed down into the fire, watching the flames leap and pirouette.

“You, Theodore, are a veritable gentleman. Which I have always admired you for.”

“Thank you,” Theodore snorted.

“That being said, I seek your most sage advice regarding a delicate matter, which I cannot wait to discuss any longer.”

“We could have discussed this at coffee the other morning—”

“I was not yet prepared to face the facts of the matter.”

“Ah, well. Of course. Go on, then. Enlighten me on what vexes you so.”

“Vexes,” Dalton scrubbed a hand down his face. “It’s more than that.”

Theodore leaned back on the couch, as if settling himself in to be entertained. Dalton plucked one of the buds from the bouquet on the mantle, bringing it to his nose. It was a little rose, small and dainty, unassuming. After a long pause, he sighed. “Gemma Hayesworth entrances me, deeply.”

Theodore did not respond for another prolonged moment, studying Dalton with an unreadable expression.

Dalton shifted his weight from one foot to the other before demanding, “Come. What am I to do about it?”

“‘Do about it’?” Theodore repeated, his mouth twitching. “What is there to do? You are in love. Besotted. With Gemma Hayesworth, the talk of London.”

Dalton groaned. “In love? You suppose that’s what it is?”

“You’ve never been in love before, have you?” Theodore chuckled.

“No.” Dalton blinked, frowning. “Have you?”

“Once, years ago. As a mere boy. But then I went to Oxford, and when I returned...”

“She’d flown into the arms of another?” Dalton grimaced.

“Unfortunately, yes.”

Just then, the butler hurried in with a tray laden with a silver coffee pot, cups and saucers, and refreshments. He set it upon the drawing room sideboard and began to pour the coffee, requesting if they should desire milk and sugar in it.

Dalton returned to the settee across from where Theodore sat and rested leaning on the sofa’s arm.

“Ever since you’ve met her, you’ve been utterly changed. Your outlook is refreshed, your spirits lifted. And I haven’t seen you like that since before your father’s passing.”

“But I am nothing more than a profligate. A libertine. A wastrel who has lost his direction in life.”

“You can find it again. And you are the only one condemning yourself to such a way of life.”

Dalton waved his hand. “I was right to name you a true gentleman, was I not?”

Theodore laughed more loudly this time, pressing a hand to his chest and bowing his head as if accepting a great commendation. “Indeed, you were.”

“She has this spark for life, or should I say...passion...that I envy.” Dalton pressed the back of his hand to his lips as a giddy chuckle escaped.

“Do you wish to know what I think?”

“What do you think?”

“I think you ought to divulge to her your true feelings. If I were to correctly interpret her response to you the other morning, she loves you in return.”

“You believe it to be so?” Dalton breathed.

“It is unmistakable. Moreover, how common is a shared love of astronomy?”

“The same thing occurred to me.” Dalton received his cup of coffee and sipped it slowly. Theodore followed suit. “But what of Neville? He has set his sights upon her, and I am certain he means to propose to her any day now.”

“But she does not favour his intentions, does she?”

“No.” Dalton resisted the urge to smirk and failed. But his smirk faltered as something else occurred to him. “But he does not have the reputation that I have. He is as unsullied as a woman locked in a nunnery.”

Theodore laughed at this. “Indeed he does. But he does not connect with Miss Hayesworth in the same way you and she do.”

Dalton relished the warm, rich flavor of the coffee as it spread across his tongue. He savored it for a moment or two, considering. “And her aunt despises me, surely. She makes no attempt to disguise it.”

“Well, you can be a boor. But you have lost your taste for those trivial pursuits. You are a new man.”

“You really think I ought to let her know of my feelings?”

Theodore’s smile softened. “I think you must. Or you will always lament it.”

Dalton couldn’t agree more, and he grinned, lifting his coffee cup. Theodore leaned forward with his own, and they clinked their cups together in a cheers.

Gemma could not sleep. She perched on her bedroom’s window sill, the astronomy book Dalton had sent her clutched tightly in her arms. At her feet, Udolpho curled up in a ball, deep asleep. Her tense conversation with her aunt downstairs, when they’d returned home from Vauxhall Gardens, did not dampen her exhilaration. All she could think of was Lord Blakemore’s expression as he drew closer to her in the shadows of the gardens, in the bowers of that tree. The air had gone heavy and warm, almost suffocating, as she lifted her face to his.

His arms had gone around her, strong and warm, and she’d felt his breath brush against her face. Her heart still fluttered, her knees still going to water when she thought of it.

She buried her face in her knees, shivering. Aunt Philippa had tried to pry from her what had happened when she’d disappeared, but Gemma had sidestepped her prying questions. She did not want to horrify her aunt or appall her. Perhaps it had been unwise to flee into the shadowy depths of the gardens, unchaperoned and alone, save for Lord Blakemore. But it had happened, nevertheless, even if none of it had ever been intended.

“I don’t understand him one bit,” Gemma whispered to Udolpho. “He is hardly the rake I expected. And yet...do you think this is but an act?”

Udolpho didn't stir from his nap, and Gemma sighed. "I wish I could speak to Mama about this. But she would just tell me to pay heed to her beloved Vicar Jennings."

Gemma rose, crossing the room, and plucked a rose from the vase on the small table near the door. She brought it to her nose, the scent reminding her of the flower garden where she had met Lord Blakemore that first night.

Rake though he may be, his quiet intelligence, his kindness...it was very un-rake like. Or perhaps that was just part and parcel with the rest of his charm. She lay down on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. She'd loved doing this back at home in Willow Grove, on her own bed. Surrounded by cats. It afforded her a chance to think everything out, whether it was a conversation—or disagreement—with Mama, or a passage of a Gothic novel she'd been reading.

Tonight, though, her mind only whirled faster and faster. Tonight, when Lord Neville had dropped Aunt Philippa and her off at their home, he had kissed Gemma's hand with a wide smile that said a thousand things she didn't want to hear.

She'd drawn her hand from him quickly before fleeing the carriage. Aunt Philippa had whispered to her, as they ascended the steps, that she'd been discourteous to Lord Neville. And Gemma had struggled not to respond with vitriol.

But how could she care for Lord Neville? All he enjoyed speaking of was parliament and the sermons given at Westminster, or the latest gossip in London.

Yet, Aunt Philippa had been so generous with Gemma. Another prick of guilt began in her chest. She sat up as Udolpho climbed onto the bed and curled up on her pillow. With a sigh, Gemma sat down at her vanity, and called for Rose waiting in the hall. Rose hastened in and began to take her hair down out of its pins to ready her for bed. Gemma studied herself in the mirror, wondering if Lord Blakemore noticed the faint freckles scattered upon her nose. Did he find them repulsive?

If the way he'd nearly kissed her was anything to go by, probably not.

When she at last fell asleep, her dreams were strange, disorienting. In the beginning, she stood in Westminster as a bride. She might be a queen about to wed her royal consort. But dismay flooded Gemma when her future husband manifested before her. Lord Neville.

Her expression must have fallen, for his smile faded, before he leaned forward and pressed his mouth to hers. But when he drew back, she let out a cry. Lord Neville no longer stood before her. Instead, Lord Blakemore drew back from kissing her, his smile faint, almost sad. He lifted a hand to caress her cheek, brush a loose tendril of hair away from her forehead.

The next morning, she joined Aunt Philippa in the dining room for breakfast. She found her aunt in a dour mood, her face pale and drawn, her lips pursed, as she stirred her tea loudly.

Gemma sank into her seat beside her diagonal to her aunt's at one end of the table, and Aunt Philippa shot her a hard look. "Did you sleep well?"

"Very," Gemma tried to smile, though it faltered in the face of Aunt Philippa's raised eyebrow.

"And I trust you enjoyed Vauxhall Gardens?"

"Very much," Gemma nodded. She spooned some sugar into her own tea, and poured some milk into it.

"Lord Neville is taken with you. Very. I should not be surprised if he were to offer

you a proposal of marriage by the end of this fortnight.”

Gemma nearly choked on her tea, and carefully swallowed so as to not spit it all out. “A fortnight?”

“Like I told you, my dear. You could not do better than Neville. His reputation is flawless. And I cannot say the same for another certain someone.”

Gemma drew in a deep breath, reminding herself to remain composed. “As much as I am grateful for Lord Neville’s attention to me, I confess—I do not believe we would make a good match.”

“A good match!” Aunt Philippa barked out a laugh. “He is the most eligible bachelor there is. And you, my dear—you are not this season’s most eligible girl on the marriage mart. Nor will you ever be.”

Gemma stared at her, stunned by her aunt’s bluntness. “That may be. But I will not surrender my desire to marry for love.”

“Love will grow,” Aunt Philippa leaned over and tightly grasped Gemma’s hand. “It will grow. Don’t you understand?”

Gemma’s eyes pricked. “But it is possible. And I cannot give up that chance.”

“That is folly,” Aunt Philippa’s expression hardened.

“Maybe it is. But I cannot help it.”

“Do you want to marry well?”

“I told you—”

“Yes, yes. You will only wed for love. But love is not enough. It never is. He will tire of you, and return to his old ways. He is tempestuous. Led by baser instincts.”

Gemma pressed her lips together tightly. “Aunt Philippa!” She shot to her feet. “I’m no longer hungry,” she whispered, and fled the room, leaving her aunt in the dining room alone.

Upstairs, Gemma picked up the astronomy book that Lord Blakemore had sent her. Opened it gingerly, carefully. And then she drew a gasp as she noticed a small inscription just inside the cover of the book. It was addressed to her.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am

Dalton would have slept in late if it weren't for the knock on his door and Wilson entering, announcing that Uncle Ernest wished to have a private word with him in the library. Dalton groaned as he rolled over onto his stomach, pulling the blankets over his head.

"What does the old lout have to say?" he muttered into his pillow.

After ten minutes, he roused and with Wilson's assistance, he dressed.

Someone knocked on the door and Wilson hastened to answer it. He lingered there a few moments, speaking to a footman in a low voice, before he returned to Dalton before the mirror. "A note for you, my lord," he announced. "From a Miss Hayesworth."

Dalton snatched it out of Wilson's hand and unfolded it, leaving the mirror to perch on the windowsill. A smile tugged at his mouth as he read it. Her humor was unmistakable, clever. He read it several times over before tucking it into the inside of his waistcoat pocket, drawing in a shaky breath. "Fetch me my maroon waistcoat, Wilson. And the matching coat."

"Of course, my lord," Wilson nodded. He pulled those items from the wardrobe and laid them neatly upon the bed. Dalton began to readjust his cravat. Lately it had become tight around his neck, nearly suffocating. Especially around Gemma Hayesworth.

"Going out, my lord?" Wilson inquired as he lifted the maroon coat to Dalton's shoulders, helping him push his arms into the sleeves.

“Yes. When we are done, have my uncle informed that I won’t be able to meet him this morning. I have more important matters to attend to.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Dalton examined himself in the mirror, turning this way and that. The color maroon suited his complexion, the color of his hair, and his eyes. And today of all days, he wished to appear his best.

Especially since he intended to call upon Miss Hayesworth. He had not made such a call in years.

“What do you think?” He turned to Wilson, holding out his hands.

“I think that a black silk cravat would do better.”

“I think so too,” Dalton grinned. He waited, struggling against a surge of impatience, as Wilson removed his white cravat and replaced it with the black silk neckerchief.

Once he’d drawn on his boots, polished that morning by Wilson, he grabbed his hat and cloak off the bed and hurried downstairs to the front door. There, his uncle cornered him.

“Where do you think you are going?” he seethed, grasping Dalton by the arm.

Dalton tried to pull his arm away. “Out.”

“Out where?” Uncle Ernest glared at him, mouth a flat line.

“That is hardly your concern, uncle.”

“Is it not? Your comings and goings become more frequent by the day. Is that not a reason for apprehension?”

Dalton’s lip curled with distaste. He jerked his arm again, this time succeeding in freeing it.

“Good day, uncle,” he said under his breath, before opening the door and slipping out onto the sidewalk.

A carriage awaited him on the street, and once in it, he rapped the ceiling to let the driver know to take off.

The drive to Philippa Kenway’s home did not take long, as it was in a fashionable neighborhood adjacent to the one where Blakemore Manor was situated. He lit his pipe, taking several draws of it to calm his fluttering nerves, until at last the carriage rolled to a stop. The footman opened his door, and he stepped out, pausing on the walk to gaze up at the Kenway house.

His driver opened the door and Dalton hurried down the steps on wobbly legs. He paused for a moment, checking his appearance in the reflection of the carriage window, before mounting the front steps and knocking. A butler answered the door and admitted him, and Dalton asked, his stomach twisting into knots, if he could inform Lady Kenway of his wish to call upon Gemma.

The butler bowed and disappeared, and Dalton paced back and forth across the foyer, pulse racing.

Aunt Philippa waved the folded paper in the air. She’d just received it from a runner, and Gemma listened politely as her aunt informed her of its contents. “Lord Neville’s

sweet sister, Lady Sarah Neville, has sent me a note this morning inviting you and I to a little soiree. I am certain that this is her way of signaling her brother's intentions."

"Oh, yes. Very good," Gemma forced a smile and nodded, though Aunt Philippa took no notice. Or else, she simply ignored it.

"You will adore Sarah. She is a great reader like yourself, and I am certain the two of you will be friends—and sisters."

Gemma rose suddenly and crossed the room to the window, unwilling to let her aunt see the tears springing to her eyes. If the stars were out right now, she'd wish on one. She'd wish that somehow, she would find a way to be with Dalton. Though, for all she knew, this was but a spring dalliance for him, and he was merely toying with her. Aunt Philippa could be right after all, but that didn't make Lord Neville any more of a desirable prospect.

Aunt Philippa's butler stepped into the room, and in a low voice, informed them that Lord Blakemore had come to call upon Gemma.

Aunt Philippa went pale, her eyes sparking with indignation, and her good mood evaporated like steam. "He's here?" she sputtered. "To—to call upon—"

"He's in the hall, my lady."

Aunt Philippa closed her eyes and prayed aloud. "May the good Lord grant me forbearance."

Gemma leaned back against the wall, touching her heart. It had begun to thunder under her fingertips, and she couldn't breathe. Lord Blakemore...here? Had her wish truly worked?

“What shall I tell him, my lady?”

“Why, send him away—”

“No!” Gemma whispered urgently, crossing the room. “Don’t send him away.”

“Gemma!” Aunt Philippa’s voice went shrill.

Gemma sank down on the settee beside her, grasping her aunt’s hand in hers as a tear ran down her flushed cheek. “Don’t send him away, Aunt Philippa. I wish to see him.”

“Think, Gemma. What good could possibly come of this?” Aunt Philippa hissed.

“Everyone can change, Aunt. Don’t you believe that?” Gemma dabbed away her tears. “He has shown me nothing but kindness, and thoughtfulness. And our connection—there’s nothing like it. Weren’t you young once, in love? Couldn’t you try to understand?”

Aunt Philippa’s mouth thinned as she stared at Gemma shrewdly. With a soft sigh, she softened and shook her head. “Very well. But let me remind you that this is against my better judgement. And if it goes amiss, you have none to blame but yourself. If Lord Neville were to hear of this—” she closed her eyes, sighing again. “Bring him in,” she ordered the butler.

Gemma flew over to the mirror to check her appearance, to tuck any loose strands of hair back into place, to dab at her reddened eyes. She’d just returned to the settee when the butler entered, and announced Lord Blakemore.

He entered, tall and imposing as usual, dressed in a fine wine-red suit, black silk cravat tied neatly at his throat, and when his piercing eyes landed on Gemma, her

chest constricted. She and Aunt Philippa rose to greet him, but she twisted her hands together, heart beating faster until it might burst. His lips curved into a subtle smile.

“Lady Kenway,” he bowed. And then, to Gemma, “Miss Hayesworth. I pray you fare well this morning.”

“We do,” Aunt Philippa said stiffly, casting Gemma an exasperated look. “And to what do we owe the pleasure of your company, Lord Blakemore?”

“I thank you for receiving me,” he replied to her, though his eyes remained fixed on Gemma.

“Refreshments and tea,” Aunt Philippa instructed the butler as Lord Blakemore smiled at Gemma, and she smiled back, grateful to sink back down onto the settee. “Won’t you have a seat, Lord Blakemore?”

He acquiesced with a terse nod, lowering himself onto the settee beside Gemma.

“Miss Hayesworth,” he murmured. “How do you fare this morning?”

“Very well. And you?”

“The same. How do you find the astronomy book?”

Gemma blushed beneath Aunt Philippa’s confused glance. “It’s just as wonderful as I remembered. I’ve been poring over it every night. It is just as comprehensive as I recall.”

“Yes, it is very detailed, is it not?” Lord Blakemore smiled. “David Gregory’s knowledge of the stars is fathomless, I think. Have you been to one of the academic salons yet?”

“Oh, what would Gemma have to do at one of those places?” Aunt Philippa interrupted, sniffing.

“Well, your niece’s passion for the study of astronomy would be one reason,” Lord Blakemore replied, unabashed by Aunt Philippa’s glare. “She would meet a great many learned scholars on the subject, who I’m sure would be pleased to make the acquaintance of a young lady of her learning and caliber.”

Gemma’s chest ached at his words. “You truly believe so?”

“I do,” Lord Blakemore turned to her, his smile broadening. It transformed his usually serious face.

“How often do you visit those salons?” Gemma asked him.

“Not as often as I did in my Oxford days. I still keep up with the recent scholarship on the subject, but it is something I’m eager to delve back into.”

“Astronomy? The study of the stars?” Aunt Philippa asked in astonishment. “Why, do you intend to become William Herschel?” she laughed at her own joke, though Lord Blakemore nodded earnestly.

“I would be honoured to one day assume such a place in the scientific community as William Herschel once did.” He directed this to Gemma, who nodded with a soft smile.

“Have you ever read through his catalogues?” she asked him.

“All three. I find his class system most impressive and comprehensive. What do you think of it?”

“Remarkable,” Gemma clasped her hands together, heart beginning to race. Aunt Philippa glanced between the two of them, stunned by this turn in the conversation. “It is my dream to study the comets, like Herschel’s sister. And someday publish my work in the Philosophical Transactions journal as she did.”

“Perhaps we could write something together.”

“I should like that very much,” Gemma laughed breathlessly. She couldn’t help it. Surely nothing could match the exhilaration in this moment, and nothing could take it away. Ever. If he was here to call, he couldn’t be toying with her, could he?

The arrival of the tea interrupted their conversation but they presently resumed it and spent more than half an hour discussing Herschel and his sister Caroline, and how it was said that Caroline these days was studying stars of similar polar differences.

Aunt Philippa began to work on her embroidery of a handkerchief, clearly bored by the conversation, and gave up on trying to participate.

Gemma’s heart sank when Lord Blakemore at last rose. “I ought not to intrude upon you any longer. Thank you for having me, Lady Kenway. And Miss Gemma, it has been a pleasure.” He bowed low over Gemma’s hand, and a shiver went through her when his lips brushed her skin.

And then, with a last smile for her and her alone, he strode out.

He was not gone five minutes when the butler entered the drawing room, and Gemma’s heart leapt. Had Lord Blakemore returned?

“Lord Neville here to call on Miss Hayesworth.”

Aunt Philippa flew to her feet with a cry. “Oh, how wonderful!”

On his way out of the Kenway house, Dalton met Lord Neville in the hall. He bowed to the older man, and Neville returned the gesture with a tight smile. His eyes were wide with surprise, however, to see Dalton here.

Dalton returned the smile stiffly, even as envy twisted in him. There would be no objection from Lady Kenway about Lord Neville's visit, surely. She made it no secret that she distrusted Dalton, if her glares and compressed mouth was anything to go by. She'd barely managed to speak more than a few words with him.

But, Dalton reminded himself as he slipped out the front door onto the street that he could understand why. He'd made a name for himself in the upper echelons of London society, as the man who danced with girl after girl but never called, who spent too many nights out carousing. He'd seen nothing in the scandal sheets reporting that he'd withdrawn from that lifestyle. But of course, they were the scandal sheets.

Lord Neville, if dull, was at least graced by a pristine repute here in London. And with his wealth to recommend him, Gemma could not hope for a better suitor. But Dalton's visit might have spurred Neville to question if his suit would be accepted by her.

Dalton clenched his jaw, telling his footman that he would walk home rather than go by carriage. He needed to clear his head. And walks were quickly becoming the best way for him to do so.

Instead of going directly home, he meandered his way through the streets, thinking. He'd been doing a great deal of thinking lately. Too much, perhaps. For some of the revelations he'd experienced were unpleasant to face.

Gemma was a remarkable young woman, with beauty, intellect, kindness...she deserved only the best. Dalton paused, frowning. With his past lapses into irreverent pursuits and infamy...how could he hope to think himself the best suitor for her? Lord Neville was everything he wasn't. And even at Dalton's best, she deserved far better.

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As soon as Lord Neville departed, Gemma excused herself to retire upstairs. But instead, she decided to slip out of the house, and hurry down the street to visit Prudence. It would be a brief walk, and Gemma needed to talk to someone other than Aunt Philippa about Lord Blakemore's visit. Her mind was whirring with confusion over it, over its abruptness, his intentions...was he attempting to announce his desire to court her? And if he did, would Aunt Philippa even allow it?

She'd thankfully not had the chance to lecture Gemma about it since Lord Neville almost immediately after Lord Blakemore departed. But Gemma could tell that her conversation with him about the Herschels, and publishing something together, had disturbed her aunt.

Aunt Philippa had gone upstairs to rest after the busy morning, so Gemma hoped she wouldn't be missed.

Prudence received her in a quiet back drawing room, away from the rest of her family, so they could chat in privacy.

"Lord Blakemore called this morning," Gemma whispered to her.

Prudence's eyes went wide. "He did?"

"Yes—for but half an hour."

Prudence's voice trembled with excitement. "And what did you speak of?"

"Astronomy, of course," Gemma covered her hand with her mouth.

“And what did your aunt think of that?” Prudence giggled.

“She disapproved. Gravely.” The two of them dissolved into muffled laughter. “But mostly, I think she was mystified by it.”

Prudence shook her head. “He truly called on you? He’s never done so before. Should this get out, the scandal sheets will certainly have something to say.”

Gemma studied her hands in her lap. “Do you suppose he means anything by this? That this is his way of announcing his intentions?”

“It may be,” Prudence smiled. “Would you accept should he ask to court you?”

“I think I would,” Gemma whispered. She and Prudence dissolved into another fit of giddy laughter. Gemma covered her warm face with trembling hands. “It’s strange, for I had just wished that Lord Blakemore would come, that he would somehow show me whether he was serious or not, and it was as if this wish had been heard...for he walked through the door a moment later. And almost immediately after he left, Lord Neville called. I wonder if they met one another in the hall.”

Prudence’s eyes widened. “Perhaps. Do you believe that Lord Neville will take this as a challenge to his suit?”

“Aunt Philippa fears it, I’m certain.”

“But he wouldn’t be discouraged, would he? Half the girls in London were vying for him, as he is a most eligible bachelor in London this season.”

“Then they may have him,” Gemma sighed. “He is very kind, and good. But something lacks between us.”

“Not at all like it is between Lord Blakemore and you,” Prudence sighed. “Well, perhaps you have reformed him.”

“Me? Reformed him? Do you think someone of his nature could change?”

“For love, it is possible.”

“You called upon her?” Theodore said slowly, and then let out a laugh. He slapped his knee. “I don’t believe it.”

“I’m not sure what came over me. This morning I awoke and realized just how dearly I wished to see her and—”

“Did your uncle find out where you went?”

“Well, he might yet. I haven’t been home since this morning.”

“Ah. And he’ll realize his designs for Celeste and you are utterly ruined.” The butler hurried in with a tea tray and Dalton gratefully sipped some, hoping it would ease his restlessness.

“So much the better,” Dalton chuckled.

“Do you think she’ll accept your suit?”

“That’s what I came to speak with you about. On my way out, I ran into Lord Neville, and it set me thinking.”

“Dalton thinking! Nothing good ever comes from that .”

Dalton waved his hand, trying and failing not to laugh. But the next moment, he lowered his tone, heart sinking. What if Theodore agreed with him, that it would be in Gemma's best interest to step back for Lord Neville to freely court her?

It would sting, but he'd accept it. He needed to.

"My reputation is not what it should be. And Gemma—Gemma is..." he exhaled slowly. "Gemma is everything. She deserves only happiness, and I am the bearer of grief. I am troubled, and I drink more than I ought. And my past would only haunt us, would it not?"

Theodore was silent for a long moment. At last, he drew in a deep breath, rising and leaning one arm against the mantle as he studied the flames. A frown settled on his brow. Dalton held his breath, tapping his fingers on his knee faster and faster.

Finally, Theodore raised his head, peering at Dalton curiously. "Grief is what set you on your path of destruction. But you've let it hold you captive long enough. It is time you seek happiness. And it is evident you desire to better yourself. You may still be a true gentleman yet."

Dalton chuckled sadly. "But isn't it too late for such a turn?"

"That is for your choosing. And your choosing alone."

"Not very enlightening of you," Dalton grumbled.

"Ah, yes. I am your source of enlightenment, your conscience. Aren't I?"

"So it would seem." Theodore returned to the settee across from Dalton's, and seated himself on it, leaning forward. "What do you believe your father would tell you?"

Dalton rubbed his hands over his face. Why did he feel weary all of a sudden? A bone-deep weariness that for a moment gave him a glimpse into what it must be like for Mother, lost in her melancholia. “He would tell me that I am the master of my own ship, that I must always strive to do better.”

“There’s your answer.”

“Gemma is an angel, full of this eagerness, this hope. And me, I’m a cynic. A jaded cynic who is lost at sea.”

“A cynic who sees the light,” Theodore corrected him, grinning.

“Am I an utter fool? Is this folly?”

“It could be, if it weren’t evident that Gemma and you are star-crossed.”

Dalton groaned, laughing. “I didn’t know you were capable of sentiment.”

The two men continued chuckling for a little while, until Dalton rose at last. “I’d best return home to check on my mother. She has been in poor spirits again.”

“For that I am sorry. Pay her my respects, will you?”

Dalton found his mother dozing in the greenhouse, in a cushioned chair with blankets draped over her lap. She roused when he approached, pushing aside some of the hothouse flower leaves to sit down in the chair across from hers.

“You’ve been gone nearly all day, and poor Ernest has been worried sick. Why do you insist on tormenting him so?”

“Tormenting,” Dalton clenched his teeth. But he swallowed down his harsh words about Uncle Ernest, focusing on his mother instead. “How do you fare today?” He leaned over to kiss her on the cheek and she smiled sadly.

“Oh, I am weary, as usual. I tried to read the scandal sheets that were sent out this afternoon, but I can’t seem to stay awake. The physician gave me a new variation of his tonic, and it makes me rather languid.”

Dalton frowned, leaning over to pick up the small brown glass bottle on the table beside his mother’s chair. It didn’t have a label on it or anything to indicate its contents. With a frown, he decided he’d consult the physician about this tonic. Whatever it was, it wasn’t helping much with Mother’s melancholies.

“Dalton!”

He nearly dropped the bottle when his uncle’s voice rang out sharply through the peaceful greenhouse. Setting the bottle down carefully, he rose, balling his hands into fists. “Uncle.” He bowed and started to exit the room through a back entrance that opened onto the gardens and hedge maze.

But his uncle stepped in his path before he could take more than a few steps. “Where did you go this morning? I needed to speak with you!” Uncle Ernest demanded, eyes flashing.

“Something urgent required me,” Dalton replied, unable to keep the disdain from his voice.

“Dalton, Ernest, please don’t quarrel,” Mother called to them pleadingly.

“Well, I’ve been slighted by my own nephew. This hardly inspires any sort of familial affection, now don’t you think, Adelaide?”

“Don’t speak to her like that,” Dalton whispered, clenching his teeth.

Uncle Ernest turned purple. “ You will show your uncle some respect for once in your life.”

“And what have you done to deserve it?” Dalton stepped close to him, itching to grab him by the shirt front, march him to the street, and throw him out. And tell him to take his cloying niece with him.

“Deserve! You ask what I’ve done to—I’ve merely been managing your late father’s estate, picking up the pieces of what he managed poorly—”

Dalton stared. “Get out,” he at last managed to whisper, shaking. “Get out.”

Mother began to weep. “Stop it, please!” she cried. “I can’t bear it.” She covered her face in her hands, and Ernest called for her lady’s maid. “Help Lady Blakemore to bed, will you?” he grunted when the girl arrived. Dalton could scarcely breathe still.

He walked over to the Greenhouse window, staring out at the gardens as he tried to return his breathing to normal. He hated to upset mother, to be the cause of her grief. But Uncle Ernest drove him mad. His gall to say such a thing about Father...

It would not be tolerated.

Couldn’t Mother see that Uncle Ernest was a leech? A parasite?

And he had just disrespected Father, in the very house Father passed in...the house he had taken great care to provide to Mother. In Ernest Blakemore’s estimation, Father had been wasting the family assets on Mother, on this home.

He could vaguely recall an argument about it between Father and Uncle Ernest.

Though it was so long ago, he wasn't sure if he'd just been imagining it. Yet, it did seem like something his uncle would make a fuss over. As it was, he'd been struggling to exact his will over the estate, much to Dalton's chagrin and growing irritation.

Mother insisted it was out of good-will only, though Dalton was not so sure.

"You," Uncle Ernest wheezed behind him, "You will not banish me from this house. Do you understand?"

Dalton didn't reply. Instead, he strode from the greenhouse, letting the door shut behind him loudly, and in long strides walked to the far edges of the hedge-maze, where he stopped to pace back and forth. He did not want to make his family the center of ridicule and histrionics.

He'd done enough damage to the Blakemore name as it was. But to come to an open rift with his uncle would be to cast himself out of London society. After all, Dalton would be eschewed by now if his uncle didn't remain in good standing with the rest of the Ton. Despite the Blakemore wealth and prestige, his reputation as a determined rake hardly recommended him.

Yet, did it matter? He wasn't sure. All he knew was that he did not wish to distress his mother more.

He inhaled deeply several times to steady his racing pulse, and sank onto a nearby bench. That sense of suffocation rose in him, like a fist around his throat, and he closed his eyes, waiting for the panic to ebb. It took a while, but at last he stood and found his way back inside

Mother did not appear for dinner that night, and it was a strained meal. No one spoke, not even Celeste, who tended to chatter when there was a tense silence. Thankfully,

this evening she remained quiet, glancing between Dalton and Uncle Ernest several times, a crease between her brows. At dessert, she at last asked him, “There is to be a soiree at Lady Neville’s home, for Gemma Hayesworth , evidently. Are you thinking of attending with uncle and me?”

Dalton blinked, trying to clear his head. “When would it be?”

“Tomorrow evening, I believe.”

“For Miss Hayesworth?”

“Rather telling, isn’t it? The man is besotted with the creature, though I can’t imagine why. She’s so quiet, and rather bookish I hear?”

“Oh?” Dalton smiled at his plate.

Down the table, Uncle Ernest sniffed but remained stubbornly close-lipped. “What good could possibly come from a girl who reads books?”

“I read, Uncle!” Celeste cried.

“I don’t mean the scandal papers.” Uncle Ernest sloshed some brandy into his glass and took a long draught of it. “Or novels.” And he gulped down the glassful.

“Uncle!”

Dalton pushed back his chair from the table and muttered a goodnight. But then Uncle Ernest said loudly to Celeste, “I hear that Lord Neville means to propose marriage to Miss Hayesworth. They make a handsome couple, don’t they?”

Dalton stiffened but kept walking. Behind him, he could hear Uncle Ernest chuckle

under his breath. His blood boiled.

Perhaps it was time to go boxing again. It would relieve some of the pent up energy that made it nigh impossible to sleep.

Instead, he set out on another long walk that ended at Theodore's place. The two of them shared a drink of coffee, and Dalton told him about his uncle's statement regarding Neville. "If he does, I ought to resign my advances. Don't you think?"

Only unless she accepts him. But I do not believe she will."

The two men retired to the billiard room to begin a game of billiards, and played well into the early hours of the morning until Dalton returned home after another long walk. As soon as he could, he would speak to Gemma, tell her his true feelings about her. And if she turned him down...he would step back, wish her every happiness. But if he did not at least try, he'd never forgive himself.

He knew this, deep in his gut.

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Gemma watched in the mirror as Rose's deft fingers wove her hair into an intricate arrangement, using heated tongs to twist the strands at her forehead into tumbling curls. A bit of stain on the lips brought out the heightened flush on Gemma's cheeks, and her stomach was a chaos of butterflies flying this way and that.

The white dress she'd chosen for tonight was perfect for the warmer weather today at the great Neville house for Lady Neville's soiree. It complemented Gemma's sunkissed skintone, which although might not be fashionable, suited her hazel eyes well.

Rose stepped back to admire her handiwork, clasping her hands together. "You look lovely, Miss."

Gemma grinned. "Thank you, Rose."

"It's only the truth," the maid shrugged, laughing.

Gemma could be walking on air. At least, it felt like that as she half-tripped on her rush down the stairs. Even the prospect of spending the evening in Lord Neville's company did not grate her as it usually did. It didn't matter. For Lord Blakemore had called, and perhaps he would call again...

Perhaps, he would be in attendance tonight.

The butterflies went mad.

Aunt Philippa surveyed her carefully, before giving a nod of approval. "He won't be

able to take his eyes off of you, surely,” she whispered to Gemma.

Gemma flushed but didn't let her smile waver.

Rose accompanied Aunt Philippa and her that night, mostly because, as Gemma suspected, Aunt Philippa wished for someone to keep an eye on her. To ensure she didn't sneak off unchaperoned and risk her reputation.

As they stood in the sparkling foyer of the Neville home, with its family busts and plushly carpeted stairs, Gemma and her aunt were greeted by Lord Neville and his sister.

Neville took in a deep breath when it came time for him to greet Gemma. “Heavens, you look—” his voice faded and he shook his head slightly, eyes dazed.

“I believe my brother is trying to say you are most comely this evening,” Lady Neville laughed behind her fan, leaning towards Gemma conspiratorially.

Gemma dipped in a brusque curtsy, and at last she and Aunt Philippa could pass on into the next room, melt into the crowd. Of course, Lord Neville would find her again, but Gemma wondered if she could get her dance card filled before then. She scanned for Lord Blakemore, but didn't catch a glimpse of him.

Her heart leapt when she caught sight of his uncle and cousin. But she couldn't see him. Perhaps he had declined to attend this evening. Her heart sinking, she began to search for Prudence. It would be comforting to have her friend nearby. She would be a heartening presence.

Especially if Lord Blakemore never appeared.

Dalton stared out the carriage window as he, his uncle, and cousin rode the short drive to the Neville residence, a block north of them.

“A pity your mother wasn’t up to attend tonight,” Uncle Ernest sighed, shaking his head.

Dalton didn’t deign to respond. His uncle couldn’t care less about Mother’s health. She was more of a burden to him than anything.

Celeste leaned over to him. “Dalton, do you think Lord Neville will propose to Miss Hayesworth tonight?”

“Anything can happen, my dear cousin.”

At last, the carriage rolled to a stop in front of the impressive Neville house and he descended, heaving a sigh of relief.

“I daresay this is a great improvement to a country cottage for the girl,” Uncle Ernest stepped down onto the wet cobblestones beside him.

Dalton pressed his lips together and hurried up the steps without a word, though he was probably red with anger. Inside, he was greeted cordially by Lord Neville and his sister. He didn’t miss the lack of smiling on Lord Neville’s part, his usually cheery expression slipping.

After bowing over Lady Neville’s hand, Dalton retreated to a private alcove to sip a glass of champagne. Now that he’d begun to cut back on his carousing, he noticed a significant lack of headaches in the morning. He could owe that to abstaining from heavier drink.

He turned his gaze to the dancers, in the middle of a set. Gemma wasn’t amongst

them. Though, presently, a new set began, and Lord Neville led Gemma into the middle of the floor. The crowd hushed and watched in reverence as Lord Neville and Gemma stepped into their places at the head of the line, and the orchestra began to play the next song.

Gemma was beautiful. Heavenly. Dalton caught his breath, mouth dry, and forgot all about the champagne glass in his hand. Envy again twisted in his stomach as Neville led Gemma in the dance, masterful, proud as any man ought to be of Gemma on his arm.

But halfway through the dance, Gemma locked eyes with Dalton, and her mouth fell open in surprise, the corners of her mouth turning up in a smile. Like she was pleased to see him. Dalton raised his glass to her with a nod and couldn't find it in himself to care when Neville noticed their locked gazes.

"Dalton?" Celeste's voice broke the moment and he turned away, struggling to breathe. "Will you dance the next set with me?"

Dalton smiled tightly. "Of course."

When it was time, he maneuvered Celeste over to stand beside Neville and Gemma. If he hoped to win Gemma, then he needed to fight for her.

Gemma smiled at him softly as the music started with a violin solo. They rotated each other, Celeste in his arms, Lord Neville in hers, but they didn't look away from one another. Dalton's throat was tight, his pulse singing, as he at last guided Celeste into Neville's arms and swept Gemma away down the line. It was part of the dance, of course, but his heart squeezed as he gazed down into her starry eyes.

"Lord Blakemore," she breathed.

“Miss Hayesworth. You are my north star. Meet me in the garden after this set?” he whispered before she returned to Lord Neville. Her cheeks were flushed, her lips parted. She glanced at him over her shoulder before Lord Neville led her through the next round of steps, and as the orchestra finished the song, she dipped her chin in a subtle nod. A silent yes.

Gemma rushed to find Prudence as soon as the dance ended. “He asked me to meet him in the garden,” she whispered to her friend, grasping her hand tightly.

Prudence’s eyes went round.

“And I said yes,” Gemma sank onto a settee in the alcove they’d retreated to.

“At the soiree Lady Neville is giving you? I think Lord Neville hopes to propose to you this evening.”

“I pray he doesn’t,” Gemma frowned. “Especially not in front of all these people.”

“Well, what will you say to Lord Blakemore in the garden? What do you think he wishes to speak with you about?”

Gemma shook her head vigorously. “I don’t know. I can’t make him out whatsoever.”

“He’s an impenetrable man, isn’t he?” Prudence whispered behind her fan.

“Indeed, he is. Well, I must go. And meet him in the garden.” Gemma braced herself, straightening her shoulders. She glanced around until she located the back doors leading onto the Neville’s garden terrace, and watched as Blakemore slipped out the large double doors.

After a few moments, she drove forward, eager to follow. She was waylaid by Lady Neville. “At dinner my brother should like to toast you. Would you mind very much?” she said to Gemma, her expression nothing but kind, genial. She would make Lord Neville’s future bride a wonderful sister. But not Gemma.

She thanked Lady Neville for letting her know and excused herself, saying she needed a breath of fresh air. Lady Neville lifted her eyebrows, concern sparking in her pale eyes. “Oh yes, do enjoy our terrace,” she grasped Gemma’s hand, casting her a sympathetic smile. “It’s lovely weather today. No clouds in sight all day. Perhaps we will be so fortunate to enjoy such fair weather tomorrow.”

“That would be wonderful,” Gemma told her as warmly as she could.

She quickened her pace to the door and slipped out unnoticed. No one else attempted to detain her.

Out in the fresh, cool air of the Spring night, she strained for a glimpse of Lord Blakemore in the shadowy garden. Hurrying down the terrace steps, she hastened along the lit path towards the bowers of roses that lined the garden entrance. But she stopped short when two figures came into view around a corner. It was Celeste, in Lord Blakemore’s arms, her mouth lifted to him.

Dalton stepped away from Celeste, trying to put as much distance between her and himself as he could. This was all wrong—he had not wanted to see Celeste approach him in the privacy of the garden. He’d been waiting for Gemma.

But she breathed his name, and advanced upon him until he had nowhere to go, pressing himself against the prickly hedge. “Celeste, what are you doing?” he hissed.

“Oh, cousin,” her pale eyes glistened with unshed tears as she leaned into his arms. “Why do you try to resist what is so manifest between us?”

“Celeste, stop, I beg you,” he stepped to the side, trying to extricate himself from her. But he heard a soft cry and turned his head to see Gemma, standing just a few feet away, staring aghast at the scene as it unfolded.

“Miss Hayesworth,” he choked out, taking a step towards her. But she backed away, shaking her head. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears, and her expression was gut-wrenching. “Miss Hayesworth, it isn’t as it seems—”

Nothing could quite describe the utter grief that twisted her features as she whirled on her heel and fled out of sight. Dalton’s knees buckled as it sank in. He’d lost her, forever. And Celeste—

He wheeled on her, heart pounding. “Why, Celeste?” he choked out. “Why would you—”

She ignored him, advancing upon him again, grasping at the front of his coat. Before he could react, Uncle Ernest, Lady Neville, and several of the other guests appeared at the head of the path, staring in horrified shock.

“What’s the meaning of this?” Uncle Ernest barked out, his voice trembling with fury as Celeste retreated into his arms, sobbing. Lady Neville hurried in the direction Gemma had gone, while the other guests whispered loudly amongst themselves. Dalton caught snippets of what they were saying.

“What would you expect from him? He’s a rake.”

“Good heavens.”

“That poor niece of yours.” That last one was ludicrous, as it was directed to Uncle Ernest.

Dalton glared at his uncle before striding after Gemma, his vision blurring as an indignation he’d never known surged within him. He paused beside his uncle, unable to think of anything to say. But he hoped his stare conveyed it all. How could you?

Uncle Ernest returned his gaze coolly, lifting one eyebrow with immaculately portrayed dismay. As if he had nothing to do with this. As if—

Dalton strode on past him, hurrying his steps until he was nearly running, up the terrace and into the ballroom inside

He scanned for a glimpse of Gemma—if only she would let him explain. Where was she? He prayed she had not left yet.

He raced into the entry hall, nearly jostling into Lord Colin Neville, who was speaking with his sister in low, urgent tones.

“Blakemore!” Neville barked out, stepping towards him. Ernest scanned for a glimpse of Gemma, for any sign of her at all. “Blakemore,” Neville repeated. “Mrs. Hayesworth, if that’s who you’re looking for, is departed already.”

“Has she? With the carriage?” Philippa Kenway swept towards them, stately as ever. “Why, what happened?”

When Lord Neville and his sister glanced at Dalton, Lady Kenway whirled on him. “What did you do to her?” she seethed, before.

“I—”

“Miss Hayesworth set out on foot, Lady Kenway,” Lord Neville said hurriedly, clearly endeavoring to avoid a scene.

“On foot!” Lady Kenway huffed, brushing past Dalton with a scathing glance. “Why would she—I’d best go after her.”

Dalton followed her before she reeled on him, holding up a finger. “Don’t you follow,” she whispered, her voice shaking, blue eyes bright with fury. “You’ve done enough, have you not, Lord Blakemore?”

He stepped back, unable to speak, watching as Lady Kenway hastened out the front door, which had been opened by a footman.

“What did you do?” Lord Neville whispered, as the rest of the guests whispered amongst themselves urgently.

Dalton didn’t answer him. He took off running out the door, brushing against a footman and nearly upsetting him. Somewhere behind him, Uncle Ernest bellowed out his name, and Celeste cried out, “Uncle !”

Dalton began to walk. Before long he was up the street, away from the prying glances and scandalized whispers. His thoughts ran together as he walked blindly, turning down streets he didn’t even read. Maybe somehow, he would find his way to Lady Kenway’s, explain everything. Or at least, try to. She had to know that he would never—

Somehow, he ended up at Theodore’s, and his friend’s butler let him in without question, as if reading everything he needed to know in Dalton’s expression.

“Is Theodore—”

“I’ll go fetch him, my Lord.”

“Much obliged to you,” Dalton sank onto the sofa, lowering his head into his hands.

After a little while, he heard footsteps in the hall, and then Theodore voice that sounded somewhere between concern and amusement. “Is something amiss, Blakemore?”

“Everything’s amiss, Theodore. Everything. My uncle, he—” Dalton couldn’t even finish speaking. He rose to his feet, striding over to the window. Is this truly happening?

He closed his eyes tightly.

“What did the old man do now?”

“He designed to entrap me with his niece. Why? Because he’s been conspiring for this very thing for years.” Dalton could scarcely breathe, digging his nails into his palm.

He just needed to somehow convey this to Gemma. But it was unlikely he’d even get his foot in the door at Kenway House.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am

Gemma ran until her sides hurt, tripping and falling once and getting her beautiful gown all stained and torn. But she got back up and kept running until she at last reached her aunt's house but a few blocks away. Gibbons let her in, his eyes widening when he noticed her disheveled appearance. As he stepped aside for her to enter, he cried, "Miss, are you unwell? What has happened?"

Gemma ignored him, flying up the stairs and rushing to her bedroom. Once there, she slammed the door shut and sank back against it, her eyes slamming shut. This must be a nightmare of some kind. It had to be.

Covering her face with her hands, she let the sobs finally come. They racked her body as she lowered her head into her knees in the dark room. After what might have been hours, or only a few minutes, someone rapped on her door. Gemma blinked, realizing she'd shifted onto her side on the floor. Sitting up, she rose, sniffing, and walked over to the window. Numb. She felt numb. And so foolish.

"Gemma?" Aunt Philippa called through the door, her voice sharp as always. Gemma couldn't bear to see or speak to her aunt right now, though. She just knew the woman would say, I predicted this very thing.

Eyes stinging, tears dripping off her jaw, she wished that she could just go back home. For the first time in a while, that was all she wanted. The door creaked open and Aunt Philippa entered, her mouth pinched, her eyes piercing. Gemma turned back to the window, digging her fingers into the bare skin of her upper arms.

Her body slowly became conscious of the chill in the dark room, since the fireplace had not yet been lit. Aunt Philippa remained silent as a maid hastened in to start a

fire. When she at last left, Aunt Philippa whispered, “Did I not—”

“Yes,” Gemma choked, “You did tell me. And I do wish I listened. I truly do. But for now, Aunt Philippa, will you just let me be?” She began to weep again, and she heard Aunt Philippa sigh, weary, before crossing the room to take Gemma in her arms.

“Rakes are nothing but rakes, my dear,” she murmured.

“I thought he was different. That he was truly a good, decent man. But—” Gemma found her aunt’s hug comforting, more so than she expected. She let herself just cry, no longer holding the tears back, until her head ached, her eyes burning, and all she wanted to do was sleep.

Aunt Philippa called Rose in to help Gemma ready for bed, before she swept out of the room.

Gemma fell into a deep sleep quickly, her dreams full of Lord Blakemore and Celeste, entangled in one another’s arms, in the privacy of the dark garden. She awoke with a gasp, sitting up abruptly. For a moment, she wondered if it had all just been a dream. Until it all came rushing back, crushing.

How could she have been so ridiculous to think that someone like him, worldly, reckless and headstrong, would ever truly care for someone as naive and unremarkable as she was? He’d just been toying with her, enjoying her innocence, her blind trust. It had all just been a diversion to him.

A tear rolled down the bridge of her nose onto her pillow as she stared at the flickering shadows on the wall, cast by the fire.

Gradually the fire dwindled into mere embers that glowed brightly in the dark room. The door opened softly again, and Rose carried in a tray with tea and other sweets.

“The lady of the house sent these up,” she said softly, setting the tray down on the bed.

“I can’t eat anything,” Gemma whispered. Her head pounded with a dreadful headache, and she closed her eyes slowly. She prayed for sleep, though it continued to elude her.

“I’ll leave it here on this table by the door. Should you need anything, pull the cord to ring for me.”

Gemma didn’t hear the door close. She drifted asleep again.

Dawn had just broken as Dalton reached his room. The whole house was dark and quiet, save for the faint echoes of servants stirring downstairs. As he turned the doorknob, Uncle Ernest’s voice rang out in a tight whisper, “Where have you been?”

Dalton jumped, whirling around to face his uncle. He swallowed hard at the sight of Uncle Ernest emerging from the shadows, a candle in one shaking hand. His face was mottled with an anger that Dalton had never seen in him before. It caused him to step back.

Uncle Ernest grabbed him by the arm and led him to a dark study down the hall, where he kicked the door shut behind them.

“You wish to ruin her, don’t you?” Uncle Ernest rasped, setting down the candle and advancing upon Dalton. “Don’t you?” he boomed, shaking his hand.

“You arranged this whole thing, did you not?” Dalton fought the urge to grasp the older man by the shirtfront, send him sprawling to the floor. It would be wonderfully

satisfying. “You did. I know you did.”

“You have none but yourself to condemn.” Uncle Ernest glared at him. He jabbed a finger into Dalton’s chest. “Admit it.”

“I’ll admit to no such thing,” Dalton cried. “I never cared for Celeste as anything more than—”

But Uncle Ernest waved his hand. “You’ve led her to believe you mean to wed her. And now you’ve just shown the whole world your true intentions, haven’t you?”

Dalton stared. “That’s nothing but a lie and you know it.”

“Do I?” Ernest shouted, his tone mocking. “I saw it with my own eyes, and Celeste is beside herself.”

Dalton turned to go but his uncle called out, “If you wish to ever show your face in London Society again, you will marry her. Save both your reputation and hers.”

Dalton kept walking, vision going red.

“Think of your mother. What would she say, should she learn of your indiscretion?”

“She’ll know—”

“Will she? I should hope so. Though you’ve given everyone quite good reason to believe that you are a rake. And that is all. Why should anyone think differently? Don’t you know how your actions grieve Adelaide?”

Dalton turned, glaring at his uncle, contempt for the man boiling inside him.

“Let Miss Hayesworth marry Lord Neville. Her family would never approve of you as a suitor for her, not after this. If you wish to at least attempt to salvage the Blakemore name, you will let Miss Hayesworth go, and marry Celeste. For both of your sakes. For your mother’s.”

Dalton closed his eyes, his throat tight with a helpless outrage that threatened to choke him. “I’m going out,” he at last muttered, before tearing out of the room, down the stairs, and back out the front door. Behind him, Uncle Ernest railed for him to stay, not to walk out the door. But Dalton didn’t care. He didn’t care about anything any longer. For as much as he despised the man, he knew his uncle was right.

Gemma would never marry him after this. She would never be able to trust him, to open her heart to him, now that he had shattered it. Even if none of this was his doing, he had already set himself on this course at high speed, with his carousing, his reckless lifestyle. And if he couldn’t marry Gemma, he couldn’t imagine marrying anyone else for love.

He made his way to the gentlemen’s rooms several streets over, and once there, he sank down in a private alcove and ordered a whiskey. His first whiskey in weeks.

Gemma sat in the windowsill she’d begun to love, that overlooked the busy street in front of her aunt’s home. She perched here, Udolpho in her arms, when Prudence called and was allowed by Aunt Philippa to visit her. She called Gemma softly, causing Gemma to start and turn, blinking her aching eyes.

“Oh, Prudence,” she whispered, setting her chin back down on her arms folded atop her knees. “Forgive me, I’m not in the best of spirits today.”

“I’ve heard what occurred at the Neville soiree. Your aunt told me of it. As did Lady

Neville herself.”

“I know I behaved so dreadfully abominable there. I just had to leave. I couldn’t stay. I just couldn’t.”

“I know.” Prudence put her arms around Gemma’s trembling shoulders in a fierce hug. “I know.”

Gemma sniffled, tears running down her cheeks, unbidden. But it seemed as if the last night and day she’d spent lost in a daze. Wishing that this was just a nightmare. But it had happened. It had truly happened.

“I’ve been so foolish, Prudence,” she choked. “I ought to have listened to my aunt. She told me. She said that—that—”

Prudence gently hushed her. “You strove to see the best in him,” she said with a small shrug, a sad smile. “That is the most you could do, Gemma.”

“It was all merely a game for him.” Gemma gulped, sinking down upon her bedroom settee.

“Perhaps, but you’ve done nothing that will have a lasting effect on your repute. You have not entangled yourself into any sort of liaison with him, have you?”

“That is right,” Gemma could barely speak around the lump in her throat “I know.”

“Then, not all is lost!”

“No, it isn’t.” But why did it seem like it? Why had a pit opened up inside her, a sinking sense of desolation that reminded her of the day Papa died?

As if she'd lost something so much greater than she could ever comprehend. Something that she'd think about years from now, the sting still as sharp as ever.

"Lord Neville is a much better man, is he not? He cares for you very much, I think?" Prudence whispered, letting Gemma lean an aching head against her shoulder.

Gemma could do nothing but nod, stomach sinking. "He has been most kind to me," she managed, her voice trembling.

"He would be a much better husband than Lord Blakemore, I daresay," Aunt Philippa declared, as she entered the bedroom just then.

Gemma chewed her lip, staring at the floor. She couldn't speak.

"It no longer matters," she whispered. "I just want to go home."

"Home!" Aunt Philippa echoed, paling. "Why, now that you are freed of the spell that man has cast on you, you are freed to let yourself be courted by Lord Neville."

Gemma shot to her feet. "I don't wish to be courted by him, or anyone," she informed her aunt, voice trembling. "I don't. I just wish to return to Willow Grove. To Mama."

Aunt Philippa closed her eyes, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Gemma--"

"I am forever indebted to you, Aunt, for your generosity, your benevolence. But I don't wish to be a burden on you any longer. I will not be a burden to you any longer."

Aunt Philippa marched across the room, grasping Gemma by the shoulders. "You are so close to receiving a proposal from Lord Neville, I can fairly taste it. Why would you dispose of such an opportunity now?"

“Mama wishes for me to wed a Vicar Jennings, and—”

“If you were to wed Lord Neville, he would humor your every whim. You could publish papers in the Royal Society, if you liked. He would coddle you so. You would not be fated to a tedious life in the country.”

“Perhaps it is for the best.” Gemma blinked away the stinging sensation in her eyes, letting out a deep breath. She called for Rose, who waited in the hall throughout this conversation. “I should like to pack my things.”

It began to rain as Dalton mounted the slope in the cemetery to his family’s mausoleum. Climbing the slippery stone steps, he entered the dark room, and stood in silence, staring down at the name carved into the wall where Father had been laid to rest.

Here lies Viscount Blakemore...

He drew in a deep breath, wiping away the dripping strands of hair clinging to his forehead, and traced his fingertips over the letters. If only you could still be here, Father. Everything would be different. Mother would be joyful again. Uncle Ernest would not be here...and I might be a better man.

He might catch his death out here, but what did it matter? Dalton reached into his pocket and drew out a flask, taking a long draught from it and letting the liquid burn a hot trail down his throat into his stomach. He lifted it in a silent cheer to his father’s grave. The late viscount did not believe in drinking and had been somewhat of a moralist. He lived by a set of strict ethics which Dalton had always admired.

But then again, Father never had to watch his mother sink into a melancholic mire,

never had to face the abrupt death of his own father...never had to endure the schemes and machinations of someone like Ernest Blakemore.

He had not lost the woman of his dreams.

Dalton closed his eyes, and swallowed yet another draught, and another. When he at last set out for home, he barely knew where he was any longer. He clutched his walking cane, intent on fending off any accosters or brigands who might see his attire and deem him a worthy target.

When he at last reached home, Celeste met him at the door, her cheeks pale, her eyes wide as she took in the sight of him. “Dalton,” she whispered, grasping at his arm, but he wrenched away.

“Haven’t you done enough?” he choked.

“Dalton, please—”

“Leave me be, I beg you.” He tore past, up the stairs, until he found his way into his bedroom. But he didn’t remember reaching the bed. Instead, his face pressed on the plush carpet, and he sank into a deep, dreamless sleep.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am

Gemma's throat closed as she scanned the latest scandal sheets, just released mere hours before. She'd found Aunt Philippa's copy on the breakfast table in the drawing room, and her knees buckled as she read the front page, centered upon the happenings at Lord and Lady Neville's soiree.

“Dear members of the Ton, you shall be most intrigued to note a recent impropriety between a certain rake, the one and only Lord Dalton Blakemore, and his fair cousin, who it would seem is more than a cousin to him this spring...”

Gemma crossed the room and thrust into the fire the scandal sheets she'd crumpled in her fist. Taking in a shuddering breath, she tried to ignore her churning stomach, and watched the papers burn in the hearth.

If only this were but a dream, she thought for what must be the hundredth time.

“Miss?” It was Rose, hovering in the drawing room doorway. “Your trunk is nearly packed now.”

Gemma turned, swallowing past the lump in her throat. “Thank you, Rose,” she whispered. She would miss the girl dearly. She would miss this house, and London. All of it. She would even miss Aunt Philippa, despite her authoritative nature.

She glanced around the empty drawing room, and her chest ached. But she needed to leave London. As soon as possible. To remain another moment longer would be insufferable. Impossible. She'd already written a letter to Mama informing her that she would be returning to Willow Grove and wondered if her mother was rejoicing.

Aunt Philippa entered just then, dressed in a simple morning gown, devoid of her usual feathers and jewels. “I’ve found great pleasure in your company, despite your penchant for stubbornness. Of course, I’ve had to remind myself that you take after my brother in that fashion.”

Gemma tried to smile. “And I thank you, Aunt Philippa, for having me”

Her aunt leaned over to pick something up off the marble-topped table in the hall, and when she reappeared in the doorway, Gemma realized what she was holding. It was the book—the book that Lord Blakemore had sent to her from his own collection.

“I don’t want it,” she whispered, shaking her head. “Burn it, for all I care.”

“It’s a beautiful book, I must say,” Aunt Philippa murmured. “It would be a shame to.”

She set it down on the table by the window, where she and Gemma had spent so many breakfasts. “I pray you godspeed on your journey.”

Gemma clasped her aunt’s hand in hers warmly, a swell of affection for the older woman rising in her. As trying as her aunt’s persistence had been, she was truly grateful to her for everything. Aunt Philippa had only ever been trying to look after her, for Papa’s sake.

Aunt Philippa kissed her on the cheek but as she drew back, Gibbons entered and announced the arrival of Lord Neville. Aunt Phiippa’s eyes widened as she turned to stare at Gemma, mouth open. “He’s come to say farewell, I presume. As I’ve told you, he is smitten with you.”

Gemma tried to smile and inclined her head slightly. Aunt Philippa beamed and told Gibbons to show in Lord Neville.

Presently he appeared, a bouquet of hothouse flowers in his hand, and he carried them over to Gemma, as Aunt Philippa retreated to the settee before the hearth.

“Miss Hayesworth, I’ve only just heard that you are quitting London, and I came as swiftly as I could to bid you farewell, and to implore you to reconsider—”

“Lord Neville—”

“Please, let me finish,” he whispered, his voice trembling with emotion. This was surprising as he tended to be a rather placid man. Gemma managed a smile and nodded, closing her mouth.

“I should be very much honoured if you would marry me, Miss Hayesworth.”

Aunt Philippa gasped from her seat on the settee, and Gemma couldn’t help the gasp that escaped her either. She stepped back, heart pounding hard in her chest. “Lord Neville, I—”

Again, he didn’t let her finish. “You are a remarkable young woman, and I would do everything in my power to secure your happiness in every portion of our life together. I understand you have a penchant for astronomy, and I should love to indulge that passion in any way I could.”

Gemma cast her aunt a shrewd glance, realizing that Philippa had likely instructed Lord Neville to say this. His eyes were full of earnest excitement, and hope. And for the first time, sympathy overtook her, as well as a deep, welling gratitude for his sincerity, his inherent goodness.

And for a moment, the words I should be so very honoured to take your hand in marriage balanced on the tip of her tongue. She could say that, and live a very pleasant life with a man who was truly good, and kind. Or, she could go home and

resign herself to being a vicar's wife.

Or, she could continue to hope to marry someone, someday, for love. Love alone.

Someone shook Dalton hard. He groaned, rolling over onto his side, squeezing his eyes shut as the sun suddenly blazed forth upon him, where he lay on the floor. His fingers were wrapped tightly around the cool glass of a bottle, and the shaking began again. He tried to sit up but pain streaked through his skull and he cried out.

And then, cold water flooded over his head in an icy rush. He gasped, blinking and sputtering out water that ran into his mouth. With a curse, he cracked open his eyes, trying to see who had just doused him.

To his surprise, he found that it was none other than Theodore, kneeling beside him on his bedroom floor.

"For heaven's sake," Theodore said, his forehead knitted with concern. "You must pull yourself together, my friend."

He grasped Dalton's hand and pulled him to his feet, helping him over to the chair in the darker corner of the room. "Close the drapes, please," Dalton whispered, sinking down, tilting his head back to rest his eyes again. The sunlight was punishing, blinding.

Theodore sighed but acquiesced, and stood above him, arms folded, a stern look settling on his usually sunny features. "You're going to kill yourself," he told Dalton firmly.

"What do I have to live for?" Dalton murmured. He probably wasn't making sense

anymore, but then again, nothing made sense. His uncle would force him to wed Celeste, and Mother was slipping away every day, further and further. She'd barely stirred from her room lately, and when he went to check on her, she was asleep still, or in a half-conscious state and the physician's expression was always grim.

He might have said all of this to Theodore in a jumbled rush, but then again, he was nearly out of his mind these days, lost in a stupor of depression and heartbreak. Or maybe, his heart had simply crumbled to dust inside. That would explain the numbness that settled over him like a blanket, making it impossible to care any longer.

Theodore leaned down and grasped him by the shoulders, shaking him. "Are you going to just let her go? Without a fight?"

"She wouldn't receive me when I called on her yesterday evening. I couldn't even get in the front door at Kenway House."

Theodore sighed, his eyes flickering with sympathy. "Heavens..."

Someone knocked, soft but urgent, on the bedroom door behind them.

"Cousin, please—I must tell you something. About my uncle," Celeste's voice was muffled, tearful as it had been the last several days, whenever she'd tried to accost Dalton. He shook her off each time with a glare that she wilted beneath.

Dalton groaned into his hands. "Celeste! I've told you—"

"Let her in—let's hear what she has to say," Theodore whispered to him.

Dalton shot him a withering glare and waved his hand in assent. "Very well," he muttered.

Theodore strode over to the bedroom door and pulled it open. “Celeste!” he hissed, motioning for her.

She hastened past him, and urged him to shut the door. Her face was pale and blotchy, her eyes and nose red as she began to weep again. “Oh, Dalton, I must tell you everything. Everything my uncle has done—”

“What has he done?” Theodore whispered, frowning.

“My uncle, and the physician—I heard them speaking last night, and they were discussing something about increasing Aunt Adelaide’s doses. Of laudanum. He’s paid the physician to render her insensible, with these tonics . They’ve—” and here she dissolved into a fit of sobbing that made her incomprehensible, and sank into Theodore’s arms.

Dalton pushed himself to his feet, ignoring his protesting head. “They’ve what ?” he whispered. “Uncle Ernest is—he’s giving my mother laudanum?”

“Yes,” Celeste hiccuped. “I heard the physician say that the dose Uncle requested he dose your mother with...he said it could kill her.” More sobbing. It took her several moments to catch her breath, and a shake from Dalton. “And Uncle—he got so angry, said the physician was going back on his word, after everything he’s been paid. And he said to the physician, ‘You did not object all those years ago when we dosed my brother with the final dose.’” Celeste pressed a hand to her mouth, tears streaming down her cheeks. “And Dalton, it was his idea, to coerce you to wed me. He’ll do anything, it’s evident. To secure your estate for himself. He always has believed it’s rightfully his. But I—I didn’t think he would—” Theodore let her dissolve into his arms again, and he met Dalton’s eyes. The air crackled with the significance of this revelation.

Dalton began to shake from head to toe, outrage clouding his senses, headier than the

whiskey he'd been drinking for perhaps days on end. Uncle Ernest killed Father? Deep down in his gut, a sickening wave of shock bloomed, and he shook his head. Uncle Ernest was conniving, certainly, but was he truly capable of murder ?

“Where is he?” He whispered.

Theodore released Celeste and grabbed Dalton by the arm. “You won’t do anything rash,” he whispered firmly. “Or you will only bring censure upon your own head. Take this to the law, as this is a criminal offense on your uncle’s part.”

“He murdered my father, Theodore,” Dalton’s stomach churned. “He—” He closed his eyes as a tear slid down his cheek. “And now, he will kill my mother.” Turning to his cousin, he roared out, “Where is he, Celeste?”

Theodore grasped Dalton by his shirtfront. “ Think, Dalton. The man is dangerous. We must proceed delicately. First of all, we must see to your mother, ensure that she is safe.”

“She is scarcely awake now. She’s slipping away because of that monster.”

Theodore turned to Celeste, grasping her by both arms and fixing her with those stern looks of his. “Celeste, is your uncle out of the house? I didn’t notice him earlier.” When Celeste nodded and confirmed that Ernest was gone, he told her, “Go and sit with your aunt. I will call my carriage around, and have your mother taken to my home, so she may be safe. Celeste, you will accompany her. I fear that your uncle will do anything to achieve his end, and that may mean that your life, your aunt’s life, and Dalton’s are in terrible danger.”

Celeste nodded and flew out the door.

Dalton tried to breathe. “And what of my uncle?”

“I have a plan,” Theodore told him in a whisper.

The carriage left London hours ago, and now Gemma watched the hills and fields blur past as she drew closer and closer to Willow Grove. She and Udolpho would need to stop over at an inn, perhaps, since it was already late in the day, and before long, it would be nightfall.

She would never forget the heartbreak in Lord Neville’s eyes as she told him in a hushed voice that she couldn’t marry him. Behind him, Aunt Philippa closed her eyes tightly, but when she’d opened them, Gemma could see the resignation lining her features.

“Very well,” Lord Neville had smiled, letting out a disheartened laugh. He couldn’t disguise the dismay in his expression as he nodded, stepping back. “I wish you every happiness, Miss Hayesworth. It has been a pleasure to make your acquaintance thus far.”

She’d watched him depart without another word except for a bow to Aunt Philippa. And then, he was gone.

Rose had carried in Udolpho, stashed away in his basket for the carriage ride ahead. Gemma had thanked her, and then bid her aunt farewell.

“Again, I am indebted to you, Aunt, for your goodness to me.”

“Say nothing of it. You are my brother’s child, and I have no children of my own. It shall be lonely here without you.”

Gemma had impulsively hugged Aunt Philippa tightly, before drawing back. She

kissed her on the cheek before turning and hastening outside.

Gemma blinked away tears as she recalled her goodbye to Prudence.

The two girls had embraced before Gemma was helped up into the carriage by the footman. On the seat beside her rested Udolpho's basket, and she picked it up to console him on the ride. She leaned out the window to wave to her aunt and Prudence on the sidewalk in front of the house.

The carriage rolled to a stop in front of a quiet tavern just off the main road. The driver helped her down and told her to go on inside and secure a room for the night. Aunt Philippa had given her some money for a stay in one of these roadside inns, and Gemma was thankful for the prospect of sleeping. Her body ached with exhaustion.

Carriage rides always jostled her about, and it was a relief to lie down on her bed, while Udolpho leapt up beside her.

"We're almost home," she whispered to him, before drifting asleep.

She woke up early the next morning to continue the journey homeward and sighed as the carriage pulled away from the inn. In but a few hours, she would see Mama again, would beg her to forgive her for being such a fool.

Although...perhaps Vicar Jennings had married some farmer's daughter by now. Gemma certainly hoped so.

She would be content to spend the rest of her life wiling away the days in the Willow Grove cottage. That would by no means be a disagreeable conclusion to all of this dreadful mess.

Leaning her head against the carriage window, Gemma glanced down at the satchel

she'd kept inside the carriage, rather than letting the footmen stash it on the roof above. It contained all her most beloved mementos from this London stay, from the Opera ticket to a small elephant figurine Aunt Philippa purchased her at Vauxhall Gardens.

Gemma leaned forward, grasping the handles of her satchel, and pulled it into her lap. It was heavier than she expected, and she began to rummage through it. Her mouth went dry when she found within it the familiar cover of the astronomy book given her by Lord Blakemore.

A note had been tucked inside of it that read, It would be a shame to lose such a lovely book. Regardless of who bequeathed it to you. Signed, Aunt Philippa.

Heart lurching, she withdrew the book, letting her satchel slide to the ground. She skimmed shaking fingertips over the gilt cover, and a lump rose in her throat. A part of her was grateful to her aunt for having it returned to her satchel. But another part of her wished she'd simply let it be. The sight of the book wrenched at something in Gemma. She inhaled, trembling, and set the book to the side, wishing she could just be home already.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am

Uncle Ernest was muttering indistinctly to himself when he entered the quiet study, where Dalton waited by the hearth. He clutched a glass of port in his hand, though he'd found it difficult to swallow the drink all evening. He'd been waiting hours for this moment. And at last, the time had come.

“What’s the meaning of this? Have you at last come to your senses about your cousin?”

Dalton’s lip curled as he set down his glass on the mantle. “Did you murder my father?” His stomach roiled with that visceral anger, digging his fingers into his palm. Staring down his uncle, he waited for the man to react, to respond.

Uncle Ernest’s face paled subtly, his eyes widening as he took a step back. As if Dalton had just struck him.

“Did I—” he pressed a hand to his heart. “Have you gone mad?” he barked out.

The door creaked open and Theodore entered, followed by the constable who clutched that rotten physician by the arm.

The physician was white as a sheet, shrinking backwards even as the constable gave him a sharp tug.

Uncle Ernest staggered back, cursing in a whisper, and wheeled about to face Dalton. Dalton gave him a smirk, folding his arms. “He told us everything. And Celeste did as well.”

Uncle Ernest lunged forward, but Dalton laid him flat on the ground before he could make it even two steps. He held himself back as the constable hurried forward and jerked the man to his feet.

“You are dead to me,” Dalton spat at his uncle. “Dead.”

Uncle Ernest tried to wrench away the constable but got shaken roughly. “You and your blighted father were going to run this estate into the grave. Better him than generations worth of a fortune. Squandered by you and him.”

Dalton’s eyes blurred as he watched the constable and Theodore wrest the two men out into the hall and towards the front door. His legs buckling, he sank onto the nearby sofa, and buried his head in his hands.

He needed to see Gemma.

Rising, he rushed into the hall, sending Wilson for his hat and cane. And out the door he rushed. It didn’t take long to reach the Kenway residence several streets over. And when he did, he tripped his way up the steps, knocking on the door. The butler presently opened it, but his eyes widened when he recognized Dalton. But before he could close the door again, Dalton stabbed his cane into the door’s path, preventing it from closing. “Please,” he whispered. “I must see Miss Hayesworth.”

“Miss Hayesworth isn’t here any longer, sir,” the butler told him, giving the door a shove to close it.

From within the house, Philippa Kenway’s voice rang out, commanding as always. “Who is that, Gibbons?”

“Lord Blakemore, my lady.”

Philippa let out a cry. “Good heavens, what could he want? After everything he’s done?”

“Please,” Dalton called, lifting his voice. “I must speak with her. This has all been a great misapprehension. And I have every means of demonstrating this to you.”

The door opened wider and Philippa appeared, fixing him with a scathing glare. “She is no longer here, Lord Blakemore. Though, if she were, what would ever give you cause to hope to see her again. After the way you—”

“As I said,” Dalton shook his head, “This is all but a misapprehension. Orchestrated by my uncle. And if you would permit me just a moment, I can explain it all to you. Should you desire further attestation, you need only speak with my cousin herself and Lord Theodore Longworth. But when you do understand, I must implore you to tell me where Miss Hayesworth now dwells.”

Philippa stared. After a long pause, she sighed, and closed her eyes. “Very well,” she whispered.

Life picked up slowly where it left off, as Gemma settled back into life in Willow Grove. This evening, she’d spent the day picking strawberries, and she would bake them into a pie tomorrow. But for now, she enjoyed the quiet evening, the air filled with the garden flowers that blossomed amply this time of year. Beside her, Mama stitched away at a pillowcase set. And around them in the quiet parlor, cats spread out, napping before the blazing hearth. It was late afternoon, and the sun was lowering steadily in the sky.

Gemma had sat up half the night reading the astronomy book Lord Blakemore gave her, poring over each page until she at last fell asleep and dreamt of the stars, bound

by silver threads into a constellation. She followed the constellation like it was a path, a bridge across the sky. She must have tripped in this dream, for she stumbled forward and found herself caught in Lord Blakemore's arms. His lips sought hers, briefly, before the dream slipped away and she awoke.

Someone knocked on the door just then, startling the cats out of their doze, and Gemma out of her stupor. She and Mama exchanged looks, frowning. "It must be Vicar Jennings," Mama whispered, before setting aside her work and rising. She hastened over to the door to admit the caller, and Gemma picked up her book again. The words on the page blurred together when she heard the visitor speak. "I've come to see Miss Hayesworth. Does she dwell here?"

Gemma lurched to her feet, going cold and then hot all over. She shook her head at Mama, hoping she'd merely send him away.

"Gemma," Lord Blakemore called. "Please, permit me to explain everything to you."

"I—" Gemma stepped back, faltering. Was this truly happening? She rushed to the door, glaring up at him, her eyes blurring. "Why should I listen to a thing you say?" she whispered, throat closing. "You've toyed with me. All this time. And I—"

"Gemma, I didn't," Lord Blakemore's eyes were also misty, his voice cracking. "I didn't. My uncle was cruel, and treacherous. He wished to entrap me with Celeste, so that I would be compelled to wed her. He sought control of my father's estate. And his only means of securing it—" he drew in a shaky breath. "His only means of securing it was to exact his will, deceitfully, upon my cousin and me. I—I love you, Gemma. Only you. And ever since I've met you, I've been transforming into someone I thought I'd never be again."

Gemma couldn't breathe. "I don't understand," she whispered, shaking her head. "I don't understand." Hot tears slipped down her cheeks.

“My uncle devised that whole encounter between Celeste and me. He forced her to advance upon me, so I would be compelled to marry her, to salvage our reputations. But he is imprisoned now, for all his vileness.”

Gemma clamped a hand to her mouth as sobs wracked her. It took several moments to compose herself, and when she at last did, Lord Blakemore stepped closer and inquired if he could speak with her in the garden. She nodded dazedly and followed him outside into the shade of the towering nearby tree that drooped over the cottage. They walked over to a bench beside the tree trunk, and she lowered down upon it. Her knees would give out if she didn’t.

“Gemma,” Lord Blakemore whispered. “I love you. I love you.”

Gemma swallowed, unable to believe what she was hearing. “You—you do?”

“Deeply. You’re everything I’ve ever sought in a wife. You are the very person I’ve been dreaming of. More than ever, I’m certain we are bound by the stars to one another.”

Gemma could barely get her reply out. “I love you as well.” She’d scarcely finished before Lord Blakemore gathered her in his arms, kissing her at last. When he drew back, he smiled, his eyes wet with emotion, his voice hoarse.

“Will you do me the great honour of becoming my wife?”

“Your wife?” Gemma repeated blankly. But instead of the trepidation and unease that tugged inside her when Lord Neville asked for her hand, joy swelled in her chest, and she nodded. She’d never been more sure of anything before in her life. “Yes,” she breathed. “Yes, yes, yes.” She was babbling nonsense, but Lord Blakemore didn’t seem to mind. He grinned, and kissed her again.

"Oh good heavens!" Mama's voice from the cottage doorway broke them apart. Gemma's face warmed but she couldn't bring herself to care.

"Mama, Lord Blakemore has asked me to marry him. And I have accepted."

Mama stared, her mouth falling open. "You—you have accepted?"

Gemma laughed, unable to contain that exhilaration bubbling in her chest. "Yes. How could I not? I love him, dearly."

She turned back to Lord Blakemore, and in a voice raw with emotion, he told her earnestly, "I love you. I adore you. I've come alive since I've known you."

This must be a dream. Is he really standing right before me?

Dalton dined with Gemma and her mother that evening, and enjoyed his glimpse into Gemma's life, the life he had not yet seen. And he told them everything that had transpired, from his uncle's conspiracy against his father, to the way he had endeavoured to slowly send Mother to her grave. Gemma was white, wide-eyed with horror as he tried to delicately weave the madness that was his life into a clear-cut explanation.

"What a dreadful, dreadful man," Mrs. Hayesworth shuddered when he finished at last. She gazed at Dalton with tremendous sympathy. "I wish that you did not have to endure such grotesque treachery, and at the hands of your own uncle."

Dalton tried to smile, but he was still shaken by it all. It was as if the ground had shifted beneath his feet. He wondered if he'd ever quite regain his balance again. But as Gemma turned her large, searching eyes to him, something in him squeezed. As

long as she was by his side, he could get through anything.

“I am so utterly sorry for all that you have gone through,” she whispered. “I wish there was something more I could do, to somehow help.”

“It is a joy to merely be here in your presence, Miss Hayesworth,” he told her, hoping she knew he meant it.

Just then a black cat strolled up to the table and began to rub against his leg, purring. Dalton stiffened, straining to see the creature under the table. Gemma laughed softly beside him. “That is my cat, Udolpho. He accompanied me to London on my late trip.”

“Did he? Well, I am pleased to meet him at last,” Dalton chuckled.

The rest of the room faded away as his eyes locked with Gemma’s, and for a long moment, he forgot about all his troubles back home, savoring her smile, basking in the aura of her nearness.

But then, Mrs. Hayesworth cleared her throat, and the moment passed.

He had secured a room at the local inn, but promised Gemma he would return forthwith the following morning. It was difficult to bid her goodnight, to part from her, but in her eyes he read a calm reassurance that she would be there, waiting for him. He resisted the urge to kiss her again and set out on his ride back to the inn.

When he arrived at the Hayesworth cottage the following morning, Gemma took him on a walk about Willow Grove, down its many winding paths that snaked through the neighboring fields and lakes.

Behind them, her mother walked as a chaperone.

The weather was clear, not a hint of clouds in the sky. He couldn't have asked for any of this to go more perfectly.

"I would have understood if you decided to loathe me forevermore after that night," he told Gemma with a smile, her arm brushing his as they strolled.

"I confess, I thought it as well." After a pause she continued, "I will confess, I was astonished that first night I heard you in the bowers at that ball. Reciting the constellations. It is so singular a passion that I did not expect to encounter anyone who shared affections for it."

"Ah, so I astonished you, did I?"

"Very much, Lord Blakemore," Gemma's lips curved, her eyes dancing.

"Well, you astonished me as well, I will confess. "I did not expect to encounter someone like you, someone I could never hope to forget."

Gemma's eyes widened at this, and her cheeks flooded with a pretty blush.

"You singled me out at the second dance I attended. Had I already intrigued you so desperately by that time?"

"But of course." Dalton drew in a deep breath and paused their stroll, turning to her. "I know I have brought you great pain, even if it was not of my own doing that last night."

"It was not your doing," Gemma told him earnestly. "And I fully comprehend that, I truly do. Do not fret about that any longer. My heart is wholly yours." He could see she meant it, and wished to kiss her again. But he didn't let himself, determined to demonstrate propriety.

“Thank you,” he whispered. “I cannot imagine what that must have been like.”

“It did shake me, I confess,” Gemma admitted in a soft voice. “I had believed, so very much, that you were sincere in your attentions towards me. But I do believe everything you’ve told me, and I hold that you speak nothing but the utter truth.”

“Indeed. I do. I do.”

“Do not be cross with me, Mama, for accepting Lord Blakemore’s proposal of marriage.” Gemma sank to the floor at her mother’s feet in the quiet, dark parlor, lit only by the blazing fire in the hearth.

“Cross with you,” Mama sighed. “I do not begrudge you your decision. I do ask you to thoroughly consider this. I merely wish to see you happy and secure, with whomever you do wed. And I understand that this Lord Blakemore has something of a questionable repute.”

“I believe I was quite adrift, dear Mama, when I encountered him. My one guiding star knew that I wanted a love like the one you shared with Papa. And I did not find that in Lord Neville, or even Vicar Jennings.”

Mama’s eyes glistened in the firelight. “Ah, I remember how it was between your Papa and myself. We danced, and I somehow knew, deep down. Of course, we still had time after that to become acquainted, but it was so utterly strange, to simply know something. When you describe how it was, when you met Lord Blakemore, it caused me to remember that night Oliver and I danced.”

“You hardly speak of Papa,” Gemma whispered. “I wish you would tell me more of him in those days. What he was like when the two of you were courting.”

“In some ways, he reminds me of your Lord Blakemore. Headstrong, intelligent.”

“Does he?” Gemma laughed.

“Yes. Your father was something of a rake himself, but he left his ways behind him when we met.” Mama smiled down into her lap, with a wistfulness in her expression that wrenched at Gemma. She could not imagine the pain her mother had gone through when Papa was found as he was that dark day. Truthfully, she’d done her very best to block it all out, to stifle it in her memory.

“I still miss him so very much,” Mama choked, blinking away tears and dabbing at them with her handkerchief. “He would be so very proud of the woman you’ve grown into.”

“I miss him as well, Mama,” Gemma said, rising and throwing her arms about her mother’s trembling shoulders. “And I want you to be with me, wherever I end up with Lord Blakemore. We’ve spoken of buying a place out here, away from the city. His own mama would join us. She is very kind, though I don’t know her so well. I’m eager to see her again soon, when she is better.”

“The poor creature. Poisoned, by her own husband’s brother. How wicked people can be!”

“Very wicked. But Dalton is—he’s so good and kind, and strong...his soul speaks to mine.” Gemma leaned her head against Mama’s knee, scarcely able to believe that so much had changed in but a few days.

Dalton and Gemma returned to London by carriage a few days later, where he brought her to the Kenway house. Aunt Philippa greeted them, for they’d sent her a note ahead with a runner while in Willow Grove.

She embraced Gemma, and then turned to Dalton, her voice sharpening. “My niece has written to me an explanation of everything that has happened. Of course, this hardly blots away your repute as a rake. That is indisputable, is it not? I do have sympathy for your situation with your uncle, and his ill-doings. But Gemma is my dear brother’s only child. As such I will do everything in my power to see that no harm comes to her. Do you truly wish to wed her, or is this another one of your flights of fancy?”

Dalton smiled. Quite fair. He had to admit, he respected the plain-spoken woman for her determination to look after Gemma. It was endearing, and almost enviable. His own uncle had sought his destruction at every turn. Philippa was a relieving contrast to Ernest Blakemore.

“Lady Kenway, Gemma is far more than any flight of fancy. I adore her with all my heart, and it will be my keenest desire to ensure her happiness, in every way I possibly can. I will be the first to admit that my past is wanting, but back then, I was lost, searching for I knew not what. And then I met Gemma, and she reminded me of the goodness that is in this world, the goodness that is worth going to battle for.”

“Quite a noble speech,” Lady Kenway narrowed her eyes. “You are a very charming young man.”

“So I have been told,” Dalton smiled.

Lady Kenway peered at her niece. “I expect that your mind is quite made up?”

“Indeed it is, Aunt Philippa.”

“Very well. Pray, Gemma, when will your mother arrive in town?”

“As soon as she finds someone to watch our cottage while she is away. Someone

must feed our cats their saucers of milk.”

Dalton chuckled at that, unable to tear his eyes from the young woman seated on the settee. Her eyes shone, her cheeks flushed, her lips curved into a bright smile. Her laugh was infectious. Was he so fortunate to marry such a sublime woman?

That evening, he returned to the Blakemore Manor, where he found his mother still in bed, sleeping fitfully as the physician, Dr. Mackenzie, looked on. Theodore had found him promptly after overseeing Ernest’s arrest.

Now, Dr. Mackenzie was taking care of Mother as she weaned off the laudanum Ernest’s spurious physician had treated her with. It still enraged Dalton to even think about, but as he sank into the chair at his mother’s bedside, and watched her pale face, twisted with pain, his gut cinched with a bone-deep anger towards his uncle. How much pain and turmoil had the man wreaked because of his sickening greed?

The man had murdered father, and had been slowly killing mother, sedating her with these tonics. Dalton lowered his head to her hand, lifeless and burning hot beneath his cheek. He couldn’t bear the thought of losing her after already losing Father.

Turning, he glanced at Dr. Mackenzie, hoping the physician would have some kind of idea of how long these symptoms would last.

“It’s difficult to know how long this sort of thing can go on. From the sound of it, she’s been taking the stuff for the past several years since your father’s death. Heaven knows how much her body has come to depend upon it.”

Dalton closed his eyes tightly. Dear heavens...

“How long has her fever been going?”

“Just a day. I started to decrease the dose of her laudanum, but her body is utterly dependent on it.”

He dozed at her bedside, waking the next morning with a jolt. Mother was still unconscious.

And Wilson stood beside him. “Sir, Miss Hayesworth is down in the parlor.”

Dalton’s heart lifted. Just hearing her name was a comfort. “Tell her I will be down in but a moment. He rose and washed his face. When he glanced in the looking glass, he was startled to find the reflection of himself pale, dark circles under his eyes.

It was clear that he’d scarcely slept the evening before.

When he made it to the parlor, he found Celeste and Gemma sitting together on the settee, chatting with friendly ease. He stopped short, and they turned at the sound of his step.

“I was just asking for Miss Hayesworth’s forgiveness for my dreadful conduct at the Nevilles. I hate that I brought the both of you such pain. I ought to have put my foot down, but I was a coward.”

“Thank you,” Gemma whispered.

Celeste leaned over, pecked her on the cheek, and rose. “I shall leave the two of you to yourselves,” she said, before darting out of the room.

Dalton hurried over to Gemma, and she rose to greet him with a warm, gentle smile. He nearly gathered her in his arms but refrained just in time. “How is your mother?” she whispered.

“Not good. She is very unwell this morning. My uncle, he—” he closed his eyes, trying to keep composed. “He has done irreparable damage to her.”

“Surely he will be tried and sentenced for his doings.”

“Oh, surely,” Dalton smiled, even as his heart wrenched in his chest. “You are fortunate to have family like your aunt, who would do anything in her power to see to your well-being.”

“Well, she shall be your family, will she not?” Gemma asked.

Laughing shakily, Dalton lifted Gemma’s hand to his lips. “Indeed. Now, how long before I can call you Lady Blakemore?”

One Month Later...

Blakemore watched, his knees nearly buckling as Gemma appeared at the far end of the church aisle, swathed in a cloud of white lace and silk that crowned her dark hair. His bride, his very own Gemma. His wife. It took him back to that night he'd first heard her voice through the hedgerow, her breathless recitation of the constellations. The awe in her voice over those vast expanses, far above their heads. He'd never heard anyone speak in such a way of the stars. Of course, he'd run into his fair share of scholars, even astronomers, at various salons and soirees.

But her tone spoke of something different, a passion that eclipsed the panic that had gripped him so often those days. She had bewitched him somehow, that evening. He couldn't describe it even now, watching her ascend the aisle, dark hair black under a veil of lace, her lovely features illuminated by the light spilling in through the stained glass windows of the church.

At last, she stood before him, and together they faced the minister, who blessed them and began the sermon. The rest of the ceremony passed in a blur, until at last they were declared man and wife. Lord Blakemore and his bride, Lady Blakemore.

When they'd retreated out the front of the church, Dalton leaned over and pressed a kiss to her lips. A waiting carriage received them, and the guests galloped out after them to toss flower petals. It was a small crowd, only family and close friends in attendance. Gemma clutched his arm, laughing, as a shower of petals rained down upon them, and Dalton's heart fluttered at her touch.

As the carriage pulled away from the church, he kissed her for the second time.

Gemma made a sound of surprise and when he drew back, her eyes were bright, starry.

“Lady Blakemore,” he whispered to her, grinning. “My dear lady Gemma.” He leaned over to her and whispered in her ear, “Would you care to accompany me to the Royal Observatory this week? It is to be a part of your wedding gift!”

Gemma dropped her bouquet of flowers with a cry, clasping her hands together. “Truly?”

Dalton chuckled. “Truly.”

At last the carriage reached Blakemore Manor, and he helped his new bride down to the steps of her new home. “Welcome to your new domicile, my darling,” he whispered in her ear as he escorted her up the steps. She giggled, cheeks flushing.

Once in the empty foyer, he drew her close and pressed another kiss to her lips, before his mother’s voice rang out from the nearby drawing room. “Is that you, Dalton?”

With a grin, Dalton grasped Gemma’s hand and led her into the drawing room, where his mother sat in a chair, blanket draped over her lap. She was pale, but her eyes danced with mirth when she saw them. “I do wish I could have been there at the church,” she sighed.

“You need your rest, Mother,” Dalton smiled, leaning down to kiss her. “But you are here with us now. That is all that truly matters.”

Mother nodded with a little sigh. “Yes, yes. When did you become so wise?” She patted his cheek.

Turning, Mother beckoned Gemma over. The younger woman approached, lowering her eyes to the ground shyly. Mother grasped her hand, giving it an affectionate squeeze. “My dear girl. You have made my boy so very happy.”

“As he has made me,” Gemma replied, ducking her head.

“I should like to bequeath my wedding gift to you, the most happy couple, before the rest arrive. You shall find it in the study.”

Dalton grasped Gemma’s hand and led her towards the quiet study his father had once loved so much, with its shelves of books that were just a small portion of his larger library upstairs. Within the study, a beautiful telescope stood, glistening in the candlelight. Gemma let out a gasp, grasping Dalton’s arm.

“It’s wonderful!” she cried out, shaking her head, covering her mouth. “Isn’t it, Dalton?”

Dalton joined her in examining the device, trying out the viewfinder first. It truly was a beautiful instrument, with wrought gold covering it in intricate, swirling designs. It had to cost a pretty penny. When they returned downstairs to rejoin Mother in the drawing room, she smiled. “I’ve put aside quite a bit, and I decided what better way to spend it than on my son and daughter.”

“It’s too much,” Gemma whispered, her voice choked. Dalton’s heart squeezed as he tightened his arm looped in hers.

“No, nothing is too much for the lady who brought my son joy . Nothing.”

Dalton’s eyes stung and he strode over to the fire to poke at it, hoping no one noticed his sudden rush of emotion.

Not long after, the guests began to arrive, filtering in slowly until the entirety of the small party clustered in the Blakemore drawing room. Across the room, Theodore entered with Celeste on his arm. It had not been until the whole ordeal with Ernest that he'd first met Celeste, since he tended to refrain from London social life. Ever since, their burgeoning fondness for one another became clear, and Dalton enjoyed watching them fall for one another. Just the night before, Theodore had pulled him aside and confessed his feelings for Celeste.

"I wish you and my cousin every happiness," Dalton told him, grinning.

"Yes?" Theodore had sounded breathless. "Thank heavens. I feared you would find it utterly strange, my affinity for the girl. But I am deeply enamored. And I am quite thankful that you met Gemma when you did. Otherwise, I might have died a confirmed bachelor."

"Strange? How could I find it strange? I find it wondrous, and you, of everyone I know, deserve such happiness."

Now, he watched the two chat together in a corner of the drawing room, at the window that overlooked the twilight garden. Fighting a smile, he turned to toast his bride. Calling upon everyone, he urged them to lift their glasses.

Later still, dancing began, and those able found a dance partner. Gemma's heart fluttered as Dalton claimed her hand and led her to the center of the floor, where the other pairs joined them. Among those pairs, Gemma noticed Lord Neville with Prudence's hand in his. She couldn't stifle the smile that rose to her face, and watched as they turned to face one another, clearly drawn to the other. Prudence blushed, lowering her gaze from Lord Neville's, and Gemma could see how much he admired her. It was evident that a sweet little romance would bloom between them.

And Gemma could think of no better pair than the two of them. Prudence deserved a kindly fellow like Lord Neville, and Prudence was true-hearted, sweet, agreeable, and Lord Neville would be utterly smitten.

Theodore, Dalton's close friend, gazed at Celeste, unable to conceal his regard for her. Dalton had told Gemma just this morning of what Theodore brought up last evening. And Gemma couldn't say that she was surprised. Over the past month of courting Dalton and planning this wedding, she'd watched Theodore and Celeste fall for one another. Every time they danced, something sparked, reminding Gemma of her own dances with Dalton.

The music swelled and the dance began, and Gemma stared in awe at the man who mirrored her every step, who joined her in the center of the aisle, his hands engulfing hers. His eyes crinkled with a soft smile as he circled with her. His mouth parted slightly, as if with a gasp, as she stepped closer, and tilted her head back to meet his gaze.

The rest of the room drifted away into the ether, and her heart leapt as he guided her across the floor. She was hardly the same girl she'd been when she arrived in London. Wide-eyed, unsure of herself or what she wanted. And now...she knew exactly where she wanted to be. Who she wanted to be. And who she wanted to be with.

As the dance concluded, she and Dalton left the floor to rest and greet more of the guests. Lord Neville's sister attended, as well as several friends of Adelaide's and Philippa's. Otherwise it was an intimate gathering. Aunt Philippa joined Gemma at the punch table, sipping on a glass of Madeira.

"I will be the first to confess when I've been in the wrong," she began. "I do see how I was rash to cast aspersions upon Lord Blakemore."

“Thank you, Aunt Philippa. For everything you’ve done. I do believe that Lord Neville and Prudence are to wed before midsummer.”

Aunt Philippa laughed softly behind her fan. “So I can see.”

“Prudence is very fond of him. And he fancies her, I think.”

“Oh yes. They’ll be wed by midsummer,” Aunt Philippa chuckled. “If not before.”

“Do you and your husband mean to make me a grandmother very soon?” Mama approached them, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Aunt Philippa.

“Mama!” Gemma cried.

Aunt Philippa dissolved into a fit of laughter.

Gemma nearly sighed, lowering her voice to a whisper that shook with laughter. “I can’t say when, Mama. Only the Lord can know that.”

“Now, if you will excuse me. I will go over to see how that dear creature, Adelaide, is faring this evening. Her constitution mend before long, I daresay. But it is a pity she has endured so much at that man’s hands.

With that, Mama bustled away, and Gemma watched the dancing beside Aunt Philippa.

“What has become of your husband’s uncle?”

“Condemned to a life of penal servitude.”

“He must pay for everything he’s done. Fratricide is not to be taken lightly.”

“Indeed.” Gemma agreed.

“You, my dear,” Mother cupped her cheek in her worn hand. “You are to overrun your dear husband’s house with all of your cats.”

“Our cats, now,” Gemma laughed under her breath.

“What is this about cats? Has Udolpho come to live with us for good,” Dalton came up behind her, his eyes twinkling.

“He will, very soon.”

Later still, Theodore proposed a toast, a heartfelt tribute to Dalton and Gemma, telling the crowd how delighted he was to see the two of them at last find their way to each other. “Despite everything that the goddess fortune herself sent their way, they still sought each other, and if that doesn’t tell you what love is, then I have no idea what might.”

Everyone cried out in agreement with this, and the newlywed couple beamed, Gemma’s arm interlocked with Dalton’s. They made a beautiful couple, with his impressive height and striking eyes, her sun-warmed skin and soft smile.

Hours later, they sat alone on the terrace of Blakemore Manor, gazing up at the star-studded sky over their heads. Gemma leaned her head against her husband’s arm, exhaling a sigh of happiness. “I could spend every night doing this, just this,” she murmured rather sleepily against his shoulder. “Couldn’t you?”

“I could. Every night,” he whispered against her brow. He brushed his lips against her cheek and she smiled, her heart aching.

“Come, let me see your arm,” he asked her, in that gentle tone he seemed to employ

only around her.

She lifted out her bare arm and he examined it, as they enjoyed their comfortable repose amongst the blankets on the terrace. Nightingales sang around them, in the trees and brambles of the vast garden, and the stars were clearer than most other nights.

Dalton held up her arm, examining it in the low light of the nearby torches lit for them, and them alone.

“See, on your arm here I see the constellation Andromeda.” He traced his forefinger from a freckle on her forearm, to another close to her elbow. Several more covered her arm, and he ran his fingertip from one to the next until the entire constellation was complete. Butterflies erupted in Gemma’s stomach.

Did you know that our eyes resemble the nebulae amongst the stars,” she asked him, peering into his blue eyes.

“I read that very thing once, and it is fascinating, isn’t it? I expect that rather than reading the news together at breakfast, we will consult the latest Royal Society publication. Do you find that satisfactory?”

Gemma laughed. “Very.”

The following day, he took her to the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, a stately building overlooking the rest of the city. Gemma’s eyes were wide, her breathing coming quick with anticipation as they ascended the steps and were guided into the admission room. From there, they climbed up to the tower, both of them stopping short as they took in the sight of the massive telescope. Dalton had come here with

his father years ago, as a boy, but there was something impressive about the fact that the instrument was as massive as he recalled. He and Gemma were permitted a chance to look through the telescope for the afternoon, and they lingered there, poring over the device's impressive abilities to observe the stars.

"I can see Polaris so vividly," Gemma cried. Her excitement tugged at something in Dalton, and he couldn't suppress his smile as he watched her clasp her hands together.

"Perhaps we should build one of our own," he murmured, and she rounded on him, her mouth open.

"Dalton!"

"Why shouldn't we, at the home I wish to purchase for us in Hartfordshire?"

"You truly would?"

"Indeed. I think it would delight us both."

She glanced around to check if they were alone, and when she found they were, she leaned up on her tiptoes and kissed him again. His stomach twisted and he was smiling, dazedly.

Before they knew it, the custodian of the observatory found them and told them he was closing up for the day. As they rode down the quiet London streets towards Blakemore Manor, he mused, "Imagine an observatory we can visit at all hours of the day at the home I mean to secure us. I've been wishing to purchase a country house for the longest time, and what better occasion for it than our own wedding? Mother will be in better condition to travel in perhaps a half a year."

“Thank you.” The gratitude in her voice was immense, and Dalton’s heart melted.

That evening, he found his mother in the parlor, now draped in a robe, her dark hair hanging over one of her frail shoulders. She slowly turned her head when she heard him enter, and he tried to smile cheerily for her as he paused, surveyed the scene. “How are you, Mother?”

Crossing the room, he knelt beside her. “I pray you are not discomforted, or ill at ease here. Should I call your maidservant?”

“I am well. Better than I have been in a very long time.”

“Your colour is much improved. And your vitality is somewhat restored these last few days.”

“The physician your friend found for me is an adroit fellow. Though, very stern with this whole weaning off the laudanum.”

“He told me your body is cleansing itself of the stuff, though it would take a long while. What would you think of a visit to the sea when you are up for it? My new bride should like to see it herself as well.”

Mother clasped his hand in her small, weak one. “That will be wonderful,” she told him earnestly.

Leaning forward, he pecked her on the cheek and bid her goodnight, eager to rejoin his bride in their chambers. “Sleep well, Mother,” he whispered.

The following morning they received a surprise visit from Theodore and Celeste, who were aglow with rapture over their news. “We are engaged,” Celeste declared to Dalton, Gemma, and Mother.

Cries of congratulation arose, and Dalton embraced his old friend, unable to keep from grinning. “You and Celeste are very fortunate to have one another. I wish you all the happiness in the world.”

“You are not displeased?” Celeste asked in a small voice.

“Hardly. You and Theodore are made for one another.”

He kissed his cousin on the cheek, and turned to clasp hands with Theodore, as Gemma joined in congratulating them.

“If it weren’t for your courage,” she told Celeste, “I wonder if Dalton and I would have ever found our ways back to one another.”

Celeste beamed at that, and it was a pleasure to see the cousin he’d come to care about instead of resent glow with such exhilaration.

Several months later, he stood on the shore of the beach, staring out at the sea stretching out endlessly before him. At his side, Gemma hovered, her small hand clutching his own. The north star hung in the sky, sparkling and diamond like, nearly as breathtaking as the young woman beside him. They’d slipped from the house they’d let for this trip, just up the coast. As Mother slept, they found their way to the rocky shores that lined the eastern side of Britain. Lacing his fingers with hers, Dalton led Gemma forward until they stood together, barefoot, in the damp sand. Gemma let out a cry, shrinking back as the water lapped at her shins.

This trip, they weren’t doing much socializing with other wealthy acquaintances staying nearby. Gemma was showing now, and in her condition, they tended to forego any parties or dances or soirees. Attending those was hardly appealing to

Gemma, already several months along. She gasped, clutching her belly, and stared up at Dalton. "I felt our baby kick," she whispered. "There, he moved again!"

Dalton rested his hand over the top of her stomach, unable to suppress a giddy smile as he too felt the faint kick against his palm. It was so soft he barely noticed it, but when he did, his chest squeezed. In but a few months, this baby his beloved wife carried would be brought forth into the world, and he would be a father. It was odd to think that not a year ago this day, he was a bitter, lonely fellow, searching aimlessly for comfort and gratification, even as he shattered bit by bit inside.

"Tomorrow, Prudence and Lord Neville arrive. I think the sea will be wonderful for her, as she's been much more sick than I."

"Prudence adores the coast regardless." Dalton brushed some loose strands of hair away from Gemma's brow. "Mother's colour is returning. Have you seen?" Dalton asked.

She touched his cheek with her small, suntanned hand. "She is much improved. The sea is doing wonders for her. I shouldn't be surprised if by the end of our stay here, she will be able to take a walk up to the cape."

Those words filled Dalton with an aching sense of hope. His mother's progress had been slower than the new physician liked, but at least she was nearly wholly weaned from laudanum. It had been a painful process, nevertheless. Pure agony to watch her suffer, to watch the chills rack her slight form, to watch how she fought to hide it, and yet, her voice shook with the pain of it. "She sleeps more soundly, the physician tells me," he said aloud after a pause. "And her fevers are not as frequent. But a great deal of her strength is gone. Not what it used to be. I pray that she lives a few more years."

"She will," Gemma told him, earnest. He nodded, fighting the emotions that rose to choke him.

Patting his bride's hand, he thanked her. "I know it has not been an easy first few months of matrimony. With my mother's health, and now the coming child...I pray you are not ill at ease with any of it."

"Not a bit. I am just grateful to be here, at your side, watching the stars together."

Dalton's heart lifted. "Forgive me for turning to such grim thoughts."

"You are merely eager to look after those you love," Gemma whispered.

He nodded. "Especially you." He touched her cheek, before kissing her. She sank into the kiss, and slowly the rest of the world faded, as it always did when he held her in his arms.

To her relief, Dalton did not protest when she brought all the cats from the cottage over to their new home. They became mousers for the Blakemore manor, scattering across its expansive halls and rooms to prowl and hunt and pounce. But Dalton did not object.

She spent some days getting lost in London bookstores, when they stayed at the London house. It was strange to think that after the past five years of getting accustomed to destitution, to humility of hearth and home, she'd found herself right back there again, able to enjoy the finer things of life that she barely remembered from her days before. Before she'd lost Papa.

These days she remained bedridden thanks to her pregnancy, and many days, she'd wake with cats around her, sleeping. Their presence was wonderfully comforting. Especially as the sickness she suffered early in the morning continued to mount. Kissing her husband on his cheek, she watched as he departed to attend some

meetings.

As the door clicked shut behind him, she leaned back in her pillows, and rested on her stomach again. “I cannot wait to meet you, my little star-sweeper,” she whispered to the baby within her belly.

And neither could Lord Blakemore, she knew. Her husband was beside himself with excitement over their prospective child.

“I would not be surprised if Celeste and Theodore fell pregnant either,” she told the baby in her belly. Udolpho meowed at this, as if trying to agree with her aloud. He slowly blinked his great, golden eyes.

In the sunny bedroom, she shook her head, marveling at the book on her side table. The very book that Dalton had given her, so long ago now. Months ago. It was as vivid as if it had been only yesterday that her husband kindly gave her this book, this book that they still pored over together, shoulders brushing, so many nights later. A soft breeze rustled the curtains over the window, and she closed her eyes, basking in the perfection of this moment.

She leaned over, pulling the book onto her lap, and began to flip through the pages. She might have been a sceptic before, but now she knew, most assuredly, that in one way or another, the stars had drawn her to Dalton, as if divinely intervening on their parts.

The End

November 1815

“I cannot , Papa. Cannot someone take this weight off my shoulders?”

Sidney’s voice rang out in the dull, muffled silence of the graveyard. It was autumn, and dark clouds hung heavily over the space, muting the colors of the lawn and the cypress trees into shades of silvery gray. A slight breeze ruffled Sidney’s dark hair like a cold hand and billowed out the black cloak that he wore. He gazed down at the recently turned earth under his boot-toes. Papa had passed away just six months ago.

Sidney had hoped that it would become easier to bear, but it seemed that the opposite was true. Every day was harder. The numb, dull ache in his chest had softened, over the months, to a mix of sorrow and disbelief that was no easier. A small part of him still refused to believe that Papa was no longer there and that he, himself, was Duke of Willowick.

It was that responsibility that he could not bear. He was not only the duke, but he was also the head of the family. His sister, Amy, was eighteen and had just come out into society, and his mother was deeply sunk in her grief. He had to take care of them. He had to be strong, but yet, for all his nine-and-twenty years, part of him still felt like a confused child, like the little boy who had run to his father with his spinning top or gyroscope and asked him to explain it. Papa had always had answers. If he had not known, he would have consulted people and encyclopedias until he could give Sidney the information. Without Papa there, it seemed there were no longer any answers, and the world was a barren, empty place he could not navigate.

He closed his green eyes solemnly and wished that he could cry. Amy still sobbed

whenever Papa was mentioned, and it seemed dishonoring to his father's memory that he had not yet managed to show the smallest sign of grief. The wound was too deep for tears.

"Papa, I will do what you require of me," Sidney managed to say in a pained, broken voice. "I promise. I will keep Mama and Amy safe. I will do my best for the family."

He had been raised to be able to keep that promise. As the heir to Willowick, it had been expected that he would take over one day. But he had imagined that would happen when he was middle-aged, and Papa was old. Papa had never got to be old.

Papa's face filled his mind, his high, chiseled cheekbones proud above cheeks that had long wrinkles carved down them. His eyes, too, had been marked with lines at the edges and they were hazel, where Sidney's were green. In all other respects, besides Papa's white hair, they were identical—both had long, chiseled faces, square jaws and big, solemn eyes. They both had the same thin-lipped mouth, or so Amy and Mama always teased. Mama always said that Papa had been blonder than Sidney. They were both fine-looking men, Mama always teased. Fine, handsome men.

Sidney sniffed as he gazed down at the grave. In his mind's eye, he could see Papa so clearly, could hear his voice in one of the last discussions they had. You'll be a fine duke, one day, son. You have a clear mind, and you are not afraid to speak up for what you believe is right.

Papa had not guessed how soon those words would come true. He had been out walking around the garden and the butler, who had been working in the drawing room, said that he saw the duke suddenly tense where he stood, and then drop to the ground. The butler had run out to check on him, but by the time he had got there, the duke had seemed dead. The physician confirmed it just hours later. When Sidney returned from a brief consultation with one of the estate gamekeepers, he was told that his dear father had passed away.

Sidney swallowed the stinging pain that rose in his throat with the memory. He turned and walked to his horse, who he had tethered to the fence. He had made his promise, and standing there would do nothing but fill him with despair. His dappled gray hunting stallion neighed when he saw Sidney approach. Sidney felt his heart lift at the sound. He adored his horse, who was named Quicksilver. He was one of the few beings on Earth who could cut through Sidney's grief.

"Easy, old boy," Sidney murmured. He took the reins and threw his leg over into the saddle. His black mourning cloak billowed out as he sat and leaned forward, signaling a trot.

Sidney let Quicksilver go ahead, barely aware of his surroundings. It was a mile back to his London townhouse. It was darker than it had been, and he could almost smell the rain. Quicksilver snorted and stepped sideways as if something had startled him. He was usually a very steady horse, and Sidney frowned in concern.

"Whoa, there, old fellow," Sidney said gently as the stallion skirted sideways again. He gripped the reins, leaning back to slow his horse and frowning more deeply. There did not seem to be any reason for such strange behavior.

A crash of thunder rent the air, and almost simultaneously a blinding flare of lightning lit the hillside before them. Sidney cried out in alarm, gripping the reins, but his horse—who was terrified beyond all else of loud noises—took off.

"Whoa! Whoa!" Sidney shouted, as the thoroughbred raced down the path. It was a simple path of packed dirt, and the rain had begun to fall, turning it into a treacherous, slippery surface.

"Stop!" Sidney yelled, but his horse was panicking and as another clap of thunder tore across the sky above them, the horse screamed and reared.

Sidney gripped with his hands and locked his knees around his horse's flanks. He had practiced for hours in the saddle as a youth, and he sent up an inner prayer of thanks for all those hours.

His horse plunged back down to earth, shivering, and stood still. Sidney, by some miracle was still seated, and he reached down to pat him, to soothe him, but another crash of thunder sounded. The big stallion screamed and started to run. There was nothing Sidney could do except to hang on. He gripped onto his horse's flanks with his knees, clung onto the reins with his slippery, sweat-and-rain-soaked fingers, and bit his lip with his teeth, trying to keep a hold on his growing fear.

They clattered down the street. A clap of thunder made his horse rear just as they rode past the vicar's garden. Sidney screamed, desperate to hang on, but this time as his horse crashed down to earth, he bent down, throwing his head forward as another roar sounded overhead.

Sidney yelled in alarm and tumbled forward, plunging off over his horse's head, skidding and sliding along the rocky ground. It was too fast, too impossibly fast, and then all he knew was pain. Searing, impossible pain in his face, in his hands and in his head.

He lay where he was and breathed in sharply. His face was wet, but it was not from the rain. He reached up to touch his cheek. His hand came back covered in blood. He gazed down at his hands for a moment. They were both covered in blood, and as the stinging, searing pain crowded in on him, stealing his senses, he realized what had happened.

In front of him, one of the vicar's glass-filled frames, under which cucumbers and other vegetables grew, lay shattered. Sidney had been thrown straight into the glass. It had shattered into sharp, cruel shards that had sliced into his face and hands.

Sidney lay where he was. His face throbbed and burned, and his hands were a mass of pain. His cloak was heavy with rain and mud, and he was too tired to move. His last thought as he hovered on the edge of consciousness was that at least he had not been blinded.

A soft, velvety nudge made him look up. Quicksilver was standing over him, nudging him with his soft, sensitive nose. Sidney let out a sigh of pain and weariness.

“I know, old chap. You didn’t mean it. I’m not dead,” he added softly. He squeezed his eyes shut again—the pain was unbearable. But he could not ignore his valiant horse. The poor creature had not meant any harm, and was still waiting there, despite the storm that raged around them. His love for Sidney was even stronger than his fear.

Sidney gazed up. He could not ride his horse in the state in which he found himself. Blood was trickling down his face, running into one eye and he could barely see. His hands were throbbing in agony, too sore and too wounded to contemplate taking the reins.

He gritted his teeth and stood up, trying not to touch anything as he did so. His horse seemed to understand, because Sidney leaned against him and he walked slowly, step by step. Together, they made the slow, agonizing walk through the village.

“Your grace!” a carter yelled. Sidney’s head whipped round. The man on the cart had a blond beard and graying blond hair. He was Mr. Aldrich, a fellow who delivered vegetables to the manor. The man’s eyes widened in horror as he took in Sidney’s appearance.

“Goodness, your grace! Allow me to escort you home at once.”

Sidney whispered his thanks and allowed the fellow to help him into the cart.

Quicksilver was fastened onto the cart too, walking alongside as they rode their way up the winding path towards London.

An hour later, the blood washed partly clean from his face by the torrential rain, his hair plastered to his skull and his body racked with pain and shivering, Sidney stumbled from the cart and into the townhouse.

“Your grace!” the butler exclaimed when he opened the door. Sidney half-fell in over the threshold. He collapsed in the doorway. Amy’s scream rent his ears.

“Sidney! Mama! Fetch the physician! Sidney’s bleeding. He’s hurt! Fetch him at once.”

Sidney lay where he had fallen. Mama and Amy ran to him, exclaiming over him and trying to rub the blood off his face and hands with handkerchiefs.

“He’s bleeding so much...” Amy whispered desperately.

“Summon Mrs. Haddon. She should have some clean cloths,” Mama’s voice instructed. She might have been born to an ancient noble house, but she was practical to an almost ruthless degree. Sidney slumped forward, knowing he was being taken care of.

The housekeeper, Mrs. Haddon, was summoned, and the butler. Sidney felt himself lifted as someone carried him upstairs to his bedroom. He was lying in bed, after Richford, his manservant, helped him to change out of his soaking clothes and into a nightgown, when the physician arrived.

“I can do what I can, your grace,” the physician said gravely. “But I do not know if I can restore everything fully.”

Sidney winced. He had always been conscious of his looks. Not vain, exactly, but he had known he was good-looking like Father, as Mama always said. He was aware that he drew the eye of the ton towards himself when he was at Almack's, and he was not displeased by it.

"Do what you can," he said grimly.

"I shall, your grace."

Six months later, Sidney stared into the mirror in the hallway near the dining room. Hatred surged in his heart. Not hatred for Doctor Penwick, who had done his best in restoring Sidney to health. But for the hideous, scarred visage he saw in the mirror in front of him.

"God," he whispered. "How can I live with this?"

His smooth skin was bisected in two places by a jagged, pink-edged line. One sliced across his right cheek, and the other down his nose, ending on his upper lip. His nose itself had not been distorted, and for that he was grateful. A third scar sliced sideways, towards his chin, but that one was only a hair's breadth in thickness.

"God," Sidney whispered, staring at his own scarred face. "Help me."

He gazed at his hands, which were likewise lined with scars. He could cover those with gloves. But he could not hide the ones on his face. His own green eyes stared, horrified, back at him.

He looked terrible. How was he going to manage to be Duke, to manage all his duties with a face that would make most women run away from him in fear?

He was going to have to try. He had promised it to his father.

May 1816

“Sister...are you sure about this?” Sidney hissed as he stood on the top step of the mansion on Duchess Street in London. His heart was thudding, and he felt terrified. The scars on his hands were stretched over his clenched fists and he winced at the pain in them. They still hurt in the early morning chill, and the breeze was brisk and cold.

Amy, her hazel eyes widening, shot him an impatient glance.

“Yes. Quite sure. It’s an art gallery, Sidney! You’ll love it.”

Sidney made a sour face. He was sure his younger sister was intentionally ignoring his real concerns. She could not fail to understand how terrified he felt of what people would say or do when they saw him. He had been out of society for a year, allowing his wounds to heal as much as they were going to. Now, for the first time, he’d listened to her entreaties and had agreed to be dragged to this place to view an art collection.

He glanced sideways, trying to avoid spotting his reflection in the window opposite. The image of his face in the looking glass in his bedroom haunted him still. No fancy cravat or gold cufflink was going to draw people’s attention away from that hideous scarring. He knew that. All he could pray was that nobody screamed outright.

He gazed down at his hands, bitterness and sorrow mixing to make a lump in his throat. He had wanted to wear his riding-gloves, but that had felt too eccentric, even to him, and so he had left them off, and he curled his hand into a fist, trying to hide

the worst of the scars.

“Henry?” his sister called, turning around. Sidney glanced sideways, catching sight of Henry, the Earl of Barrydale. He was newly married to Amy, after a courtship that had lasted only a few months before the two of them declared themselves blissfully in love. Sidney felt his lip lifting in a smile at the thought.

“Yes, my sweetling?”

Sidney felt his smile deepen and he looked away. Henry was a dear fellow—chestnut-haired, with a rather fuller face than Sidney had, and dimples that showed when he smiled. Sidney and Henry had met one another at Cambridge, where Sidney had read Classics. They had liked each other a great deal, and Sidney was delighted that Henry and his sister had found such instant warmth.

“I was wondering if we should stand over there?” Amy asked. “You’re sure this is where we go in?” They were standing in front of a door that was resolutely shut.

“It seems to be the only entrance, my dearest,” Henry assured her. He consulted a pocket-watch in an elaborate filigreed case. “It is not quite nine of the clock, my dear. They will open at any moment now.”

“Oh. Grand,” Amy replied. She gazed smilingly at Sidney. He coughed, feeling awkward, as he always did when anyone gazed at him too long.

“Not too long, old chap,” Henry assured him. His lively, russet-brown eyes lit up. He was one of the few people Sidney had agreed to see following his accident, and he was glad he had. Henry, like his family, ignored the scars utterly. In their presence, it was possible to forget, at least sometimes, that they existed.

He took a deep breath, his stomach tying itself in painful knots. He had no idea what

to expect and the tension was making him feel ill.

“It’s nine o’ clock,” Amy murmured, as the church bells began to peal for the hour. Henry looked around.

“I’m certain this is the right place.”

Sidney glanced down, his heart thudding. His hands sweated and his teeth clenched as he made an effort to ignore his pounding heart. He could not do it.

“Ah! Look, my dear. See?” Henry declared, as a man in a liveried uniform came over and unlocked the door. Sidney, who was standing at the front of the group, looked away, trying not to notice the man’s widening gaze.

“Your Grace, my lord? My lady?” the man addressed them, his voice a mixture of surprise and respect. “Do you wish to gain entry?”

“We do,” Amy spoke instantly.

“Well, then. Step inside,” the liveried youth invited them. “The entire gallery is open for viewing.”

They nodded their thanks and Sidney hesitated before stepping in through the door. He swallowed hard, his heart racing. He glanced over at Amy, but she was not even slightly nervous. If anything, her expectant look suggested she was already weary of standing around outside and wished he would hurry up and go indoors.

Sidney stepped in, not letting himself think about it. He felt Amy follow, then Henry, and then it was too late to run, because he was already inside.

His gaze moved around the wide space. The ceiling soared high overhead, many

windows letting light pour in. The floor in the art gallery was laid with polished wooden boards, reflecting a refined elegance befitting the gallery and the room was bare except for a few chairs here and there placed opposite the paintings to allow restful viewing. The only other person in the gallery was a man in the same livery, and Sidney guessed he was a servant of some kind, sent to check on the paintings and straighten them. He could hear voices, though, and he guessed that more people were coming up the stairs to the gallery. He gazed around, feeling the desperate need to escape. His legs burned with the need to run, and his heart thumped, ready for action.

“Ah. Look. Landscapes. That’s your interest, eh, Sidney?” He followed Henry’s gaze and they all seemed to share his interest, because, without speaking about it, they all drifted over to the landscapes section.

Sidney tilted his head back, staring up. He could hear the murmur of voices behind them, and he knew that other people had, indeed, followed them into the exhibition. He tried to ignore them, but his ears strained for information.

They are talking about me, he thought, horrified, as the people glanced at him and then said something he could not hope to overhear. They are staring at me.

He looked at his hands, ignoring them. They had, indeed, turned to look at him and he gazed at the paintings on the walls, heat surged within him, as wrath suffused his countenance with a deep crimson hue.

“Look at that!” his sister murmured, sounding impressed. Henry was gazing up with her at one of the paintings higher up on the wall. Sidney tilted his head, staring up at the landscape.

The subject was a seascape, though the shore looked desolate, like a desert. The picture was painted in oils, and there was a lot of technical skill on display—the highlights on the waves were intelligently placed, the rendering of the sand skillful.

But somehow the whole thing lacked any sense of atmosphere. It was dull and lifeless, a faithful rendering of what the scene looked like, while capturing nothing of what it felt like; or of what the artist felt about it.

I could portray that same scene better, Sidney thought a little crossly. Painting was a hobby of his; one he had always kept largely secret. His mother knew, and Amy and Henry as well, but nobody else. It was not befitting for a duke to paint. Even Sidney himself suspected that creating anything at all might be out-of-keeping with being a gentleman of leisure, and accepting money for the works would be seen as vulgar.

“It seems very deserted, does it not?” Amy murmured.

“It’s a lifeless scene. It could have been used to capture real desolation, a haunted, haunting atmosphere. But it’s just dust and oil-paint,” Sidney said bitterly.

“Oh?” Amy blinked at him in surprise. Shorter than him by a head, her hazel eyes gazed up confusedly.

“Sorry, sister,” Sidney said in a quiet voice. “I’m just not feeling very generous with my comments today.”

“Oh. Oh, of course,” Amy replied. “Look at this one. This is more like it. Lots of grass and plenty of flowers in this one.” She was looking at a scene in what was most likely England or Scotland. Lush greens filled the canvas, and here and there little flowers showed in the thick green grass. Sidney breathed in, feeling relieved. He preferred this one. He could almost feel the grass under his feet and smell the dew. This one evoked something. It might not be as good, technically, as the scene above it, but it was burgeoning with life and emotion.

He coughed, about to share his opinion on this one, since it was much more favorable than the opinion he had given earlier, but at that moment three new visitors arrived.

They all stared at him in unabashed confusion. One of the young women lifted her hand and whispered something to the others in the party.

Sidney shut his eyes, feeling shame swamp him. If he had not been there with his sister, if he had not promised to spend an hour at the exhibition with Henry and her—against his will, more or less—then he would have run away by then. Shame like the biting of a hundred tiny ants, crawled across his skin. He looked down.

“Ah! Behold these delightful still-lives! They possess a charm that is decidedly more jolly.

I like them,” Henry said warmly, seeming to notice his discomfort and trying to distract him.

Sidney glanced over at the still-lives. It was a genre he disliked—something about a scene in which action was implied but failed to take place, worried him. It was dead, like an image of death. Like his father’s desk, filled with the familiar objects that ought to be used and moved and yet were not anymore. It made his stomach knot with pain.

“I think I’ll go over there,” he suggested. “There are portraits and also some studies of animals.” He went over to the other wall, where a few portraits of various people were hung. One of them struck him at once—a young woman looked out, her big dark eyes wide, her lips set in a slightly uplifted line that seemed as though she had been caught in the instant before she grinned. It was a beautiful painting, one that evoked a sense of joy in him. Portraiture was a genre that he found interesting. Capturing the likeness of a person was, in his mind at least, not too different from the likeness of a scene. In both cases, it was what the subject evoked in the artist that was actually painting.

Nothing is truly seen, he thought distantly as he gazed at the beautiful painting of the

woman. It is only perceived. Does anything really, objectively, exist at all?

He was so deep in thought that he did not notice someone standing beside him until he had taken a step and heard a sharp yell. He jumped back, alarmed, realizing that he had bumped right into someone. He let out a small, shocked sound and turned in alarm.

A young woman stood there. She was average height, with blonde hair and big, startled blue eyes that gazed up at him.

“Pray excuse me,” he said with haste. “I did not perceive your presence.”

His heart stopped as she gazed up at him. She was a little taller than Amy and he stared at her for a moment, unsure of what to say. Where Amy’s face was rounded and dimpled, this woman had a slim face, with delicate bones; a long oval in shape. Her brows were pale and arched and her skin was like porcelain. He noticed all that, but what he noticed the most was her eyes. Wide, framed with pale lashes, they were the exact blue of the morning skyline. They were bright and sparkled and they called to his weary, saddened soul.

“It’s all well,” she murmured. She smiled, the corner of her mouth lifting in a brief, amused grin. “I understand being deep in thought at an exhibition.”

“I...” Sidney stammered. Her smile, those pale lips parting just briefly to show white teeth in a gentle grin, was the most mesmerizing thing he’d seen ever. “Yes. It is understandable.”

“Are you fond of portraits?” the young woman asked him.

“Yes,” Sidney managed to say. He blushed red. He felt foolish. He had walked into her, and now he could barely speak without stammering. The heat of the blush spread down into his neck.

“Me, too,” she agreed.

They stood side by side as he gazed up at the paintings. She was wearing a pale cream-colored gown in muslin, the sleeves delicate puffs of gauze, her hair arranged in ringlets about her face and drawn back in a chignon. The low neck of the gown was filled in with a chemisette and she appeared, quite frankly, exquisite.

Sidney stared at the canvases hung high overhead. His pulse raced. He was standing close to her and the strangest thing of all was that she wasn’t frightened of how he looked—or if she was, she had not run away, not yet at any rate.

Sidney gazed around the room. He wished that he could see a mirror somewhere. Her complete lack of response to his scars made him think, just for a second, that they had somehow been rendered invisible.

Mayhap she currently hasn’t noticed, he thought quickly. Mayhap she will notice in a moment and then she’ll run away and call the town Watchmen.

He gazed up at the portraits, holding his breath lest she take fright and run. He did not want to hurry away. He had been afraid to confront the other visitors and preferred to weave his way as swiftly as possible around the exhibition. After all, he was only doing it for Amy, and she could not ask that he do more. With this woman standing close his fear disappeared, and he felt curious instead.

Why is it that she cannot see the scars? Perhaps her eyesight is bad.

He looked up at the portraits, heart thudding as he tried to decide whether or not to

risk saying something to her.

“What think you of this?” he asked, his voice harsh in the silence of the room. The woman turned and looked up at the painting he was staring at.

“That one is very impressive. It seems as though it radiates something; a sense of warmth,” she murmured.

“Yes!” Sidney exclaimed, amazed that she noticed exactly what he did. He lifted his hand to his mouth, a flush creeping into his cheeks. He need not bring any more attention to himself than the cruel stares he was already receiving. “It does. That was my exact thought.”

The young woman smiled. The effect was breathtaking, making his heart leap. Her cheeks flushed prettily with rose pink and those pale lips were drawn up at the corners, transforming her face. She was beautiful before, but even more when she smiled.

“You are evidently in possession of a good eye for art,” she told him.

Sidney blushed. Normally, he would have dismissed a comment like that as being flattery. But what reason did she have to flatter him? He was not known to her. She could have no idea he was a duke, since he was sure he’d never seen her in his life before. And there seemed no other reason she might flatter him.

“Thank you,” he said solemnly. “I am pleased you think so. I have always been fond of the pursuit.”

“As am I. Though I do not paint,” she began to say. He smiled, and for a second, he hesitated, feeling a strong desire to tell her that it was his favorite mode of creation. But just as he decided that he ought to say something else instead, Henry and his

sister appeared.

“Pray tell, would you care for a cup of tea, Sidney?” his sister inquired. “There is a delightful tearoom almost directly across the street from here.”

Sidney drew in a breath. An art gallery was one thing—there the people attending it had endless other things to stare at. A tearoom too—well, that was too much for one morning.

“Thank you, Amy,” he began slowly. “But I think I would prefer not to. I had quite enough for breakfast to keep me on my feet till lunchtime.”

He tried to make his tone sound light. Amy grinned.

“Of course, brother. Well, then, when we have all walked through the room once, perhaps we ought to go to the coach. It looks like rain out there and I wish to be at home so that I can practice the piano while it’s light enough outside to read the music.”

Sidney smiled. “Of course, sister.” He would have added that they could depart whenever she desired to, but the thought of the pale-haired young woman made him stop before he could say that. He turned towards her, planning to introduce his sister to her. He realized that he did not know the young lady’s name, so he could not make an introduction. She had drifted off towards the paintings, a red-haired young lady gripping her arm firmly.

“I have not yet looked at the paintings of those ruins there,” his sister murmured. She glanced over to the door, where one small wall hosted paintings that seemed devoted to landscapes and ruins.

“Yes, quite so,” he murmured. He felt a little saddened by the young lady’s

departure—it had been delightful to talk to her, even so briefly.

Amy turned to Henry, and he said something gentle, making Amy laugh warmly. Then they were already crossing towards the paintings of animals. Sidney looked around, his heart thudding. His mysterious companion had vanished into thin air.

Perhaps it's better that way, he thought harshly to himself as he watched Amy and Henry walking clockwise around the space. Perhaps it was better that her lovely, charming smile could not prey on his mind too much.

He glanced around the room again, but he could not catch sight of her. His heart hurt a little, which surprised him.

You're a fool, he told himself firmly. You said naught more than a few words to her. That does not mean a thing to her, and it should not to you.

He blushed at his own foolishness. The young woman was a visitor just like he was. She was here to see the artefacts and that was all.

Perhaps it is better that you ignore me, he said silently to the image of the young woman he'd just spoken with, which was still seared into his mind. I am not what you seek, not at all.

She was beautiful, but she was also doubtless as concerned with social matters and with acting as the ton dictated she should. Nobody was honest about what they felt in high society. She was doubtless the same—insincere and cold.

He looked around and found a bench in the hallway with a padded cover. He went out and sat down, feeling weary. He had not realized how draining it would be, venturing into society. He was so tense and alert that his energy was being used up too fast.

“You did an excessively good job,” Henry’s voice reminded Sidney warmly. “You deserve a bit of fun now and again.”

Sidney swallowed hard. “I disagree,” he managed to say. The idea of his deserving any manner of pleasant thing almost burned him with fear. He was disfigured and horrible and he did not feel as though he deserved anything.

As they rode back in the coach, the image of the young girl’s face slipped into his mind, as if it was an answer to his question. He pushed it away. He was scarred, he was hideous, and he had no right to do so much as think of her. His lips set into a hard line, and he stared out of the coach, watching the gray buildings and streets roll past below a gray sky.

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“Camilla, dear...what is it?” Anastasia asked in a low voice, turning a wide-eyed blue gaze at her friend. She tucked a strand of pale golden hair out of her eye and frowned at her red-haired friend beside her. Camilla had come to join her the instant two people had joined her and the scarred gentleman; her arm wrapped through Anastasia’s as though she was about to drown.

“My dear friend!” Camilla hissed; her expression concerned. “I had to come and rescue you.”

“From what?” Anastasia asked, blinking her pale blue eyes confusedly. She looked around the gallery where she stood. There was no fire, and no footpads or bandits had leapt out from behind the pillars. Or, if they had, she had not noticed them.

“From that man!” Camilla whispered urgently. “He looks like a terrible sort. I could not bear to see him exchange a word with you.” Her dark eyes widened with urgent fear.

“That man...?” Anastasia blinked again, looking around. There were quite a few men at the gallery, walking about in fashionable velvet coats and long trousers. But nobody seemed dangerous. Just behind them, their chaperone, Martha, walked. Nobody had approached them, and she could not imagine what had made her friend fearful.

“The one with the scar! He was horrible.”

“Him?” Anastasia shook her head confusedly. “No. He was quite affable. He talked about the paintings.” She gazed dreamily up at the portraits they had discussed

together. There were so few people willing to chat at art galleries that she had been glad to stop and talk about the artworks with somebody. Camilla had been talking to a mutual friend in the doorway and she had missed being able to share comments with someone.

“But that scar!” Camilla repeated. Her long oval face was a picture of shock. Her deep russet hair was piled up on her head in a fashionable chignon; her pale pink dress a cheerful clash with the spicy color of it. Her hazel eyes were wide, framed with black lashes and her lovely face was still distorted by her shocked look that she directed towards Anastasia.

“He had some scars, yes,” Anastasia said lightly. “But his insights into the work were interesting. Shall we go over there?” she gestured at the wall where the landscapes were.

“Some scars...Anastasia!” Camilla exclaimed. “That’s the Duke of Willowick. Everyone says he’s monstrous.”

“The Duke of Willowick?” Anastasia frowned. She recalled distantly hearing some gossip. She barely paid attention to gossip. “Well, whoever he was. He knows a lot about art. And he’s friendly. What difference would a few scars make to that?”

“A few scars?” Camilla exclaimed, then grinned. “I wager you a shilling that if Napoleon Bonaparte were to stroll in here, you would scarcely take note of him either. Your attention perpetually resides elsewhere.”

Anastasia chuckled. She linked arms with her friend, and they drifted towards the paintings.

“Are you going to attend Almack’s tomorrow?” Camilla asked as they wandered around. They had taken a turn around the gallery already. “I find myself quite parched,” she remarked, gliding toward the doors.

“Indeed, I feel the same way,” Anastasia responded. “As for Almack’s... I believe so,” she added, though her voice exhibited a hint of uncertainty.

Camilla grinned. “You must know!” she teased. She often teased her friend about being permanently elsewhere, her head full of thoughts and dreams. Anastasia chuckled.

“Indeed, I shall attend. However, I confess I do not possess a particular inclination to do so.

“Why, I do comprehend your concerns!” Camilla chuckled gently. “However, I assure you, it shall be a diverting engagement! I have a great affection for dancing.”

“Me too,” Anastasia assured her. Dancing was one of her favorite activities; more than playing the pianoforte or painting. The pianoforte ran a close second, however, which was a happy coincidence, since Camilla loved to sing. They performed together whenever they had a moment and were highly praised among their family and friends for their talents.

“Well, then,” Camilla said lightly, “it should be diverting.”

Anastasia nodded slowly. They were walking past a tea-house, and she glanced at Camilla, who nodded, and they went over to the door.

“Why not?” Camilla asked lightly. “The Hatfield is as good a tea-house as any I know.

They went in. Anastasia looked around the bright, white-wallpapered interior, where dozens of long windows let in plenty of light and the wooden floor was meticulously clean. A woman in a long black dress with modest long sleeves and an apron approached them. The proprietor, Anastasia guessed.

“A pot of tea for us, and...shall we say two slices of cake?” Camilla asked Anastasia, her voice wandering as her gaze moved towards the counter.

Anastasia lifted her shoulder. “I suppose.”

Camilla shot her a look and they both grinned.

“So,” Camilla asked as they went over to the table that the proprietor indicated to them. Martha followed and sat down with them. “You are prepared for the first ball?”

“I have to be,” Anastasia said lightly as the proprietor returned with their tea. “Papa has ordered the gown and everything.” She felt her stomach knot awkwardly. Her father, the Earl of Graystone, was known even more for his love of money than for his noble status, and she often got the impression that he saw her purely as a means to advance himself on both fronts. He always insisted that she attended Almack’s and every other fashionable venue when they were in Town, and he always bought her a new wardrobe, including the showiest gowns. Anastasia loved dancing, but she would much rather have been at home reading or chatting to her sister Lily and Camilla than being at Almack’s and feeling like she was on show.

“Oh.” Camilla made a face. She understood better than anyone how Anastasia felt. Her own parents, the Viscount and Viscountess of Bramley, were nowhere near as interested in advancement and Camilla’s mother frequently assured her that she could marry whomever she chose. Anastasia’s stomach twisted. She wished someone had given her anything like that assurance.

“Yes,” Anastasia murmured in reply. They stood and wandered over to the counter to select their cakes as the proprietor brought the teapot to the table.

“I would rather be at Lady Etherly's ball,” Camilla commented, pouring some tea and stirring in a lump of sugar. “The music is better.”

“Absolutely,” Anastasia agreed firmly. She poured her own cup of tea and sipped it. It was hot and she sipped it slowly from the small porcelain cup with its painted roses. “The quartet at her balls is much better.”

Talking of music with Camilla reminded her of discussing art with the strange man at the gallery. It had been diverting to talk with him. He had seemed as though he knew a great deal about art, and she had been looking forward to talking further with him. She recalled again those haunting green eyes and the way his lips had lifted in a slight smile, though his gaze had not lightened but remained brooding throughout the discussion.

“Ah! Thank you,” Camilla murmured as the proprietor appeared with the slices of cake that they had chosen. Anastasia accepted her plate of fruit gateau with a smile and a nod and took a delicate forkful with the silver cake-fork. She shut her eyes for a moment, savoring the sweet, many-layered taste. She had barely eaten at breakfast time, being lost in thought and a little apprehensive about the upcoming ball.

Her mind wandered back to the gallery, and thence to the man she had talked with there.

“That man,” Anastasia asked, as her friend took a hearty mouthful of cake. “Were you concerned because you know something about him?” It seemed very unusual for Camilla to judge someone by their looks and her friend’s vehement reaction had confused her. Camilla coughed, apparently almost choking on her tea. “The Duke of Willowick?” she asked, her eyes round. “What more can one know about him? He’s a beast. People say he sleeps all day and walks about at night like a nocturnal creature, and that he can curse people.”

“What?” Anastasia blinked. “Camilla, my dear! Surely none could be so foolish as to truly believe such a thing, could they?”

Camilla shot her a look. “Well, I don’t think the last bit can be true,” she admitted.

“But he is rather frightening in his appearance, so I understand how people might assume it.”

Anastasia shook her head. She felt a little sad. While she had never felt pushed out by society, she had been raised by her mother to try and accept people in spite of their differences. It seemed confusing and hurtful that other people did not see things that way.

“He just has a scar,” she said slowly.

Camilla raised a brow. “But what if it’s a dueling scar?” she demanded. “How many times do you reckon he’s dueled to get so many of them?”

“Indeed, it could be said that such an occurrence took place but once. Should that indeed be the case, I should imagine he would have little inclination to engage in further hostilities.”

Camilla stared at Anastasia and then burst out laughing.

“Indeed, you speak with complete accuracy!”

Anastasia felt her own lips lift. She was glad she had managed to change the subject and to lighten the atmosphere a little. It was so unlike Camilla to be hurtful or judgmental that she was pleased the mood had lightened somewhat.

“Will you have time to practice tomorrow?” she asked, referring to a song they were preparing for the season’s many soirees. Young ladies were often called upon to play the piano or sing, and she and Camilla always performed together.

Camilla sipped her tea and looked up at Anastasia wide-eyed. “An hour in the

morning, at least. I have to go to the modiste's, in the afternoon."

"Oh?" Anastasia grinned. "A new gown?"

"Two new gowns," Camilla answered, making a wry face.

Anastasia chuckled. "A ball gown?" she pressed. The light, happy conversations she had with Camilla always lifted her spirits.

"A ball gown," Camilla confirmed. "White, as befits a young lady, with plenty of lacy embellishments."

Anastasia grinned. "I'm sure it will become you very well." Camilla's mama had a tendency to design Camilla's gowns—at least her ball-gowns—without much input from her daughter. Since Camilla's parents were, in every other respect, some of the most relaxed parents in the ton, neither Camilla nor Anastasia minded that one foible. And Camilla insisted on being the sole designer of her day-dresses.

Camilla made the same sour face. "I'm not so sure. But the other gown is promising. Dark green and long-sleeved. I think it suits me well."

"I'm sure it does," Anastasia answered, sipping her tea. Camilla was beautiful, with her long, fine-chiseled features and darker coloring. Anastasia felt quite sure Camilla was more of a society beauty than she herself was, with her pale hair, blue eyes and slightly sharper features. But Camilla always assured her that the opposite was true until Anastasia had to beg her to stop saying it. As always, they ended up laughing a great deal.

"I ought to return to the residence," Camilla said, casting her gaze up at the timepiece. "I must attend to some matters within the ledgers." Camilla was very quick with numbers and her father often asked her if she could cast her gaze over the household accounts with him. Anastasia nodded.

“I should return too,” she agreed a little sadly. She would have to pretend to be excited about the upcoming ball when she went home, and she felt no true excitement. Her father focused on it, and she felt afraid he had some or other expectation of her, since he often commented that she needed to uphold the family honor; something he had never said before.

“I will see you tomorrow, though?” Camilla asked, lifting her cup to sip at her tea.

“Of course. In the morning,” Anastasia agreed.

They went into the street where the coach was waiting, and they all alighted into it. As the coach moved down through London, Anastasia stared out of the window, watching the buildings and houses move past under the gray sky. Her thoughts returned to the art gallery, and she found herself thinking, once again, of the man she had met. Her lips lifted at the edges as she recalled how he had talked to her so naturally. Not many people were so ready to discuss art, and he seemed knowledgeable.

You’ll not see him again; her mind reminded her. He doesn’t seem the sort for balls and parties, or you would already have spotted him somewhere.

She gazed out of the window, watching the buildings rattle past and trying not to think of the Duke of Willowick, nor of the upcoming ball, which she had to endure in a few hours’ time.