



One Christmas Disaster

(Singular Sensation #10)

Author: *Sandra Sookoo*

Category: Historical

Description: Missing pearls, maudlin memories, and unexpected new perspectives will make this Christmastide a holiday no one will forget.

Mr. Cornelius Harding—Lord Timelbury—is a former military man who has lost the magic Christmastide used to possess due to unsavory memories. When a priceless pearl and diamond bracelet he procured as a gift for his aunt goes missing, the number one suspect is a woman who dropped by for donations. So until he can find the piece of jewelry, he has told her ailing father that they are engaged.

Miss Samantha Marchington is a woman at her wit's end, trying to make the Christmastide holidays special for the children at one of London's orphanages as well as raising funds therein. It's her favorite time of the year, but she's been run ragged and needs a break. When a handsome man with a commanding presence demands she return a stolen bracelet and then springs a fake engagement on her, she loses her temper, which helps nothing.

Though they might be enemies, Cornelius refuses to let Sam out of his sight until she confesses. They are forced to spend the days leading up to Christmastide together, and the forced proximity will spur potential scandal. Heated attraction is shared and brings with it a budding romance, but when the pair is bedeviled by a recurring evil scourge to the members of the Rogue's Arcade, danger threatens everything they might be building. Unless they can discover what truly matters during the holiday season, their Christmas might turn into a disaster for everyone.

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December 14, 1818

Harding House

Manchester Square, Mayfair

London

What fresh hell is this?

Captain Cornelius Harding—Lord Timelbury—rubbed his eyes with the fingers of one hand while his mother continued to harangue him about his apparently deplorable unmatched state.

The dear—and he used that term loosely—woman had recently moved into Tetford House, where his sister and her husband of perhaps half a year resided in Berkley Square, yet here she was at his home, and telling him there was something odd about him and the fact he hadn't married.

When gritting his teeth didn't alleviate his ire, he blew out a breath of frustration. "Did it ever occur to you that perhaps I am not ready to take a bride, or that I might not trust women enough to let one close again?"

His mother waved a hand in dismissal. With her slim form and her gray-streaked brown hair scraped back into a severe bun, she looked more harsh than she truly was. "Pish posh. That happened four years ago. Why haven't you put it behind you?"

Why indeed?

A muscle ticced in his cheek as he looked at his parent. “Possibly because men sometimes don’t enjoy having their hearts broken and refuse to usher in that sort of pain a second time.” Slowly, he shook his head as he offered his teacup for a refresh. “Leave it alone, Mother. I am well enough.”

“I rather doubt that.” But she put another measure of the amber liquid into his cup, frowning when he dropped a lump of sugar into the brew. “Life is passing you by, Cornelius. It’s time you wed and set up your nursery.”

“Why? There is no title for me to pass along since mine was awarded to me, and I don’t have many holdings other than this townhouse and the country estate.”

He had been given the lordship and a monetary award to buy an estate from the Regent for extraordinary services rendered to the Crown during his service in the war. So he’d bought a country estate and rented a townhouse in London, but he made a living with smart investments and the occasional public speaking appointment.

“What I do have, I plan to leave to Annabelle.”

Though, his sister was married to an earl and she wouldn’t have need for such things.

“As the Countess of Hazelton, Annabelle will be busy enough without managing your affairs.” His mother looked down her hawkish nose at him. “The easiest solution is to marry and have a son.”

“As if I have control of either outcome.”

“You know, dear, sometimes people can surprise you.”

He glanced at the other woman in the room who had just spoken. Aunt Beatrice, was his father's sister. She often came over to check on him and to take tea with him once a week. She was his mother's opposite in every way. While his parent was tall and thin, Beatrice was short and matronly with a round face and cherub-pink cheeks. Blue eyes and blonde hair had probably once been quite the beauty in society, but she'd chosen to remain unmatched. Never had he gotten the story of why.

For whatever reason, she and his mother apparently thought him in danger of becoming a recluse who would lock himself away.

"I appreciate that insight, Auntie, but matters of the heart are best left to the owner of said organ, don't you think?" Why did both of them assume a man was useless without a wife?

"Personally, I am not certain men have the capabilities to make such decisions." She genteelly sipped her tea as if this conversation was perfectly normal and not a judgment of his character. "While I understand why you are reluctant to offer your heart to a woman again, I agree with your mother. You're not getting any younger. How old are you?"

"Nearly six and thirty. I'll be that on Boxing Day. What does it matter?"

The ladies exchanged a glance.

Aunt Beatrice continued. "You need to forget about your last failed relationship, Cornelius. That woman missed her chance, and quite frankly, you were far too good for the likes of her."

"Ha." He snorted in derision. "So it would appear, since she threw me over for an earl." That didn't mean the sting of her betrayal didn't bother him. The woman had left him standing by himself at the church, and had a footman deliver a note telling

Cornelius that she had fallen in love with an earl and wished to marry him instead.

As if what they'd had over the course of a damned multi-year engagement had meant nothing. Not for worlds would he tell these two ladies the other reason his former fiancée left him, because if he did, he would have to acknowledge the break was his fault, and it would send him into a dark spiral he might not be able to pull out of.

“In any event, the Christmastide season is nearly upon us.” His mother’s sharp gaze took him in from tip to tail. “That means there are plenty of societal events in Town just now. I would like for you to attend at least half of them you’ve been invited to. No doubt at one of them you will meet a suitable candidate for a wife.”

Perish the thought.

The last thing he wanted during this time of the year was to court a romance. In fact, the holiday season was ruined for him, all because of that damned embarrassing betrayal and breakup.

“Bah.” He shook his head then finished his tea. “While I have no faith in romance any longer, finding one during Christmastide holds even less appeal for me.”

His mother frowned. “Why?”

“This time of year makes it far too easy for women to fall in what they think is love, for everywhere they look, there is evidence of couples and romance, couples marrying, couples having or expecting babies. The list goes on. What they are really feeling isn’t love but infatuation and the thought that they must chase what their friends are experiencing. It’s merely a way for women to trap men into marriage.”

And it was nauseating.

Aunt Beatrice looked at him with compassion in her gaze. “That is a rather dim view of things, don’t you think?”

“Perhaps I am too jaded, or perhaps I simply don’t have patience to start that process all over again, but the two of you pestering me about my marital prospects isn’t helping.” He leaned forward and rested his cup and saucer on the low table. “Once Twelfth Night is over, that magic fades and women start to regret their choices. They’re stuck in a relationship, or worse, an engagement, they no longer want, for they were never in love to begin with.”

“How sad for you, Cornelius.” Aunt Beatrice shook her head. “To go through life seeing everything and everyone as a scheme or con.” She shook her head. “Your father would be so disappointed. He wanted so much for you; to be better than he was.”

“I am better than he was. At least I’m alive.” Though someday, that was suspect.

His father had been a naval man. More away from home than he’d been home, Cornelius had grown up without that masculine influence. By the time his father had come back to London after he’d retired, Cornelius had bought a commission into the military, but his father continued to forget his troubles and demons with various vices.

The war with Napoleon had lasted far longer than anyone had anticipated; he’d survived battles and had seen horrific things no man should ever have to bear witness to, and when he came home with his mind scrambled and his soul scarred, it was to the news that his father was suffering from an ailment of the lungs.

Of course, Cornelius had no knowledge of the illness because no one in his family had seen fit to write to him and tell him, so where he thought there was an opportunity to reconnect with a father he hardly knew, when he visited that man, it

was to be told he was on his death bed.

They had run out of time, and that was one of his only regrets.

“Don’t speak ill of the dead,” his mother said in a waspish tone. “Your father did the best he could, and he was a good provider.”

Yet that hadn’t stopped his mother from having an affair with another man. Cornelius rather suspected she didn’t know that he knew, but since it had ended with that man’s death a year before his father had returned home, he’d never said anything about it.

Such was life, he supposed, but it only meant that even though his parents had supposedly married for love, they couldn’t keep that emotion heated enough to last the course of the union. Not something he wished to keep as a goal.

“I am not; it was merely a statement of fact.” His nerves felt as if they were crawling beneath his skin, and his legs were restless to move. “If there is nothing else? I have business yet this afternoon that will take me away from the house.”

Gently, Aunt Beatrice cleared her throat. “Do stay. I particularly enjoy our time together, for in you I see much of my brother, and it helps to heal the grief of his passing.”

Well, damn.

“Fine.” With a sigh, he stood and took to pacing, merely to calm his frazzled nerves. The warmth from the fire was most welcome. “What would you like to further converse upon?”

“Well, your mother and I have been talking. We think that since you won’t put yourself out in society except to go to your club, we will lend a hand in helping you

meet eligible ladies.”

He stifled a groan. “How the devil do you plan on doing that?” Did he even want to know?

When his mother smiled, he had the distinct feeling she had been scheming with his aunt, and that none of it boded well for him. “Beatrice and I have decided to jointly host a Christmas Eve party.”

Bloody, bloody hell.

“Wait. Isn’t Annabelle throwing a dinner party on Christmas Eve? Surely you don’t wish to upset those plans that she’s had for some time now.” He would much rather go to his sister’s house than anything his mother had concocted.

“Oh, my poor deluded boy.” She clicked her tongue. “Do you truly think I’m going to trust such a popular date on the calendar to your sister who has no experience in hosting society events?” Another grin had him a bit on the defensive. “Annabelle might believe she’s hosting a dinner party, but in truth, it will be through the efforts of Beatrice and I that the event is much more like a rout with dinner included.”

“And in doing this, you believe I’ll fall madly in love with a woman at said event?” Were they deluded, desperate, or merely hopeful?

“Yes, of course.” His mother nodded, and from her smug expression. “It can’t fail.”

Well, he had a bit about that to say, but he kept silent on the matter.

“Oh, Cornelius, please just come.” Aunt Beatrice set her cup and saucer on the low table as she implored him with her eyes. “For my part, I only want you to find happiness. For far too long, life hasn’t been kind to you. Don’t you think you deserve

that now? Or at least peace?”

That caught him off guard, and he paused near the windows. “I’ll admit, I haven’t had either in many years.” How could he, after the war had made him far too broken to carry out the life he’d had before? Not that he’d had many plans in the past. All he’d known was the infantry life for what had seemed like a lifetime, doing what he’d been told until he’d earned the rank of captain...

...and then his mind had fractured.

“Please say you will try. For me,” his aunt continued. “I worry over you every night, say a prayer before I sleep that you will come out right. Above everything, I would like for you to settle, have someone in your life who will take care of you, to see past everything you think you are not and have a glimpse of all that you are, all that you can be if you would but let yourself.”

Finally, he couldn’t bear the pleading in her gray eyes, so like his own. Beatrice always had a way of phrasing things that appealed to his common sense. He bowed his head. “I promise I will attend your rout, and that I will do so with an open mind.” As a general rule, he adored his aunt. Having her in his life gave him back a sense of his father, if only a tiny one. In many ways, she had been more of a parent to him than his own mother had, and certainly she had written to him more while he’d been away at war than his mother had. “Will that make you happy?” Their event was in twelve days. Anything could happen in that time, couldn’t it?

“Yes. Oh, thank you.” She rocked to her feet, for Aunt Beatrice wasn’t a slim miss any longer. In fact, she had never married, but he couldn’t understand why, for she was an agreeable person... unlike his mother. “You don’t know what this means to me.” Then she joined him near the fireplace and hugged him.

“All right, enough of that.” Gently, he set his aunt away from him. “You always

know how to wrap me around your fingers, don't you?" She was an amusing sort, and he dearly wanted to please her. His mother, not so much. "Since you are quite the dear, I'll go ahead and give you this now." He fished about in the interior pocket of his sapphire superfine jacket and retrieved a slim, square-shaped box. "I bought this today but wished to keep it back for Christmas. However, perhaps you can make use of it through the holiday season and think of me fondly."

"How wonderful!" As soon as she opened the box, the candlelight and firelight winked off the pearl and diamond bracelet, all set with silver. "This is lovely. Thank you." With tears in her eyes, she hugged him again before he set her away at arm's length.

Uncomfortable with the display of affection and feeling somehow he wasn't deserving of it, Cornelius cleared his throat. "I'm off for a bit, but will be back for dinner." It was a promise he'd already made to the two women, and he couldn't break that.

Rogue's Arcade Club

Mayfair, London

Since the hour was far too early for dinner, there weren't that many of his friends or acquaintances around the club, but that didn't matter much. Cornelius was perfectly content to sit in one of the comfortable wing-backed chairs near the fireplace and sip his cut-crystal glass of brandy. At least he was away from his matchmaking relatives.

"You are the last person I expected to see this evening."

He glanced up at the sound of Edenthorpe's voice, and as the duke slowly approached, his gait broken by the limp and his reliance on the cane, Cornelius frowned, for the man—and one of the founding members of the club—seemed older,

somehow. Lines of exhaustion framed his face, and when he grinned, the gesture didn't reach his eyes.

"You look like a dog's breakfast," he said by way of greeting.

"Ordinarily, I would dress you down, but today, I suspect that it's true." The man collapsed into a matching chair near Cornelius'. "God, everything is a coil."

"Is the baby well?" The duke had a daughter a bit over the age of one.

"She is. Teething, but nothing worse." Edenthorpe briefly closed his eyes. "Don't let on that I told you this, but my wife has just informed me she's increasing again. Early on, of course, but she's been a bit sicker with this pregnancy than the last, so sleep is difficult to come by just now."

Interesting. "I assume you are happy with the news?"

The duke's eyes popped open, and he managed a wider grin. "I am. However, it also brings more anxiety to me." With a sigh, he rubbed a hand over the side of his face. "If I'm being honest, I'm concerned over what Lady Stover and her minions will do next."

"I am as well, though my worries perhaps aren't as acute as other members here who have wives and families." In fact, he was one of the last of the rogues who hadn't fallen to parson's mousetrap. Of course, he didn't know many of the newer members of the club. Since the duke invited a handful of men each year to join, there were many Cornelius hadn't had the chance to meet.

"That matters not. The lives of every man beneath this roof are precious. All of you are friends, brothers-in-arms, closer than blood." The lines on his face settled deeper. "I couldn't bear it if one of you were injured or worse because of that woman's

insanity.”

“Has she made contact with you?”

“Not overtly, but recently I’ve had the sensation of being watched.”

Cornelius nodded. “I can imagine your senses have been heightened.” For long moments, silence stretched between them. “It’s been an age since I’ve spoken to some of the rogues. Every once in a while, I’ll have updates about their lives, but I feel as if we don’t have reason enough to gather here altogether and meet face to face.” And he rather missed that.

“I think we have all decided to stick around home and take stock of what’s truly important in our lives.” Edenthorpe glanced at him. “You know, Timelbury, I’m grateful for your presence. You’ve been instrumental in building the backbone of this organization for a long time. In the last several months particularly. When our friends are under attack, you have thrown yourself into the fray without hesitation until the threat was neutralized.”

The praise warmed his insides and caused his chest to swell. “I try. But in all truthfulness, I would do anything for the men in this club. Never have I felt more at home or more understood than within these walls.” Emotion balled in his throat. It wasn’t like him to show such things, so he struggled a bit until he got control of himself. “If I can help to save one of their lives, I’ll do it, because life is already difficult enough for those of us who came home from the war damaged.”

“I quite agree.” The duke rested his gaze on Cornelius. “I have a feeling things will grow worse for us, regardless if it is the Christmastide season.”

“You and the others need to take your families and stay at your country estates. It is no longer safe for you here in London.”

Edenthorpe snorted. “You don’t believe Lady Stover’s minions can’t find us there?”

Cornelius shrugged. “One can hope.”

“No.” The duke frowned. “As much as I want to send my family away for their own protection, I fear that being separated and something happening would completely destroy me where the war couldn’t.”

That was something Cornelius didn’t understand. Of course he loved his mother, aunt, and sister and would mourn if they died, but he rather doubted their loss would destroy him. Send him further into the darkness, sure, but he’d survived other deaths for people he was close to before. “Do the other rogues feel the same? St. Vincent? Lockwood? Broadmoor? Twinsfield?” The list could go on, for there were many men he considered his brothers.

“I would imagine so, but I haven’t talked with some of the men in a bit.” He leaned forward in his chair. “What we need is an old-fashioned council of war with everyone present. We need to make plans and contingencies for an attack if such a thing should occur.” Then an expression of sadness crossed his face. “I never thought when I founded the club that this threat would bring us all together. We’ve become a tightly knit family, and every single man here is vital to my growth and happiness.”

“I think we all would say the same, and to know that you have steadily led us without complaint or obvious fear? That’s something to find pride in.” In many ways, Cornelius admired the duke for what he’d accomplished, as well as envied some of the rogues for their contentment as well as for finding peace where they could. “Set the meeting. It’s Christmastide. We will all share a drink or a cup of cheer, and then once the year turns, we’ll be better suited to meet whatever challenge befalls us.”

“Together.” The duke nodded. “We will not let evil win, and that I can promise.”

“Agreed.” Then he grinned. “It’s good to be part of a mission again. It helps me to focus, for I’ve been adrift for far too long.”

“I understand that, my friend, and if you need to talk, to work out the demons in your mind, I’m here. We are here.”

That meant so much.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:10 am

December 14, 1818

No. 6 Birch Place

Portman Square

Marylebone, Mayfair

London

Miss Samantha Marchington glanced about the cozy drawing room until her gaze landed on her father. Not for the first time in recent months did she wonder about the state of the future.

“Papa, are you settled comfortably? Do you need another blanket?”

Currently, her father occupied a wing-backed chair near the fireplace, for there was a bit of a chill in the air. A crocheted blanket of tan wool lay draped over his lower half, while a cap that one would wear for sleeping was on his head. He claimed it helped keep him warm, and who was she to argue with him?

“Leave off, girl, I am fine. Don’t need your constant hovering.” He lifted a hand to wave her off, which caused the blanket to slip.

“I haven’t been a girl for ages,” she said in a soft voice as she crossed the room to put his blanket back into place. “I’m nine and twenty. Nearly thirty if you want the truth, and a spinster. Nothing girlish about that.”

“Bah. Age is nothing.” He kept his gaze focused on the flames in the hearth. “You keep yourself away from men because you refuse to leave me to fate.”

“I am not leaving you alone merely to have a life away from you. How could I find happiness in that?”

Not that she’d wanted such a thing. That hadn’t been the plan at all. She’d had dreams for her life, of course she had, and just like any other woman, she’d wanted a husband and a family. But fate had other plans, as it usually did, and despite a handful of Seasons, she simply hadn’t taken.

Was it due to the slight limp she’d had since sustaining an injury in her early adolescence? That was anyone’s guess, but it didn’t matter. She was here and it was her responsibility to take care of her father.

“You should. I’m past my usefulness, Sam. You’re wasting time here with me.” He frowned but didn’t take his attention off the fire’s flames. “Just let me die in peace.”

Her chest tightened as it always did when he was like this. “Stop. You are not in danger of dying.” At least she hoped not.

“My mind is going, Sam. You know this. I can’t hide it any longer.”

That was true. Some days, he didn’t even remember who she was, and because of that, he grew more disgruntled and grouchier. It had to be quite frustrating to find oneself trapped in a body, in a life, that one couldn’t remember living.

“Then we will live for the good days, when your mind is still sharp.” But with the words, sorrow welled in her chest and put unshed tears into her throat. At this point, it was only a matter of time before his health took a turn. “In any event, I need you to eat the soup and bread Mrs. Fredrickson is going to bring you for supper.”

Finally, he turned his head to look at her. Sadness reflected in his brown eyes. “Will you not eat with me?”

“Not this evening. I need to go out and canvass a few neighborhoods in Mayfair for the orphanage.” It was her chosen charity. Funds were desperately needed to keep the orphanage open and running. If not, by the end of January, it would be forced to close and who knows what will become of the children there.

“It’s not right you running all over Mayfair unaccompanied.” He crossed his arms at his frail chest, looking for all the world like a petulant child.

“I don’t have a choice. The orphanage needs the coin, especially at this time of year. Do you want me to bring a footman or a maid? I’ll have the carriage driver if something untoward happens.” Really, she’d rather the footman and maid stay here in the event her father needed assistance.

A grunt was his only answer.

Samantha sighed. Tears filled her eyes, for taking care of her aging father who was slowly losing his faculties was quite difficult and there was no one to talk to about it. “Remember to eat all your supper when Mrs. Fredrickson brings it.”

“I’m not hungry.”

She bit her bottom lip to keep from overtly crying. “You need to keep your strength up.”

“Bah,” was his response and then returned his gaze to the fire.

“I should return in a couple of hours, so you won’t need to worry about me being out after dark.” Then she closed the distance and bussed his cheek. “If you’d like, once

I'm done with my errands, I can read to you tonight before you retire."

Her father nodded then waved her away. "Go."

With a heavy heart and tears, Samantha left the room. Something needed to change, and soon, for she couldn't continue feeling like she was about to break.

May 1, 1813

Starkton Hall

Surrey, England

As May Day balls went, this one was a most lavish affair. Samantha had been invited because the host of the event knew her father, and since her father was a retired major from the military and a gentleman to boot, many of the older men in the ton enjoyed hearing his war stories. And since the ball was part of a week-long house party and the last social event from that gathering, she hoped to make a good showing.

She clung to her father's arm, for he had been making use of the card rooms for the last hour. "Would it be rude to leave early?" she asked in a whisper.

"Why would we do that? Look how lively everyone is." Her father was a big, solid man, and all she wanted was to burrow into his arms for a protective hug.

Forcing down the disappointment and urge to cry, she sighed. "I have done nothing except sit in one of these chairs on the side of the room with the other wallflowers."

"No one asked you to dance?" He frowned at her.

"Not after the first one." The heat of embarrassment filled her cheeks. "My only

guess is that either other men saw my limp during that dance, or my partner warned others, but here I sit, because I'm considered different."

That was how her life had been ever since she'd fallen from a horse when she was fifteen. Her left ankle had broken, and though it had healed enough that she could walk, it hadn't healed enough. She suffered from a limp, and in times of foul weather, the bones pained her. That meant dancing and running was difficult for her, to say nothing of the fact that climbing stairs was sometimes a challenge, but she had tried to make the best of it.

Until the injury set her apart from everyone else, and not in a good way.

"The best advice I can give you, dearest, is that men have the tendency to act like nodcocks at all times. This is because it hides their fears or insecurities. They simply can't imagine someone having the strength to meet their disabilities and keep their heads high, so they ignore it whenever they see it." He patted her hand. "They don't deserve a woman like you."

"Thank you, Papa. That is certainly a lovely way of looking at it." And helped to banish the disappointment. Slightly. "Why can't I ever meet a man who has the patience to look past my injury and slow his pace enough to walk beside me?"

"Perhaps it will come in time. Until then, you have me." Then he led her to an open space on the dance floor. "I am happy to partner you in this waltz, and you may go as slowly as you wish. Society can wait on us for the next handful of minutes."

"You are the best father anyone could ever have." Since she lost her younger sister as well as her mother in a horrific carriage accident three years before, he was all she had left in this life, and she couldn't imagine life without him. "Thank you for this. I do so love to dance."

“I would give you the world if you would but ask, poppet. Remember that.”

Present Day

When the driver rapped on the roof of the closed carriage and shouted, “Approaching Manchester Square!” Samantha was wrenched out of her remembrance.

“Thank you.”

She held the strings of her reticule tight in the fingers of one hand while the vehicle came to a stop on the street curb. The shadows of night had already descended. It was one of the things that made late December both so cozy and so alarming, but she had never been afraid of the dark, and almost welcomed the anonymity the night provided.

The carriage rocked as her driver climbed down. Seconds later, he opened the door and put down the set of rickety steps, for the vehicle had been in her father’s possession for some years, and now that he had health challenges, he didn’t go out as much as he used to.

“I shouldn’t be more than an hour in this area,” Samantha said as she relied heavily on his hand to assist her out of the carriage. “However, you know my father. If you feel there is something wrong, please come and find me.”

“Absolutely, Miss Marchington. The major will always have my allegiance.” In fact, they’d come by the driver—Dennis—because his father had once served beneath her father, and had been their driver for years before Dennis took over.

She offered him a grin. “Thank you.” Then she shivered when an errant breeze came whistling through the street and clawed at her skirts and the hem of her cloak. “I expect it will snow soon.” Which would only add to her lingering feelings of sadness,

for snow had always had a cozy feel to her which signified love, romance, but on the other side of that was the desolation that winter brought, and the sense of being alone.

How long would her father's health last?

Nearly an hour had passed as she made her way through the Manchester Square area. Less than half the homes she had been shown into had wished to donate to the orphanage, but she was confident in other neighborhoods. She waved to Dennis as she walked up the short path of the last house then she knocked on the red-painted door.

What a cheerful color!

Seconds later, the panel swung inward to reveal a tall man of indeterminate looks and wispy gray hair who peered over the tops of his half-moon spectacles at her.

"May I help you?"

She nodded. "I am here to see the master or mistress of the house. I am collecting funds to keep the Barrett Street Orphanage in Marylebone open for another few months."

"Lord Timelbury is at home, so I will inquire as to whether he wishes to speak with you. The family will sit down to dinner in moments. Follow me."

Then the man stood back and allowed her to enter the short entry hall. After he closed the door, he walked ahead of her along the corridor that was lined with oil paintings depicting pastoral scenes or wildflower meadows as well as seascapes. From what she could see, it was a lovely townhouse and tastefully decorated without the loads of showy, gaudy wealth that some of the titled members of the beau monde accumulated. As the man passed a highly polished wooden staircase, the soft drone of

voices drifted to her ears. But the butler didn't lead her upstairs. Instead, he showed her into a small parlor at the end of the corridor.

With nothing else to do and rather glad to be out of the cold, Samantha perched on the edge of a chair with gilt legs and glanced sadly at the dark fireplace. No doubt the household didn't have many visitors or else they were trying to keep expenses to a minimum, which didn't bode well for her collections.

A few moments later, two women perhaps in their upper fifties entered the parlor, and as Samantha stood, her gaze fell to a younger man, perhaps twenty years or so their junior, and what was more, he resembled both women but in different ways.

How interesting.

The man stepped forward, but his expression didn't reveal his thoughts. "I'm Cornelius Harding, Lord Timelbury. This is my mother, Mrs. Harding, and my aunt, Miss Harding. Hartley said you were here canvassing for donations."

Hmm, if she followed the clues correctly, the shorter and more matronly woman was the sister of the Timelbury's father, and his mother was no doubt a widow, for she didn't carry herself as a married woman would. Neither did it seem that she had much joy in her life, if the tight way she held her mouth was any indication.

"Uh, right." She wrenched her gaze to his face. There was something extremely trustworthy about him, and those sensual, chiseled lips had the capacity to encourage naughty thoughts, for which she refused to indulge. When she met his gray eyes, the shadows and secrets there drew her curiosity. "I am Miss Samanthan Marchington, and I am here on behalf of the Barrett Street Orphanage. It is located in Marylebone, in a renovated townhouse, but unfortunately, it is rapidly outgrowing its walls."

Mrs. Harding frowned. She crossed her arms at her chest. "You are delaying our

dinner, young woman. Why are you here?"

With haste, Samanatha retrieved a pamphlet from her reticule. It was rather worse for wear with wrinkles and folds. "I had hoped to encourage you to donate funds to the orphanage. Without outside support, I'm afraid the organization will be forced to close by the end of January." When she offered the literature to the woman, she abjectly refused to take it. With a sigh, she offered it to the man, who tugged it from her fingers. "Uh, I work closely with the founders of the orphanage, and it's heartbreaking how crowded the space has grown in the past two years. So many babies have been dropped off there that the workers simply don't have room to help—to save—any more."

"That is quite the story, Miss Marchington," Lord Timelbury said as he browsed the pamphlet. "If the orphanage is as desperate as you say, it will take more than house-to-house canvassing through Mayfair to save it."

"Yes, I am aware of that, but I have to try." She met his eyes once more, almost daring him to contradict her. "I couldn't live with myself if disaster befell those babies who couldn't find a position within that orphanage."

"Yes, well, that is the way of the world, though. Isn't it?" he said as he handed her back the pamphlet.

She refused to take it, forcing him to tuck the paper into the inside pocket of his tailcoat. Which set off the breadth of his shoulders splendidly. "It doesn't have to be, for Christmastide should be the time of year when people open their hearts to others who have less."

The woman she suspected was Timelbury's aunt softly cleared her throat. "If you don't mind me asking, dear, who are your people?"

“Oh.” Samantha smiled, for the woman gave off motherly feelings. “My father is Major Marchington. He is a war hero, I suppose, and when he finally retired from military service fifteen years ago, he was quite sought after in London drawing rooms for his stories and charm.”

“How lovely!” Miss Harding grinned. Amusement danced in her eyes. “I know your father.”

Shock went through Samantha’s chest. “How?”

“I met Henry at a ball years ago. He was still in the military and used to regale the men with stories from his time in the military. Was so dashing in his uniform.” A chuckle escaped her, and her eyes took on a faraway look. “Oh, he was a charmer, and a big flirt! But that man could dance. He had quite the skill, which meant all us ladies who hadn’t been matched always vied for his attention.” Then she sighed. “There was a time when I thought he might ask for my hand...”

“Oh?” How had she never been told this story? “What happened? Why didn’t that come to pass?” Of course, if it hadn’t, she wouldn’t be standing here...

Miss Harding laughed again. “He fell in love with your mother, and they were perfect for each other, so I let him—and the dream of him—go. I knew your mother in passing, and liked her.”

“What a lovely story!” For whatever reason, that endeared her to the woman even more. “I will tell him I met you. Perhaps he’ll remember you.” Her voice broke, but she cleared her throat and hoped to regain control of her emotions. “His memory comes and goes, but lately there have been more bad days than good.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Miss Harding laid a hand on Samantha’s arm. The candlelight caught on a diamond and pearl bracelet that glittered like mad. “Perhaps I

could come by for a visit soon? It might cheer him.”

“For shame, Beatrice! Mrs. Harding admonished. “This is not the time.”

Samantha kept her own counsel. To the other lady, she said, “Of course.” She nodded. “Your bracelet is gorgeous.”

“Thank you.” Miss Harding held it up. “My nephew, there, just gave it to me for Christmastide.”

“Ah.” When she bounced her gaze to Lord Timelbury and their gazes connected, a queer little thrill went down her spine. He was a bit too intense for her liking. “Well, this house is my last stop of the night, should you like to contribute.”

Lord Timelbury nodded. “Have you had much luck?” The timbre of his voice was far too lovely and rich. A lady would soon find herself in trouble if she listened to it long enough.

“Not as much as I would have liked.”

Both women talked at the same time.

“That’s terrible! Of course we’ll donate,” Miss Harding said.

“Well, it is a rather lean time of year, but I suppose I can give something as well. For the orphans,” Mrs. Harding replied and unbent enough to relax her arms. “Cornelius, what of you?”

A huff left his throat. “I shall give as well. Why don’t the two of you go retrieve your coin? I’ll entertain our guest until you return.”

As the women left the room, Lord Timelbury turned more fully to her. “How did you become involved with the orphanage, Miss Marchington?”

“That is a long story, I’m afraid. It has its roots in my sister.” And quite frankly, she didn’t want to feel more emotional than she already was. Not to mention the fact this man was a stranger.

“I see.” He reached into the pocket of his jacket and withdrew a slim leather pouch. “Where do you and your father live?”

“In Portman Square.”

“Not far from the orphanage, I’ll wager?”

“That’s right.”

“Ah.” He offered her the pouch. The soft clink of coins reached her ears. “There is about fifty pounds here, but I am not opposed to giving more at a later date.”

“Oh!” That was quite a sizable amount. “Thank you,” she managed to choke out as she took the pouch and stuffed it into her reticule. “That’s very kind.”

“Think nothing of it.”

Then the ladies returned, and each one of them handed her a leather pouch of their own. Miss Harding took her hands in hers.

“Thank you for visiting, Miss Marchington. I am so happy to remember your father.”

“I’m glad too. And thank you both for your generosity.” With Lord Timelbury’s donation alone, the orphanage would easily reach beyond the end of January.

He cleared his throat. “Well, if that is all? I will walk you out. I assume your carriage is waiting?”

“Yes, and thank you.” The Harding women were forgotten when she peered up into the lord’s face, and those intense eyes searched out hers, for what she had no idea. At the pavement, she turned to him. “I appreciate what you and your relatives did tonight. You have no idea how much you’ve helped the orphanage.”

“Yes, well, enjoy your night, Miss Marchington. Best wishes for further donations.” Then, with a curt nod, he left her in the care of her driver and then returned to his house.

She stifled a sigh. The stark black of his evening jacket against the softly falling white snowflakes made quite the picture, and oddly enough, she was glad, too, that she’d had the chance to see such a picture.

It made going home to a less-than-ideal situation a bit... better.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:10 am

December 15, 1818

Harding House

Manchester Square, Mayfair

London

Cornelius came into his house just as the longcase clock on the second floor chimed the noon time hour. His mood was elevated because his mother and aunt weren't underfoot, and he'd concluded a meeting with his man-of-affairs that had proved quite lucrative due to investments in coal and steel as well as buying into a company that dealt with insuring area townhomes.

As he made his way upstairs to the drawing room, he couldn't forget about the woman who'd come collecting yesterday for her charity. It had been too difficult to tell if she'd been telling the truth; Christmastide brought out the greed in everyone as well as the selfishness, but there had been pain and shadows in the blue pools of her eyes that had given him pause. There was also a darker blue ring around those irises that had completely fascinated him.

Why? He did not need a woman in his life in any capacity. Already, his mother and aunt were slowly driving him mad.

No sooner had he gone over to the sideboard and poured himself a glass of brandy than a sound echoed through the room that thoroughly chilled his blood.

Pop! Pop!

Even though it was the logs in the fire snapping and cracking, sweat broke out on his upper lip and brow, but since it caught him by surprise, Cornelius couldn't properly guard his mind from it. Far too quickly, the day terror swallowed him up into its vortex, and the cut crystal glass slipped from his hand to shatter at his feet, splattering his boots with the liquor.

Spring 1808

Peninsular War

Somewhere in Spain

Cornelius' pulse pounded hard in his chest and temples as he lay in the dun-colored dirt. They had been part of a reconnoiter party with the large remainder of their troops a few miles away. There was no question that the French troops outnumbered them two to one, and even with the Spanish platoon that fought with the English, it was nearly impossible that any of them would leave the high plain alive.

Still, they couldn't give up, and every man determined to stop the advance of Napoleon's troops dug deep to confront fear because the madman dictator couldn't be allowed to rule the world.

On his right, Major Harry Briggs peered through a brass spy glass. From their position on a slight hill, they were able to see what was happening with the French troops. "Looks like the regiment is splitting up."

"To do what?" Risking it, Cornelius lifted his head and squinted against the setting sun. The damned French would use the cover of darkness to affect an attack, for most men were rubbish fighting in the dark.

“It’s hard to say, but I’ll wager part of them is going to make camp while they still have the light.” The captain frowned. “The others? Probably a patrol. We need to fall back.”

“To where? The plains are barren. There is literally nowhere to go.” The only thing anywhere close was a small mission school run by monks, and they refused to get involved in the war in any capacity. For their own survival. Not that he could blame them.

“We’ll have to use this bluff, and I have to believe that we have the better sharp shooters.” The captain pocketed his spyglass. “Especially if we pick them off from this position.”

He brought forth his rifle. “Best get started.”

Major Briggs gestured with a gloved hand and indicated the hill where they lay. How he managed to communicate their intent without words, Cornelius didn’t know, but at least five Spaniards belly-crawled over to their position. In a low voice, the captain explained what the plan was.

Then, seconds later, everyone settled their rifles, and one by one, they each targeted a French soldier and fired.

Pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop!

When the captain consulted his spyglass again, he nodded. “Excellent work, fellows, but now the remaining four will retaliate. Heads up.”

Cornelius drew his pistol, as did the men around him. Seconds later, the French patrol ran up the small hill where he and the others were hiding. Gunfire was exchanged. Pain went through his upper arm as a ball penetrated the sleeve of his uniform, but it

didn't seem to be all that deep, and his attacker continued to come at him, this time using a bayonet, for his pistol required reloading.

He fought him off as best he could, and finally shot the man in the chest. Warm blood splattered over his own face and chest, but the French soldier toppled and remained motionless in the dirt. The attack had taken less than ten minutes, but it was over as quickly as it had started, and his small contingent was still safe.

"Damn." Toppling onto his back, he stared at the rapidly darkening skies and tried to regulate his breathing. "I despise this war."

The major nodded. "As do we all, but we simply cannot let madness win, so we will continue to fight."

But at what cost?

"Cornelius?" Someone jostled his arm. "Cornelius? Can you hear me?" Tapping commenced on his cheeks. "It's me, Annabelle. You're safe and at home. Nothing will hurt you, but you must come back."

The sweet voice of his sister acted like a rope, a chain, and in his mind, he grasped hold of that lifeline, pulling and tugging until he reached her. Only then did he dare to open his eyes and stare at her from where he'd apparently curled into a fetal position on one of the low sofas in the drawing room. Every muscle in his body ached, even his jaws, as if he'd been clenching his teeth.

"Annabelle?" What the devil was she doing here? He blinked in an effort to see her clearly, for he hadn't expected her in his house.

"I'm here." She sat beside him on the sofa as he slowly put himself into an upright position. "When I came in, I saw the broken glass on the floor and you were on the

sofa, moaning, but when I shook you, you didn't seem to see me."

"Oh. I need to have a maid in here to sweep up the glass."

"All in good time. Are you well?"

"I..." Though he had hoped to keep this part of himself from his sister, clearly that hope was dashed since she'd witnessed it in person. "I, uh..." He forced a swallow into his suddenly tight throat. "I have been suffering day terrors for the past few years. They go hand in hand with the ongoing nightmares regarding the war, except with the day terrors, I'm literally trapped in a memory and can't free myself easily."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Annabelle laid a hand on his arm. Compassion swam in her blue eyes. "Out of everyone, I would have understood. Living with Hugh has opened my eyes to what many of you former military men struggle with."

Made even worse by the fact that the very country, the government, they'd fought for had turned their backs on the veterans who'd returned from the war. That was a slap in the face, and every time he thought about it, anger welled, but his sister required an answer.

"I didn't want to appear weak in front of you, and it's something I need to battle, not you." Though he had been home from the war for nearly four and a half years, he still didn't have the strength to beat back the nightmares.

Perhaps he never would. The thought was far too depressing.

"You should have told me. Hugh suffers too, every so often."

"I know, but that doesn't mean you should worry over me too."

“I do because you are my brother, regardless of where your mind is.”

“You are a dear.” He nodded, for Annabelle had married within the past year, to one of Cornelius’ friends and fellow Rogue’s Arcade club members. Yes, the earl probably suffered nightmares, but he had been dealt a critical blow when he’d been attacked by robbers—employed by the detestable Lady Stover— and was struck down with amnesia. The man couldn’t remember anything about his past, and truth to tell, he probably never would.

She patted his arm. “Do you want laudanum? I can go fetch it.”

“No. That only makes me sleep and my mind fuzzy. And I’m afraid I will become too reliant on the drug.” It was far too easy to depend on the opiate, and if he did that, he might lose himself to a different demon than the nightmares. “With how things are right now and with the threats that are coming against members of the Rogue’s Arcade, I can’t afford not to be alert.”

“Then it’s true? Things in that quarter are as serious as the rumors I’m hearing being whispered through the wives of the rogues?” Annabelle’s voice was hushed. “I’d hoped it was just nonsense.”

“I’m afraid it’s true. I’ve fought enough battles with my friends recently against Lady Stover and her minions to know that something horrible is most likely coming, but I can’t put my finger on it.”

“It is much like waiting for a final blow, isn’t it?” She frowned. “At least you men are a strong defense. That makes me feel a bit better.”

“I’ve met many of the rogue’s wives. You ladies aren’t ineffectual, you know.” When they shared a laugh, it helped to regulate his breathing and calm his frantic heartbeat. “By the by, why are you here instead of with your husband? I would have thought

that honeymoon period would still be going strong, especially during this time of the year.”

A faint blush stained her cheeks. “Hugh has been struggling. So much that it’s effecting his performance in the boxing ring.” She shrugged. “It’s worse because he doesn’t remember the war that he fought in, so those nightmares are far too vivid, and he can’t understand why he’d having those dreams. No doubt worry about his club members are dredging up some of that.” Tears welled in her eyes. “I thought preparing for the holiday might help distract him.”

“Good idea, and if I know you, you will be certain to help with those distractions.” For one thing was certain, his sister was madly in love with her husband.

“There is that.” If possible, her blush intensified. “May I tell you a secret?” Excitement danced in her eyes, and it made him grin.

“Of course.”

She lowered her voice. “In May of next year, if all goes well, you will be an uncle.”

“What?” He gawked at her. “Are you...?”

“Yes.” Annabelle nodded with a wide grin. “Just over four months along and only starting to show.” She grasped his hand and squeezed his fingers. “It’s a tiny, secret hope, of course, but the midwife said I’m past the dangerous phase. But I’m still cautious.”

“That is wonderful news.” He hugged his sister. “You and Hugh are going to make lovely parents. I imagine he’s thrilled?”

“He can hardly believe it, but he’s wildly happy.”

A stab of something he rather hoped wasn't envy went through Cornelius' chest. Of course he'd thought about having the same for his own life, but those dreams ended four years ago, as did his faith in romance or even Christmas magic. Swallowing down his disappointment, he nodded. "I'll tell Hugh congratulations the next time I see him." Knowing that his sister was increasing brought home just how vulnerable all the rogues and their loved ones were.

I have to protect them the best that I can.

"He would enjoy that, and you should come to visit more often."

"Why? Because you need Mama's attention on someone else besides you?"

"There is that." She chuckled. "But because Hugh would like the company. Ever since he lost his memory, he's been a bit... introspective, I think. Though he doesn't remember his past, it weighs on him that there is a history there he's no longer a part of."

"I'm sorry." Cornelius squeezed her hand. "That must be difficult for you."

"It is." She nodded. "But we're making the best of it."

"And you are here why? You still haven't answered my question."

"Right." She snickered, and he couldn't help but smile, for he missed that sound. "I wanted some of my clothing that is still here. Oh, and one of the special Christmas baubles that used to belong to Papa. I would like to put it in my own house. Mama said it was in the boxes of decorations here."

"And Aunt Beatrice has already ordered them down, because she apparently thinks it her duty to put Christmas cheer into my house, you came over."

“Yes.” Then she winked. “Of course, it’s always lovely to see you.”

He briefly rolled his eyes to the ceiling before resting them on her again. “Well, I don’t know where Aunt Beatrice put the boxes of decorations, so you should probably ask the butler.”

“Cornelius!”

Both he and Annabelle glanced at the doorway where Aunt Beatrice sailed in as if she’d been summoned there because they were talking about her.

“Auntie? What’s wrong?” After looking into her face and seeing the anguish there, he frowned. “What has occurred to see you in such a pelter?”

“My bracelet!”

“What?” His mind was bit muzzy from the day terror, so he didn’t really know what she was talking about. “I thought you liked your bracelet.”

“I do, of course. It’s lovely.” His aunt shook her head as she came further into the room without much more than a cursory glance at Annabelle. “It’s missing!”

“I beg your pardon. What is missing?”

Annabelle snorted. She playfully smacked him on the arm. “Her bracelet, obviously.”

“You lost your bracelet, Auntie?”

“No!” The older lady shook her head. “It’s missing ! I couldn’t find it this morning when I dressed for the day, and I searched everywhere at home.”

“When was the last time you saw it?”

“Shortly before that young lady came calling for the charity. I don’t remember if I had it on for dinner last night.”

“Damn it all.” As a wall of hot rage smacked into his chest, Cornelius pushed to his feet. “That woman stole it. That Miss Marchington. I’ll wager money on it.”

“Oh, I shouldn’t think so.” Aunt Beatrice shook her head. Doubt was written all over her face. “Don’t be so hasty. Perhaps it’s merely lost or fell off due to a faulty clasp.”

“None of the servants brought it to my attention or that of the butler, and I trust everyone who works here.” He had to, for being a member of the Rogue’s Arcade had given him a healthy dose of paranoia.

“Well, then, perhaps Auntie took it off and laid it somewhere last night before she left,” Annabelle said with a quick look around the room.

“I would have remembered that, dear,” his aunt said with a frown.

“The only strange occurrence was the addition of the charity collector,” Cornelius said as he shoved a hand through his hair. “I don’t believe in coincidences. Let’s all thank the heavens she wasn’t given the run of the house while she was here.” He shook his head. “I’m going to pay her a call.”

“Cornelius, no.” Annabelle shook her head as she crossed the Aubusson carpet to clutch his arm. “Don’t go in anger. We don’t know the facts.”

He blew out a breath. “We will soon enough.” How dare that woman come into his house and steal a valuable bracelet he’d given his aunt as a gift.

Annabelle frowned. "Where will you find her?"

"Yes, dear," his aunt added. "Did she say where she lived with her father? I don't remember her telling me that."

"Lucky for me, she did mention it." Anger still battered him. If he wasn't careful, he would have another episode. "She said Portman Square."

"Ah. No doubt she enjoys taking daily walks with her father in the square or the gardens." Aunt Beatrice smiled. "Would you like for me to accompany you? I did promise Miss Marchington that I would call on her father. And it would ensure you won't lose your temper with her."

"That is not necessary." After a few deep breaths, he felt much more calm. "I won't dress her down, but I will demand that she return the jewelry." What kind of a person called on a home on the pretense of collecting for a charity and then stole from the people there? For that matter, was she truly taking donations or did she keep the coin for herself? Well, he would discover the truth regarding that as well.

"Do have a care, Cornelius," Aunt Beatrice cautioned. "It is the Christmastide season, and there are many people who are facing extenuating circumstances."

He huffed. "That doesn't give them leave to take what isn't theirs." As he bounced his gaze between his aunt and sister, he sighed. "Fear not, though. I will have my manners about me. Aunt Beatrice, Annabelle requires your assistance in any event. I'll try to return in a timely manner."

Then he ran out of the drawing room and along the corridor toward the stairs. This was just another reason why he despised Christmas. Everyone lied and everyone had an angle to separate a man from his coin. And another reason to remind himself that he didn't need a woman in his life, no matter how compelling her eyes had been, or

how winsome the faint vanilla and floral scent of her.

Christmastide, bah.

There was no such thing as Christmas magic anymore, not since that day four years ago, and neither was there the belief in romance. That was what foolish women believed because they read too many fairy stories or men who hadn't any grasp at reality.

Thank goodness he was well beyond all of that.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:10 am

December 15, 1818

No. 6 Birch Place

Portman Square

Marylebone, Mayfair

London

Samantha couldn't help but smile, for her father was having a good day, and for that she was exceedingly grateful.

One never knew what his mind would be like from day to day or even within that same day, so when he was himself, all was well in her world. As she put a teacup into his hand, she kissed his cheek. "I'm glad in a happy attitude. I have another round of canvassing to accomplish this afternoon, but after that, we'll have a lovely conversation over tea and possibly discuss plans for Christmas."

He sipped his tea while watching her from his chair near the fireplace. "We can certainly discuss that, but that isn't what's uppermost in my mind."

"Oh?" Quickly, Samantha finished her own tea, for she wasn't lying when she said she needed to be out of the house. At least the tea would help to keep her insides warm once she went outside.

"What I am currently thinking about is your future."

“I will be fine. Haven’t I up until this point?” Was it a lonely life at times? Certainly, but it could be twelve times worse.

“No. Listen to me, girl.” He caught her free hand with his and met her gaze. “Please marry that man who keeps coming ‘round wanting to court you. Seems to me he’s your only chance at being a wife and possibly a mother.”

“What?” She frowned. “Mr. Arbuthnot?” When her father nodded, she gawked as if he’d grown two heads. “I don’t find him all that appealing. Yes, he is easy on the eyes, but he isn’t my ideal man for a husband.”

Unfortunately, she had met the gentleman in question at the nearby lending library perhaps a month ago. He had struck up a conversation with her, did some flirting that she’d tried not to return. After that, she’d politely but firmly told him she wasn’t interested in a courtship. He, apparently, was either hopefully determined or stupidly aggressive.

“Beyond that, I can’t imagine spending the rest of my life with a man I don’t love.”

“Yet he’s interested in you. The old saying ‘a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush’ is applicable here, I think.”

Briefly, she pointed her gaze at the ceiling before resting it on him again. “Mr. Arbuthnot is of questionable morals. I don’t care for some of his contemporaries. They seem a greedy, shifty lot and make me feel vastly uncomfortable when I’m with them.” It was something she couldn’t explain, and she’d only met a couple of his friends once when they’d congregated outside a shop where she’d been.

“Bah. I don’t know what you are waiting for, so I told him you would welcome a suit from him. I should think he’ll call on you soon.” He nodded with apparent encouragement.

“Oh, Papa.” An annoyed huff escaped her as she laid her cup and saucer on the low table then stood. “I’ve told you I don’t fancy him. Now this has made everything complicated and will be quite embarrassing for all of us.”

When her father stared at her as if he couldn’t remember who she was, her chest tightened in panic. “I don’t remember you saying that.” Surprise lined his face. “Hell, I haven’t talked to you for days, child.”

“No, Papa, I live here, same as I have all my life. We were just now talking over tea.” It didn’t matter that it was frustrating at times bearing witness to his failing faculties, he would never understand it, and she couldn’t blame him. His mind was going, and he had no control over that. Emotions lodged in her throat. It was becoming worse every week that passed. “Well, I need to go canvassing for donations. Will you be all right while I’m gone?”

“Why are you leaving?”

She tried to summon her patience around herself, but it was a difficult and heart-breaking prospect. “I’m raising funds for the orphanage. Remember when I told you about that?”

“I don’t recall any such thing, and it’s scandalous that you are doing this. At your age, you should be married with children.” He shook his head and mumbled to himself, clearly no longer with her in the present.

Biting the inside of her cheek, she patted his arm. “Well, there are other concerns in this world than what you want from my life. I’ll return in a couple of hours.”

“You don’t come to visit me, girl. Miss you,” he said in response.

Fighting off tears, Samantha left the drawing room. When she reached the short entry

hall, she accepted her cloak from the butler, who gave her a silent look of compassion, and no sooner than she took her bonnet in hand than there was a knock on the door.

With her lips pursed together, she pulled the wooden panel open ahead of the butler, and then narrowed her eyes to see a man standing there who she recognized from her last call from yesterday. “Lord Timelbury?” Oh, dear. He was even more handsome bundled up on the chilly afternoon and rather dashing in his top hat, red muffler, and dark gray greatcoat. Unfortunately, she was in no mood for banter or conversation. “Did you wish to donate additional funding to the orphanage?” For that matter, how the devil had he found her? She’d never given him her full direction.

“Ha!” The man regarded her with a mixture of incredulity and disgust, but why? “Donate more? Surely, you must be mad.” And he continued to gawk at her. “I’m here because you stole something from me, or rather my aunt.”

“What?” She could fathom what he was on about. “I did no such thing. How dare you accuse me. Now if you don’t mind, I have business away from this house.” When she made to move around him with her bonnet still in hand, he stepped directly into her path and then slammed the door so she couldn’t easily leave.

“Then where is it?” He crossed his arms at his chest and glared while the butler looked on in confusion.

She frowned. “Where is what?” What was happening? Had maggots got into the man’s brain since he was accusing her of something she obviously hadn’t done?

Another huff of frustration escaped him. “The diamond and pearl bracelet! It’s been missing since your visit yesterday, and I distinctly remember you made a point of admiring it on my aunt’s wrist.” His eyes narrowed. “Did you slip it from her person while distracting her with talk about your charity?”

“I have no idea what you are talking about, so I will ask that you leave.” The mad was mad, of course. She had never stolen anything from anyone.

“Poppycock. All I know is that the bracelet is missing. You were the last person to see it.”

“I rather doubt that. I’ll wager it was still on her wrist when I left.”

“Then why the hell do you think I’m here?” His voice grew more angry with every word. “She came to my house just now, extremely upset because the bracelet is missing, and she said she’d searched the house. Clearly, it’s gone.”

“Then, by all means, if you think you’re right, go ahead and search my house. You’ll come up empty handed.” She glared. “I am not a thief, and quite frankly, I haven’t the time to be a member of the criminal element, not with everything else that’s been going on.” Then, to her horror, tears welled in her eyes in a quick torrent to spill onto her cheeks.

Obviously, that gave him pause, for he frowned. His gray eyes resembled thunderclouds, and his expression suggested he wouldn’t give quarter. “Miss Marchington, if you think taking refuge in tears will distract me from my investigation, you have no idea how tenacious I can be.”

God, the man was insufferable! Her patience snapped. “Sometimes it’s not about you, you ogre!”

“Like hell it’s not!”

“Enough.” The heat of embarrassment seeped into her cheeks to argue with him in the entryway of her home in front of the butler, who would no doubt run to the servants with the gossip. Then thoughts of her father flooded her brain and made the

situation even worse. “You have no idea what it’s like to grieve a loved one who hasn’t even died yet. You watch them day by day deteriorate and know that their mind is slowly leaving them. They don’t always remember you or even the past you’ve shared, and it’s quite difficult.”

“That is neither here nor there, Miss Marchington.” If possible, his scowl deepened. “I worked hard to be able to procure that bracelet for my aunt, and now it’s gone.”

Did the man have no feelings, no compassion? She brushed at the moisture on her cheeks. “Sometimes things don’t go our way and sometimes things are just gone .” She thought about her father’s mind, and how nothing would ever be the same. That she had disappointed him by not marrying well before now. Then she shook her head. “I do not have time for the nonsense you’ve brought to my door, Lord Timelbury. If you don’t mind, I have pressing things to attend.”

“No.”

She stared at him, and so did Niles, the butler. “I beg your pardon?”

“I said no .” Then he went a step beyond propriety and grabbed her free hand. “I am not going anywhere until you return the bracelet.”

This is outside of enough!

“Are you daft?” As she struggled to tug her hand from his, she gawked at him. “I. Don’t. Have. It. Go home, Lord Timelbury, and think about your horrid choices from today.” When he didn’t appear to want to move neither did he release her hand, the remainder of her patience blew away like chaff in the wind. “Quite frankly, a misplaced bracelet isn’t nearly as weighty as everything else I’m currently worried about.”

“I rather think—”

“No.” She shook her head, effectively interrupting him. “A bracelet doesn’t matter, not compared to my father’s mind slipping away to the point that he only remembers me half the time. A bracelet doesn’t matter against being worried about making ends meet or keeping food on the table and having the ability to keep fires going or paying the staff or the taxes.” With each point, she drummed an index finger into his chest, and since she still held the bonnet in her hand, it thumped against his nether region as it hung by the ribbons. “A missing bracelet doesn’t matter when compared to the orphanage that is bursting at the seams with unwanted infants and children, because their parents couldn’t pay for their upkeep. Imagine the horror if that institution were to close. What would become of those children?”

With each new statement, Lord Timelbury’s eyes widened. “I—”

“And to make things even more difficult, Christmastide will be upon us soon, which brings with it memories and a different sort of grief, for nothing will be the same, and once I lose my father fully, I will be alone in this world. So, please, tell me again how any of that is less important than a misplaced bracelet?”

“I suppose when put it such terms it’s not but—”

“And all of this is made even worse by some puffed up, arrogant peer who thinks he knows much more about seemingly everything. A man who has nothing else better to do than bedevil a stranger and—”

“Good God, do shut up.” With a huff, he tugged her close and pressed his lips to hers, no doubt in an effort to stem the flow of her words.

Shock went through her, for she had only been kissed a handful of times in her adult life, but she did cease talking. As she stared up at him—he had a good six inches on

her average height—flutters moved through her lower belly. For whatever reason, and for the space of a heartbeat, there was a connection between them, a flash of recognition as if their souls had briefly flared, but then she pulled away. Dropping her bonnet, she used that hand to slap him, hard enough to leave faint marks on his skin.

Lord Timelbury put a hand to his cheek where the outline of her hand was deepening. “Why the devil did you do that?”

Niles retrieved her bonnet and then discreetly moved to the closet where outwear was stored.

Samantha ignored him to concentrate on the man in front of her, and she didn’t answer his question. “Why did you kiss me?”

He shrugged. “Because I’d be here forever if you didn’t shut up and it’s damned cold in this entry hall.”

At least it was the truth, and inside that, there was a touch of humor lurking.

Before she could answer him, the unthinkable happened. Her father came down the stairs. He’d no doubt heard voices and had come to investigate, but when he reached the entry hall with a disoriented expression on his face, his gaze fell on Lord Timelbury and his hand holding hers. Delight crossed her father’s face, as well as excitement, and that was something she’d not seen from him in a very long time indeed.

“What is this, Annie? It’s as if you haven’t the sense God gave a goose. Introduce me to your suitor. He’s different from Mr. Arbuthnot.”

Oh, merciful heavens.

The heat of embarrassment once more seeped into her cheeks, but tears welled again, for the name her father had called her was her mother's, who had been dead for years.

"I, um... My name is Samantha, remember, Papa?"

Lord Timelbury frowned at her then bounced his gaze between them. "Uh, Mr. Marchington, I really must inform you that—"

"He is your beau? You are a cheeky monkey for keeping this secret." Her father cackled with laughter. "Now I don't need to worry over you or your future. You will be taken care of."

She didn't need things to be more complicated than they already were. "Papa, this is Lord Timelbury. He was just leaving. There is nothing between—"

Once more, the man interrupted her. Unfortunately, it wasn't with a kiss. "Hello, Mr. Marchington." Lord Timelbury slowly walked through the entry hall to where her father stood, brazen as a thief. "I'm sorry to keep your daughter in the entry hall, but she wasn't quite ready to share the happy news, which is why we were having words here." Then he sent her a speaking glance. "However, since you are here, I'm going to announce it anyway."

"Oh?" Both of her father's bushy eyebrows rose up his forehead.

Samantha frowned at him. "This is ridiculous. We aren't—"

Lord Timelbury silenced her with a look that had storms shadowing his gray eyes. "Miss Marchington has just agreed to be my wife. We are engaged."

Both Samantha and Niles gasped and stared at him.

“I know, it’s a bit of a shock. It has been for both of us as well.” He gave her a speaking glance then gestured her toward the stairs with her father. “We won’t marry for a while, of course. I need to sort myself, you see, but I wanted you to know she’s no longer a spinster, and she’s promised to help me find a bracelet my aunt lost.” There was a hard note to his voice that sent cold shivers down her spine. “Hopefully sooner rather than later.”

“Marvelous! Let’s go upstairs to celebrate. Deuced cold in this corridor.” Her father led the way up the stairs.

She had no choice but to come abreast of Lord Timelbury. “Oh, well played.” she muttered as she slowly went up the stairs with him. “You bastard.”

A snort preceded his answer. “At least in this way I can keep you close, and I can watch you in the event you try to pawn the bracelet.”

Once in the drawing room, her father gestured Timelbury onto a low sofa.

“Do you plan to take care of my daughter in the manner she deserves?”

A grin curved those sensuous lips, but it was far from kind. “I can promise you that she will have exactly what she deserves, Mr. Marchington. Do not worry on that point.”

Still stewing, Samantha tugged on the bell pull. The last thing her father needed was brandy, so she would order tea to head off potential disaster. How dare Lord Timelbury high handedly think to manage her life! Yet her father was uncommonly happy, and she didn’t want to break his heart by telling him the truth.

What a coil.

After she ordered tea from the footman who answered the ring, she was forced to play the role Lord Timelbury had unexpectedly thrust her into. She settled on the sofa next to him, went so far as to buss his cheek. The scent of his shaving soap or cologne immediately wafted to her nose and she let herself bask in the scents of sandalwood, cedar, with a hint of pine and orange. “He’s exactly what I’ve ever wanted in a soon-to-be husband.”

“How wonderful,” her father responded with a wide grin.

Beneath her breath to Lord Timelbury, she said, “If you so much as make my father confused or sad or angry or upset, I will make your life so miserable you’ll think you were married.”

“Ah.” But his lips twitched as if he would laugh, but that sound never came.

“Before tea comes, since my daughter apparently doesn’t trust me with brandy these days, I want to see you both share a kiss.” Merriment danced in his faded eyes.

“Uh...” Heat settled into Samantha’s cheeks, but this time not from embarrassment. “How silly, Papa. We would need mistletoe for that, since it’s Christmastide.” Not that she wouldn’t welcome another kiss... but not with this man, not as a part of his foolish notions.

“Clever girl.” Her father shook his head. “I’m sure your fiancé can procure that for you.” In his glee, he rubbed his hands together. “We shall decorate the drawing like we did when you were little. Your mother always liked that...”

Well, drat.

Cold disappointment circled through her gut. She glanced at Lord Timelbury, who shrugged. “I suppose we could do that.” Yet how much would he actually remember

or even want when his mind shifted once more? “Don’t you agree...” Oh, dear. At the last second, she remembered his Christian name from yesterday. “...Cornelius?”

“Oh, ah, yes, of course.” But he seemed anything but helpful. A look of annoyance crossed his face, and he frowned at her, rested his gaze on her face, searching for what she couldn’t say.

“Good.” She didn’t say more, for the footman brought in the tea tray.

They could be inconvenienced together, but part of her was relieved that she might not pass the holiday season alone and there would be someone to talk to during the bad days with her father. If Lord Timelbury insisted on this stupid little farce, so be it, but she didn’t need to make it easy on him.

Perhaps.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:10 am

December 16, 1818

Rogue's Arcade Club

Mayfair, London

What the hell has happened to my life?

By the time Cornelius wandered into a private room at the Rogue's Arcade, he'd already downed two servings of brandy, but as soon as he saw familiar faces of some friends, his mood instantly elevated.

"You look like a dog's breakfast, Timelbury." This from the Earl of St. Vincent. He was one of the founding members of the club, but he was rarely seen at the place anymore, at least while Cornelius was in residence. "Hard night?"

"You could say that." He loosened the knot of his cravat, for even though there was some propriety observed at the club, in a private room, he felt a bit more relaxed. When he dropped heavily into a chair around the large, round table that could easily fit eight or more, he sighed and glanced about at the other men that had joined them.

Viscount Aldren was there, very charming and suave with his dark looks. Surprisingly, the Earl of Baselton was also in attendance. He was a bit of a recluse—not as bad as the Duke of Broadmoor—but only just. The older man with silver threading through his blond hair seemed at ease and relaxed as he chatted with the Viscount of Winteringham. That man's red hair gleamed beneath the candlelight since the private room was on the interior with no windows to let in the natural

afternoon light.

St. Vincent snorted. “Did you wish to expand on why you aren’t as put together as usual, or did you want us to extract it from you, piece by piece?” He took a sip of his brandy. “Grant me this boon, if you please, as a distraction. My infant has colic, and I need something to take my mind off the constant crying.”

“Ah. I hope this stage of life goes quickly for you and your wife.” Honestly, Cornelius knew next to nothing about babies or raising children, but as was the course of things with his fellow rogues, they had taken to childrearing with aplomb, and instead of handing off the young ones to servants or wet nurses, they were intimately invested in all stages of a young child’s care.

“We shall see, but thank you.” The earl nodded. “It’s the worry that does a man in. That, and the lack of sleep.”

At that point, every man at the table rested their gazes on Cornelius, but it was Winteringham that answered him.

“I well remember those days.” Currently, the man had a seven-year-old son, and in addition to being recently wed for the second time, Cornelius wouldn’t put it past the man to immediately begin filling his nursery, for he was a man who wildly enjoyed being a father as well as a husband. “They will pass, just as every phase does. You might not enjoy it now, but you will remember this time with fondness.” Then he raised an eyebrow. “However, we all know Timelbury has not entered with particular part of his life yet, so what has you at sixes and sevens?”

“Uh...” He tugged on the knot of his cravat again. It was disconcerting to have his brothers-in-arms staring at him, but he knew deep down they would help him if they could, and he had been on that side of the table many times so to speak. This was what friends did. “I believe I made the stupidest decision of my life yesterday.”

Good-natured chuckles went around the table.

Baselton grinned. “Do you think we all haven’t? I’d rather like to say that sometimes what our existence needs is a wrong decision to push us onto the path fate has for us.”

“This is true,” St. Vincent said with a nod. “God, how true. Why, when I met the woman who is now my wife, it was under risqué circumstances.”

Aldren held up a hand. “Spare us. We don’t need another recount of the story of how she was tied to a bed.” As another round of laughter went around the table, he grinned. “However, I will say that horrible decisions tend to forge us into the men we need to be, for whatever reason.”

“Perhaps.” Slowly, Cornelius nodded. Perhaps what he’d done wasn’t as bad as he feared. “Well, yesterday, a diamond and pearl bracelet I’d given to my aunt went missing. Around the same time, a young lady had come by canvassing for her charity. She’d admired the piece.”

Winteringham chuckled. “And you jumped to the conclusion that she must have stolen it.” That wasn’t a question.

“Yes.” Heat sneaked up the back of his neck.

Aldren wouldn’t let up. “Was she attractive?”

He shrugged. “I suppose. Outside of her blonde-brown hair, I didn’t notice, for I was in a bit of pique when I tracked her through Mayfair and showed up at her home.”

The laughter turned to groans.

“What happened then?” Baselton asked with interest in his expression.

“We argued a bit, and during that time, she told me of all the ills currently in her life, which included taking care of her father who is losing his faculties. I guess it was loud enough to summon her father down, and that was when I apparently went insane.”

Aldren snickered. “Meaning?”

“Meaning that when her father mistook me for a beau and went on about how much relieved he was to see her future settled, I...” He forced a swallow into his suddenly dry throat. “I told the man that she and I had just become engaged.”

At least two of the men laughed.

However, it was Winteringham who regarded him with compassion and sympathy in his eyes. “I know exactly why you were prompted to do such a thing.” After a sip of brandy, he continued. “Sometimes, when we meet a woman, there is that note of fragileness to them, a hint of vulnerability of what or why we have no idea. We can’t help but want to protect them even if we don’t know them well.”

“That’s not it at all.” Cornelius frowned. “I’m convinced Miss Marchington stole my aunt’s bracelet. I want it back, so I’m going to make a nuisance of myself every day in her company until she’s so sick of me she returns it.”

“How the hell can you be so na?ve, Timelbury?” St. Vincent asked on the heels of a laugh.

“I quite agree,” Aldren added with a shake of his head. “You might believe you’ll hound her until the bracelet is found, but the fly in the ointment, Timelbury, will be the spending of the time with her. Once you start squiring a woman about Town, do activities and visits together, come to know her family, things will change for you.”

“From the accounts, her father is all she has on this earth.”

“Even worse for you then, because she’ll latch on and crave the companionship.”

Cornelius shook his head, but he couldn’t quite evict her blue eyes from his mind. “I doubt that. There is one mission only and that’s that.”

Another round of laughter went about the table.

Winteringham raised an eyebrow. “One more question. Have you kissed her yet?”

The heat on the back of his neck continued. Not for worlds would he tell them they’d almost had to kiss in the drawing room at her father’s behest before Miss Marchington had made an excuse about mistletoe. “Yes, but merely to shut her up. She’s got quite the tart mouth, and she went on and on, so I—”

Additional laughter interrupted him.

Amusement danced in St. Vincent’s eyes. “One thing is certain, then. You’ll soon be in the thick of it.”

Winteringham nodded. “Just promise us you won’t hurt her or trifle with her feelings. Regardless of if she’s a thief, she’s still a woman who is apparently under a good bit of strain.” He held Cornelius’ gaze. “It’s difficult to watch a parent decline in front of our eyes, or anyone for that matter, and if he was in the military at one point, you at least have that in common with him.”

“I understand that, but this isn’t a real engagement. I feel nothing for her nor she for me. Hell, I didn’t even properly ask her. I just said we were engaged for her father’s benefit.” Did the protest matter? “Surely he can’t remain in the present for much longer, then we can break the betrothal.”

Winteringham snorted. “And in the meantime? You shall have to do right by her and treat her as a doting fiancé would. A connection will no doubt form. At least, it did for me even if my circumstances and mine are slightly different.”

“Well, damn.” When he’d kissed her and shortly before she’d slapped him, there had been a jolt of feeling, a hint of attraction, but it had been a fleeting affair. Perhaps he’d misinterpreted it. Yet for the first time he admitted to himself the sham engagement might not have been a good idea, for there was bound to be some collateral damage.

And he didn’t want to be that personally.

“Right.” Cornelius nodded. “I promise not to hurt her. Besides, I’m not looking to offer my heart to any woman again after what happened last time.” When a footman came into the room, Cornelius declined another round. “I need to get home. My campaign for finding that damned bracelet starts tomorrow.”

St. Vincent chuckled. “I wish you luck. In both endeavors. Women have a way of burrowing beneath our skin when we least expect it.”

“But take heart, Timelbury,” Baselton said with a grin. “It’s been ages since you’ve had to search for a stolen piece of jewelry. Enjoy the adventure. Might just put light into your Christmastide season.”

“And make sure you come back and keep us updated!” Aldren called as Cornelius left the room.

Wanting to take in the air, Cornelius decided to walk through Mayfair and planned to hire a cab near Piccadilly, for he needed to clear his head.

What was he to do about Miss Marchington? Hell, he hadn’t called her by her

Christian name yet, and she? Well, she'd made use of his yesterday when talking to her father with him present. Of course, that was possibly because they were supposed to be engaged...

It was a conundrum, and if they were truly engaged, at least for a bit, he should probably call on her.

As soon as he reached an alley between buildings, someone jumped out at him, caught him with a shoulder to the chest, and they both went sprawling to the cold ground.

"What the devil?" Shoving the attacker off him, he scrambled to his feet. "Who are you?"

"That doesn't matter. I am but an emissary." The stranger got off a punch that landed on Cornelius' chin and sent him staggering backward.

"For whom?" He delivered an uppercut to the other man's cheek that spun him about. "Tell me!" But deep down, he knew.

They exchanged a few more blows before the man of indeterminate height and build sent Cornelius sailing onto the ground, temporarily stunned and lying on his back.

"Tell your friends in the Rogue's Arcade that punishment and retribution is coming soon." He wiped at the blood seeping from his broken nose. "Lady Stover will make certain it's swift and sure... and deadly."

So then his hunch had been correct. This man worked for the countess.

"My brothers-in-arms can take care of themselves." Cornelius wiped at the sweat on his brow with the sleeve of his greatcoat. "I rather doubt Lady Stover will be

successful. Hasn't she tried numerous times to bring us down but hasn't succeeded?"

"That is your opinion."

"No, it is actually facts."

The other man threw him a withering glance. "It isn't just about the rogues who are in Lady Stover's sights. It is also their families and everyone each man cares about." When he grinned, blood stained some of his teeth. "That includes your new fiancée, Lord Timelbury."

"What?" Shock slammed into his chest.

The man drew himself up to his full height and then drilled a gloved fingertip into Cornelius' chest. "It would be a shame if you were made a widower before you were even a groom, hmm?"

"I..." How the devil could Lady Stover and her minions have known that? The engagement only happened yesterday. "Leave Miss Marchington alone, or there will be hell to pay."

Was there a spy in the club? If so, the Duke of Edenthorpe would be alternately heartbroken and livid.

"Don't think to dictate anything to us, Lord Timelbury." The man struck out and caught Cornelius in the belly, which made him double over in pain. "While the men of the Rogue's Arcade have been distracted by women and nurseries, Lady Stover has been building her organization. We are poised to take away everything you work for and defend." He reached out, and since the top hat was nowhere to be seen, grabbed a handful of Cornelius' hair and jerked his head upward. "And when we finally take out every last one of you, she will own London. There will be no one left to stop her."

As he gasped for breath, Cornelius straightened his posture. “What the devil does she want to rule London for? And is she silly or stupid to do so right under Prinny’s nose?”

“You will discover that in due time.” Then, he vanished down the alley as quickly as he’d come, leaving Cornelius standing alone on the pavement, frowning into the shadowed space.

After he retrieved his top hat and then jammed it on his head, he glanced about but the handful of witnesses looked away and continued on their way. With a scowl and shoulders hunched into the December breeze, by the time he reached the Piccadilly area, both anger and annoyance churned through his chest.

What was the world coming to when a man was attacked, and the people in charge allowed it to happen to begin with?

By the time he returned home, his body throbbed with pain, but for the moment, he ignored that in favor of giving into the cold worry circling through his gut.

His butler stood waiting in the entry hall for his outer clothing. “Was there an issue at the club this afternoon, my lord?”

“Not at the club, but directly related to it.” Even as he spoke, the hurting parts of his body made themselves known. “I was attacked by an unknown assailant.”

“Do you want me to send a footman for a constable?”

“Not quite.” He shoved the fingers of one hand through his hair. “I will, however, want a hot bath to soothe the bruises, as well as a healing balm.”

“Of course, my lord. I shall have those things ordered immediately.”

“Thank you.” He nodded. “I will also need a footman at the ready. After I dash off a missive, he will need to deliver it to the Duke of Edenthorpe’s home.”

“I’ll send John to your study.”

With a nod, Cornelius went directly there from the entry hall. As soon as he seated himself behind his desk, he pulled a piece of stationery toward him then dipped a pen nib into an inkwell. Edenthorpe needed to know what had happened to him and what his assailant had told him. He also put forth the thought that there might be a dissenter within the club’s ranks. And finally, in the missive, he made it a point to tell the duke there was a creditable threat thrown down regarding the rogues’ families and wives.

Something must be done. Hopefully, Edenthorpe would call a council of war so that every member of the club could go under intense scrutiny as well as discuss what to do in the immediate future. As soon as he folded the letter and slipped it into an envelope, the footman arrived at the door.

“Ah, John.” Cornelius stood and was immediately obligated to stifle a groan, for now that he was home, his bruises were quite evident. “Take this to the Duke of Edenthorpe’s home, and don’t put it into anyone’s hand but his. No exceptions. If he is not at home, chase him down. It is important.” Quickly putting a glob of wax on the back, he set his seal into it, and then gave the letter to the waiting man. “And post haste. No dawdling.”

“I understand, my lord. You can count on me.” He gingerly took the envelope and then left the room.

Damn it all to hell!

This new threat changed everything. There was no chance that he would willingly

break the faux engagement any time soon because he now had an obligation to protect Miss Marchington. None of this was her fault. He'd simply hadn't wanted her father to find further disappointment in the woman. It didn't matter that he knew her not at all. She didn't deserve to be thrust into danger because of an arbitrary decision on his part.

Even if she had stolen the bracelet, she needed him and his protection.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:10 am

December 17, 1818

Unfortunately, her father wasn't having a good day, and it made Samantha quite harried as she joined him in the drawing room to stand sentinel at the window that overlooked the street. For whatever reason, Lord Timelbury had sent round a note this morning asking to take her driving today, since it looked to be fair weather-wise.

And she couldn't refuse since the impromptu and quite false engagement had made her father so happy yesterday.

"Annie, we need to plan our Christmas meal soon. The housekeeper will need to go to the market, and then there is a gift for Samantha to procure," he said as he stared into the flames in the hearth. "So much to do for the season."

Her heart squeezed with an ache she hadn't experienced since her mother died. It was quite difficult to be in the same room with him when he didn't even know who she was. Shoving the assorted emotions deep down to sob over later, she nodded but kept her attention on the outside world where random snowflakes drifted through the air.

"I shall put those items on the list to discuss with Mrs. Fredrickson." How long would his mind be gone this time? Would he be her father when she returned from this ill-timed drive with her fiancé? Swallowing past the ball of emotion in her throat, Samantha finally turned around and looked at her parent. "Papa, Lord Timelbury is coming to take me driving then we intend to walk in Hyde Park for some exercise." And no doubt talking, which was sorely needed after the shock of yesterday. "I shouldn't be gone more than a couple of hours."

A hint of panic went through his expression. “Are you leaving me, girl?”

Since she couldn’t determine if he was speaking to her as his daughter or his wife, Samantha nodded. “Yes, just for a little while. Do you remember Lord Timelbury from yesterday?”

His face brightened. Excitement twinkled in his eyes, which hadn’t been there for a long time. “Your fiancé.” It wasn’t a question. “Want to spend more time with him.”

“Of course.” With a sigh, Samantha glanced again through the window. The shifting back and forth of his mind was a difficult thing to navigate. “In any event, he is taking me driving, and since we are engaged—” allegedly “—there is no need for a maid.” Which wasn’t such a hardship, for she could talk to the man without being under constant supervision. The freedom in that almost made her breathless. And suddenly, she welcomed the distraction of having someone as a captive audience, so to speak, that she could voice her concerns with. It was a challenge not having friends in Town, who she only heard from when a letter arrived from the country. “Once the outing is over, if he’s of a mind, I’ll ask him in for tea. The two of you can have a conversation.”

Then movement on the street below caught her attention. She sucked in a breath, for once the closed carriage came to a halt at the curb, Lord Timelbury sprang out before the driver could leave his perch, and once more she was struck with how tall and attractive he was even though the gray greatcoat hid his form, and the top hat covered his dark hair prone to curling.

“Lord Timelbury is here, Papa. I’m going down. Will you be all right until I return?”

“Dear Annie, stop the incessant worrying over me. I can look after myself.” He waved her off then resumed peering into the flames of the fireplace.

As tears filled her eyes, Samantha fled the room as best she could with her limp and didn't stop running until she'd reached the entry hall, though she made slow progress. When her gaze connected with Lord Timelbury's, the look of confusion he shot her worked at her undoing, but she ignored the emotions and joined him. "Good afternoon, Lord Timelbury," she greeted in a tight, choked voice. Then she looked closely at him. Where had he gotten the bruises on his face?

"Good after, Miss Marchington." He gave her a subtle nod as she accepted her cloak and bonnet from the butler. Once she'd donned them, the butler handed her a pair of ivory kid gloves. "Are you ready for our outing?"

"I am." Hoping she'd been able to hide her emotions successfully, she pulled on her gloves. "It will be lovely getting out of the house just now." To the butler, she said, "Papa's not quite in the present at the moment. Will you please keep an eye on him?"

"Of course, Miss Marchington," that man said as he pulled open the front door.

"Thank you." Then she preceded Lord Timelbury out of the house, down the short walkway, and through the wrought iron gate. At the closed carriage, when he handed her into the vehicle, a brief tingle danced up her arm to the elbow. She sat on a bench and watched in silence as he occupied the other.

"To Hyde Park, if you please, Jenkins," he said as the driver put up the steps.

"Good day for a walk, hmm?" Then the driver closed the door and left her alone with her make-believe fiancé.

And it was exceedingly awkward.

"Where you in a fight?" As a conversation starter, it wasn't the best.

He grunted. “Not exactly. Attacked and threatened, but it was hardly a fight.”

Which only had more questions bouncing around her head like soap bubbles, but she kept her own counsel on that subject. “Are you anticipating the Christmastide season with joy?” she asked as she watched the world go by through the window glass.

He snorted. “If anything, I am anticipating it with dread or a bit of resentment. All due to a woman.”

“Why?” Samantha frowned. She glanced at him, but he was quite serious as he looked back. “Is it the holiday you hate or women in general?” It would be a fascinating peek into his life and perhaps she could understand him better.

One corner of his mouth quirked upward into a half-grin, and remarkably, that gesture made him infinitely more approachable. “Suffice it to say, this time of the year doesn’t exactly make me remember the other years with fondness.”

“And?” One of her eyebrows rose in inquiry.

“That is all you need to know at this time.”

Ah, so he wasn’t comfortable sharing feelings. How very Neanderthal of him. Well, she had no intentions of spending the rest of her life—or until she could somehow break the engagement—with a man who couldn’t talk about anything. It would make for a silent, and interminable future.

“Very well, then perhaps you can tell me if we are truly engaged, or was that just a bit of fiction for my father’s benefit?”

“It is... complicated.” As an expression of concern crossed his face, he blew out a breath and then found her gaze with his. “I know what you’re going through with

your father's health challenges. My father suffered from an illness before his end, and quite frankly, I felt bad for him." He shrugged. "The man is worried for his daughter. It will be the Christmastide season shortly. Where is the harm in having a sham engagement through Twelfth Night?"

At least now she had more information. "So, then we must endure a Drury Lane production of an engagement for several weeks. What happens after Twelfth Night? Don't you think my father might start pestering us to set a wedding date?"

"Not at all, for I've already laid the groundwork. I told him the engagement would be a long one while I sort myself."

"And then what, Lord Timelbury? Hope his disease will have progressed to a point that he's no longer coming back to the present?" How could anyone be so cruel?

"I... No, of course not." With a sigh, he sat forward on his bench and rested his forearms on his knees, letting his hands dangle between his splayed legs. "It is not my intention to hurt your father. As I said, I understand the pain and struggle you are going through. And Christmastide might not be my favorite time of the year, but I'm not adverse to making it into the best one your father will ever pass." He cleared his throat. "When one is losing one's mind, it is a terrible endeavor."

How very... odd. Just what did his personal experience entail? She didn't know how to interpret his offer. A queer little thrill went down her spine and into her lower belly. "Um, thank you, but truly, you don't need to do this. I'm certain there are other things you might want to do this month than playing fiction with me."

"Consider it a gift to both you and your father." Yet there were shadows in his eyes she couldn't quite understand. "And due to our engagement, you will be under my protection. No one will harm you while I'm around."

Her frown deepened. “Why would anyone want to harm me?”

“Who can say? The world is a horrible place, at times.” The answer was vague enough, and as he sat back against the squabbed bench, he turned his head to peer out the window without saying anything further.

Well, she did enjoy solving a problem, though it was difficult to know just how large his would be.

A quarter of an hour later, the driver rapped on the roof of the vehicle. “Approaching Hyde Park, Lord Timelbury.”

By the time she let him hand her out of the carriage, she’d had a bit of time to think about what he’d told her. On the one hand, he was adorable in his wish to give her father what would probably be his last semi-coherent Christmastide, but on the other hand, he obviously didn’t comprehend how having to spend each day in his company would complicate her own life.

“Uh, Lord Timelbury, please remember to adjust your gait. My limp rather works against a fast pace.” She hated to call attention to her shortcomings, but he seemed a tiny bit distracted. “It is why I haven’t danced in years.”

“Thank you for reminding me. If you don’t mind me asking, what happened?” As he spoke, he offered her his arm, bent at the elbow.

She sighed. “I fell off a horse during a jump and broke my ankle when I was fifteen.” When she rested her hand in the crook of his elbow, he started them forward at a slow walk. “I suppose the surgeon either didn’t set the bones properly or my body just didn’t heal as expected, but here we are. Fourteen years later and I’ve had to cope with a limp that immediately sets me apart from all other women, and not in a desirable way.”

“Is that the reason you are what your father called a spinster?” There was no maliciousness in his voice, only polite inquiry.

“Yes, unfortunately.” The breeze carried the scent of him to her nose, and she nearly sighed with the deliciousness of it. “But there are more important things in life than dancing.”

“Perhaps, but was the exercise something you enjoyed?”

For the space of a heartbeat, she thought about it. “Yes. That and riding. It was one of the most lovely things, but I have since made my peace without it.”

Mostly.

It was rather peaceful strolling at his side with fluffy white snowflakes drifting lazily down, but against the overcast skies, the red of his muffler stood out as a cheerful splash of color. At no time did she feel rushed or pulled along the paths, and when they were forced to traverse down a hill, he was solicitous to her needs.

Eventually, they came to a small clearing with a handful of pine trees, a thin stream that went beneath a wooden footbridge, Lord Timelbury led her to a wrought iron bench not far away from the bridge and the walking path, which was too thin for horses to tread.

“Let us talk for a bit. There are things we need to know about each other in order for us to make this faux engagement to be successful in your father’s eyes.”

The deep rumble of his voice tickled through her chest, but she nodded and sat on the bench, ignoring the immediate chill of the metal that seeped through her clothing. “Thank you for the kindness, Lord Timelbury.”

He frowned as he sat beside her. “It’s Cornelius if you please. You made use of my Christian name before.”

Heat went through her cheeks. “Very well, Cornelius.” She enjoyed how saying his name felt on her lips and tongue. “You may call me Samantha, or even Sam if you wish. Sometimes my father refers to me with the shortened version.”

“It’s a beautiful name. Why the devil would anyone wish to shorten it?”

The warmth of him sitting so close to her on the bench had her craving more of that, but she didn’t dare move for fear he would spring away. She pulled the folds of her cloak more tightly about herself. “What would you like to know?”

“Since you asked me, I shall return the favor. How do you feel about Christmastide?”

“Oh, that’s an easy answer.” As she spoke, Samantha clasped her hands together in her lap. “I adore this time of year. To me, it means when family comes together. It means security, I guess, for lack of a better word.” When she met his intense gray gaze, she smiled. “Also, my parents were at their best during this time of year. And something I loved about them was the fact they never tried to hide their affection for each other.”

“I envy you that, for my parents did not have a union like that.”

“Oh?”

He nodded. “My father... tried, I think. But he enjoyed drinking to excess and whoring more than he liked being at home with his family. But then, he’d been a military man and had demons to face.” When he focused on the stream, a muscle ticced in his cheek. “When I was a young man, I made a promise to myself to never walk in his footsteps even though I madly wished to know him better. I didn’t want

that chaos for my life, and there were many times when I wondered what demons he struggled with that drove him to those vices.” His swallow was audible. “For I have them too.”

“That’s a lovely sentiment.” Instead of blaming his father for those things, he knew there was something else that provoked those behaviors. “I’m sorry all the same. When either parent isn’t present, it makes for sadness.” She followed his gaze and then was content to watch birds flit in and out of the evergreen trees. “My mother would decorate a few of the rooms. Sometimes in the evenings, my father would tell stories before the fire before my sister and I retired to our rooms for slumber.”

“I have a sister also. She’s younger than me, married in the past year, and I’m glad she’s finally settled and is enjoying her life as a wife.”

“I’m happy for you. My sister died just over three years ago.” Tears welled in her eyes, for it had been an age since she’d talked about her loss. After she cleared her throat, she continued. “There were also evenings where we would roast chestnuts in the fireplace. Papa was so pleased whenever he could bring those home for us.”

“Does he still do that?”

“Not as much in recent years since his mind started playing tricks on him.” Knowing he was in a quick decline, her chest tightened, and she focused her gaze on her hands in her lap. “I try to make his life as simple as possible for him now. If the nights are decent, we will go outside into the garden. If he’s agreeable, we’ll either watch the stars and talk or dance in the softly falling snow.”

“I thought you said you haven’t danced in years?” One of his dark eyebrows rose in question.

Another round of heat filled her cheeks. “It’s not true dancing, of course. Just moving

in small circles in the garden.”

“Why?”

When she shrugged, her shoulder brushed his, and warm tingles went down her arm. “My mother always said life was found in the little moments, not the big ones. That I might remember the big moments more, but it was the little ones that built the foundation for everything.” Again, tears filled her eyes. “Those were the things that would be more valuable as the years went on, and she was quite true, I’ve found.”

“Sound advice. Something I should remember for myself.” They sat together in silence for a time, and it was rather companionable, which shocked her. Then he spoke again. “My mother simply harps on me to find a woman to marry or bosses me in other aspects of my life. She is nothing like Aunt Beatrice, who happens to adore Christmastide as much as your mother, I’ll wager.”

“I knew I liked her from that brief meeting.” But she didn’t want to invoke his anger, for didn’t the missing bracelet belong to that same aunt? “On Christmas Day, there was a present waiting for me and my sister, as well as one for her and Papa. Later, after breakfast, we would play a game or read aloud from a book we all favored.” Unfortunately, those things were just memories now, for her father would never be the same. “Dinner that night was always a gay affair, for the family—I don’t have many relatives left these days—would gather. It was lively, full of conversation and laughter. At the end of the meal, there was sort of pudding for dessert with a brandy sauce, and they allowed us girls to have a taste or two.”

“It sounds cozy. I’m glad you had that.” When he looked at her, peered into her face, there was a longing in his expression that resonated deep within her. “In my family, with the exception of my aunt, Christmas was merely another day. Every once in a great while, my parents would have a dinner party.”

“I’m so sorry.” Without thinking, she laid a hand over his. He froze, but then relaxed seconds later, even went so far as to grasp her fingers.

“These are things that have forged us into the people we are now, I suppose.”

“Agreed.” Briefly, she tilted her head to the sky, giggled when a fluffy snowflake landed on her nose. “There were even years when Papa would sing after dinner. He used to have the best voice! That’s since left him, and he can’t remember the words to many songs anyway.”

“Can I assume your mother is no longer with you?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “Over three years ago. Mama perished with my younger sister. They were involved in a horrific carriage accident when someone recklessly drove a phaeton into their path. I wasn’t given the opportunity to say goodbye.” Tears once more welled up in her eyes. “They were gone in a blink, and life was never the same. Papa certainly wasn’t, and now his mind is betraying him. Less and less is he in the present day.” She brushed at the tears that escaped onto her cheeks. “I apologize for being a watering pot.”

“Never apologize for that. You have no doubt been at a breaking point for a while, I’ll wager.” Then he half-turned toward her. When their knees knocked together, heat twined up her leg. “Would it be all right if I comfort you?”

“I suppose.” Yet she eyed him warily. “But why?”

“For the moment, I am your fiancé.” Then he slipped his arms about her and simply held her close to his body. Desire might not have motivated the embrace, but a certain awareness washed over her before she relaxed into his hold. It was far too lovely to rest, however briefly, in a man’s arms. “I’m sorry that fate is sometimes fickle. We never know when the comfortable path we’re on will end.”

Samantha pulled slightly away and peered into his eyes. “Is that how it’s been for you?”

For long moments, he held her gaze. Again, the shadow lurked there but provided no answers. “Let us just say I didn’t come back from the war the same man as I was when I left. Because of that, other things collapsed. It has been a challenge recently.”

Did that mean his mind wasn’t completely right? It wasn’t ideal, but she didn’t blame him for having demons of his own. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not at this time.” When he released her, she immediately missed his warmth. “Perhaps later.” Miracle of miracles, he grinned, then, and the gesture took years from his face making him quite attractive. So much so that she forgot about the bruises that decorated his skin. “After all, won’t we be spending more time in each other’s company? And I did promise your father to help decorate your house. I might be many things, but I’m a man of my word.”

“There is that.” She couldn’t explain it, but a truce had somehow been silently declared. It was a start, into what she didn’t know, but oddly she looked forward to it, for it meant she wouldn’t be alone this year for the holiday season.

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December 18, 1818

Cornelius shoved his arms into the jacket of charcoal superfine that his valet held out for him. Oddly enough, he was in a halfway chipper mood, and honestly, he couldn't fathom why.

"You have either gotten in a full night's sleep or a delectable lady has shared your bed, for I can't remember the last time you had such an uplifted attitude," his valet said as he brushed at a piece of lint from the sleeve of the jacket.

"Ha!" Heat crept up the back of Cornelius' neck. "On both counts you are wrong, my friend. Sleep was fitful, and I haven't had a woman in my bed for upwards of six months." Not by choice, for he hadn't wished to put a woman in danger due to his penchant for nightmares and day terrors.

Burton snorted with laughter. "Then you are going through life all wrong, my friend."

"Perhaps." But it couldn't be helped. He didn't want to put anyone into harm's way. "However, a woman is not necessary to one's happiness."

"Definitely wrong." The valet shook his head. The anemic December sunlight made his red hair like molten lava. "Yet I have heard snatches of rumors that you are engaged. Is that true, and if it is, why haven't you told me?"

Bloody hell.

"That happened purely by accident."

“So, then the rumors are true?” Burton’s red eyebrows soared into his hairline.

Damn. “Yes, to a point. I swear she stole my aunt’s bracelet.” Quickly, he explained what had happened and why he’d done what he had. “Now I have a false fiancée and have promised her father that we would celebrate Christmastide with him. And worse, that Miss Marchington will be taken care of forever.” Crushing guilt filled his belly and chest. “To say nothing of the fact that when I was attacked on the street the other day, the minion of Lady Stover’s made threats against Samantha’s life.”

“Ah, and now you feel responsible for her.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes. None of this is her fault, but she’s in the middle of it and doesn’t even know it.” Cornelius nodded. “What do I do?”

“What can you do?” Burton led him over to a chair and gently pushed him onto it. Then he kneeled and offered a newly polished boot. “You’re a man of honor, and that demands you’ll protect her for as long as you feel the need. Whether you tell her why or not is your prerogative. But don’t discount the value of companionship and company. She could help you in ways you haven’t thought about yet.”

“That is doubtful.” As he put his foot into the boot, he acknowledged to himself that talking with Samantha in Hyde Park yesterday had been interesting, to say the least. Learning some of her history had given him a basic understanding of her and what drove her.

At least a bit, but he hadn’t done the same for her.

“Would you care for my advice?” Burton held up the second boot.

“Do I have a choice?”

The valet rolled his eyes. “Let yourself enjoy the next few weeks. You rarely do anything for yourself.” He pushed the boot on when Cornelius shoved his foot into it. “For the last year or so, you have given yourself tirelessly to your club mates and have assisted them in winning their wives or saving their lives. Don’t you think that it might be your turn to find what they have, what they’re all working to defend?”

It took a few moments for him to answer, for his friend wasn’t wrong. Finally, he blew out a breath. “I can’t promise anything, but I will keep my options open in the event my mindset changes. Will that satisfy you?”

“For a time.” Burton nodded. “Where are you headed this afternoon?”

“I thought to call on Miss Marchington. Perhaps take her to a tea house or the British Museum if she wishes.”

“You are making quite the effort for an engagement that doesn’t have a future,” the valet said as he gave over Cornelius’ gloves. “But then, who am I to say?”

“Do shut up, Burton,” he said with a grin. “I’m off. Try to stay out of trouble while I’m out.”

The valet snorted. “Somehow I’ll wager you’ll draw the trouble to you instead.”

A half hour later, his driver Jenkins brought the closed carriage to a stop at the curb outside of Samantha’s townhouse. No sooner than he’d opened the door and put down the steps than a cry of warning rent the air.

“Look out! Runaway carriage!”

When the sharp whinny from a horse echoed as Cornelius stood to exit the carriage, it didn’t matter that the danger was apparently a street away. Hearing the shout and the

horse infiltrated his brain and scrambled something in his mind so that he was no longer in the present. With a cry, he felt himself falling, but then he was firmly back in the past.

Somewhere in France

Summer 1810

Twilight was falling on some unnamed village. Cornelius and a handful of his brothers-in-arms were slowly filing back to their campsite after doing reconnaissance, which would conclude their watch this day.

A cry of warning rang out, quickly followed by the thunder of a horse's hooves.

He glanced over his shoulder, saw the out-of-control horse and cart bearing down on their position, and while the bulk of the men scattered, the one closest to him and the one that had been closer to him than a brother during this stint of the war was slower to react.

"Smithfield, move!"

There was no time.

But instead of him shoving his friend out of the way, it was Smithfield who threw Cornelius beyond the danger of the horse as well as the cart. As he fell into the dirt, the inevitable happened.

Before Smithfield could move nor turn around, he was caught beneath the horse as it stopped abruptly and reared. Hooves flailed and the cart's forward momentum forced both of them on top of Smithfield, easily trampling the man.

As Cornelius watched in horror, his friend was lost beneath the wreckage. His body was mangled. There was no doubt that some of his bones had been crushed, including the ribs. Smithfield's cries of agony echoed in his ears as he dashed over to the site of the accident. By the time the cart driver ran over to the area and got his horse under control, the damage had been done.

"Smithfield!" Cornelius dropped to his knees at his friend's side. There was nothing that could be done for him, yet it seemed horrible to let him die in the middle of an empty street far from anyone who cared for him. "Can you hear me?" As best he could, he made the other man comfortable. There was so much blood. The skin on one side of his face was shredded beyond recognition. His ragged breathing echoed horribly in Cornelius' ears.

"Yes." The man rested his good eye on him. "Harding, listen, I don't have... much time..."

"Nonsense. We'll get you patched up..." But he knew what was true. There was no hope for his friend.

Pain clouded the good eye as he gazed up at Cornelius. "Take care of my sister. She'll be all alone now."

"I will, of course, will write to her on the morrow. While I'm alive, she won't be alone. I promise." It didn't matter, for he had no recourse but to watch the life drain out of his friend's body while his other brothers-in-arms bore witness to the horrific death. "I promise."

Damn but he hated war. If it wasn't for that, none of them would be here now.

Present day

Oh, God.

Cornelius lay cowered on the floorboards of the carriage between the two benches as memories twisted through his mind. When he'd made that promise to Smithfield before he'd died, he kept it at the forefront. He'd written to Elizabeth the very next morning. They'd struck up a friendship that evolved into something more, and by the time he'd returned to England in 1813, he'd already asked her to marry him through letters, which she'd accepted.

And had eventually opened another assortment of horrors.

But he could never manage to forget the day her brother perished.

Jenkins came into his line of vision and shook his shoulder. "Lord Timelbury?" When Cornelius could do nothing except look at him without truly seeing, the driver shook his head. "I'm going to fetch help."

Moments later, Samantha ran to the carriage with her black cloak flapping about her form. At the vehicle's open door, she leaned in and touched a hand to his shoulder. "Cornelius?"

Though he saw her and heard her words, he wasn't fully back in the present enough to trust himself to talk.

"Cornelius? My father is napping, but you're welcome to come inside." When he didn't move, remained curled in a ball, she frowned. She glanced at the driver. "What's wrong with him?"

Jenkins shrugged. "Sometimes, Lord Timelbury suffers from nightmares in the day. When that happens, he loses consciousness and becomes lost in them."

As he watched, emotions flitted through her expression, and he died a bit more inside, for it was humiliating to be seen like this.

She nodded. “Is that what happened here?”

“I believe so. Should I take him home?”

Again, Samantha rested her gaze on Cornelius. “That might be best, but I’ll accompany him. He shouldn’t be alone. After he’s settled, you can bring me back here.”

Bloody hell.

“No.” He shook his head as the heat of embarrassment climbed his neck and went into his cheeks. “I can manage...” When all was said and done, he didn’t want her to see him this weak or know of his infirmity that he couldn’t control.

“You obviously are in no condition to make decisions.” She glanced at the driver. “Take him home.” Then she accepted Jenkin’s help and climbed into the carriage. Afterward, she assisted Cornelius onto one bench, and she settled onto the other.

“Thank you, Miss Marchington,” Jenkins said with a nod as he put up the steps, closing the door seconds later.

Silence reigned in the carriage for several minutes as it rolled in motion.

Eventually, she stirred. “Tell me what you’re feeling or thinking. Perhaps I can help you through it.” There was no judgment or pity in her voice, only mild inquiry.

When he met her gaze, he nearly tumbled into the blue pools of her eyes and the compassion there. “Ever since I came home from the war, my mind hasn’t been

quite... right. In fact, as time goes on, it becomes more and more shattered. It's difficult to discern what is reality and what are memories, especially when a sight or sound sends me right back to those battlefields."

"There is nothing to be ashamed of. Many men suffer from the same because of their military service." She offered a small smile. "In fact, other events can bring out similar experiences."

He pressed his lips together. "I... I don't know how to rid myself of the nightmares, but I refuse to use laudanum like so many others have done." His shrug only lifted one shoulder. "When my mind is clear, I want it to stay that way."

"I can't say as I blame you. Opiates are becoming a scourge on society." Those eyes were encouraging, and he thirsted for more of that calm she represented. "Perhaps you can't banish the nightmares or the day terrors; they just are, but you might need to make room for those things in your life, because as you said, you aren't the same man who went to war." There was no disgust in her expression, and he appreciated her all the more for that. "Of course you would have changed since those years. It's expected. War changes everyone, unless they were evil to begin with."

"Yes, but how can I hope to invite anyone else into my life when my very existence is steeped in turmoil?"

"That is where trust and faith come in." Another swath of silence reigned inside the carriage. "I can't fix your problems—no one can—and I certainly don't have a magical elixir for that. Neither should I be able to do that for you, but I can sit beside you." So saying, Samantha moved from her bench to his and laid a hand on his arm. "Both physically and figuratively."

"I... I honestly don't know what to say."

“Then don’t say anything.” Again, she offered a soft smile. “If you don’t want to talk, that’s fine, but I’ll keep you company. I know what it’s like to battle grief and worry by myself. Perhaps we can both benefit from having someone beside us. And in the event that you want to talk, do it. Above all, I want you to know you’re not alone. Believe me, that makes a difference.”

“Thank you.” It was as if he’d been granted an unexpected boon. Slowly, some of the weight lifted from his chest, and for the first time in a long while, he felt as if he could breathe again. “What you don’t know is that my friends at the club and I are under siege by a horrible woman and her cronies. That is adding to my anxiety.”

“Oh? Who is the woman?”

“Lady Stover. She is a countess who is growing in power within the beau monde . It is why...” He cleared his throat, for this was difficult for him. “It is why that, for the moment, I refuse to break our engagement even though it’s a sham. You need my protection from this threat.”

“Ah, that is why you said that yesterday.” Then a gasp escaped her. “That is who Mr. Arbuthnot has been spending time with. I knew I didn’t like him for a reason.”

Cornelius frowned. “Who is he?”

“The man my father wished for me to marry.”

Over my dead body.

The vehement thought surprised the hell out of him, for they were strangers. Weren’t they? Yet there was this odd connection between them that made him feel responsible for her. “As you can imagine, all of this has brought on unimagined stress which is feeding the nightmares.” He rubbed a gloved hand along the side of his face. Where

the devil had his top hat gotten off to? “I’m sorry I’m broken, Samantha.”

She huffed out a sigh. “You are not broken. You are merely Cornelius. A man who came home from war and is trying to live his life.”

The driver rapped on the roof of the carriage. “Approaching Harding House.”

Slight panic filled his chest. He wasn’t ready to leave the cocoon of safety she’d woven around him with her words and company. “Jenkins, drive to Hyde Park and then loop back to Mayfair. I need some time.”

“Will do, Lord Timebury,” the driver replied.

Samantha caught his gaze. “Are you feeling more the thing now?”

“Truthfully? I am still... vulnerable.” Perhaps that was the most appropriate word. “And that makes me hate myself.”

“Do stop.” Again, she patted his arm. “We are all that at some point, but you aren’t alone.” Then she managed to shock him once more by slipping her arms around him after a moment’s hesitation. “For as long as you have need, you can depend on me to be there for you.”

“I’ll admit, I have never had that before.” It was rather... encouraging and somewhat exhilarating. The longer she held him, the more awareness crept over him and the longer her vanilla and floral scent teased his nose. “Thank you.” Then, because he’d apparently lost his damn mind and she so sweet in the simple plum-colored dress beneath the cloak, he shifted, wrapped his arms around her, and then brought his lips down on hers.

“Oh!” For a fleeting second, Samantha froze, met his gaze with surprise in her

expressive eyes.”

He paused, wanting her permission to continue, but those damned pillowy soft lips cradled his as if exclusively made for him.

With a tiny nod she gave him all he needed, and beyond that, she sighed, resettled her arms about his shoulders, and applied herself to kissing him rather clumsily back.

It was much as if a match had been dropped onto a pile of tinder, and soon enough, heat consumed him. Needing so much more from her, Cornelius gently eased her backward on the bench, kissing her as he followed her down. Dear God, she tasted of tea, innocence and excitement; it was a heady combination that he chased with every frantic meeting of their mouths, and what was more, she didn't seem all that skilled in kissing, which only served to fan the flames of desire licking through his blood.

Despite that, it took very little coaxing for her lips to part. The second his tongue touched hers and the glide of satin and silk made the connection with his brain, Cornelius was lost. That first kiss he'd given her on the day they'd met didn't hold a candle to this one. Over and over again, he fenced with her, tangled with her tongue in a frantic dance, for it was frightfully obvious he hadn't been with a woman in months.

For the first few moments, Samantha mimicked his kissing, but then she found her own style. She shifted on the bench, and he settled naturally between her bent knees. The insistent pulse of his erection pressed tight into the front of his breeches, and desperate to alleviate the tension, he ground his hips into hers. That provided only a modicum of relief, and if anything sent more intense need pinwheeling through that organ.

When a barely audible moan escaped her, the last vestiges of his sanity wavered. She nibbled and nipped at his bottom lip then left his mouth entirely to press

featherweight kisses beneath his jaw. When she found a particularly sensitive spot he had no idea existed on his person, desire exploded throughout his body.

What the devil are you doing to me? And why the hell was he letting her?

There were no answers, not in that moment where he tumbled through heat and passion and want. As he settled himself more comfortably between her splayed thighs, he dragged his lips down the side of her silky throat. “Bid me nay, Samantha.”

“Why should I when I’m quite curious about what will happen next?”

That confirmed she was still an innocent, and that was heady stuff indeed. She was quite a willing participant, for she had his cravat undone in a thrice. Her lips were at the hollow of his throat, her breath steaming the skin of his chest she’d uncovered, and the sensations worked to drive him toward the brink.

“Very well, but try to stay quiet. I’d rather the driver doesn’t overhear.”

Need guided him; he no longer thought with caution or common sense. Daring much, he tugged the simple, round bodice of her dress down. A bit more manipulation freed her breasts from the fabric, and they were perfect, pale works of art with bright pink nipples that were quite aroused and very hard.

Feeling oddly reverent, he cupped her pert, full breasts, kneaded the soft flesh, and when a surprised moan pulled from her throat, he grinned against her mouth and dared to brush the pads of his thumbs over the nipples. Damn his eyes for still wearing gloves that prevented him from feeling the softness of her skin or experiencing the pebbled surface of those tips, but there was nothing for it. As her back arched the longer he played, Cornelius took one of those tempting buds into his mouth.

“Oh!” The low-pitched utterance spurred him onward. Clearly, he was the first man to give her such pleasure, and that worked to separate him from the remaining shreds of his sanity. While he continued to torment the nipple with his lips and teeth, he teased the other with his thumb. Would that he could divest her of the clothes to kiss every centimeter of her skin, feel the heat of her on his fingers. “Cornelius, this is...” Her words dissolved beneath another moan. “Ah, oh yes, do that again.”

Damn but he adored how responsive she was, how she found enjoyment from the smallest things. A chuckle escaped as he again flicked his tongue over that taut, tempting tip. Urgency tingled through his hardened length and his stones. There was nothing else he’d rather do than claim this woman’s body, and it didn’t matter that he’d only met her a few days ago. Perhaps that made him slightly mad, but he didn’t care. Samantha writhed from the attention. As he moved to take her other nipple into his mouth, Jenkins rapped on the roof of the carriage.

“Approaching Hyde Park, Lord Timelbury.”

The noise clanged into his passion-soaked brain, and he pulled away from the oh-so-erotic image of her sprawled along the bench. “Drat,” he whispered against her lips. “Thank you, Jenkins,” he said in a louder voice. “Now take me home, if you please. I’m feeling much better.” As he shot her a rueful glance, he eased off her body. “We should put ourselves to rights,” he advised in a barely audible whisper.

Confusion shadowed her blue eyes. “But I thought...”

So did I. Beside the fact that he’d never live it down if he ravished his false fiancée in his own carriage, the guilt of inadvertently putting her in danger due to his club ties would bury him before long.

Yet there was that connection and the way she understood his nightmares and fears. He couldn’t discount that. “I beg your pardon. That wasn’t well done of me.” Once

he'd collapsed onto the opposite bench, he quickly tied his cravat into an easy knot. His heartbeat continued to thunder in his ears, to say nothing of the raging cockstand that wouldn't settle as he glanced at her. "Even if we are engaged."

There was a mischievous glint in her eyes as she tucked those gorgeous breasts back into her dress and then pulled the folds of her cloak around her form. "Then obviously the only reason you did such a thing was due to the engagement?" The sarcasm she'd managed to infuse into the question sent heat coursing up the back of his neck.

"Do shut up, Miss Marchington." His lips twitched with amusement. "We were swept away by the moment compounded by the serious conversation we'd had previously. That is all." Yet how was he to forget what she'd felt like or how he still craved the heat of her on his tongue?

The men at the club would certainly make jest of him when—if—they found out. He needed to forget about this incident and concentrate on keeping Samantha safe as well as retrieving his aunt's stolen bracelet. To say nothing of pulling the wool over her father's eyes through the holiday season. That was all.

After that, he didn't care what happened.

Didn't he?

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Instead of going home straight away, that choice was removed from her, for Cornelius' aunt arrived at Harding House the same time his carriage rocked to a halt in front of that dwelling.

“Well, damn,” he said beneath his breath. “No chance of sneaking into the house unseen.”

Samantha peered out the window. When the matronly older woman caught sight of her, she waved, which prompted her to wave back. “I thought you liked your aunt.”

“I do, but I don't wish to have company just now on the heels of an episode plus what you and I just did.” A dark flush sneaked up his neck above his cravat and collar. “I'd hoped to spend time alone and rest.”

“What you and I did was merely kissing,” she said in a barely audible whisper as the driver opened the door and put down the steps. “Nothing you should feel embarrassed about.” She hoped Jenkins would think she referred to Cornelius' earlier day terror.

After the driver helped her out of the carriage, Timelbury joined her and escorted her up the short walkway. His aunt waited for them inside the entry hall. He put his lips to the shell of Sam's ear and whispered, “Oh, I'm not embarrassed about that . In fact, I wouldn't mind having another go at it... if you're willing, of course.”

Heat immediately jumped into her cheeks, but there was no time to say anything further, for the butler closed the door behind them and immediately his aunt greeted them.

“How fortuitous!” The older woman embraced Samantha with a hug. “I had just come over to visit with Cornelius as is my wont, and I’d also heard a rumor last night while out at a rout that you are engaged to him. Is that true?” There was so much excitement in her voice and anticipation in her expression that Samantha didn’t have the heart to tell her the truth.

“Uh...” With a quick glance at Cornelius, who appeared frozen with shock—did he truly not think his family wouldn’t find out?—that she nodded. “Yes, it’s true. It happened quite suddenly, in fact, and there hasn’t been time to announce it.” What would become of them once the general public did know of the engagement? From all accounts, it was a sham in every conceivable way, a bit of fiction put on for her father’s benefit to help ease an old man’s troubled mind.

Actually, when she thought more about the reasons behind it from Timelbury’s perspective—missing bracelet aside—it was quite sweet. How very odd.

“How wonderful! And to think my nephew would never have met you if it weren’t for your collecting for the orphanage.”

“Well, Samantha should be going—”

“Nonsense.” His aunt’s grin encompassed them both. “Take off your outer things, dear. We can have tea together and you can tell me all about your engagement.” As soon as Samantha surrendered her cloak and gloves—she’d rushed from her house so fast to attend to Cornelius’ illness that she hadn’t grabbed her bonnet—the other woman latched onto her arm, and over her shoulder, she told the butler to have tea brought to the drawing room. “For a long time, Cornelius’ mother and I have hoped he would wed.”

He snorted. “Well, you have badgered me long enough,” he said as he gave over his outerwear to the butler.

Knots of worry pulled in her stomach, for none of this was real. This kind woman would be hurt after Twelfth Night when the engagement was somehow broken. Cornelius hadn't been clear on how that would come about, and she supposed it would damage both of their reputations, but that hadn't been discussed either.

"It sounds like you truly care for your nephew," she said in response, for she could admit to the truth.

"Of course I do! I'm happy for you both." And she continued to guide Samantha toward the stairs as Cornelius trailed behind them. The dear woman didn't even point out her limp, and for that, she adored the plump, welcoming lady. "And you may call me Beatrice." She patted her hand.

Once in the drawing room, Samantha settled onto a low sofa and when he sat next to her, heated awareness of him danced over her skin. Those kisses and brief caresses they'd exchanged in the carriage had nearly seen her undone; her whole world had been turned upside down, for never had she been kissed like he'd done, and what was more, she still longed for that sort of attention.

Aunt Beatrice settled on a chair near Samantha's location. "Cornelius, when did you decide to propose to Miss Marchington? Had you known of her before?"

When she glanced at him, she caught a dark flush rising on his neck. "To be honest, no, we didn't know of each other before, but when she came to the house on behalf of her orphanage charity, I suppose we shared a connection that couldn't be denied."

All those words were humble enough, and he'd even infused his tone with enough genuineness that anyone would believe them, yet he didn't once crack a smile, and his eyes didn't glow with feeling as a man in love would.

Not that she expected him to have fallen in love with her in three days. From all he

said, that wasn't part of this plan.

"How wonderful!" His aunt was so pleased that the knots in Samantha's belly pulled once more, for she wasn't comfortable with deception. "You can never go wrong with Christmas magic as well as fate."

"I don't know if magic or fate played a hand in this engagement," Cornelius said with a fair amount of doubt in his tone.

When a footman brought in a tea tray, which he set on the low table in their grouping of furniture, Timelbury's mother also entered the room at the same time.

He didn't quite manage to stifle a groan all the way. Leaning toward Samantha, he said in a barely audible whisper, "Now we're in for it. This won't be good. She must have scented the blood in the water of our engagement rumors." Then he sprang to his feet. "What a lovely surprise to see you, Mama. Both you and Aunt Beatrice here, at my home, together... again."

At the last second, Samantha bit the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing. Poor man.

The tall woman crossed the room and when she reached her son's location, she presented him with a cheek so he could buss it. "To be fair, I didn't know that Beatrice would be here, but I just came from the home of one of my friends, who told me that she'd heard you were engaged." One of her thin brown eyebrows rose in question or perhaps challenge. "Is that true?"

Oh, dear.

When it appeared Cornelius was nonplussed once more, Samantha stepped into the gap. Slowly, she stood, went to Mrs. Harding, and took her hand. "It's true. He

surprised me with the proposal a few days ago, and the man was so dear about it, how could I refuse him?" When she glanced over her shoulder at him, she gave him a wink, which provoked a frown from him. "Your son is everything a gentleman needs to be." Not that she knew that for a fact since she'd only met him three days ago.

"Oh." Confusion clouded that woman's eyes. She bounced her gaze between them before nodding. "I don't understand why it was kept a secret, though."

Finally, Cornelius found his voice. "Well, Mama, when would I have had the time to inform you of this event? It happened suddenly."

His mother frowned as she peered at him while perching on the other low sofa across from the one where Samantha re-settled. "Why is your face so bruised? Were you in a fight?" Then she gasped. "Did this..." she gestured to her, "... woman do that to you?"

They both gawked at her.

Cornelius shook his head. "Of course not. I was attacked by a man on the street. No doubt he wanted to rob me, but I fought him off."

"Francene don't berate the boy. He's engaged at long last. Isn't that what you've wanted for years?" Aunt Beatrice took it upon herself to pour out cups of tea, which she passed around with the air of a cheerful elf.

"I suppose." But her frown matched her son's in depth. She dropped a lump of sugar into her tea and then stirred the contents with a tiny silver spoon. "Why her, Cornelius? The last we heard of Miss Marchington, you were incensed because you assumed she'd stolen Beatrice's bracelet." Mrs. Harding held Sam's with hers. "Did you? We simply can't have a thief in the family."

Another round of heat stung her cheeks. “I did not steal anything.”

Aunt Beatrice chuckled. “Except, apparently, Cornelius’ heart?”

She looked at the man beside her. Slight panic shadowed those intense gray eyes. Why was he repelled by the mere thought of marriage, even if their engagement was a sham? Perhaps they needed to have another deep conversation. Suddenly, she wanted to do what she could to help alleviate his fears and concerns, and in the process, she might be able to help with his day terrors.

“I am beginning to find that Cornelius is charming, and he possesses courage I can never begin to fathom.” At least that was the truth. “He battles with things not many of us would understand, and for that alone, it is a privilege to be at his side.”

While Aunt Beatrice beamed with obvious delight and his mother retained speculation in her gaze, surprise lined his face. “Thank you,” he said in a choked whisper. “No one has wanted to do that small thing for me since I came home from the war.” When he took her hand and brought it to his lips, he kissed the middle knuckle, butterflies awoke in her belly.

“If that isn’t fate, I don’t know what is,” Aunt Beatrice said with a pretty stain in her doughy cheeks. “You two will prove good for each other, I think. So tell me, when are you planning to wed?”

Oh, dear. The longer the tea stretched, the more deeply they both plunged into deception, a web of lies where everyone would be hurt. “I’m not certain. The engagement is so new we haven’t discussed any sort of plans, for most of my time is spent with my father or at the orphanage.”

“Ah, well don’t worry yourself over it, dear,” Aunt Beatrice said to her. She followed it up with a sip of tea. “The hard part is already over—landing the man.” As she

chuckled, Samantha couldn't help but smile too. Really, the woman was a dear, and she appreciated that maternal air. "Although, if I were you, I wouldn't wait too long, especially if your father's health is truly compromised. You might want to marry sooner so he can enjoy it."

Worry tightened her chest, and since Cornelius hadn't released her hand, she squeezed his fingers. He gave hers a supportive hold, and she rather appreciated his presence there. "I will definitely consider that, and I will need to talk with Cornelius about everything."

All of that brought home to her just how fragile life was.

"Yes, well, whatever you do, I should hope there is no scandal even if you are engaged," his mother said with a sniff. "Have you told your sister, Cornelius?"

"I have not. As I said, it's been a busy time." He took refuge behind his teacup. "Perhaps I'll pay her a call with Samantha soon."

Mrs. Harding nodded. "I suppose she has told you she's increasing?"

He nodded while Samantha stared. "She came by the other day when I'd had a day terror and told me then. I'm quite happy for her."

"I shouldn't think you'd want to overshadow the birth of her child, so perhaps you should marry sooner rather than later."

This time, it was Samantha who squeezed his fingers in empathy. "Let us discuss our options, Mrs. Harding, and then you will be the first to know." She gave a nod and a smile to the other woman. "It is all much to digest, of course." And it was so silly, for there would be no wedding; this was a sham engagement.

“I would have liked for Cornelius to choose a woman of more consequence in the ton , but I suppose if you make my son happy, I can’t complain.”

“No, but you probably will,” he said before Samantha could form a reply. “Don’t be a snob, Mama. There is nothing wrong with Samantha’s pedigree. A person doesn’t need to have blue blood in order to qualify as a good person, and sometimes a title doesn’t mean that either.” He glanced at her. “Character and heart mean far more, especially to me.”

“And after your last experience with that woman , too, hmm?” Aunt Beatrice smiled. “I’ll call on your father this week, dear. It will be lovely to have a chat after so long, and perhaps we’ll discuss plans then.”

“I’m sure he will enjoy that.” If he was cognizant. But she was far more curious about the previous woman in Cornelius’ life. Would he open up and tell her eventually? That remained to be seen. “In fact, I should return home. I’d promised my father I wouldn’t be out long.”

“Of course, dear.” Aunt Beatrice nodded. “Cornelius will escort you there, I’m sure.”

“Oh, he doesn’t need to bother with that.” After setting her cup and saucer on the table, she stood. When he scrambled to his feet, she tamped the urge to grin. “Ladies, thank you for the tea and conversation. “We should do it again soon.”

Both ladies nodded.

Then he escorted her from the room. In the corridor, he halted her before they went down the stairs. “I apologize for them. They are quite nosy and sometimes they pry.”

“That’s only because they care about you.” She laid a hand on his arm. “I miss that in my life at times.” How much longer would her father remain in the present enough to

voice concern over her future?

“Samantha?”

“Hmm?”

“Did you mean what you said in there, about it being a privilege to be at my side? Or was it a show for my relatives?”

Ignoring the heat in her cheeks, she nodded. “It was the truth. I feel you are a good man, Cornelius. I hope that someday you’ll believe that too.”

“Ah.” When he gently cupped her cheek and slightly tipped her head back, she thought that he might kiss her. In fact, he lowered his head and stopped when their lips had nearly connected. But then laughter from the drawing room made him pause. Immediately, he straightened, dropped his hand from her person. “I should get you home, but I would like to call upon you tomorrow. Perhaps we can walk again in Hyde Park if you’re of a mind? After all, we should probably talk about the engagement.”

Tremors of need danced down her spine to mix with cold disappointment in her chest, for she’d wanted another kiss from him. “I would enjoy that very much. We can also discuss how we’ll decorate for Christmastide to please my father.”

“Of course.” He offered her his arm and together they went down the stairs. “Are you certain you didn’t steal that bracelet?”

She snorted. “Yes, I’m quite certain. Do I look like the sort of woman who would even know where to take a stolen piece of jewelry for quick coin?”

“Who can say? The criminal element is made up of a shifty lot.” Amusement

threaded through his voice.

“Rogue.” At the foot of the stairs, she playfully smacked his shoulder, and was rewarded by a wide grin. “Too much more teasing and I might just fall for you.” As shock jumped into his eyes, the same emotion filled her chest. “Of course, those were just words.” She lowered her voice. “We’re engaged until Twelfth Night, as per the arrangement.”

And he hadn’t presented a contract yet to her father, a clear sign this was a sham relationship.

“Yes, of course. After that, we shouldn’t have need of each other, for any reason.” But his frown had returned, and it seemed rather entrenched.

Well, she would make certain she didn’t, in fact, fall for him. That would be sure disaster, for them both.

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December 19, 1818

Hyde Park

Mayfair

Cornelius remained silent as he slowly walked with Samantha through the park on one of the popular bridle paths. Their pace didn't bother him; many of his friends had injuries and infirmaries, but they were widely accepted despite those things.

Because of the flurries of snow swirling in the air, the area wasn't all that crowded, which afforded them a bit more privacy in order to converse without being overheard. Aside from a few pleasantries exchanged after he'd fetched her from her townhouse, neither of them had said much. Perhaps it was safer in their thoughts. He couldn't say.

"Thank you for bringing me out here again. I adore the park." Samantha's breath clouded about her head in the cold. "While I'm here, I can forget about life's ugliness for a time. There is also such beauty here that one sometimes forgets about when they're rushing about their daily lives."

Fair point.

"I'll wager I'd accompany you anywhere in Town you'd like to go if it would make you smile like that again." Surely, he wasn't... flirting with her? He didn't need a woman in his life. That had already been established, hadn't it?

She glanced sharply at him. "Smile like what?"

"As if you've never seen the world around you before, and everything you do see delights you." He patted her hand. "In many ways, I would give anything to be either that na?ve again or as uncaring."

"It is neither of those things, Lord Timelbury."

Cornelius frowned. "What does that mean?"

With a sigh, she stopped him on the path. "A person can't be na?ve in this life any longer, I think. Reality is a horrible task master, but that doesn't mean someone can't look for the good in things, seek out the light as it were." Emotions clouded her blue eyes, and the predominant one was sadness. "Does that mean terrible or sad things won't happen? Of course not. But it does mean they'll have less of a chance of hurting us too deeply or worse, taking away our chances of seeing that good."

Please teach me how to change my thinking.

"That is exactly what you embody. The sense of happiness." Then he gasped. "The spirit of Christmastide." Was she having him on? Except the longer he peered into her eyes and saw nothing except honesty tinged with sadness staring back at him, the more he knew she could never lie.

Not to him and not to anyone.

"I don't know about that." But the pleasure in her expression was unmistakable.

"I haven't known you that long, but you're different than the rest."

"The rest of what?" When she tried to remove her hand from his arm, he put his other

hand over hers and prevented that from happening.

“Women.” From his gut, he knew beyond every doubt that she didn’t take that missing bracelet. I was wrong. He heaved out a breath. “I think I have become too jaded from life, and I don’t trust easily any longer.” Certainly, he’d judged her on what his previous fiancée had done to him, and that wasn’t fair.

“It is never too late to make a change, Cornelius, no matter how small.” As she tipped her head up to gaze into his face, and the snowflakes dotted her face and bonnet, he slowly slipped beneath her spell.

Was she even aware of the power she could wield?

“So I am coming to learn.” Damn it all, why did he want to kiss her? Shifting slightly, he took one of her hands and cupped her cheek with the other. Since there was no one around, he didn’t feel that stretching propriety was that grave of a sin. “Will you help me?”

“Are you asking out of genuine interest or are you asking in a further bid to try gain access to my life because of the missing bracelet?”

Heat sneaked up the back of his neck. “I don’t believe you stole the bracelet.” As he spoke, he glided his gloved thumb along her bottom lip. “Will you help me try to find it?” With each word, he brought his head closer and closer to hers until their lips nearly touched.

Before he could claim his fiancée’s lips, someone slammed into him, knocking him to the cold, hard ground. Her scream echoed in his ears as he scrambled to his feet in time to see the assailant yank her arm in an attempt to drag her along the path. Damn if it wasn’t the same man who’d gotten off a few punches on him a few days ago.

“Samantha!” In that one moment, another truth was made startlingly clear—their engagement might be false, but there was no reason why they couldn’t both enjoy the hell out of it while they were together.

As he recovered his wits, Cornelius sprang at his attacker. “Take your foul hands off her this instant or I’ll rip your arm off and beat you with it.” He wrenched him away from Samantha and quickly threw a punch that caught the other man in the chin. “She isn’t part of this.”

“That doesn’t matter,” the other man said while he delivered a punch to Cornelius’ left cheek. “Lady Stover requires a word with Miss Marchington.”

Ignoring the pain radiating from his face, Cornelius fought back with a sharp right hook that caught the other man squarely in the breadbasket. When the attacker went stumbling backward, he pounced again, for this man needed to bring a message to the damned countess. He grabbed onto the man’s lapels and then threw him against the wide trunk of an oak tree, pinning him there with another punch to his jaw.

“You tell Lady Stover that Lord Timelbury is damned tired of her interference. She has no power or control over my life, and she absolutely has no access to Miss Marchington.”

“None of that is up to you.” With a growl, the man pushed off the tree, lashed out with a fist, and caught Cornelius in the temple.

Darkness wavered at the edges of his vision as he fell to his knees. The same panicky feeling welled in his chest that usually heralded an episode of day terrors, but he glanced to the side where Samantha stood. Somehow, somewhere, she’d procured a large fallen branch, and from all intents she meant to defend herself with it. The distraction was enough to stave off being lost into a memory.

For the moment.

The man kicked Cornelius in the ribs. “This isn’t over. Your reckoning with Lady Stover will come sooner rather than later.” Then he skirted around him and went toward Samantha.

But the dear woman took a swing at him with the branch. It connected on the man’s shoulder with a dull thud. Easily, he wrenched the branch away from her hand, but by that time, she’d run from him and hovered at Cornelius’ side.

“Are you all right?” With gentle hands, she assisted him to his feet. “Who was that man?” When he didn’t answer, she gasped. “He was the same one who attacked you the other day.” It wasn’t a question.

Damn, but she was clever. “It was.” Seemingly everywhere hurt on his body, even looking at her. “Let’s go.” After that, he could collapse without needing to be strong for her.

“To your house?” She slipped an arm about his waist, and he threw an arm about her shoulders.

“God, no. Mama has come for a visit. No doubt she’s hoped to ask me more questions about you.”

Samantha frowned. “Do you want to come home with me? I’ll order tea. You can put your feet up while I try to soothe your aches.”

“Truth to tell, that sounds like heaven.”

“Good.” She tightened her hold on him. “No doubt my father will be napping at this time of day, and since it’s Saturday, that means the housekeeper is out at market.”

The soothing quality of her voice did much to make him forget his bruises and cuts. “It is also when Niles goes into the shopping district on errands.”

“I’m glad, for I’m not inclined for conversation or gawking.”

Once in the carriage, he closed his eyes and slumped on the bench while Samantha sat beside him with a hand on his arm. He rather appreciated her presence.

The trip to Portman Square didn’t take very long, and soon enough she settled him in a parlor at the rear of the house. She left him, then, no doubt to order tea and supplies as well as check on her father. Just as he was about to fall into a doze, she returned.

“You poor thing.” Compassion lit her gaze as she gave him a tight smile and sat beside him on the low sofa.

“It looks worse than it is.” When his attempt at a joke fell flat, he sighed. “Are you harmed? When that man tried to take you, I went a bit primal.”

“So I saw. It was quite... intense.” A blush stained her cheeks. “As for me, no I’m not hurt, just frightened.” She brushed a shock of hair from his forehead. “What about you? I honestly thought you’d be lost to a nightmare after that attack.”

“I nearly was.”

One of her eyebrows rose. “What kept you from fully going there?”

“I don’t know.” When he shrugged, pain went through his shoulders. “You, I suppose.”

“What?”

Conversation broke off when a footman brought a tea tray into the room. After he set it on a low table, he exited the room as quickly as he entered it. One glance at the silver tea service showed a bowl of water along with a folded stack of rags and a pot of salve.

Cornelius blew out a breath. “You made the difference, Samantha. Knowing I needed to protect you. This mess is my fault and that of the Rogue’s Arcade. You don’t deserve any of it, yet here you are, mired in danger with me.”

“Do stop, Timelbury.” She waved a hand in dismissal. “I can take care of myself.”

“Oh, of that I have no doubt.” An image of her wielding that tree branch sprang into his mind, and when he grinned, a groan escaped, for it hurt to activate the muscles of his cheeks. “Suffice it to say, now you don’t need to because you have me. We’ll fight together.”

And he truly meant that. For the first time in years, he had a mission, a purpose again, and that made all the difference.

A sigh escaped her. “For how long will I have you with me, though?” She lowered her voice. “This isn’t a true engagement, and you know it. Just one of convenience if you didn’t wish to call it baldly a sham.” The longing he’d glimpsed in her eyes that first day he’d met her had returned, and oddly, the same emotion echoed deep within his soul.

“Truth to tell, I don’t know what I want to call what it is between us.”

“Oh?” Was that... hope in her eyes?

“Yes.” Awareness for her rushed through him in a tingling, heated wave. “It has been rather lovely having a purpose again.”

For long moments, she rested her gaze on him as emotions flitted over her face. Then she swallowed and the delicate tendons of her throat worked. “Uh, you should go home, Cornelius. Unless you want me to clean and tend to your wounds?” That odd lilt in her voice gave him pause.

He snorted, for it was a touch amusing. “You would do that for me?”

“I am not a monster. You were hurt defending me.” She gestured to the tray. “And I already ordered the supplies.”

“Ah. I suppose I’d appear ungrateful if I didn’t submit to your ministrations.”

“Indeed.” There was a particular look in her eye he didn’t quite trust. “I have never had anyone defend me against an attacker before.” She took his right hand and lifted it her lips, kissed the busted, bruised knuckles. “I never knew how raw it was to watch two men fight each other. You have quite the form.”

“Is that right?” He could hardly concentrate on her words when the soft flit of her lips on his skin proved quite the distraction.

“It is, but the moment you went to your knees, I knew rage liked I’d never felt before. All commonsense left me, and I took grave exception to that man beating you.” She scooted closer to him on the sofa and kissed his chin where he’d taken a hit. “So I grabbed whatever I could use for a weapon and wanted to knock him out.” When she then kissed his temple, the hold on his control began to slip.

“I’m glad I wasn’t alone this time.” Unable to keep his hands to himself, he framed her face with his palms. “You have proved yourself different again and again, and because of that, I...” Unable to finish his thoughts when he couldn’t order them himself, Cornelius leaned toward her, for he wanted her for more than just tending to his wounds.

With a soft growl, he brought his lips crashing against hers as he'd wanted to do in Hyde Park. When a tiny moan of apparent approval escaped her, he tugged her into an embrace, settled her more comfortably into his arms, and set out to kiss her beyond senseless. There was something about the woman he couldn't have enough of, something that he was compelled to explore, and for the moment, he didn't care why.

Far too quickly, the kisses turned heated. He traced the seam of her lips, and when she opened for him, he chased her tongue with his. As they thrust and parried in a quest for that heated connection, blood surged through his member, tightening it.

Damn, but they would get up to wicked scandal if they weren't careful. Was that somewhere he wanted to go with her?

Wrenching away, Cornelius peered into her eyes, saw the same desire there that was flooding his system. "Bid me nay, Samantha, and I'll leave you untouched." For she was an innocent and should remain that way for the man she would eventually marry. "But I want you, right here, right now, if you were curious."

"There is nothing stopping you," she said in a low voice. "And since I am curious about a good many things, I don't see why I can't explore at least some of them with you. After all, are we not engaged?"

If there hadn't been that subtle suggestion in her dulcet tone, if she hadn't slightly quirked a finely arched eyebrow upward, if she hadn't briefly held her bottom lip between her teeth like a skilled courtesan, he would have been fine. He could have kissed her again, taken tea with her, and then walked away like a gentleman, but she had done all those things, and together they had the power to separate him from his sanity.

"Ah, Samantha." Leaning forward, he brushed his lips over hers then he sprang from

the sofa.

“Where are you going?” Disappointment threaded through her voice as she gained her feet while he crossed the room.

“Closing the door. This meeting is not one I wish to see interrupted or witnessed.” So saying, as soon as he shut the wooden panel, he made certain it was locked before turning back to her. “Are you quite certain you wish to continue?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “Very.” Though worry clouded the blue depths of her eyes, she held out a hand to him.

Of course nerves would beset her; she was an innocent, but knowing he would be the first man to show her carnal play had another wave of awareness skittering through his veins, enough that he forgot his aches and pains. Unable to resist her, he took her once more into his embrace, and kissed her so forcefully they crashed against the wall beside the door, and turning her, he had her snugly trapped between him and the wall.

And damn if she didn’t feel good—right—in his arms, as if she alone could settle the demons within him and quiet his fears. It was heady stuff indeed.

Cornelius kissed her, drank from her again and again, dragged his lips along the silky side of her throat while she clung to his shoulders. When she pressed her lips beneath the underside of his jaw, his breath caught. Had he been enchanted or was he simply mad? Too far gone to give thought to the consequences, he yanked down the simple bodice of her dress, worked to free her breasts from the layers of fabric beneath, and when the perfect globes were finally bared, he cupped one while taking the nipple of the other into his mouth.

“I have wanted to see these since yesterday.”

“Oh.” A shuddering sigh escaped her. She arched her back, putting herself more securely into his care. “Cornelius, I...” Her words were lost to a moan as he pleased those pebbled tips with tongue and teeth and fingers.

No, she wouldn't soon forget him, and there was some comfort there. Never had he wished to live on in someone's memories... until he'd met her. “I need more of you,” he whispered against the crook of her shoulder as he slid a hand down her side and then gathered handfuls of her skirting.

“I haven't tried to beg off yet,” she responded in an equally soft and throaty voice.

He growled and kissed her again, shared breath with her, wanted to show his possession so would know that no other man could have her, yet in this engagement, this sham, he didn't really have a claim to either. Shoving the thought away, he bunched her skirts between them, then he eased his hands beneath the layers of fabric to clutch her buttocks. A surprised squeal came from her, and the sound made him grin. Oh, she was an innocent, but tempting, indeed, and he couldn't wait to show her, teach her... everything.

“Tell me you want me, for I won't have you crying foul that I took you against your will.” Already, his prick pulsed with pain-tipped pleasure. He'd explode soon and embarrass himself if she declined.

But she gazed up at him with passion-drugged eyes and kiss-swollen lips, and he knew . The same need etched upon her features fired through his blood, and he stupidly lost a tiny piece of his heart to her in that moment, and that was something he'd not thought possible again.

“I want you, Cornelius. Show me what it's like to have a man desire me so much he can't control himself. Let me experience what other women take for granted. Show me what I could have had all along if my life had been different... If I wasn't too

unwanted to be chosen.”

Well, damn.

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“Your differences don’t make you less desirable; they make you unique enough to be pursued because you stand out.” The desire that darkened his gray eyes nearly made her breathless.

Those words warmed her from the inside out, and for several seconds Samnatha held his gaze while heated tingles zipped up and down her spine. This man had come into her life in the most unorthodox of ways, but after spending a few days in his company, watching him as he’d defended her from being attacked earlier, seeing him interact with his family, she wanted to know absolutely everything about him.

Would he trust her enough for that?

“You are...” She shook her head, temporarily at a loss for words. And he looked so endearing with his battered face and his bloodied knuckles. “Just know that you are enough, Cornelius. Broken or whole, you are enough.” Unwilling or unable to be apart from him, Samantha threw herself back into his waiting arms. When she peered up into his face, some of her doubts and fears faded. “Thank you for your protection. It’s not easy, this looming scourge that is coming from Lady Stover, but just know I don’t plan to let you go at this alone.”

Oddly enough, moisture gathered in his eyes before he blinked away the excess of emotion. His Adam’s apple bobbed with a hard swallow. “I appreciate that.”

“Good. For as long as you wish it, we are a team.” In that moment, they were perfectly aligned, and she wanted him, as much as he would give, but more than that, she needed to be with him, the consequences be damned. Lifting onto her toes, Samantha held his head between her hands and kissed his mouth.

The press of his lips to hers, the sure insistence of his hands on her hips then sliding up her back left her gasping, wanting more.

And she was ready for this next phase of her life, for she wouldn't be the same after this.

As tiny fires licked through her veins, she pulled away merely to find his gaze. "I need you, Cornelius, in all the ways a man can claim a woman." It was a bold statement to be sure, but it was how she felt, and she stood by those words. Perhaps this was her only chance to know what it felt like to share carnal intimacy with a man, and she didn't want to waste it.

Those gray eyes deepened into the most mysterious charcoal. The hand at the small of her back tightened ever so slightly, and already his other hand worked at the laces on her raspberry dress in a lightweight wool blend. A hint of vulnerability shadowed those gorgeous pools. "You should keep your innocence for the man you will marry." The same desire burning her up from within lined his face. "That is your right."

"We both know I am a spinster and nearly thirty. There is no more hope for me." But her heart trembled from his consideration. "I am old enough to know my own mind. What I do with my body is my decision, as is living with any potential consequences." It would be a sticky wicket if she should fall pregnant, but she worked with an orphanage. If she wasn't able to keep the child, easily it could be incorporated into the infants already there.

Unwanted.

He stared at her as if he were seeing her for the first time. "I have never known anyone like you before," he said in a low voice.

"I'm happy to turn your head, at least for a bit." She tamped on the urge to sob at the

choice she might need to make. Then wanting the distraction and the experience, she pressed her lips to his. “I am giving myself to you. Without coercion, without the expectation of anything from you other than this night. Promise me you won’t sully that with obligation.” Truth be told, spinster or no, she didn’t want a man out of guilt or pity.

“I promise.” For the space of a heartbeat, he held her gaze. “You have no idea how much I want you, Samantha.”

“Oh, I have a fair idea.” Hadn’t she already glimpsed his engorged length in the carriage yesterday? And she could certainly feel the hardness as it pressed against her belly. No matter, she would confirm that desire as soon as his breeches came off. “Will there be much more talking? I’d rather kiss you.”

The corners of his lips twitched. “Let’s see if we can give that tart mouth of yours something to keep it occupied.”

“Rogue.” She squealed when he hefted her into his arms, holding her beneath the thighs, then took a few steps until the wall at her back halted further movement. As her heartbeat beat out a frantic rhythm, she clutched his strong shoulders, wrapped her legs about his waist, and kissed him again, for there was no reason not to. The faint metallic taste of blood on his cheek oddly enhanced her need, but she didn’t wish to think about that now. Instead, she breathed in the scent of him and let the sandalwood and citrus mingled with man carry her away.

Timelbury wasn’t content to let her have all the fun. He swiftly took possession of the embrace, and all too soon his tongue was in her mouth bossing hers, and the kiss veered into wicked, heated territory that had every inch of her tingling with anticipation. Friction from the fabric between their bodies rubbed along her sensitive flesh, and she shivered. A barely audible moan left her throat, and Cornelius chuckled.

“Your first time shouldn’t be against a wall, I think.”

“But I—” Before she knew what he was about, he lifted her once more, and when he gently deposited her on the low sofa, he followed her down. He covered her body with his, treated her to long, drugging kisses that left her heated and floating in a cloud of passion with need for something she didn’t quite understand zipping through her bloodstream. “Mmm.”

There was simply nothing better than having the weight of a man on top of her. She shuddered with eagerness as his hands glided over her skin while he slowly, oh so slowly, removed her dress, petticoat, shift, stockings, and then her slippers.

“I thought your breasts were gorgeous, but seeing all of you...” The appreciative gleam in his eyes as he devoured her naked form with his gaze sent curls of excitement through her belly. “A muse, surely, come down to torment me.”

“Do stop, Cornelius.” Yet she couldn’t contain her grin of pleasure. The chill in the air tightened her nipples, and she shoved the thought of this being scandalous from her mind. “Far too charming for your own good, I think.” She wanted him as nude as she, so they could play with conviction. “Remove your clothing, please.” Samantha plucked at the buttons on his waistcoat then tugged at his cravat. “Or I would be happy to stand in for your valet.”

“So polite.”

She giggled, for something about him had her leaving inhibitions behind. “I’m afraid I don’t know what I should do or how I should act.” Then she frowned. “Please don’t think badly of me for it.”

“Such gammon. I like you as you are.” He grinned but followed her command with alacrity. Clothing dropped indiscriminately to the sofa as well as the floor. “And I can

teach you everything you need to know.”

“Oh, dear.” He was quite manly indeed, and she didn’t know where to look first. The dratted man paused on his knees, merely so she could look her fill.

“You are... for lack of a better phrase, mouthwatering.”

Merciful heavens, he is wonderful!

Finally, she had a glimpse of him sans breeches, and it was every bit as lovely as she’d hoped. His body was lean and muscled like marble statues of Greek gods, but he wasn’t the perfection of those men of legend. In fact, he was better, for he had scars presumably from his time in the military, as well as cuts and bruises just from this week from his attacker. Those imperfections made him exquisite in her eyes.

“I want to kiss every inch of you, all those horrible bruises because I know what they must have cost you.”

“Hush.” When he brushed his knuckles over one of her aroused nipples, he chuckled as she moaned. “I appreciate you thinking of me, though.”

“Touché.” Those broad shoulders alone could bring her to tears, but her mouth watered at the sight of the ridged lines of his chest as well as his flat abdomen. “I would do many things to lick syllabub from your naval, and I don’t even care for the dessert that much.” What had happened to her since meeting this man? The dark hair on his chest drew her attention, and with a hand she followed a thin ribbon that went down his body. The rampant length of him that sprouted from a nest of black curls had her gasping. What would that appendage feel like moving inside her? For that matter, how would it fit? It was quite thick...

“I can almost see your mind working.” His grin was genuine as he waggled his

eyebrows. “Sometimes thinking about an event gives more worry than actually experiencing it.”

“Perhaps.” She smoothed a hand along his chest and shoulder. “So solid.” She met his gaze and smiled. “I would have adored seeing you in your military uniform.”

“Ah, well...” A flush went up his neck. “Perhaps my mother has a portrait I can show you.” Once more he came over her body, and this time he kissed her as if he had all the time in the world.

“I would like that.” Samantha didn’t mind the distraction, for he was darling in his quest to see her relaxed and comfortable. Everywhere he touched brought out exquisite sensations or sent ripples of awareness sailing over her skin. As best she could, she returned the favor, for she couldn’t have enough of his body. Timelbury was strong and hard in all the places a man should be, but soft and luscious in others. His warm skin was a lovely contrast to the coolness of the room, and when she dragged her lips along the underside of his jaw, the trace of his stubble ignited her need. “This is better than I could have dreamed,” she managed to gasp out before a moan stole further words.

“On this I agree with you, but you have dreamed of me?”

Heat seeped into her cheeks. “I... Well, I...”

His chuckle sent tingles down her spine. “The hint is ego-boosting enough.”

Then he proceeded to kiss and caress every inch of her body. Nowhere escaped his notice. He explored all of her with slow leisure, and that unwavering devotion brought tears to her eyes. With each touch, lick, and nibble, she was lifted higher and higher toward that edge of bliss and a goal she didn’t understand why she was going toward. Cornelius’ hot mouth on her breasts, his tongue teasing her sensitized

nipples, his talented fingers between her thighs left her moaning and wriggling with excitement. Her body hummed in heightened need. Each time she reached to fondle his member, he batted her hand away.

“Not yet.”

Slowly, her mind began to shatter. “I cannot survive much more of your torture.” She contented herself by caressing his chest, his shoulders, his back, but her concentration fractured for he was relentless in bringing her pleasure.

“That is too bad, for I am only starting my campaign.” The warmth of his breath skated over her skin as he kissed a blazing path between her breasts while he kneaded those quivering mounds. Down, down, down he went along her torso, over her stomach, past her mons, kissing and licking and nibbling as was his wont. When he put his mouth over the place, the center of her heat where his fingers had just teased, Samantha wasn’t prepared for the feelings that crashed into her. She shook into a million pieces of light. A moan mixed with a slight cry left her throat as she arched her back.

“Merciful heavens, Cornelius! What are you doing to me?”

“Trying to make you shatter.” There was a certain smugness in his words. “And we are not finished.” While she cried out and danced her fingers over his shoulders, he drew out her pleasure with tongue and teeth. At the same time, he worked at teasing the swollen button at her center. When she tugged on his hair as contractions rocked her core, he lifted his head. His chuckle further heightened the sensations battering her. “Did you need something else?”

“I, you...” She panted but urged his head back to where she wanted him. “There will be paybacks.”

“I don’t doubt it, for you are quite determined to convolute my life, but in this I have the upper hand.” With a gleam in his eyes that promised wicked things, Cornelius resumed his work. His fingers dug into her hips, branding her, holding her steady, and on one particularly enthusiastic series of teasing with his tongue, release caught her up in an unexpected vortex.

“Ah!” She tumbled into the void of white light dappled with rainbows as pleasure washed over her. How he’d managed to toss her into bliss so quickly, she had no idea. “I didn’t know such a feeling was possible.”

“There is more, if you would like to continue.” The words rumbled in her chest as he came back up her body.

“Definitely continue,” she said in a broken whisper. This time she wanted to show him the same pleasure, so she slid a hand between their bodies. As she wrapped her fingers around his straining shaft, a moan escaped him. “Retribution is at hand, Timelbury.”

“In your hand, rather.”

“Even better.” She nipped the underside of his jaw while slowly pumping her curled fingers up and down his length.

“Mmm, go slowly else I’ll embarrass myself, for it has been a while since I was last with a woman.” When he kissed her again, all thought flew out of her mind. She left off with her torture, and as he spread her thighs wider, he fit the wide head of his member to her opening. “I want to savor this moment.”

“While that is an adorable comment, please don’t draw this out.” Nearly mad with need, she bumped his hips with hers.

“Such a managing baggage.” Yet he didn’t seem in a hurry to claim her. Instead, he threaded their fingers together, pressed her hands to the sofa cushion at either side of her head. “I shall try to make your first time memorable.”

Even in this he was protective of her. She shifted her body, and as his shaft brushed her sensitive flesh, she moaned. “Finish me.” Longing coursed through her, made stronger by his delay, and enhanced by anticipation.

“Ah, Samantha. Your excitement is infectious.” He brushed his lips over hers. Then, with a powerful flex of his hips, he penetrated her in a long, smooth glide that didn’t stop until he was fully sheathed.

A pinprick of pain followed, and she squirmed, but the discomfort fled in moments. His length filled her, stretched her, was snug into her as if he’d always been a piece of her that was missing, and it was easily the most incredible thing she’d ever experienced.

“Merciful heavens, you feel wonderful. I couldn’t have thought...” A sigh shuddered from her. Never in her life had she experienced anything like this. No one had told her how lovely lying with a man would be, for her mother had avoided the subject whenever she was asked. Desperate for more of him, Samantha canted her hips and took him deeper, and the sensation was so exquisite, another moan escaped. She clung to his fingers. “What should I do? My thoughts are scattered...”

“Just feel.” Cornelius rested on his forearms as he stroked into her, slowly at first, the thrusts leisurely and tender, leaving no part of her body unclaimed. “I’m honored you would share this with me.”

Her heart shivered from his words, but she was too far gone to answer him. Freeing her hands, she looped her arms about his broad shoulders and clung to him in an effort to be closer still. Then she wrapped her legs about his and kissed whatever part

of him she came into contact with as he increased his pace. Over and over, he pushed, harder and harder he moved as if he wished to join them permanently. Deeper and deeper came his strokes, and she met them by moving her hips to receive him.

The rhythm was far too right. It was quite odd to try and describe, but each time he thrust, fractured shards of bliss streaked through her body. When Samantha opened her eyes, it was to find him looking at her in surprise. She held his gaze, and for a moment he paused. They communed without words or movement. Instead, their souls connected, and something was exchanged between them. Then the moment passed, and he kissed her as if this would be the final time he would see her.

With each stroke, the band of need stacking within her grew until she feared she would certainly break apart. A muffled cry left her throat. She held him tighter while Timelbury's thrusting grew ever faster and more urgent.

"Cornelius!"

That intense madness came upon her before she was ready, and it roared with veracity through her already primed system. Samantha tumbled and pinwheeled through a field of white, sparkling light where all sound and thoughts were absent. There was only her and him, and it was the most glorious thing. Heated pleasure crashed over her, pulled her down beneath its waves, swept through her body until she bobbed along with it, powerless to resist, never wanting to come up for air. She drowned in it, succumbed to the vortex swirling within and for the second time that night, she fractured into a million pieces.

Shortly after, Timelbury found his own release with a muffled shout of her name. Heat sank into her cheeks as his member pulsed. Seconds later, Cornelius collapsed on top of her. The comforting sound of his ragged breathing filled her ear, but it was the strength of his embrace as he wrapped her in his arms and turned them both onto their sides that guided her back to reality.

“If every Christmastide was like this, perhaps I wouldn’t be so reluctant to celebrate it.” His whispered statement seemed overly loud in the sudden silence, but she didn’t care.

“I quite agree.” Samantha smiled when he chuckled and nuzzled the crook of her shoulder. Several minutes later, as her breathing returned to normal and the tremors faded, she snuggled deeper into his embrace. There were no regrets after what they’d just shared, for in this perfect moment, she was his, and the farce of an engagement held no sway.

For a long time, she luxuriated in the feel of his arms around her and his strong body pressed so intimately against hers, then she sighed. She’d willfully given her innocence to this man she’d only known for a handful of days. What would that mean for her future? For her reputation? And worse yet, would her father be disappointed in her if he should discover what she’d done today?

Was she disappointed in herself? Then she grinned and a residual shiver of pleasure went down her spine. No, she was not. There was no shame in this, scandal or not.

“I rather think if you were a cat, you would be purring.”

The rumble of his voice beneath her ear tickled through her chest. “Can I help it if you have opened my eyes to this new world and it agrees with me?”

He chuckled. “Ah, Samantha, sometimes I can’t believe I only met you five days ago.”

Surely, that didn’t mean he had feelings toward her. Yet when he didn’t continue, she wriggled from his hold to prop herself up and peer down at him. “I suppose our tea is now cold.”

“No doubt.” A snicker followed the response, and when he brushed a knuckle over one of her nipples, it immediately hardened, and she gasped with renewed awareness. “Or we could indulge and restore our strength to have another go ‘round...”

“Oh, you.” With a laugh, she shoved at his shoulder then removed herself from the sofa. “You should go home. No matter how lovely this was, you were attacked in the park today and need to rest.”

“I suppose.” With desired darkened eyes, he watched as she began donning her clothing.

There was a certain scandalous excitement to dress in front of a man, and each layer of fabric she put on slid over her skin and ramped that awareness. “Uh, perhaps you can call again tomorrow? We could do a bit of decorating for my father. Of course, that assumes you might bring evergreen boughs and pine branches with you. Even if he’s not lucid, he might enjoy it.” She struggled into her stays. “We could play games and have tea.”

“Oddly, I would like that.” After he left the sofa and yanked on his breeches, hiding that glorious manhood, he assisted her with the stay’s laces. “Thank you for the invitation.”

“It will be lovely if you could find something in common with Papa, and it might just give him a bit of a kick to remain in the present longer.” Though that point was something Cornelius hoped was over by Twelfth Night.

“It is good we’re engaged.” His words were muffled as he tugged the lawn shirt over his head and then smoothed it down over his chest and shoved his arms into the sleeves.

“Why?” After she had her petticoat and dress on, she let him adjust the laces at the

back.

“Because after what we just shared, if something should come of it...” His smile was wide. “You are quite thoroughly ruined, and I want to make sure gossip evades you.”

“Oh.” A tiny piece of her heart flew into his keeping. Closing the distance between them, she lifted onto her toes and bussed his cheek. Again, his scent tempted her, and she tamped down her reaction. “You are sweet to protect me, even in this, but you and I both know this engagement has an expiration date.”

And once it ended, he would cease to care what became of her. What a miserable thought, but it reminded her that she couldn’t let herself get too close to him. A broken heart or a silly crush weren’t something she needed in her life.

December 20, 1818

Harding House

Manchester Square, Mayfair

London

“Uh, the sapphire superfine jacket this afternoon, if you please, Burton,” Cornelius told his valet as he put the finishing touches to an intricate knot in his cravat. It was a task of his toilette he enjoyed doing himself at times, for it allowed him to focus his mind on the puzzle and that prevented him from being lost in a day terror. “It will pair well with the silver waistcoat.”

Of which he’d already donned. It was his only concession to the season with the white embroidered snowflakes on the silver satin.

“Of course, my lord.” Moments later, the red-haired man brought the garment into the bedchamber where Cornelius attached his cuffs and collar. “Is there a special reason why you’ve requested this jacket today?”

“Not truly.” Except the color reminded him of the dark blue ring around Samantha’s irises. “Just felt like wearing that hue.”

“Ah.” Burton held it up for him to shove his arms into the sleeves. “You seem as though your spirits are quite lifted today. Is there a reason for that? Perhaps you are rubbing along well with Miss Marchington?”

“Cheeky, aren’t you?” But he didn’t mind the teasing from his friend. “As a matter of course, yes, Miss Marchington does have much to do with it. The past few days have been... interesting.” And all manner of rubbing had been quite pleasurable.

After he’d left her home yesterday, his life hadn’t felt real. It had been ages since his steps had been so light or his mind so clear. Had he been a nodcock because he’d bedded her yesterday in her family’s parlor while her father had napped upstairs? Perhaps, but that time with her, seeing her sans clothing and knowing she trusted him enough to do intimate things to her had affected him more deeply than he’d anticipated.

Slowly, she was burrowing her way beneath his skin and under the wall he’d erected around his heart, and what was more, it didn’t pain him as much as he’d previously thought.

“That is encouraging news.” As Burton took a brush to the arms of the jacket in order to remove lint, he said, “What is the state of the engagement at this time?”

Cornelius frowned. “There is not much to tell. Things are progressing as expected.”

Surprise jumped into the valet’s eyes. “But they are progressing? When we last spoke regarding your engagement, you were adamant that the two of you remain separate. Enemies, almost, and you had accused her of stealing your aunt’s bracelet.”

“Yes.” Heat sneaked up the back of his neck. “Which was true at the time. Since then, I have had cause to ponder a bit and don’t truly believe she is a thief.”

“Mmm.” Burton left off with the sleeves. After he stowed the brush into a velvet lined case, he crossed the room to retrieve Cornelius’ recently shined boots. “Have you and she found common ground?”

“We have, I think.”

“Have you kissed her?”

“What difference does that make?” While a hint of annoyance stabbed through his chest, he had wished to keep that information to himself, for it was personal and he didn’t want it sullied from gossip.

“It doesn’t, I suppose. Just making conversation,” the valet said with a wink. “However, since you are my friend, I would like to see you finally happy in your life.”

“I appreciate that.” Cornelius put his foot into the boot Burton held. “And yes, I have kissed her. A couple of times.” The other man didn’t need to know how many times during each session he’d kissed Samantha nor that yesterday’s kisses had led to carnal satisfaction.

“What an interesting but unanticipated development,” the valet said, and there was heavy sarcasm and teasing in his voice.

“Do shut up.” Cornelius couldn’t help his grin as he shoved his other foot into the second boot. “We both know the engagement isn’t serious nor is it permanent.”

“Is that ‘we’ you and I, or is it you and her?” One of Burton’s red eyebrows rose. “Because I think ‘we’ think one thing when something else entirely is going on, and whether ‘we’ want to or not, ‘we’ should consider the possibility that a relationship is brewing. Additionally, it might be exactly the thing one of us needs.”

Though the logic was a bit difficult to follow, he got the gist of it. “Again, shut up, Burton. Suffice it to say Miss Marchington and I are... What we have between us is... That is to say, she and I have... Bloody hell.” After yesterday, everything had

changed, just as he'd alluded to when he'd tried to talk her out of the coupling.

Except, it didn't feel like the looming disaster he'd originally assumed. Damn it all to hell and back. This engagement is becoming exactly what he hadn't wanted for his life, and what was more, he suspected that his heart wasn't as frozen as it had been even a year ago.

"If there is nothing else, my lord? I'll leave you to your own devices." When the valet stood back from him, amusement danced in his eyes. "By the by, where are you off to this afternoon?"

"I am going to call on Miss Marchington."

A knock on his open door showed the butler in the corridor.

"One of the footmen has stowed the evergreen branches and pine boughs in your carriage, my lord. If you are ready to depart, the vehicle is at the curb."

Cornelius nodded. "Thank you. I'll be down directly." When the butler departed, he glanced at the valet, who tried to bite back a grin. "What?"

"You are taking Christmas greenery to the home of your fiancée who really isn't your fiancée? You, the man who hasn't celebrated the holiday with fondness in four years and hasn't let a woman close in the same length of time?" Incredulity rang in his tone.

The heat on his neck intensified. "I promised her father we would decorate his home, and since that man is rapidly losing his facilities, I didn't see the harm in it." Without waiting for a reply, he stormed from the room.

Yet he wasn't all that upset about being the one to deliver the greenery. Oddly

enough, he looked forward to helping Samantha make the drawing room festive for her father.

I am the biggest fool in London.

No. 6 Birch Place

Portman Square

Marylebone, Mayfair

London

After arriving at Samantha's home, the butler told him that Miss Marchington had run out to the orphanage. She'd apparently wished to drop off the donation money she'd collected thus far as well as a few supplies.

"When do you think she might return?" he asked as he handed off his outerwear and gloves.

"Oh, I should think any time. These days, she doesn't like to leave Mr. Marchington alone by himself for long periods."

Cornelius frowned. "Surely, he isn't by himself. You and the other servants are here."

"It is Sunday, my lord. Most have the day off, but each Sunday, one of us stays back to take a shift and look after Mr. Marchington to prevent him from harming himself when he sinks into the past."

Slowly, the direness and fretfulness of Samantha's existence became starkly clear, and his chest tightened. "Thank you, Niles. I have brought Christmas greenery. It's in

my carriage. Since there is no one else, I'll try and catch my driver to help bring it in."

"That would be helpful. Miss Marchington mentioned this morning about the decorating. I brought a couple of boxes down from the attics. They are currently outside the drawing room." The older man shrugged. "I didn't want Mr. Marchington to root around in them and potentially injure himself."

"Good man." He laid a gentle hand on the butler's shoulder. "I'll return soon with the greenery."

Twenty minutes later, the two burlap sacks full of fragrant pine cuttings had been deposited in the drawing room where Samantha's father was in his customary chair, dozing.

After a loud snore, the man woke. Immediately his gaze fell to Cornelius. He looked at him in confusion for a few seconds, then clarity returned. "Lord Timelbury. What a lovely surprise. Where's my daughter?"

"Good afternoon, Mr. Marchington. Samantha had to run out, but she'll return shortly. I came to call, and we are set to decorate the drawing room for Christmas," he explained as he settled on a low sofa near the other man's chair.

"Ah, then it's just us men." Apparently, that delighted him, for he cackled with laughter and grinned wide enough to show that he was missing a few teeth in his lower jaw. "Sam is always nagging me to have visitors, and I'll wager she nagged you about the decorations, so we'll both rout her today, together."

"To be honest, your daughter doesn't nag me. I was simply following through on a promise." If the man was lucid, Cornelius wouldn't know the difference, for he didn't know him that well. "And I want her to trust me." He heaved out a breath. "When we

first met, I'm afraid I didn't make that good of an impression." Why he thought to confess that to her father, he couldn't say.

"She probably didn't like that, the older man said with another grin. "She's got a quick temper and has lost patience of late."

"Yes, well, that's understandable. She has much on her mind."

The major nodded. "It's true. My girl has had a hard time of it. Never was the same when she lost her mother four years ago."

"She mentioned that in passing but didn't speak much on the subject."

"It was a difficult time in her life, losing her mother and her sister on the same day." He tapped a hand on the arm rest of his chair and then pulled the blanket covering his lower half higher up on his person. "I think she's shoved it down so she won't feel hurt again, but I do that to her every day."

"How so?"

His shrug lifted his slight shoulders. "I'm ailing. Must be a nodcock to think I'm not." He tapped a temple with a gnarled finger. "Mind's going more and more." Then his eyes narrowed. "You look like you've seen a fight or two. Brain's going to scramble if you're not careful."

"I'm not too worried about it, but just know your daughter is safe with me."

"Oh, I know it. Girl's positively giddy when she tells me about her outings with you."

"Ah." How interesting. When silence lapsed between them, he hadn't the faintest clue about what to do. "What sort of girl was your daughter?"

“Sharp as a tack and could always hold her own.”

For the next half hour, the older man regaled Cornelius with stories of Samantha and her sister when they were little girls. It was a fascinating insight into her past, and helped him to understand the woman she was.

“Has Samantha always had a heart for charity? She doesn’t speak often of the orphanage.”

“She wouldn’t. No more humble a person out there than my Sam. Says charity shouldn’t be something one brags about, for that isn’t what it’s about, but she has more or less been that way. Always helping in some capacity. Never could bear to see someone suffering.” A slow grin snaked over his face. “That girl would rather go to sleep at night knowing she made someone else’s life better. Some days, I think she would work herself to the bone, sacrifice herself without a second thought if it meant someone else could sleep in peace that night.”

“Somehow, I’ll wager she learned that from you,” Cornelius said in a low voice. Military men were like that. Always sacrificing and giving, never expecting anything in return.

“I’d like to think that, but she has a lot of her mother in her, which makes her difficult to control at times.”

“Women like Samantha aren’t meant to be controlled, Major.” Suddenly, he was humbled to know her. “If you want the honest truth, she’s unlike anyone I’ve ever known.” Every day that went by showed him something else about her that left him gasping for breath in one turn and wanting to praise her from the rooftops with another.

“I expect so. Those types of revelations knock us upside the head and tilt our worlds,

eh?”

“Very much so.”

“Well, my Sam won’t ever complain. Charity work keeps her busy. It eases the burden of being a spinster and having a limp. She’s a real brick of a girl.”

Cornelius frowned. Did the man not know that by having the heart she did, she would always feel guilty about leaving him, and in that way, her life would never be her own? It didn’t matter that she’d gone into that silver cage willingly, there was no escape. “Do things bother her?” Suddenly, he wanted to rescue her from all this and show her how beautiful life could be for her. Truly.

“Don’t know. She doesn’t say as much. Rather ask me about my day.” He rubbed a hand along the side of his face. “I think she’s always wanted to be a mother. That’s why she enjoys spending time at the orphanage. Breaks her heart to see the babes abandoned by their mamas, but this world isn’t kind to the unwed women or ones wed to bounders.” The older man shook his head. “When her sister died, some of her ambition left her. Didn’t want to spend time in society much. Perhaps that’s driven her to charity.”

God, Samantha deserved so much more than she’d been given.

No more was said between them, for she came into the room with apologies on her lips, but interest in her eyes when they told her they’d been having a grand time talking.

“Your fiancé listens well and is respectful. A real solid choice, girl. You did well for yourself,” her father said with a nod.

“Thank you, Papa. I’m glad you approve. I ordered some tea. Cornelius and I will

decorate the room for you.” When she glanced at Cornelius, he made a point to grin and usher to the sofa where he’d been sitting.

“We didn’t say anything bad, of course. Just about how we both are grateful to have you in our lives.”

“How lovely.” When she offered a smile, he was certain his world shifted a bit. “It’s a good thing the two of you are getting along.”

Eventually, the butler brought in a tea service, and Samantha poured out with all the grace of a duchess. It was quite a domestic scene, one in which Cornelius unexpectedly enjoyed far more than he probably should have.

By the time he and Samantha began decorating the drawing room, her father was in full celebration attitude, for he entertained them with embarrassing stories from his younger days that had them both laughing. Cornelius did the same, and more laughter ensued. Never had he laughed or smiled so much that his cheeks and sides hurt, but here he was, indulging in the domestic bliss of a holiday gathering, and it hadn’t made him melancholy at all.

He wiped away a trace of tears at the corners of his eyes. “...and that is why a man should always wear small pants beneath breeches.”

Another round of guffaws followed the conclusion of the story.

The major slapped a knee. “You’re good for the gel, Lord Timelbury. Never heard her laugh so much as she did today. Make sure you keep her in good humor.”

Samantha shook her head. “I’m never disagreeable, Papa.”

Her father snorted. “Sure, my girl.” Then, it was as if a switch flipped inside the man.

He went pale and he glanced between them with confusion. “I want to go lie down. Don’t really care for all this ruckus.”

Some of the gaiety faded from the afternoon.

“All right, Papa. I’ll escort you upstairs.” When she met Cornelius’ eyes, he offered a small smile of support. Clearly, the responsibilities resting on her shoulders were heavy.

A quarter of an hour later, she rejoined him as he finished drinking his tepid tea. He scrambled to his feet as she came into the room, and he had to admit, the simple dress of navy suited her body and set his mind headed into wicked places, especially when his gaze briefly dropped to her bosom. “I should probably leave you to your day.”

“Why?” A frown tugged at the corners of her lips, and all he wanted to do was kiss her again. “You’re welcome to stay.” A blush stained her cheeks. “I wouldn’t mind admiring our handiwork with you by my side.”

Well, damn. If he wasn’t careful, he’d be sucked further into the domestic scene, which could prove dangerous to his peace of mind. “Thank you but that is far too tempting.”

“Why?” When she closed the distance between them, he reminded himself to behave.

It was difficult, so he grinned instead. “Because I’ve rather enjoyed being here with you and your father. It took me back to a simpler time in my own life, one where nothing mattered except who was in my company, where I could almost forgive my own father for being less than I wanted—needed him—to be.”

Why the hell did he feel the urge to share such things with her?

“I’m sorry your parents weren’t the most loving toward you and your sister.” When she drifted close enough to rest a hand on his arm, the floral scent of her teased his nose. Awareness skipped over his skin. “I’m glad you were here today and caught Papa when his mind was sharp.”

“So am I.” Daring much, he tucked an escaped lock of her hair behind her ear then allowed his fingers to drift along her cheek, the side of her neck. “You are fetching in that dress.”

“Such gammon,” she whispered but there was pleasure in her eyes. “It’s a few years old and quite out of style.”

“That doesn’t matter.” He took her hand, raised it to his lips, and then kissed the back. “If I stay, I’ll linger here, which will lead to kissing, and you already know where that can go.” Feeling far too cheeky, he winked.

“As if that is such a bad thing?” But the blush in her cheeks after what they’d already done together was adorable. “Perhaps you’re right, though. I should have a bath in any event while Papa is napping and doesn’t need supervision.”

Immediately, his mind jumped to an image of her lounging in a porcelain tub of rose-scented water with lather from a soap bar clinging to her breasts... Quickly, Cornelius shook his head. “Right. Shall I see you tomorrow, then?”

“If there is time, of course.” She shrugged, but her gaze dropped to his mouth, and damn if interest didn’t shudder through his length. “Your sister sent over an invitation this morning for me to spend the afternoon with her tomorrow.”

“Why the devil would Annabelle do that?”

“Perhaps she heard about our engagement and wants to come to know me.” Those

expressive eyes of her showed a trace of apprehension. "I'm looking forward to meeting her. I suppose if we return early enough you and I can share tea."

"Very well." Oddly enough, he wasn't pleased that his time with her would be cut short. "Barring that, perhaps you and I go on a drive afterward or even have dinner together."

Her whole face lit when she smiled. "I would enjoy that."

"So would I." Surely, he wasn't beginning to fall for her.

That would prove the greatest folly, wouldn't it?

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:10 am

December 21, 1818

For the past hour, Samantha had been going about the shops the Countess of Hazelton, or rather Annabelle as that woman had instructed her to call her.

It seemed the countess heartily enjoyed shopping, for she'd bought a small gift for many people in her life, as the poor footman could attest. The young man followed them from shop to shop and toted her bags and boxes with nary a complaint. Probably because he was halfway infatuated with the young lady, but Samantha kept her own counsel on that.

To be fair, Annabelle was a lovely woman with pretty eyes and light brown hair and rather on the short side. She possessed a confidence that Samantha envied and kept up a steady stream of conversation that meant neither of them were bored.

For her part, Samantha didn't have as much funding as the countess, so she was choosier about what she purchased. After procuring a pair of knitted wool socks for her father, she was now contemplating a simple silver chain for Cornelius' pocket watch, which she had only spied once.

"Oh, that's a fine chain. Who did you have in mind for it?" Annabelle asked with bright eyes and an easy grin curving her lips.

"Uh..." Heat went through her cheeks. "For your brother, actually. Every man can appreciate a new watch chain. I hope."

"Of course they do!" Annabelle linked her arm with Samantha's as they moved about

the crowded shop. "I'll admit, when I found out that my brother was engaged, it took me quite by surprise."

"Why is that? Doesn't he wish to marry?"

"He did at one time, but then a woman broke his heart four years ago, and he hasn't been the same since."

"Oh!" Her eyebrows rose. "He hasn't mentioned anything about it to me and has certainly never told me the story." It would certainly make sense, then, of why he didn't care for the holiday or hadn't married already.

"Well, Cornelius has always kept to himself out of pride, you see." The countess drew her over to a quiet corner where there weren't many people. "Might I ask you a question, Samantha?"

"Of course."

"Do you care for my brother? I'm merely asking because he had his heart broken all those years ago, and I ached for him at that time. But if you don't care for him at all, why are you keeping him trapped in this engagement?" Though her tone of voice was genteel and pleasant enough, there was a hardness to her eyes that brooked no argument.

Samantha's chest tightened. So it had come to this and she needed to face the truth of the matter. "To tell you the truth, I'm not certain what the relationship is."

"How so? Aren't you engaged?"

"Yes, we are, of course." Barely, and he had bedded her, so that must mean their relationship was a tad more than a sham... She shook her head. "I think he only asked

me so my father wouldn't be disappointed. You see, Papa is facing some health challenges, and at the time, Cornelius clearly felt pity for me." Then she frowned. Why was this suddenly so complicated? "But within the past few days, I can't help but wonder if our engagement hasn't changed into some odd, honor thing."

"What does that mean?" The countess seemed as confused as Samantha was.

"It's difficult to know for certain. Your brother is exactly forthcoming about... anything." She was quiet for a few seconds as she thought over her next words. "He has some misplaced desire to protect me from some vague threat currently raging against the men in his club. As well as their families." Though, truth to tell, if a man was going to protect a woman in his life, that was a decent enough excuse. "It's darling, I suppose, but not needed."

"We don't know that, but my brother is quite honorable."

"You are aware of the threat?"

"Oh, yes." The young countess nodded. "My husband is a member and the threat is true." She glanced about the immediate area before continuing. "Lady Stover has grown quite bold over the past several months. For whatever reason, she despises the members of the Rogue's Arcade and wishes to bring them all to harm or even death."

Samantha gasped. "Why hasn't she been arrested for this?"

"She no doubt has many high-ranking people on her side, for her aim is to accumulate wealth and power. For what, no one is certain." Annabelle frowned. "It's quite disconcerting and a bit frightening. Especially since I'm..."

"Yes?" Though she knew, Samantha wanted to hear it from the other lady.

A fierce blush raged in the countess' cheeks. "I'm enceinte ."

A smile came automatically to Samantha's face. "I'm happy for you, Annabelle. Your mother must be over the moon."

"It is difficult to tell with her." A bit of nervous laughter escaped her as the crowds in the shop ebbed and flowed. "She has been quite vocal in telling me that I should start my nursery, especially since she's moved in with Hugh and me."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about it. Once the babe comes along, she will be a changed woman." At least Samantha hoped so.

"Thank you." Annabelle nodded but there was a flush of pleasure in her cheeks. "When I told Cornelius, he had the better reaction."

"He has a good heart, and he adores you, I think." Samantha frowned into the contents of her basket. "Yet you told me, and you hardly know me. Thank you for that."

"I know enough." When Annabelle smiled, her eyes twinkled. "For whatever reason, you have given my brother a bit of light, a bit of his dignity back where it was missing. When he came home from the war and the government turned its back on him, it took a heavy amount of hope from him even if he didn't show it much." She shrugged. "I've seen him grin more since you came into his life than in the whole of this past year. Or rather four years, if I'm honest. That must mean something."

"What, though?" Truly, she was at sixes and sevens regarding the whole thing. "I rather doubt this engagement will last." Would the other woman notice the slip or her insecurities surrounding the sham? "Once the threat to the rogues ends, so will this relationship."

Annabelle snorted. “I wouldn’t be so certain about that. Cornelius has the ability to surprise you.”

“Mmm.” Did that mean he wanted the engagement to become real? Did she? It was something she hadn’t thought about until this very moment. A warmth started in her stomach and spread through her chest. “I don’t know.”

“Well, don’t think about it overly much. The two of you will find your path.” Some of the joy faded from Annabelle’s eyes as apprehension sneaked in. “I can tell you this, though. I’m worried about many things in this moment of life. What if Lady Stover succeeds in her mission in devastating the Rogue’s Arcade? What if something goes wrong with this pregnancy? What if my brother’s demons grow stronger?”

Oh, dear.

“Please don’t worry yourself, Annabelle.” Samantha grasped the countess’ free hand and squeezed the fingers. “All of that is to be expected, and it’s natural to feel such. But I want you to know, I’ll be with you for support if you should need it. No matter what.” Her voice broke, for her engagement was naught but a fiction. “I promise,” she said in a soft voice. Once it ended, could she still retain Annabelle as a friend? Would Cornelius let that happen?

Beyond that, she didn’t wish to go through a period of grief again as she had when her life had changed forever.

December 2, 1814

No. 6 Birch Place

Portman Square

Marylebone, Mayfair

London

The moment she came into the house, she could feel that something was wrong. There was a pall in the air, a sadness, but she didn't quite know why.

"Papa?" It had been a busy year, and she was nearly dead on her feet after helping with the orphanage all day. Then she frowned when two strange men emerged from the back parlor and her father trailed behind with a stricken expression. "Papa, what happened?"

Both of the other men glanced at her with looks of pity before continuing along the corridor and then out of the house.

Apprehension balled in her belly as she reached her father's side. "What is amiss?"

"Come, poppet. There has been news." He drew her into the parlor and then urged her to sit on the low sofa. "One of those men is a constable; the other is a representative of a freight moving company."

"Why were they here?" She couldn't understand what he was trying to tell her.

He sighed and moisture rose into his eyes. "One of his carts, heavily laden with heavy crates and other goods collided with the carriage your mother and sister were traveling in." His voice broke. "They had gone out for some shopping and..."

Icy fear played her spine. "What happened?"

"There was a horrific accident. They were both killed, instantly from what the constable told me." He shook his head, but there was incredulity in this gaze. "The

constable said their bodies were managed; there was much blood at the scene and the carriage nearly destroyed. The owner of the freight company said he would accept all charges, pay for the burials...”

As she stared at her father with dawning horror, his words faded away. A wall of panic and grief welled and crashed over her again and again until she was numb from the information. “Mama and Sarah are dead?”

“Yes. I was taken to the scene, saw for myself before their bodies were taken away. It was quite a ghastly sight.”

“I didn’t have a chance to tell them goodbye.” Never would she be able to talk to her mother or have her gentle presence in her life. “Sarah and I sniped and each other this morning over something silly and dumb. She must have hated me...” Then she dissolved into tears and was inconsolable from that moment.

“I’m so sorry, my girl.” Her father took her into his arms and held her as they cried together.

How could anything ever be the same again?

Present day

“Samantha? Are you quite well?”

The feel of Annabelle’s hand on her arm and the concern in her voice yanked her back into the present. “Yes.” She nodded and gave the other woman what she hoped was a disarming smile. “Just remembering a time in my life that was filled with grief.”

“I’m sorry. I know how that feels.” She led the way to the front of the shop where

they both paid for their items.

Once outside, they paused in front of the shop to wait for the carriage while a few snowflakes drifted down.

“May I tell you a secret?” she asked of the countess.

“Of course.”

Perhaps the other woman reminded her of her own sister in some way, or perhaps she was missing her sister more because of the time of year, but she didn’t want their conversation to end. “The reason for the engagement, outside of making my father happy, was because your brother thought me a thief.” Briefly, she explained about the missing bracelet that belonged to his aunt.

“Oh, dearest.” Annabelle rested a hand on her arm. “I don’t believe Cornelius fully thinks you stole that bracelet. Knowing him, it was merely an excuse to be in your company.”

“Ha!” Samantha snorted. “I am not so certain.” Though their time together yesterday was beyond pleasant. Comfortable even, and she desperately wanted to experience that again. “Perhaps he is only a man, after all, and I am deluding myself.”

The countess’ eyes were kind. “Please don’t give up on my brother. He needs someone, after everything he is battling, someone to be there for him and keep him grounded, and if he has difficulties sharing or showing emotion, just be patient.”

“I promise I won’t give up.” After all, this was the season of miracles, wasn’t it? “Already, I want to help him. I know I can’t take away his demons, but I’ve promised to sit with him in the dark times if he wants me to.”

Annabelle nodded. “Do you have any feelings for him at all?” The hope in her eyes tightened Samantha’s chest. “Sometimes we don’t realize that what we’re feeling for someone might be love in disguise once we’re done denying it, of course.”

“Oh, it’s definitely not love.” Heat slapped at her cheeks. “Cornelius is lovely, of course, but there are complications.” Though they’d spent the last handful of days in each other’s company, and oddly, he was making her braver, encouraging her to see the world differently, none of those things equated to a lifetime or a foundation for a relationship.

“Together, though, you can confront anything. That is what happened with Hugh and me.”

Just as the carriage pulled to a halt at the street in front of the shop, a man rushed over to them on the pavement.

“Miss Marchington, I need a word, please.”

Samantha frowned then gasped as she recognized him. “Mr. Arbuthnot? Truly, there is nothing I wish to discuss with you.” Then she understood what Cornelius meant when he said she was under his protection. “I am engaged now. To Lord Timelbury, so please leave me alone.”

“Your engagement is exactly what I wish to discuss.” There was a particular mania about the man’s face. His green eyes beneath the brim of his top hat were a bit wild. “I am the one you should be engaged to. In fact, you would be better off with me instead of that broken, dull nodcock whose mind is fractured.”

“Lord Timelbury is not broken.” And she would defend him against such a slur until her dying day. “He is everything lovely and honorable, and he is beyond respectful.” Except the time he accused her of stealing that bracelet. Heat anger rose in her chest.

“I would appreciate it if you would stop maligning him.”

Annabelle stood off to the side, watching the scene with rounded eyes.

“Your father gave me permission to court you, and I don’t take someone else swooping in and stealing what is mine lightly.”

“I am not property, Mr. Arbuthnot.” She stopped short of stamping her foot as she would have done as a young woman. “And even if I weren’t engaged, you are not my ideal of a potential husband simply due to the company you keep.”

“You don’t understand.” He dared to come close to her, dared even more to put a hand on her shoulder. “The men of the Rogue’s Arcade are a scourge in London. They are not good men.” His eyes were even more wild. “Soon something big will catch them all, and I don’t want you anywhere near that event. Choose me.”

“No.” Annoyance rose in her chest. If this man thought to have her betray Cornelius, that must mean these people were desperately afraid of the Rogue’s Arcade. “Back away, if you please, and know this. Lord Timelbury is worth twelve of you, and I don’t appreciate being intimidated in public.” When it appeared he wouldn’t leave her alone, she resorted to beating him with her reticule.

Finally, he backed away with an angry flush on his face. “Clearly, you have made your decision and your future is forfeit.” Then he ran off, easily blending with the gathering crowd.

“Good heavens.” Quickly, she ushered Annabelle into the carriage as best she could with her limp.

When they both sagged onto separate benches, the countess glanced at her. “So you said you don’t care about my brother, hmm?” She said with a wink and amusement in

her eyes.

Her lips twitched with a grin. “Do shut up, Annabelle.”

Though they both dissolved into laughter, it couldn’t relieve the worry knotting in her belly from the not-so-veiled threat from her would-be beau. More than ever, she wanted to burrow into Cornelius’ strong arms and hope that he could bring her calm.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:10 am

December 26, 1814

Rogue's Arcade Club

Mayfair, London

It's my damned birthday.

Cornelius slipped into a comfortable winged-back chair near one of the fireplaces at his club and stared, stunned, into the cheerfully dancing flames. He was numb inside with hot, growing anger coming up beneath it. To add insult to injury, he brought the damned letter out of his pocket, unfolded it, and then smoothed it open on his leg, to torture himself by reading it again.

As if he hadn't already memorized the few words.

Dearest Cornelius,

As much as it pains me to do this to you, I'm afraid I must inform you that I cannot marry you today. Yes, we enjoyed a long engagement, and I truly thought you were who I wanted by my side for a lifetime, but I was wrong. I am not strong enough to be with a man haunted by the war to the point of being lost in nightmares. It frightens me too much.

By accident, two months ago, I met the man who turned my world upside down, a man without the problems you struggle with. In a week, I am leaving for Rome where I will marry the Earl of Wycott on his estate just outside the city. To be fair, I am

grateful to you in that you were with my brother when he died on that battlefield, but you have more than fulfilled your promise to him.

Warmest regards,

Angelica

Not exactly the angel he'd thought her. Two days ago, she'd left him standing at the altar in a church. Waiting for her, to wed her, the woman he'd been engaged to through letters since he'd been deployed. When he'd finally returned to England from the war earlier in the year and met with her in person, he'd been absolutely sure she was the woman for him.

His promise to her dead brother aside.

But now, on his birthday, instead of embarking on a honeymoon trip with a new bride, he was drowning his sorrows in copious amounts of brandy at his club because she betrayed him with another man.

How damned unlucky could I be?

"I just heard the news, Timelbury. I'm bloody sorry about that," the Duke of Edenthorpe said as he seated himself in a matching chair next to Cornelius' location. "Though there is nothing I can say that will make any of this better, nor will it heal your battered heart, I will say this. She wasn't the one for you."

"She was going to be my wife," he said in a low voice as he handed over the letter for the duke to read. "For years, I dreamed of the life we would build together, thought that after Prinny rewarded me for actions in the military enough that I could buy property and a townhouse, I'd be a more attractive catch for her."

God, I'm a nodcock.

"There are things in this existence we will never understand. Trust me, I know of what I speak, for I have been engaged to a woman since childhood, and I..." He cleared his throat, frowned at the missive before giving it back. "Well, it's neither here nor there."

Cornelius nodded, for it was well known that the duke hadn't any options and continued to drag his feet about actually wedding his fiancée. "Things are difficult enough with my mind being shattered from the war. Now this. I don't know how I'm going to survive." Already, the nightmares were distracting. If they continued, they would distract from daily life.

And because of them, he'd lost so much.

"Look." Edenthorpe turned toward him. As he met Cornelius' gaze, compassion and understanding clouded his depths. "It doesn't feel like it now, but you'll eventually realize that Angelica's defection had nothing to do with you, and everything to do with her character. Do not ever let anyone make you feel less than worthy because the war left an impression on; as it did to all of us." He remained silent for a few seconds before speaking again. "The woman who is meant for you won't care about any of that. She will accept you as you are, because she loves you, the man who you are at your core. That woman will connect with your soul and will help to give you the peace you've sought every damned year you were in the war."

Cornelius swallowed around the lump of emotions stuck in his throat. "Is that what you believe will happen in your life as well?"

Some of the color drained from the duke's face, but he nodded. "That is the hope, yes."

“What do I do until then, when I can promise you right now that I will never offer up my heart to anyone again.” And he meant it. This betrayal hurt too much.

The duke shrugged. “Keep yourself busy. Check in with all of us at this club if you feel unmoored from reality. We are all experiencing similar battles. Do the most good where you can, and above everything, try not to despair or make yourself into a bitter shell of yourself.”

“In this moment, I choose bitterness. Perhaps those views will change in the future.”

Why the devil would he ever want another woman in his life?

Present day

“Timelbury? Are you with us?”

Blinking rapidly, Cornelius focused on the two men at the table with him at the club. One was the Duke of Broadmoor while the other was the Duke of Edenthorpe. It was odd to see them both at the club these days since they were active with their growing families, and even odder to find them both together. “I’m sorry, what? I was temporarily lost in the past.” In two days, it would be the fourth anniversary of his failed marriage, or rather his marriage that never had the chance to begin. “This time of the year provides some unsavory memories for me.”

“I can well imagine.” Edenthorpe’s expression conveyed compassion. “However, I’m told there is a new woman in your life, one to whom you are engaged. Is that true?”

Heat sneaked up the back of his neck. “I suppose it’s been a bit since I last spoke to you all, but yes. I’m engaged to a Miss Marchington.” As briefly as he could, Cornelius explained what had happened and how the engagement had come about.

Broadmoor grinned. The man might not enjoy leaving his home and he certainly was rarely seen in society due to his own damaged brain from the war, so seeking his counsel was a boon. “All of that is well and good. Many of us have married our wives because those relationships began as false engagements. So tell me this.” He leaned forward in his chair near the fire. “Have you shared kisses with this woman?”

One of Edenthorpe’s eyebrows rose as he too waited on the answer.

“Yes, quite a lot.”

“Ah, good. Now, have the two of you been intimate? That makes all the difference.”

Bloody hell.

There was no sense in lying. “We have.” As succinctly as he could, Cornelius told them what happened before he’d bedded Samantha.

“Right, and after that, you had a messenger sent over to me with a letter explaining about the new threats and the possibility of a leak in this club.”

“Yes.” He nodded. “Have you looked into it?”

“I am in the process of doing so.” There was a hard glint to Edenthorpe’s eyes. “I don’t take these allegations lightly, of course, but we must be absolutely sure. Of late, I’ve felt as if the walls are closing in on us and the club. I am truly worried, for every man beneath this roof is a friend, a brother-in-arms. I want these threats eradicated, but we must be strategic.”

“Then we will have a council of war soon?”

“We will, but it won’t be announced or held in this club.” The duke dropped his

voice. “You will all receive hand-delivered letters with the time and place. Until then, it is business as usual. We don’t want to tip our hand.”

“Agreed.” Broadmoor nodded. “Now, back to Timelbury’s problem. I realize you were jilted nearly four years ago, but it seems to me that you are finding a new way of thinking with Miss Marchington. Yes?”

Slowly, Cornelius nodded. “Oddly enough, I am. She has this way of infiltrating the walls I’ve put up around myself.” He told them of spending time with her and her father, or how she was willing to stand beside him in the darkness. “And recently, there are moments when there is a distinct feeling that I am falling for her.”

Both dukes flashed indulgent grins.

“Good women tend to do that to the best of us,” Edenthorpe said with a wink. “And we all need more people who bring us happiness, Timelbury. If Miss Marchington does that for you, I implore you to keep her close and do whatever you can to hold onto her. You deserve every good thing. It matters not how it came about.”

“And if I may add something?” Broadmoor nodded. “Men like us need a woman who doesn’t mind being our anchor in this world, we need women who makes us feel that everything we did for England was worth it, and they restore our faith in humanity. If your fiancée does that, you would be a complete nodcock not to let yourself go tip over tail for her.” He held Cornelius’ gaze. “Perhaps it’s time to release the unsavory memories and move forward.”

Could he do that? After four years of clinging to them? “Thank you. I will mull over your words and advice.” Already, he knew there was no one quite like Samantha. His sister had come by his home yesterday after shopping with her, and they’d taken tea together. Out in the corridor, Annabelle had told him what had occurred in front of the shops with Mr. Arbuthnot and how Samantha had defended him—Cornelius. It

had both humbled him and encouraged him, and he didn't take that lightly.

Edenthorpe winked. "Make sure you invite us to the wedding, Timelbury. After everything you've done for your fellow club members, we will be glad to support you in any way we can."

"Don't rush my fences, my friend."

Harding House

Manchester Square, Mayfair

London

After meeting with the dukes, Cornelius wished to do something fun for Samantha, something that might make her give him a genuine smile and see him as a man beyond a retired military person with a broken mind.

All week, he'd wanted to take her ice skating, but since it hadn't been cold enough to freeze the Serpentine and the weather had decided to rain today instead of snow, he had to become creative. With the butler's help, the entry hall was waxed and polished within an inch of its life. When it was almost as slippery as ice, he greeted her at the door when she arrived, for they were to share tea and then he would drive her home.

"Hullo, Samantha," he said as he met her at the door, and just seeing her with the black cloak and ever-present bonnet cheered him considerably.

"What are you doing out here?" The slightly lopsided smile she offered had the ability to tilt his world.

"Well, I had you come over because I have something quite different in mind for us

to enjoy before tea.” Not for the first time was he thankful for the engagement that allowed them a modicum of freedom from chaperones and the like. “Please, come in and we will ice skate.”

“I beg your pardon, but what?” The confusion in those gorgeous blue eyes was adorable.

“I’ll show you.” He offered her his crooked arm. “Allow me to escort you upon the ‘ice’.” A snicker followed his words, for he couldn’t quite contain his excitement. “With Hartley’s help, we have transformed the entry hall into a frozen pond of sorts.” As pride swelled his chest, he ushered her inside and winked at his butler as the door closed behind them.

As he looked at the entry hall through her eyes, he was pleased with the result. Potted evergreens lined the hall along with potted ferns. One of the maids had even found two wooden ducks and put them at the far end as if it were truly the Serpentine.

“What is this?” Samantha looked about with rounded eyes. “It’s so pretty, though.”

“Since it has been consistently too warm to freeze the Serpentine, I’ve decided that we shall skate here on this high polished floor.”

“How, though?”

“Please remove your boots while I do the same.” He led her over to a chair, and as soon as she sat, he kneeled in front of her. “Allow me.” While she watched with a mix of surprise and anticipation in her eyes, he unlaced her brown leather half-boots, and once they were off her stocking-covered feet, he quickly toed off his boots. “Ready?” he asked as he held out a hand to her, as gallant as if they were at Hyde Park.

A trace of uncertainty went over her face. “I don’t know if I can do this because of my limp.”

“Nonsense. Just hang on to me and I’ll see you through.” When she put her gloved hand into his, he pulled her into a standing position, and then fitting his lips to the shell of her ear, he whispered, “I won’t let you fall.”

“Thank you.” A blush stained her cheeks, but a ready smile graced her lips when he pulled her over the polished floor, and she glided easily in her stocking feet. Seconds later, she squealed. “Dear heavens, this feels exactly like ice skating!”

“Ah, good. I wasn’t sure if the madcap scheme would work.” Inordinately pleased, Cornelius continued to pull her until they reached the far end of the hall. “Now, watch this.” Somewhat arrogantly, he wanted to swan about and impress her, so he released her hands, took off with a running start, and then slid in his socks over to where the butler stood watching.

And it was exhilarating!

As he turned about, he gestured to Samantha. “Come, sweeting. Get up a bit of speed as best you can then sail along the hall.” It was too late to recall the endearment, but had she noticed? It was too difficult to tell.

But she frowned and looked so distressed as she stood there in her raspberry dress and cloak, that he unexpectedly lost a piece of his heart to her. “That’s just it, Cornelius. I can’t run, not anymore.”

With an uneasy glance at the butler, he hit upon the solution. “Don’t worry your head about it. I’ll take care of it.” Then he slid back down the length of the hall until he reached her location. “I’m going to push you. Do you trust me?”

“Yes. More than most people I’ve met.”

Warm pride rose in his chest. “Good.” Maneuvering behind her, he placed his hands at her hips. “Ready?”

“Yes.”

Was he? For a moment he wondered if he was asking for something far beyond playing around on a polished floor. “Here we go.” Thankfully, he was able to gain traction against the tile, and midway through he was able to push her quite quickly over the length of the floor. The reward of hearing her giggles and laughter ringing off the walls was priceless.

Again and again, he guided Samantha over the floor until they were both laughing together. When his sides hurt, he gestured to the butler. “Hartley, your turn. Call some of the staff out here. It’s time for you to make use of this before the floor is scuffed up again.”

“Truly, my lord?” An odd excitement filled the older man’s expression.

“Absolutely. Call the staff together. Have at it. You have all earned some frivolity.” And if his servants couldn’t enjoy themselves, then what sort of master was he?

“Thank you. I shall summon them this instant.”

“Good man.” He nodded as the butler departed. “Come with me,” he said to Samantha, and with her hand in his, they claimed their footwear. “I want to tell you about the woman who broke my heart.” Yes, he was ready, finally, to share with her.

“What a fine day indeed.” As they climbed the stairs in their stocking-covered feet, she turned her head and smiled at him. “That was a lovely little interlude you did for

me. I thoroughly enjoyed myself.”

“I’m glad.” In her grin, he felt as if he could do anything, could face anything the world might throw at him. “You deserve to do something just because once in a while.” Once in the drawing room, he led her to a low sofa and waited until she’d settled before he did the same.

Samantha removed her bonnet, cloak, and gloves, and when she gazed at him with anticipation, she sighed. “You needn’t tell me if you don’t wish it.”

“I think I should, merely to set it free.” Because the dukes had been correct earlier in the day. Some things had gone past their expiration date, and they shouldn’t weigh him down any longer. “In two days, I’ll reach the fourth anniversary of being jilted at the altar.”

“What? She didn’t tell you until then?”

“I’m afraid not, and she did it by a short letter the vicar handed me upon arrival.” Damn, but that had been singularly embarrassing.

Samantha gasped. “She didn’t even tell you in person?”

“No.” Then he pulled the slip of paper from the pocket of his jacket and gave it to her. “I’ve no idea why I kept this except to torture myself.”

With shaking hands, she unfolded the many-creased letter. As she read, he sat reliving all the emotions he’d had that day. “Oh, dear.”

“Indeed.” Cornelius nodded. “It was my friend’s dying wish on the battlefield that I take care of his sister. We’d corresponded by letter for years. In fact, I’d asked for her hand through a letter, which she told me was the height of romantic.” For the space of

a few heartbeats, he watched her face before he continued. “When I came home to England in early 1814, I felt ready for the next phase of my life, and we made plans to wed. I had no idea she wouldn’t be true to me.”

“Cornelius, listen to me.” As Samantha folded the letter, and it fell easily into its creases, she held his gaze with hers. “This was terrible, to be sure. If it had been me, I would have suffered terribly from a broken heart.”

“And broken trust,” he couldn’t help but add.

“Yes, there is that too.” She nodded. “However, this Angelica must never have loved you at, for not only did she betray your love by running off with another man—and encouraging him before she’d ever told you—but she dismissed the man you are by not accepting you fully.”

“No woman should do that anyway,” he said in a low, choked voice. “My mind—”

“Your mind is sound,” she interrupted with authority in her voice. “The war was a traumatic experience for everyone who took part in it. That is not your fault and should never be held against you.” When she stood, he panicked slightly for fear she’d leave him. Instead, she wandered over to the fireplace, looked at him, and then tossed the letter into the flames.

“What did you do?” Cornelius jumped to his feet, staring as the fire licked at the paper and all too quickly engulfed it.

“I am helping you by freeing you from the past.” When she faced him, she didn’t look at him with pity or disgust. Instead, unless he missed his guess, pride and gratitude shone from the blue depths of her eyes. “Just because Angelica didn’t understand or appreciate the man you are, it doesn’t mean the rest of us don’t see the wonderful person you are.”

“I rather doubt I’m wonderful. I’ve done too many horrible things while at war and—”

“Stop.” She closed the distance between them and took his hands in hers. “Who else but you would give me ice skating in a townhouse simply because the Serpentine hadn’t frozen? Who else but you would decorate my father’s drawing room to give an old man a Christmas like the ones he remembered?” When tears welled in her eyes, he wanted to drop to his knees and say words he never thought he’d utter again in his life. “And who else except you would offer me—a veritable stranger—his protection merely because there might be trouble with his fellow club members?”

“Anyone could have done those things,” he said in a barely audible whisper.

“Perhaps, but how about this? Who else but you could kiss me in such a way that I forget my own name and would willingly give up many things in order to experience more of them?” As she smiled, he couldn’t help but stare at her mouth. “My point is that you are a man worth knowing, and a pox on Angelica. She had the chance to marry you, but since she gave you up, someone else will have that joy.”

Except he’d told her more than one time that their engagement wasn’t real and wouldn’t last. Still, she had that much faith in him? He’d be an idiot of the first order if he didn’t marry her right now, yet could he make that ultimate sacrifice without being hurt if something went awry? After all, no feelings had been exchanged between them.

Not knowing, he tugged her into his arms with a soft growl then he crushed his lips to hers, kissed her with enough possession that perhaps she could discern what it was he tried to convey without needing to find the words. For the first time in years, he felt as if some of the self-loathing he carried had slipped from his shoulders, and it was remarkable.

He didn't know what his future held, but for the time being, there was her and there was him, and he would enjoy wherever that path led.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:10 am

December 23, 1818

“There is quite a crush here tonight,” Samantha whispered to Cornelius as they sat in a couple of chairs with gilded legs and mauve crushed velvet cushions. He had been invited to attend a musicale evening hosted by a viscount and viscountess and had asked her to accompany him.

“Agreed. My mother should have attended tonight but she and Aunt Beatrice have far too much to do since they’re usurping Annabelle’s dinner party with a rout tomorrow night.” He huffed as he glanced about the music room at the people still milling around. “I think she assumes our engagement will flounder, and she wants to have a lady waiting in the wings so to speak she can throw at my feet.”

Samantha snickered. “She is determined to see you wed soon, and frankly, I don’t think she cares for me in this role.” Yet ultimately, it didn’t matter, for after Twelfth Night, they would find some reason to break the false engagement. The thought of Cornelius with another woman on his arm or in his bed sent chills down her spine and heated jealousy through her chest.

Yesterday, after she and Cornelius had talked about him being jilted by his former fiancée, they’d kissed, and since the servants had been occupied for a time with the makeshift ice skating in the entry hall, she’d let him carry her away with passion. Not that they’d gotten up to scandal—much—and even though she would have liked to have been bedded again, the only bit of naughtiness they’d indulged in had been a few caresses and pleasurable fondling before observing propriety again.

What sort of woman did that make her since she lived for those touches?

“How can you tell? My mother doesn’t care for anyone.” He leaned closer to her, and the heat of him sent a wave of awareness over her skin. “I’d hoped Annabelle announcing her pregnancy would have occupied Mama’s attention, but that woman is like a dog with a bone.”

“Perhaps she only wishes for her children to find happiness where she didn’t have any,” Samantha whispered back. His sandalwood and citrus scent teased her nose and reminded her of the times they’d spent alone together.

“Clearly, you don’t know her, for when you do, you’ll find she simply likes to criticize. It’s her greatest talent, I think.”

She pulled slightly away from him but couldn’t help her budding grin. “For shame, Cornelius, maligning your mother like that.”

His own lips twitched. “You’ll see.”

How would that even be possible unless he meant at the rout tomorrow night instead of an extended future. Either way, her smile faded beneath the weight of worry. Did she want this engagement to be of the permanent kind? And if so, how to convince him of the fact? Since there were no answers, Samantha tried to shove the thoughts away as the recital began.

Then he winked. “However, what I’m seeing of you now in that green velvet gown, dear God, Samantha, you are beautiful.”

She ducked her head as heat went through her cheeks. “Thank you. I have a couple of gowns fitting for the holiday season and didn’t wish to repeat wearing them, so Annabelle gave me the loan of this one.”

“I’ll have to remember to thank her, for it suits you wonderfully well.” Once more, he

put his lips near to her ear and whispered, “In fact, I wouldn’t mind removing you from that gown in order to do very wicked things to you.”

She gasped, but there was pleasure in her chest from his flirting. “Lord Timelbury, behave!”

A few people around them tittered or glared, depending on their mood.

The Viscount of Brookshire went to the head of the room. He tugged at the bottom of his festive waistcoat of red satin. His head of thick, gray hair glimmered beneath the candlelight. “Thank you for coming this evening. My wife and I are glad to be among friends. Tonight, we’ve assembled a good pool of talents musicians and singers, so settle in and enjoy.” He grinned at the company. “Refreshments will be served in the corridor outside the room at any time you wish.”

A few pianists ranged from outstanding to mediocre. Then there was a flutist followed by a vocalist. Then the viscount returned

“Unfortunately, one of our singers didn’t arrive tonight, so there is a hole in the schedule. Unless there is someone in the audience is who vocally or musically inclined, we will pause for a brief intermission.”

Whispers and snatches of conversation circled through the room.

Cornelius glanced at her. “Do you know how to play the pianoforte,” he asked her in a whisper.

“I do, but I am not nearly as accomplished that I want to play in front of a room full of strangers,” she whispered back. “Can you?”

“Sadly, no, but I do possess a skill I haven’t told you about.” Slowly, he stood. “I

believe I can assist in this manner.” Then, before she could question him, he left her side, but she didn’t understand why.

“Wonderful! Thank you for your kindness, Lord Timelbury,” the viscount said with an easy and grateful smile. “You may begin at any time.”

Cornelius cleared his throat. “I appreciate that, and bear with me. It has been some time since I’ve last done this.” Good natured chuckles moved through the room. But when he sought out Samantha’s gaze and locked eyes with her, he gave her a grin that sent a host of heated flutters through her lower belly. “Tonight, I’ll sing Largo al factotum from Rossini’s *The Barber of Seville* .”

The second the first words of the aria burst upon the air, Samantha was enthralled. His baritone soared and dipped, and there was such power in his voice that even the people at the back of the room could no doubt hear. As he sang, Cornelius punctuated the song with hand movements and expressions, so even though she didn’t understand Italian, it didn’t matter, for with the dips and sways and emphasis he used, the gist of the song was understood.

By the time the aria ended, there were a few seconds of profound silence before the room burst into wild applause, with a few people calling for another song.

As for Samantha, she stared in shock at the man she thought she knew. Why had he not told her that he could sing? The words had wrapped themselves around her like the most intimate of caresses and left her with a longing for something deep in her soul she didn’t quite understand.

He raised a hand for silence then gave the room at large a wide grin. “Because you asked so nicely, I will now sing *While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night* , since it is the Christmastide season.”

During the performance, Cornelius once more met her gaze with his, and for the remainder of the song, he kept his focus solely on her. She couldn't look away, not that she wanted to, and they communed without conversation as he sang the familiar Christmas carol, which had been one of the songs her father had entertained her with in recent years, until his mind failed, and he could no longer remember it. A piece of her heart flew into his keeping for no other reason than she was proud of him and delighted he had this talent.

By the time he was finished, tears overflowed her eyes and spilled onto her cheeks.

But he wasn't done with the evening. Oh, no.

As the applause faded, he held up a hand. "I appreciate the support. As I said before, I has been some years since I last performed like this, but I now remember why I adore singing so much. Thank you for letting me indulge in this passion of mine." After throwing a glance about the room, his gaze once more fell to her. "However, I would be remiss on this night if I didn't at least mention this. Christmastide, as I have been recently reminded, is a time to gather family around us and to show our gratitude for them." When he grinned, shivers of need twisted down her spine. "It is a time to remember others more unfortunate than ourselves. If anyone here tonight should want to donate to a worthy cause, please send coin or supplies to Barrett Street Orphanage, or seek out my fiancée Miss Marchington after the evening's entertainments conclude—" he pointed her out and the heat in her cheeks intensified— "because she works for that charity and is taking donations. In fact, that is how we met."

Everyone in the room stared at her.

Oh, it was quite embarrassing, and she gave a tiny wave and nod to the people around her that promised funding, but above everything, she was grateful someone like Lord Timelbury with his connections would draw attention to the plight of the orphanage.

When the brief intermission occurred, separating the halves of the musicale evening, Samantha immediately left the room, for a crowd of well-wishers crowded around Cornelius. She required time and space to compose herself after being singled out as well as discovering her false fiancé had a talent for singing.

She fled to the host's darkened library. It was as good a place as any to compose herself. A single candle guttered in a silver holder on one of the tables. Shelves full of books lined the walls, but unfortunately, she couldn't read the spines in the dim light and neither did she want to, for that would mean a distraction from what she'd just heard.

Why hadn't she seen it before? Possibly because she'd never had cause to recognize the signs since this had never happened to her, but there was every possibility she was in love with Cornelius. Confused beyond reason, Samantha drifted to a window between two tall shelves. After unlatching it, she pushed open the panel and breathed in the sharp, cool winter air. At least it helped to cool her overheated skin.

I think I truly do love him.

It continued to be a revelation.

"Finally, I've found you." The soft snick of the door closing followed Cornelius' interruption.

Samantha didn't turn around. Of course he found her. "I apologize for hiding. I didn't mean to be away for so long, but I needed some air."

"No matter. It's only been about ten minutes, but I brought you some champagne." The low tone of his voice grew stronger as he approached her location. "The intermission is over, and everyone has returned to the music room, but there are plenty of people who wish to meet you once the performances end."

“I see.” Slowly, she faced him. “All because you publicly told everyone we’re engaged.”

“So I did.” When he flashed a grin, flutters once more erupted in her lower belly.

“Why?” In the dim light, she met his gaze but couldn’t read the emotions therein.

“Why not? I’m proud of you.” When he gave her a champagne flute, their hands brushed, and even though they both wore gloves, the connection between them was still strong. “And the charity needs more visibility.”

“I think so too.” As she took refuge in the bubbly wine, she giggled when the bubbles tickled her nose. “Thank you for bringing awareness to the orphanage. They are always in desperate need of funding. The world is a harsh place for women with no choices.”

He nodded. “You’re welcome.” After sipping his own champagne, he grinned. “Why do you stare at me as if you’ve never seen me before?”

“Why didn’t you tell me you could sing?”

“It didn’t come up in regular conversation, and what with everything else, there wasn’t a need to share that information.”

That made sense. “Well, you have a beautiful voice. So elegant and rich. I was swept away on your words. They burrowed under my skin, swept through my soul and were almost cleansing.” She took another sip of her bubbly wine. “It reminded me of when my father used to sing. Thank you for that connection.”

“It was my pleasure.” Quickly, he finished his champagne and then relieved her of her flute. He rested both of them on a nearby table. “Come with me.”

“Where?”

Taking her hand, he led her to one of the low leather sofas then he sat and tugged her down with him, arranging her legs so that she straddled his lap. “Here.”

Her pulse pounded hard in her ears. “What are you about?” Not that she cared. Being back in his arms was her idea of heaven.

“Showing you how much I appreciate you.”

“For what?”

He shrugged. In the dim light, the healing bruises on his face were hardly noticeable. “Being there for me when I need you. Accepting me with no questions asked. Letting me be myself without feeling the need to hide my imperfections.” It was the most honest thing he’d ever shared with her, and her eyes prickled with tears. “You have no idea how much all of that is refreshing even as I work to keep you safe.”

“From a threat that hasn’t truly made itself known against me.” Knowing exactly where she wanted the evening to go, Samantha quickly divested herself of her gloves. They fell to the sofa cushion next to him.

“That doesn’t mean it’s not real, and...” His voice broke as he trailed his fingers up and down her sides. “I couldn’t live with myself if something were to happen to you,” he finished in a broken voice.

“Oh, Cornelius, I—” Her words were stemmed when he claimed her lips, just as he’d done the first day they’d met. It was a tender kiss with emotions behind it she didn’t quite understand but they mirrored perfectly what she felt as well. Tears prickled the backs of her eyelids, and she kissed him back.

How easily she was lost in him.

In them together after what had already been a wonderful night.

Each meeting of lips, every touch and caress, each glide of tongues sent her closer to that sought-after edge before any clothing had been removed, which was odd because he'd yet to touch her intimately. Perhaps that didn't matter, for if fate had put them together, there was a reason why. His sandalwood and citrus teased her nose and drove her further onward in the quest to claim him as hers.

I want this man as my husband, as a real partner instead of playing at this bit of fiction.

It was impossible, wasn't it? Especially since he hadn't given her even a hint of the same feelings? That didn't matter either. Need and desire twisted down her spine. She couldn't have enough of him. What had begun as a ploy to make the holiday season happy for her father—and for him to discover if she truly was a jewel thief—had grown, little by little, and had the potential to become a romance of a lifetime.

Please tell me you want that too.

But there were no words needed. Not truly. After tugging her skirting free of her legs, she lifted onto her knees, and holding his gaze, she slowly drew the bodice of the green velvet gown downward, and as he watched with desire darkening his gray eyes, she continued until her breasts were bared. The coolness in the air immediately tightened her nipples and she shivered, for she wanted his hands, his mouth on her person, warming her.

His chuckled reverberated within her chest as he wrenched off his own gloves. Only then did he take those globes in his hands. “When did you become such a tempting tease?”

“The company I keep is exceedingly scandalous, I think.” When she leaned into him, he sucked one of the erect nipples into his mouth, and she sighed.

Exquisite sensation washed over her the longer he played with her breasts or teased the sensitive buds. For a distraction, she nuzzled the crook of his neck, nibbled a line of kisses beneath his jawline. The rasp of his stubble enhanced the desire already ricocheting through her body, and she shivered.

“How much time do we have until the musicale ends?” She wanted to feel him moving inside her, wished to have his thick length in her palm, taste him on her tongue. In short, she wanted him in every way a woman could have a man, because she hadn’t been afforded enough of that the last time they were together carnally.

“Perhaps twenty minutes?” His eyes glittered with unreadable emotion. “Clearly you wish to get up to scandal, at least a bit, and I’m completely willing to lend my support.” With a lick to the side of her neck, he whispered, “I like this amorous side of you.”

“Something about your singing voice has apparently set me off.” As if she had all the leisure time in the world and they weren’t in their host’s library where anyone could come upon them, she manipulated the folds of his cravat. As soon as skin was somewhat bared, she pressed her lips to it and laughed when his muscles clenched and he dug his fingers into her hip.

“Bloody hell, Samantha.” But he didn’t bid her nay in the explorations.

“Mmm.” It took next to no time to manipulate the buttons of his frontfalls, and when his engorged length sprang free, she sighed. “You are truly a gorgeous man.”

He snorted. “You would say that about anyone with rampant equipage and you in this mood, I think.” Teasing threaded through the words as he caught a hand into her hair

and plucked out a few pins until the mass tumbled down her back.

“You are the only man I have been with, and you are the only man I...” Allowing her words to trail off due to confusion and a shyness at confessing her feelings, she shrugged. “Well, let’s just say I have wished for this since we came together the last time.”

“Who am I to say you can’t have it?” He followed the question by rolling one of her nipples until she moaned with pleasure.

“Cheeky man.” Delighting in the freedom he allowed her, she kissed his lips. The scrape of his clothing against her sensitive nipples only heightened her need. “What should I do, I wonder?”

“This teasing will truly be my death.” When he delved a hand through her skirting and then between her thighs, she shook with anticipation, for that was where she’d wanted him all along. “Let’s see how much you can endure before you fly.”

“To be honest, it might not be much since thinking about you in this capacity has already put me on edge.” The moment he spread her open and found that tiny nubbin, Samantha shuddered. Soon those feelings of being undone would overtake her.

“Your honesty is refreshing. There is something comforting knowing where a man stands with you.” He claimed her lips and at the same time worked that swelling button at her center with various levels of friction until she squirmed. With each pass, her heartbeat raced and her breathing labored.

With a hum of encouragement, she yanked his shirt tails from the waist of his evening breeches then shoved her hands beneath his shirt. The rasp of that hair on his chest against her palms only increased the sensations pinging wildly through her. Naked or half-dressed, it didn’t matter. They were together in the moment, come what may.

For long moments, they communed with kisses and touches. Then the unrelenting pressure that stacked inside her broke. Heated waves of pleasure caught Samantha up in their vortex, and she gave herself over to them. A keening cry of surprise and enjoyment ripped from her throat despite her efforts in stifling them.

“Do you know how fortunate I am?”

“What? Why?”

He held her gaze. “Because you are beautiful when you find release,” he whispered then kissed her again. “But as much as I adore looking my fill at your breasts, we need to put our clothing to rights.”

“You won’t couple with me tonight?” If there was a slight whine to her voice, she couldn’t help it. That longing deep inside her body hadn’t been assuaged with this heated interlude.

“Perhaps if we weren’t here.” Cornelius kissed her again, lingered at her lips for the space of a few heartbeats. “However, I do want you to meet some of those potential donors. You have worked so hard for the orphanage already. It would be lovely if they were to have a happy Christmas.”

If she wasn’t already in love with him, that would have done it. “Thank you. It means so much to me that you did this.”

“How could I not?” With one last brush of his knuckles along her nipple, he helped her off his lap. “You rejoin the guests first. I’ll follow once certain... things have settled.”

A giggle escaped her. “Perhaps next time I can finally handle your equipage.”

“Most assuredly,” he said in a barely audible voice, but when she glanced at him again, he was intent on fixing his mussed cravat.

Promising herself she would tell him what she was coming to realize tomorrow at his mother’s rout, Samantha turned away and righted her own clothing.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:10 am

December 14, 1818

Christmas Eve rout

Harding House

Manchester Square, Mayfair

London

God, why am I so nervous?

Cornelius paced the space between the window in his bedchamber and the door to the corridor. Burton had helped to finish his toilette nearly a half hour past. Any moment his mother's rout would begin. Even now, she was probably meeting and receiving guests by his Aunt Beatrice's side. Tamping the urge to shove a hand through his hair, he continued to pace.

The two women had spent the bulk of the day trying to outshine each other on how many tasks they'd completed, and from the snatches of conversation he'd heard in the corridor from the servants, they were competing against each other on who had the most stunning gown for this evening's event. They'd make him insane soon if they didn't find something else to occupy their attention.

When the valet came back into the room, he frowned. "Why are you still here? I thought you would have gone downstairs to help with reception?"

“That is exactly why I don’t want to go down.”

“I can understand that. Mrs. Harding is in quite the mood,” Burton said with a laugh. “On the other hand, both your mother and your aunt look lovely tonight. It has been a while for both of them since they probably felt vital within the ton .”

“True.” Cornelius wandered over to the small round looking glass that hung over the wash basin in one corner of the room. He checked the knot of his cravat, smoothed gloved fingers over a lapel of his evening tailcoat, adjusted a ruby stick pin in the folds of his cravat. That jewel matched the crimson satin waistcoat that was embroidered with swirls of golden embroidery. Everything was as it should be.

“Yet you still linger here.” Burton’s frown deepened. “What are you afraid of? Have you had another day terror?”

“I haven’t, thank God, but...” How could he explain to his friend what he was only beginning to realize? “I, uh... I’m trying to avoid going down to postpone seeing Miss Marchington.”

“Why?” The valet’s bafflement was genuine. “Have the two of you argued?”

“No, of course not. Things between us are going extremely well.” When he remembered what had happened between them last night at the musicale evening, interest shivered through his shaft. He would have done just about anything to have coupled with her in that library, but he had been afraid of declaring himself prematurely as well as being found out by their host. And so that moment of connection had passed. “I just don’t know...”

What? If what he was beginning to feel for her was real? Or was he fearful of what might happen if he threw caution to the wind and let himself fall the rest of the way?

“Well, none of your questions will be answered if you hide yourself up here.” Burton peered at him with narrowed eyes. “Can I guess at the source of your unease? Do you suddenly wish your false engagement were real?”

Did he?

Ignoring the heat rising on the back of his neck, Cornelius shrugged. “I don’t know.” Except, that wasn’t far from the truth. Each time he found himself in her company, her bravery inspired his own, and why shouldn’t he attempt to court her within the engagement?

“Well, allow me to add this in the event it helps you.” Burton grabbed a rejected length of silk that had been the first attempt at a cravat this evening. “I have been in your employ since you returned to England when you retired from the military. And in that time, I have seen you devastated by a broken engagement, laid low by nightmares, treated less than honorably from various people in the ton due to you being a former soldier, beaten down mentally by your mother for being less than what she wanted.”

“What is your point, man?” But he could guess.

“At no time in the past four years or so have I ever seen you actually happy, and what is more, you have laughed more this month than you have in a string of months. Miss Marchington did that.” The valet pinned him with a look. “The woman has certainly made an impression on you, and if you’re honest with yourself, she has also changed your outlook.”

There was nothing to deny in that statement.

Slowly, Cornelius nodded. “I’ll admit, I have hope again where that hasn’t been evident since Angelica’s betrayal.” It was mind-boggling that the woman made the

difference, and Samantha was loads different from his previous fiancé. Now he understood why a certain vibrancy had been lacking in that old relationship. Ever since Sam had come into his life, everything had gone upside down. “I almost hesitate to look forward to what comes next for fear everything will collapse.”

“Of course, but consider this. If you don’t have a serious conversation with her that comes from your heart, nothing will move forward.” Burton laid a hand on his shoulder. “If you truly fancy this woman, if you can see a life with her, then you owe it to yourself to do something about it.”

“And if she isn’t thinking along the same line as me?”

“Then at least you’ll know.” He gave Cornelius’ shoulder a shove. “Go down. Do the pretty with your mother and aunt. Flirt madly with your fiancée. Enjoy yourself. Lord knows you’ve done precious little of that these days.”

“Perhaps you’re right. Thank you, Burton.” With a nod, he left the room and then wandered downstairs. Already, people were milling about the drawing room doors, but he continued to the ground floor where his mother and aunt were just greeting the stragglers.

“I’d begun to wonder if you would show your face,” his mother said by way of greeting as she looked him up and down. “However, you are quite handsome tonight, so I’ll forgive your tardiness.”

“Oh, well thank you for that.” It was difficult to keep the sarcasm from his voice, but he took one of her hands and kissed the back. “You are quite striking yourself tonight, Mama. That color suits you.” The copper taffeta gown she’d chosen was perfect for her and had been set off by a golden necklace that featured large oval-shaped emeralds. “Be careful or you might attract a second husband tonight.”

“Perish the thought, boy.” But she smiled, and he stared. When was the last time he’d seen his mother happy or amused?

“Do hush, Cornelius, and leave your mother alone. She’s worked hard on this rout.” His aunt bussed his cheek. “Such a handsome boy.”

She was such a dear, and he kissed her hand as he’d done for his mother. “Thank you, Aunt Beatrice. And you are absolutely gorgeous in silver.” It didn’t escape his notice that both ladies had chosen metallic colors for the evening. In everything, they were truly competing.

“Thank you, dear.” His aunt brushed her fingertips over her necklace in silver with small, square-shaped rubies. “I’ve always found colors of moonlight to be flattering.”

“You two should go upstairs since everyone is gathering. Hartley can manage in showing late arriving guest upstairs.”

His mother harrumphed. “Your sister hasn’t come yet.”

Oh, dear. “I’m sure Annabelle and the earl will be here shortly.” No doubt his mother wished to show off to her friends that her daughter had snagged an earl for a husband.

Though, if he were his sister with a new husband on her first Christmas Eve together with him, he’d find something naughty to entertain himself with before arriving.

Aunt Beatrice smiled. “I’m going upstairs. Can’t have our guests thinking we’ve abandoned them, and Cornelius, perhaps you can regale the men later with war stories.”

Why the devil would he want that? Remembering anything about the war was dreadful enough without having the general public thinking everyone who served was

a bloody hero on a lark.

His mother's lips formed a tight line. "I'd rather Cornelius mingle with some of the eligible ladies we have invited."

Aunt Beatrice snorted. "Enough of that. Your son has a perfectly lovely fiancée already. Best make your peace with that." As she moved up the staircase, his mother followed at a more docile pace, for of course she couldn't have Aunt Beatrice gaining more popularity with the guest than she garnered.

Once the guests lingering on the lower level saw the two hostesses heading up to the drawing room, they eventually made their way upstairs as well. He was about to follow them but then he was hailed by a soft, dulcet voice, and he slowly turned around to find Samantha coming toward him.

"You can strike me dead with a feather; you are simply a beautiful vision in red tonight."

Damn, but she was lovely. The gown in scarlet satin demanded anyone close to pay attention to her. The low bodice was lined with two inches of white rabbit fur. It also trimmed the bottom hem and swept along the floor with the elegance of a queen's wardrobe. Clear beads sparkled on the skirting as if a merry elf had scattered stars over the fabric. A small cluster of red rosebuds had been pinned into her upswept hair. Tiny curls clung to her neck and nape, and he couldn't wait to kiss those rogue curls. White opera-length satin gloves covered most of her arms while red satin slippers peeked from beneath the hem of her gown.

The only thing missing was jewels, and why shouldn't she have sparkling gemstones around her neck, wrists, and hanging at her ears? If anyone deserved them, it was her. Was it too late to procure a parure to gift her with on the morrow? Quite possibly it was, so that would need to wait a bit. Drat his eyes for not properly preparing.

“That is quite the best reaction a woman can garner, I think.” But it was the pleasure in her blue eyes that made him stare even longer, for there was no doubt she looked forward to the evening. When she closed the distance between them and stood at the foot of the stairs, she offered a hand, which he took with alacrity. “You are by far the most handsome man I’ve seen in ages.” As she swept her gaze up and down his form, he swore he felt as if she’d caressed him. “I do adore a man dressed for evening activities.” Then she lifted a hand and brushed a shock of his hair away from his brow. “You will command feminine interest tonight, so your mother will be pleased.”

“A pox on my mother,” he said in a low voice then placed a kiss on the back of her hand. “I am your fiancée and quite off the market.” Would that give her a hint on how he was feeling? Had he put enough possession into his voice so that she would know?

A pretty blush stained her cheeks. “Well, if you meet someone better than me, you may consider yourself free to pursue her.”

He frowned. Did that mean she didn’t want him like he wanted her? Too much a coward to ask, he took her hand. “I am content with what I have now. Come upstairs. I wish to introduce you to everyone I can.”

Except the moment they gained the second floor, he whisked her into the butler’s pantry which was across from the dining room and catty-corner to the drawing room.

“What are you about this time?” she asked with a grin curving her lips.

“I suddenly realized I can’t go another moment tonight without stealing a kiss.” Then he swept her into his arms and claimed her lips in a kiss meant to convey what was being etched into his heart that he was too fearful to put into words. Moments went by as he willfully lost himself in the glory of her, and when he finally pulled away, his world went tip over tail as she smiled. “After dinner tonight, I would very much like to usher in Christmas with you.” He lowered his voice and put his lips to the

delicate shell of her ear. “Preferably in bed with that gown pooled on the floor.”

When she gasped, he chuckled. “I think that would be a fine way to ring in Christmas day. My father will be blissfully in dreamland, probably is there already if you want the truth.” She laid a palm against the side of his face. “It is good to see you so wonderfully playful and confident.”

“I’ll wager that is largely due to you.” Why couldn’t they both just sneak upstairs to his bedchamber and pass the remainder of the night? In her arms perhaps he’d find the words that had evaded him thus far.

“Stop. Such gammon. You always had it inside you.”

“Hmm.” And he kissed her again.

Seconds later, the sound of fabric tearing reached his ears.

“Oh no!” Samantha glanced down, and in the candlelight coming from the sconces in the corridor beyond, she frowned. “My hem is torn. You must have accidentally stepped on it.”

“Can you mend it? It’s a beautiful gown. I’d hate for you to lose part of that rabbit fur trim.”

She laid a hand on his arm as she inspected the hem. “I should be able to.” As she released the skirting, she peered up at him. “Let me find the ladies retiring room and a sewing box. Your mother probably has it set up in the downstairs parlor.” When she smiled, he thought he might go mad if he couldn’t possess her right then. “Go mingle and keep your mother company. I’ll join you in perhaps a quarter of an hour. By then all the guests should be here.”

“And if there is dancing? Will you save me one?”

“You know why I can’t dance.”

“I didn’t say it would be with the party, now did I?” he asked with a wink. Then he kissed her and moved out of the butler’s pantry. “See you soon.”

She nodded and moved toward the stairs.

A few moments after he entered the drawing room, he was immediately beset by two of the men from the Rogue’s Arcade. Both the Duke of Strathfield and the Earl of Hedgecomb wore the requisite dark evening clothing demanded by society, but they were as different from each other as night and day. Where the duke was broad of shoulder with a solid form, dark hair, and walked with the help of a cane, the earl was tall, blond, was thinner which had landed him the nickname of scarecrow. They were also some of the only members that hadn’t yet been matched and married over the years.

“It’s good to see a couple of friendly faces,” he said as he shook their hands. “Thank you for coming.”

Strathfield nodded. “Twinsfield and Aldren said they might come out if they can sneak away from their own familial celebrations.”

“That would make the evening festive.” And might delay the plans he’d just made with Samantha.

The earl glanced around the immediate area. “Where is your fiancée? I’m keen to meet her, for I’m not sure she’s real.”

Heat crept up the back of Cornelius’ neck. “She’s real and just repairing a hem. No

doubt she'll come in soon." Around them conversation and laughter filled the air. There was quite a crush of people, and from all accounts it seemed his mother's rout was a success.

"Say, Timelbury, you have the look of a man supremely satisfied with his life." The duke grinned and there was a cunning twinkle in his eyes. "Never say your false engagement is becoming all too wanted?"

"Perhaps." There was no use in denying it. "However, just now my mind is confused. I just don't want to make the wrong decision a second time."

"I'm afraid I don't know your full history," the earl said, "but if an engagement didn't come to fruition before, there was something wrong with the match. The fact you are fretting about this one bodes well, don't think?"

"Let us hope so." As they talked, Cornelius kept his focus on the doors, but Samantha never arrived. Surely it wouldn't take this long to mend a slight tear on a hem. After another quarter of an hour of conversation, his nerves started to crawl, and knots of worry pulled in his gut. "I'm going to look for her. Something doesn't feel right."

The duke nodded. "We shall come with you. I'm not interested in doing the pretty with anyone tonight, and perhaps we can find some brandy afterward."

When she wasn't located anywhere on the lower level, his worry grew into a full-blown panic. Surely, she hadn't left. She'd seemed enthusiastic for his plans to usher in Christmas. Hartley was nowhere to be found either, but that wasn't a surprise since he was probably directing the staff in food and drink, but when he and his friend wandered toward the entry hall, he cursed beneath his breath, for stuffed into the narrow closet was a footman. His legs and feet stuck out across the floor and in the shadows, he had been easily missed. What was more, the front door to the house gaped open, admitting blasts of cold air.

“What the hell?” Dashing over to the man, he yanked him out of the closet. Then finding the man unconscious, he kneeled at his side, tapping the younger man’s cheeks. “Wake up!”

“Easy, Timelbury,” the duke warned. “Something dire must have happened.”

Again, he tapped the footman’s cheeks. When the man came to, he immediately demanded to know what occurred to see him stowed in a closet.

“A large man dressed in evening clothing came to the door. There was a closed carriage waiting at the curb. I thought he was a guest so let him into the house.” The footman put a hand to his head. “He apparently recognized Miss Marchington, but she wasn’t happy to see him.”

Cornelius frowned. “How so?”

The footman shrugged. “She argued with him when he demanded that she go with him.”

“What?” All three men exclaimed at the same time.

“Who was this man?” Hedgecomb questioned as he went to the door and wrenched the wooden panel open.

“She referred to him as a Mr. Arbuthnot. They argued again and she kicked him in the shin when he tried to take her arm.”

At least she’d gotten in a bit of hurt to the other man. “Why did she ultimately go with him? Samantha doesn’t care for the man.”

The footman nodded. “He said if she didn’t then she would never see her father

again, that they had him and were holding him hostage. Miss Marchington argued again; she was quite incensed. Got off a good punch to his cheek.”

“What happened then?” the duke wished to know.

Slowly, the footman scrambled to his feet. “Well, by this time, she was getting mouthy. Before I could intervene, another man came to the door. A friend of Mr. Arbuthnot’s I’ll wager. The first man dared to lay a hand on Miss Marchington, gave her a right proper hook. Said they had to hurry and meet a countess in Hyde Park. Next thing I know, she’s slumped in his arms, not moving. I tried to get to her, but the other man slammed the butt of a pistol into the back of my head. Don’t remember anything after that until I woke up here on the floor.”

“Dear God.” The urge to cast up his accounts assailed him, and when Cornelius nearly collapsed from fear, the earl stuck a hand beneath his arm and yanked him to his feet. “She’s been kidnapped.” Ice cold fingers of horror gripped his insides.

The duke took immediate command. “Let us think about this in a logical manner, for nothing will be gained with hysteria.” He bounced his gaze between Cornelius and the earl. “Someone needs to send a footman over to Miss Marchington’s home. See if her father has truly been taken. Somehow, I don’t believe it. If he is there, I’ll send one of the men from the club over to stand guard. And someone summon the butler. This footman needs a lie down in the case he has suffered concussion.”

Having something to occupy his mind was a good thing. “Right.” Cornelius nodded. “John can lie down in the library. I’ll summon Harley from there.” Then he looked at the duke. “I can’t lose her, Strathfield.” In that moment, everything narrowed, and he knew one thing with unshakeable certainty—he was in love with Samantha.

Quite desperately, in fact.

Strathfield huffed. “We go after her, of course.” He guided Cornelius along the corridor toward the library while the earl escorted the footman, John. “After all the times you’ve helped your fellow rogues do the same, it’s time for you to chase after your own happy ending.”

It made sense, but his mind was spinning with horrible scenarios and worry gnawed at his gut. “She must be so frightened.”

“From everything I’ve gleaned about your fiancée, she’ll hold her own for a bit and allow us to find her, and perhaps if we’re fortunate, we will come one step closer to stopping that damned Lady Stover. I’m beginning to be quite annoyed with her antics.”

Keep strong, Sam. We’re coming after you. And once he found her, he would confess everything to her, declare himself over and over again until she believed him and agreed to accept a real engagement from him. He was a better man for having known her, and now he wanted the right to be her husband.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:10 am

When Samantha came back to consciousness, pain ricocheted through her head from the blow she'd received from Mr. Arbuthnot while fear tripped icy fingers down her spine.

With a groan and a hand to head, she opened her eyes and then subsequently frowned. For a few moments, she didn't understand where she was. Besides that, it was quite chilly, and that cold seeped through the layers of her gown and petticoat to send goose flesh sailing over her skin. Then it dawned on her that she lay on a squabbed bench in a traveling coach. Complete darkness engulfed the interior, and for the moment, it seemed, the vehicle had been parked.

Where am I?

In the struggle to sit upright, her head pounded more, but she was able to peer out the window glass around the black velvet curtain. Though the darkness was complete and the door to the vehicle gaped open, she could just make out the forms of a man and a woman who wore a gown as if she'd come here from a society event.

There was a low buzz of voices as they discussed something of import if hand gestures and body language was any indication. Then the man indicated the coach, and the woman shook her head. The only words Samantha could make out was, "Not yet."

They slowly moved toward the coach, and she recognized Mr. Arbuthnot's voice.

"You promised she would be mine."

Dear God, did he truly think she would accept him as a suitor?

“No, I promised you could remove her from the rout.” Annoyance wove through the woman’s voice. “The plan hasn’t changed, Gregory. I want to dismantle the Rogue’s Arcade, so that means there will be collateral damage.”

“I plan to leave for the Continent after tonight. I would like to take Miss Marchington with me.”

The woman snorted. “And somehow in that plan you think she will come to love you?” A trill of laughter escaped her. “Kidnapping, forcing her into marriage, removing her from everything she knows? You won’t win her heart. Besides, that is not where her affection lies.”

“What does it matter? Wouldn’t she learn to accept me when she has no other choice?”

Inside the coach, Samantha gawked with shock. No one should be made to do anything they didn’t wish to do. Love, or even respect, couldn’t be forced.

“It matters because that is where it will hurt. And that is the point of all my interactions with these rogues.” The woman made a gesture with her hand. “Go make certain the site we need has been cleared of anyone lingering in the area. I do not need more witnesses.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Talk to our short-term guest, of course. It is much like a cat toying with a captured mouse, and for whatever reason it is my favorite part of such proceedings.” The trill of her laughter sent icy tremors down Samantha’s spine. “There is a certain power there in feeding hopes and fears before delivering the final blow. And this time, I will

make sure she is dead before leaving the scene. I grow weary of these men escaping at the last minute.” When she moved to the door of the coach, Samantha scooted across the bench to the opposite side of the vehicle.

Knots of worry formed in her belly while the woman came up the steps and then into the coach. As soon as she settled on the bench opposite Samantha’s, a grin broke over her face. “Ah, welcome back to the world of the living, Miss Marchington.”

After swallowing down her fear the best she could, she narrowed her eyes on the woman. “Who are you?” In the dim illumination from the moon, she could just make out a coif of blonde hair with pearls and ribbons woven through the tresses. Light blue eyes stared at her as if analyzing her every weakness. Her gown of navy velvet trimmed with pearls suited her frame and coloring, but it also emphasized the poise and power in her form. A navy cloak lined with lighter blue satin and trimmed with white rabbit fur completed the ensemble.

In that moment, Samantha wished she had that cloak, for already, her teeth were tending to chatter together from the cold.

“I’m surprised you haven’t managed to piece it together by now. From all I have seen, you are quite clever.” Her gaze never left Samantha’s face. “But I will indulge you. I am the Countess of Stover.” A satisfied grin curved her lips. “I can see from your reaction that you recognize my name. That is all to the good. I’ve found it’s more personal when a victim knows exactly who has encouraged them off this mortal coil.”

Surely, this woman was demented. Who talked about killing people as if it were normal drawing room conversation? “You mean to kill me.” It wasn’t a question.

“Of course, dear. Oh, and to draw out your loving fiancé. He is the one I truly want.” Her eyes glittered in the darkness. “Some of the other men of the Rogue’s Arcade

have managed to escape my plans, but Lord Timelbury will be used as an example.” She tsked her tongue against the roof of her mouth. “The accounts of the deaths in the newspapers will be quite shocking and saddening. You fell into the Serpentine thinking it might be frozen enough to ice skate but then your fiancé dove frantically in after you. Sadly, you both were overcome by the temperature of the water and drowned.”

Another chill went down her spine. “I have no intention of going anywhere near the Serpentine.”

“As if you think we won’t force you.” Lady Stover laughed as if that were the gayest joke she’d ever been told.

“Where is my father? I was told you’d taken him.” It was the only reason she’d paused to talk with Mr. Arbuthnot at the house.

“A bit of fiction. We have no interest in a broken, frail old man. In fact, I just needed to use that in order to get to you.” The countess shrugged. “Small bait for the bigger bait, as it were. You see, my dear, I intend to bring down the whole club. The men you make up its members have thwarted me over the last year, and quite frankly, I grow weary of it. In fact, they stopped several lucrative ventures of my cousin before that. Where the Duke of Winthrop and his hapless brother didn’t have the wherewithal or power to finally dismantle the club and take out its members, I do.”

Samantha didn’t have the first clue about what the other woman meant, but it didn’t sound good. “There is a flaw in your logic.”

“Oh?” Lady Stover leaned forward. “Do tell. I enjoy a bit of fiction before disposing of a couple bodies.”

Clearly, the woman was near insanity. Shoving down her fear, Samantha continued.

“My engagement to Lord Timelbury is also that—a fiction. We became engaged to please my father and get him through the Christmastide season. It is not real.” As she said the words, sorrow filled her chest, for she should have told him what was being written on her heart. Would it have made a difference? There was no way to know, but it was too late now. She cleared her throat. “He won’t come.”

Please, Cornelius, stay away!

“You truly are quite the ninny, aren’t you, Miss Marchington?” A soft chuckle came from Lady Stover, made even more terrifying with her smile and the conversational implications. “Can you not see the man adores you?”

She snorted. “I rather doubt that. There have been no words of love exchanged, no declarations given. We have simply enjoyed each other’s companionship for Christmastide.”

The other woman shook her head. “That doesn’t matter. Anyone watching the two of you interact together can see he’s nearly tip over tail for you.”

“Impossible. I would know.”

“Not if you have no prior experience with love.” One of her blonde eyebrows rose in challenge. “Have the two of you shared intimacy past kisses?” When Samantha didn’t answer, the countess chuckled. “You needn’t tell me. Your true feelings are written all over your face, in your voice. The faux engagement only continues because Lord Timelbury wishes to protect you from harm—from me. Unfortunately, in that he will fail.”

There was much to digest in everything Lady Stover had said, but Samantha couldn’t allow herself to feel giddy about the possibilities. She needed to find a way out of this vehicle. “This has all been highly entertaining, of course, but I refuse to sit here and

continue this ridiculous conversation.” When she darted off her bench and down the steps of the coach to the ground, the unmistakable sound of a pistol cocking stilled her steps.

“That is not part of the plan, Miss Marchington.” With an ease Samantha envied, the countess came down the steps with the snub nose of a ladies’ pistol trained on her. “We shall continue this conversation at the Serpentine, where you can tell your tearful goodbyes to Lord Timelbury.” Her breath clouded about her head due to the cold.

Fear twisted down her spine. “You plan to shoot me?”

“Oh, no, dear. The ball in this pistol is meant for your fiancé.” Still, she gestured with the pistol at Samantha. “Start walking.”

Only then did she realize the coach had been driven into Hyde Park and off the graveled path set aside for carriage traffic. In fact, it had been guided onto the frozen grass near the deeper part of the Serpentine. No sooner did she have the thought about running away when Mr. Arbuthnot was there and that he’d latched onto her arm.

“Let me go.” The situation was already annoying enough; she didn’t need this man to add to it. “I want nothing to do with you.” She shook from the chill in the air. With each huff of breath, the exhalations clouded in the air. Trying to free herself from his hold was fruitless, for he was stronger than he seemed.

As Lady Stover led the way toward the water, her escort leaned close and put his lips to Samantha’s ear. “If you do what I say, at least you will live.”

“At the cost of killing Lord Timelbury?” She could hardly speak for the wad of fear lodged in her throat. How had any of this happened? When she stumbled due to her limp, Mr. Arbuthnot simply yanked at her arm. He wasn’t as gentle nor as patient as

Cornelius.

“What can I say? Lady Stover is determined to quell and squash every last member of the Rogue’s Arcade. She hates those men with a fiery passion; God only knows why, so please, let me save you.” His voice was graveled with emotion. “You must know of my regard for you, Miss Marchington.”

“If I do, it has no bearing on my life, for my heart belongs to another.”

“And he is not here, is he? If you throw in your lot with me, we shall live in Rome and be well away from the madness that London has become.” If possible, he dropped his voice even further. “I can get off a shot to buy us some time. We can run like mad to the arch where my carriage is waiting.”

Other women might have made such a deal to remain alive, but Samantha couldn’t imagine a life without Cornelius in it.

There was no time to respond. As soon as she and Mr. Arbuthnot arrived at the edge of the Serpentine, Lady Stover took charge. And she wasn’t alone, for there was a burly man standing off to one side. No doubt he was the guarantee both she and Cornelius would be thrown in the water and left for dead.

“It shouldn’t be a long wait now, Miss Marchington. If your dear Lord Timelbury is as intelligent as you seem to think, he’ll find us directly.” She gestured with the pistol. “Come, Mr. Arbuthnot. Put the shackles on Miss Marchington’s ankles and wrists.”

“What?” Shock went through his voice. Clearly, he hadn’t expected that.

The countess nodded. “Did you think I would just toss her in without a guarantee?” Though she chuckled, there was no mirth in the sound. “Make quick work of it,

please. The show is about to begin.”

“Samantha!” The hail of her name had her head jerking up, but she couldn’t see him.
“I’m coming!”

“Cornelius!” When she tried to pull from Mr. Arbuthnot’s grip, he clamped down even tighter. Though she couldn’t see her fiancé, the fact that he was in the park and knew where she was brought a modicum of comfort to her.

The burly man brought over two sets of rusty manacles and dropped them on the ground at Mr. Arbuthnot’s feet. Even more terrifying was the fact there was a weight affixed to the middle of each chain, all but ensuring that she would sink once in the water, and fast. “Shall I guide Lord Timelbury down here?”

The countess nodded. “That would be lovely, Mr. Bolton. Perhaps the moment you escort our special guest down here, he’ll be just in time to see the love of his life tossed into the Serpentine. Once he has that motivation, he’ll rush over, I’ll put a ball into a vital organ, and he can follow her into the drink and hopefully off this mortal coil.” She shrugged. “And if he didn’t come alone, feel free to dispose of the extra guests.”

“Do you honestly think he wouldn’t come without help?” Fear twisted down Samantha’s spine as Mr. Bolton left the area.

“That depends on his mindset. If we’re fortunate, he dashed into the night by himself without telling anyone of his direction.”

“Surely not.” Oh, please say you made a plan! She bounced her gaze between the countess and Mr. Arbuthnot, and when she attempted to break away, Lady Stover pointed the pistol directly at her head.

“If you vex me too far, my dear, you’ll be dead ahead of schedule, which will force me to use Mr. Arbuthnot’s pistol to kill your man, and that will make me quite annoyed.” She narrowed her eyes. “The shackles, Mr. Arbuthnot. Now.”

With a curse beneath his breath, the man maneuvered behind Samantha. When he yanked her wrists behind her back while the countess held the pistol with the nose pointed at her heart, tears stung her eyes. The bite of the rusty iron around her wrist despite her glove made her gasp, but as the second one went around her other wrist, tears fell to her cheeks. This was not how she’d hoped the night would end, and now both she and Cornelius had essentially walked into a trap.

“Please reconsider your actions,” she pleaded with the countess in a whispered voice. “You don’t need to do this.”

“Oh, but I do, and I have similar scenarios planned for each member of the Rogue’s Arcade. Retribution is coming soon for them, sure and quick, and I can’t wait until the day London has no more of their ilk.” Then she made a sound of annoyance in her throat. “However, that must wait until the New Year, for my husband has some nodcock plan of spending time in the country as a family once Christmas has concluded, and I am not in a position to bid him nay.”

Samantha’s body jerked when Mr. Arbuthnot clamped one of the larger shackles around her ankle. “It must rub you the wrong way knowing you still must depend on the whims of a man, hmm? That his name is what lends yours legitimacy and opens doors for you?”

“How dare you!” The countess lashed out and slapped Samantha’s cheek with a hand. “He is only still around for one reason only.”

Despite the heat in her cheek and the bite of the shackles on her ankles and wrists, Samantha managed a faint grin. “You love him?” When the countess didn’t answer,

she snickered. “How inconvenient for you, that you have that tiny hole in your armor.”

“Nonsense. It is not love that keeps me with him. In fact, I haven’t loved my husband for years. He is well aware of how I spend my time.”

No doubt the woman used her body as if it were a piece of a chess board. She frowned. “Then what is it? I would have thought a woman like you would be independent.” When there wasn’t an answer forthcoming, she grinned. “Ah, it’s your children. You would do anything for those girls.”

“I am building an empire for them. They will live like queens and never want for anything. No one will deny them anything.”

“That is a lovely dream, of course, but you know as well as I that the world we live in favors males and probably will for a long time to come. The best you can do is love your children and make them feel secure, raise them up to fight.”

The countess huffed. “Love can fade or lead us wrong. Coin is what makes things happen in this life, and as long as we have enough, we can buy anything we require.”

Mr. Arbuthnot chose that time to interrupt. “I have done everything you’ve asked of me, Lady Stover. Your quarry is well on his way. Let me have Miss Marchington, and you’ll never see either of us again. You can torture Lord Timelbury at leisure.”

Samantha wriggled her wrists, but he’d done his work all too well. The iron held.

“Absolutely not. Her death will usher in his.” The countess shook her head. “Perhaps his heart will break before he dies. I would very much like that.” Her expression twisted into a macabre mask of hate and envy. “Love has been the downfall of many men and women throughout the ages. Why should he be any different?”

None of this was about power or accumulating coin. Despite the situation, excitement climbed Samantha's spine. Lady Stover had been thwarted in love at some point. It had left her bitter and jealous. Was that the real reason she hated the Rogue's Arcade men? Had one of them broken her heart? She couldn't wait to share with Cornelius and perhaps they could dig into the club's history or membership.

If they survived.

"Why do you care, Lady Stover? Do you fear what a man—or woman—in love can do? Is it because you have seen extraordinary feats when it comes to the men of the Rogue's Arcade?" There was no answer, of course, so she warmed to her topic. "Love is real, Your Ladyship, and it is the true power in this world."

"Don't be stupid. I refused to let emotions rule me long ago. There are only alliances in this lifetime that lead to real power." Had she truly found the way to bring down the countess and her criminal network?

"Love won't end if you kill me," she continued in a low voice. "What I feel for Cornelius will remain, and that is something you can never banish." Somehow, she would tell him before the worst happened. He needed to know, deserved to hear the words spoken, even if it meant she might die... or he would.

"Enough. We are wasting time, and I have Christmas to ensure for my children." She chopped the air with her free hand as her eyes glittered dangerously. "Killing you and Lord Timelbury will bring me joy and one step closer to leveling that club."

Merciful heavens, the woman was too far gone to argue with. She moved her hands, but the bands of iron around her wrists didn't budge. "Mr. Arbuthnot, are you willingly going to let yourself be an accomplice to murder?"

His gaze shifted. "You have no idea what this woman has made me do in the face of

horrible penalties,” he admitted in a choked whisper.

Panic crowded and grew in Samantha’s chest like escaped bubbles. What would happen now? Despite her wish to remain strong in the face of danger, a whimper escaped her. Where was Cornelius? Had he been delayed or worse by Mr. Bolton? And worse yet, had she imagined her feelings for him. As a few tears fell to her cheeks, she shook her head. No, there was something real there, she just knew it. And dash it all, if she wanted to claim that future, she’d have to fight for it, and that meant somehow evading her captors.

You can do this, Sam.

A movement, a shift in the shadows past her vision alerted her to the presence of another, and every beat of her heart strained. Was it Cornelius? It had to be him, and if it were, she’d give him the opening he needed while her captor was distracted.

“You disappoint me, Mr. Arbuthnot. If you love me like you claim, you wouldn’t let this madwoman harm me.” She turned to face him and tried to ignore the countess. “I refuse to spend the remainder of my lifetime with a man who only views women as objects to be possessed. If you truly cared for me, you would never have brought me here in the first place.”

“I had no choice. You have no idea what Lady Stover and her gang is capable of.” Pleading set up in his voice. “She’s threatened my parents, my sister...”

“While I understand that, I must say it saddens me that your allegiance didn’t extend to me.” Cornelius was near; she could feel his presence. How could she not when every beat of her heart, every rush of blood, fairly called out his name? “In fact, I feel quite betrayed by you, Mr. Arbuthnot. Definitely not the actions of a man who loves a woman.”

Bang!

The whizz of a pistol ball leaving the weapon's chamber filled her ears. Seconds later, it found purchase in a nearby tree. Cursing from Lady Stover and Mr. Arbuthnot ducking for cover only provided a modicum of amusement, but Cornelius had announced his presence.

"Put down your pistol, Lady Stover. I won't miss the next time." Yet he would need to pause at some point to reload. That would waste precious time.

Relief poured over her at the blessed sound of Cornelius' voice and the command therein. Perhaps the nightmare was almost over. "Be mindful. She is quite insane. They both are," Samantha called to him as he sneaked through the shadows.

"So I have seen." He tossed away the useless pistol as he came closer then addressed the countess, who'd whirled about to face him and train her weapon on him. "I waylaid your thug in the woods. Don't know if I knocked him out but I slowed him down. Stop this foolishness and let Samantha go."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Lord Timelbury." With a small, curt gesture of her chin, she communicated with Mr. Arbuthnot. "It's time."

The man next to her jerked as if she'd hit him. "But, I—"

"Now, or everything in your life will be taken away!" The note of hysteria in Lady Stover's voice was unmistakable.

With a curse, Mr. Arbuthnot put an arm about her waist and hauled her toward the water.

"No!" She attempted to squirm away from him, but he was quite strong, and she

didn't have the use of her hands and feet. "Cornelius!" Terror pulled the scream from her throat. Nothing that she did released her from her captor's grip, and her limp prevented finding purchase on the frozen ground.

"You and I could have been good together, eventually," Mr. Arbuthnot growled. At the edge of the water, he whispered, "I'm so sorry. Forgive me." Then he lifted her into his arms, and with a grunt, he tossed her away.

A sense of weightlessness possessed her for three seconds while she screamed. Images flitted through her mind, and the strongest of those contained Cornelius and how his grin had the power to melt the bones in her knees. She would miss him terribly and the life they might have had if they both hadn't been so afraid to be honest with each other.

"Samantha!" Cornelius' anguished cry squeezed her heart.

All too quickly, she hit the freezing water of the Serpentine. Without the use of her hands and feet, as well as the weights on the chains, water quickly seeped into the fabric of her gown and dragged her down. As terror took over her person, she sank beneath the surface while she screamed inside her mind.

Bloody hell!

Cornelius couldn't believe his eyes as Samantha sank beneath the dark surface of the Serpentine, tossed in the water as if she'd been little more than rubbish.

He'd arrived at Hyde Park in his own carriage so it would look as if he'd come alone, but Hedgecomb and Strathfield had followed in another carriage at a discreet distance if anyone had been keeping a watch. They'd planned to split up in the park and attack the countess on three angles, and if he threw his own shot, there was comfort in knowing the other two men had been sharpshooters in the war.

Yet none of that helped him in this moment.

"Samantha!" With his heart in his throat and his pulse hammering in his temples, Cornelius darted to the water's edge. Lady Stover anticipated him. She got off a shot of her own that thankfully only grazed the side of his shoulder and didn't do much more than tear a hole in his sleeve and perhaps leave him with a scratch that burned like the devil.

But she wasn't his immediate object of revenge. Instead, it was the damned Mr. Arbuthnot, the same man who had hounded Samantha even after she'd rejected him, the man who had threatened her and Annabelle on the street in front of the shops. And he'd been responsible for pitching Samantha into the water. With the shackles, chains, and what had looked like a weight in the darkness, she stood absolutely no chance of survival.

"I am going to kill you," he said in a shaking whisper as he skittered to a halt at the

mud at the water's edge. Bubbles surfaced, but otherwise there was no sign of Samantha.

“Do what you must, but I love her more.” Pain rang heavily in the other man's voice as he cast his gaze between Cornelius and the water. “Save your woman or take down the man who will have essentially killed her? Or rather go after the woman who is orchestrating the dismantling of your club and going after your brothers-in-arms?”

“Shut your damned mouth.” He could either rescue her or let Lady Stover vanish into the night to do more harm. If he didn't capture the countess, she would continue to wreak havoc on his friends but if Samantha died, how could he live at all?

For one fleeting second, her head broke the surface, and she gasped for breath. “Help!” Sputtering sounds followed while she fought valiantly to stay afloat. “Mr. Arbuthnot, if you care for me, help me. Only then can I see the depth of your regard.” Then the water and weight ensured she went under again.

What the devil?

Why did she call for Mr. Arbuthnot? Had she played him for a fool just like his previous fiancé had? Threw him over for another? Even if their engagement was naught but a fiction. Then he shook his head and cleared his mind of thoughts. There was no way of knowing until he talked to her. And he would, damn it. Dismissing the other man, he moved through the mud at the river's edge. It was already deuced cold, and that water had to be freezing. It wouldn't be long for hyperthermia to set in.

Saving Samantha was the only choice he could make. Without her, he had no future. He had to trust that his friends would take care of Lady Stover.

Before he could make the first move, Mr. Arbuthnot dove into the water, leaving Cornelius staring into the murkiness. Only then did he understand why she'd called

for the other man. If he'd gone into the water after her, Mr. Arbuthnot would be waiting for him on the bank, no doubt with a loaded pistol and would have killed them both. Now, with the other man doing the rescue on the ridiculous hope that Samantha would choose him, he'd find himself freezing and exhausted. Cornelius could dispatch him and keep himself as well as her alive.

How much do I love her?

Vowing to tell her at the first opportunity, he willed them both to surface as he stared at the dark water that threw ripples up every few seconds. There was no waterfowl nearby, and the longer he stared, the colder he grew. Where were they? His pulse pounded. Would the man truly rescue her, or did he mean to pull her down until the last breath left her body and his in some demented hope of a romantic ending?

Fear twisted up his spine even as he knew that he had to trust.

A masculine shout echoed from somewhere nearby. No doubt either Hedgecomb or Strathfield had caught up to the large thug who'd attempted to waylay him earlier. The rattle of carriage wheels on a street not far off drifted to his ears, and still he monitored the water.

Then Mr. Arbuthnot's blond head broke the surface of the water, quickly followed by Samantha's glossy dark tresses that were plastered to her skull. Yet only Mr. Arbuthnot sucked in lungfuls of air as Cornelius knelt in the mud with his free hand outstretched.

"Does she live?" He could hardly force the words out of his tight throat.

"I don't know." Annoyance wove through the other man's voice. "Help me get her to land, you idiot," he muttered while he shoved her body into Cornelius's arms.

Dear God. She was far too still and pale. “Samantha?” He hauled her to safety but left her lying on her side on the crunchy, frozen grass perhaps six feet from the water’s edge. “Breathe for me, sweeting,” he said to her, but she remained unmoving.

There was nothing for it. Promising himself to return as quickly as he could and hoping that resting her on her side would help any water she’d swallowed come out, Cornelius returned to the riverbank where Mr. Arbuthnot had scrambled out of the water. He buried a fist in the man’s collar and yanked him away when he would have gone to Samantha’s location.

“You will not touch her again.” He wanted to throttle the man, to kill him for the part he’d played in her abduction and her murder if she didn’t recover. Yet a sweet, sweet sound reached his ears—Samantha’s coughing. Then she took a ragged breath followed by more coughing. It was the most glorious confirmation he could have heard, but he forced himself to ignore her. “You’ll hang for your crimes.”

“I’ll tell you everything about Lady Stover and her gang if you keep my out of Newgate.”

“That would make things far too easy for you, wouldn’t it?”

“I’m a desperate man.” Mr. Arbuthnot lunged. “Miss Marchington and I will marry and disappear. You heard her. She asked for me , not you.” He plowed his head into Cornelius’s ribcage, and the force knocked them both onto the cold, hard ground.

Cornelius landed heavily on his back. “Over my dead body.”

“That can easily be arranged. What’s one more death?” The other man’s body shook, no doubt from exposure and the cold. If he wasn’t treated soon, he would go into shock. “You have no idea what I’ve done for that woman to keep my family safe.”

“That doesn’t make it right.” He lashed out with a powerful uppercut that clipped the other man’s chin. When Mr. Arbuthnot stumbled and tried to gain his footing, Cornelius swung out a foot and caught his adversary in the stomach. It stung because he wore shoes instead of his customary boots, but it was just as effective.

Mr. Arbuthnot went flying and landed on his side, but he didn’t stay down for long. As the grass slipped beneath his boots, he wrestled himself into a standing position, yet he was shaking on his feet due to cold. Cornelius followed suit, and once more they came at each other, locked in a tangle for supremacy, both with everything to lose.

“She’s mine, Arbuthnot. Always has been.” He had to believe that.

“Hardly. Your engagement isn’t real.”

“Perhaps not but the sentiment is.”

“That doesn’t matter!” Mr. Arbuthnot’s strength was borne from madness or perhaps desperation, while Cornelius struggled to keep the upper hand. A wild punch from his opponent caught him in the gut, winding him. He doubled over and struggled to catch his breath.

Bang!

The report of a gunshot echoed in the cold, clear night.

“What the devil?” Surprise reflected on Mr. Arbuthnot’s face. He hopped on one foot while clutching his other leg in his hands. Then he fell face forward onto the grass with his breath clouding about his head. Blood seeped between his fingers from a busted kneecap—Hedgecomb’s signature shot.

Cornelius glanced about, easily spotting the earl in a stand of trees. As of yet, he hadn't seen the duke. Lifting a hand in acknowledgement, he sucked in a breath.

With a cry of rage, Mr. Arbuthnot surged to his feet and would have closed the distance had not Cornelius used the remainder of his strength to punch the man in the nose. The crunch of cartilage echoed in his ears. Blood gushed down Mr. Arbuthnot's face as he toppled once more to the ground. "It wasn't supposed to end like this! I was going to move to Rome and thrive there with my new bride!"

"Sometimes you have to take the loss, Arbuthnot." Tired of the man's blathering, Cornelius delivered a hard punch to his temple where the jawbones connected.

Immediately, the man slumped to the muddy ground and this time he didn't move.

When Cornelius looked about the immediate area for Lady Stover, but it was as if she'd vanished into thin air. Damn, damn, damn. Since there was nothing he could do about that and hoping the duke would find her, he rushed to Samantha's side where he fell to his knees. "Samantha, dearest, can you hear me?"

Her eyes were closed with the light brown lashes forming perfect arcs on her pale cheeks, but her chest moved as she drew breath, shallow though they were. It mattered not; she was alive. Every so often, deep shivers wracked her body and as he stared down at her, a blue tinge took hold of her lips.

"Samantha?" Wrenching off his greatcoat, he tucked it around her and hoped it might provide much needed warmth.

In the distance, the report of a pistol echoed through the night. Had Strathfield come upon Lady Stover? Which one of them had shot first? A whistle soon followed, which meant the earl was going off to investigate. Cornelius had served half a year with that man and had never forgotten his peculiarities.

“Cornelius?”

Moisture immediately sprang into his eyes, for he was so bloody grateful to hear her voice. He bundled her into his arms and lap, holding her close even as the shackles and chains clanked together. Dear God , she was so cold! And completely drenched. “Stay with me, sweeting. I’m going to take you home and get you warm, but you must hang on. Do you hear?” Rocking her back and forth, he peered down into her face as her eyes fluttered open. “There are things I would say to you, but you need to survive.”

“I need...” Her teeth chattered together so badly she couldn’t talk. “S-s-so c-c-cold, but I w-w-want to...” Then she frowned. Panic reflected in her eyes before the lids fluttered, and with a sigh, she went pliant in his arms as she once more succumbed to unconsciousness.

December 25, 1818

Late Christmas night

“Lord Timelbury! She has woken!”

The excited utterance by a maid wrenched him from the exhausted dose he’d fallen into on a low sofa in the drawing room. For a few seconds, he was disoriented, but when he saw the flickering flames in the fireplace, felt the weight of the wool blanket someone had thrown over him after he’d fallen asleep, reality came roaring back to him.

“I beg your pardon?” He could hardly allow himself to believe what the maid had said.

The young woman nodded. Her eyes sparkled with excitement. “Miss Marchington

has woken and has asked for weak tea.”

For a second, his knees almost didn’t support his weight, but then he nodded, and relief washed over him. “Then by all means, go make some for her. I’ll be up directly. And please, don’t wake anyone else in the household. It’s nearly midnight. They can wake to the joyous news in the morning.”

“Of course, my lord.” Then she dashed from the room.

He briefly closed his eyes and offered up a prayer of thanksgiving, for he hadn’t truly believed he would be standing here suddenly with possibilities ahead of him.

As he left the drawing room and headed for the stairs, thoughts swirled through his mind.

After the contretemps at Hyde Park and because Samantha required immediate attention, he’d taken her to his house. She needed constant care and looking after, and he wasn’t about to leave her side when he didn’t know if she’d live or die.

Of course, the household was in chaos, for the rout had ended an hour previous, and though most of the guests had left, his mother and aunt were still in attendance. Once they’d been appraised of what had happened to Samantha and the reason they’d both been missing for the bulk of the event, they became dual mother hens, which had surprised the hell out of him, especially in his mother’s case.

Regardless, he’d sat by her bedside in the spare room while his diligent staff plied her with blankets and hot water bottles and encouraged warm broth down her throat in the hopes she would come back to consciousness.

Then he reached her room and stood in the doorway while the maid came in with a tea tray containing a pot of tea with all the accompaniments and a few slices of dry

toast. Once she left the room, only then did Cornelius venture into the room.

“Samantha?”

A single candle burned at the bedside table, and her blonde-brown hair shimmered in the low illumination. At some point, one of the maids must have combed out the tresses, perhaps during a bath they’d encouraged her into during a brief stretch of consciousness in an effort to warm her body. The mass flowed over her shoulders in a softly curling waterfall. A night dress and matching wrapper of pale pink lawn covered her form. Lined with satin ribbon in a darker pink, it gave her an air of sultry innocence, but it was her eyes that held him captive. The blue pools were clear and the darker blue ring that rimmed the irises was very evident.

Never had he been so damned speechless as he was in this moment.

A slow smile curved those highly kissable lips. “Hullo, Cornelius.” If her voice was a tad graveled, he couldn’t blame her, for swallowing copious amounts of Serpentine water and then vomiting it up would do that to a person. “I think I missed Christmas.”

“Ah, dearest, you certainly did.” By the time they’d arrived here last night, the clock had already struck midnight... which it was doing again just now.

And again, it’s my birthday.

The soft chime from the longcase clock on the floor below filtered to his ears. “In fact, you were out for the better part of twenty-four hours.” Suddenly unsure of himself, he perched on the chair at the side of her bed where he’d spent most of his time on Christmas.

“But I am here now.”

“You are, and just in time to wish me well on my birthday.”

“How lovely. Many happy returns of the day.” She poured out a cup of tea for herself since the tray rested on the other side of the bed, then with a sigh, she sat back against the pillows. When she held his gaze with hers, he wanted to throw himself onto his knees and tell her...everything. “Please tell me you captured Lady Stover.”

“We did not.” His chest tightened at the distress in her expression. “In the confusion surrounding getting you rescued and then subduing Mr. Arbuthnot, she somehow slipped away. However, the Duke of Strathfield did get off a shot that found purchase in her hip. Through and through, I believe he said, so she will live and will no doubt need only a couple of weeks in bed to recuperate.”

“I’m so sorry.” She sought refuge behind sipping her tea. “If it weren’t for me—”

“Stop.” Reaching out, he took her free hand. “I would gladly have you here with me over seeing Lady Stover dead or in Newgate. There are other days to fight for that.” Since it was impossible to order his thoughts, he would just talk to her. “Regardless, Mr. Arbuthnot has agreed to tell the rogues as well as Bow Street everything he knows regarding Lady Stover’s organization in exchange for remaining out of Newgate himself.”

“Do you think he’ll tell the truth?”

“That remains to be seen, but the Duke of Edenthorpe has written to one of his friends, an Alexander Burgess who used to work with Bow Street, asking him to come to London from the Lake District sometime before the New Year to question Mr. Arbuthnot. It’s the best leverage we’ve had on Lady Stover and hopefully it will gain us the upper hand.”

She nodded. “Yet I know a few things about Lady Stover that will allow the rogues to

chip away at her weaknesses.”

“Oh?” One of his eyebrows went up. “You can tell Edenthorpe in a few days. He’ll want to know.”

“I’ll do it. At least something good came out of this.” After a sip of tea, she continued. “When I said those things to Mr. Arbuthnot, I didn’t truly mean them.”

“I know.” As moisture rose in his eyes, he rubbed the pad of his thumb along her knuckles. “You wanted him to risk himself to retrieve you so that I wouldn’t be shot.”

“Yes.” She nodded. “I care nothing for him.”

“I know that too.” Why the devil couldn’t he say the words that were on his heart?

“You’re bruised and battered again.” It was a statement of fact.

“It would appear that ever since I’ve met you, being beaten has become a matter of course.” And he would do it all over again for the love of her. “Oh, and I was shot last night. Don’t forget that.” When she appeared alarmed, he squeezed her fingers. “It was nothing.” He showed her the tear in his sleeve at his left shoulder where only a tiny trace of blood had seeped through. “Just a scratch, but it was my favorite jacket. That I can’t forgive.” His attempt at a joke fell flat when she didn’t laugh.

“Is that why you’re in such a state of undress?” As she raked her gaze up and down his person, he shifted when awareness swept along his skin.

At some point during his vigil, he’d stripped down to his satin evening breeches and fine lawn shirt, that he’d rolled up to his elbows. “That, and also I was so concerned about you that I couldn’t spare the time away from your bedside to attend to grooming.”

Then she gasped, and his musings scattered. “Is that what I think it is?”

Turning to follow her line of vision, he chuckled, for the dim candlelight sparkled off a bracelet that sat on the bureau top—a diamond and pearl bracelet. “That is my Aunt Beatrice’s bracelet we assumed stolen.”

“Clearly, it’s not.” One of her light brown eyebrows rose. “I told you I didn’t take it.”

A grin curved his lips. “Apparently, this was all my mother’s doing. She took the bracelet to cause chaos in the hopes I might find you attractive enough to take a chance on.” As heat went up the back of his neck, he shrugged. “I hate that she knows me so well.”

When Samantha giggled, he put a hand over his heart. Never had he thought he would hear that sound again, and never would he take it for granted. “Well, I’m glad it has been returned.”

“As am I. No doubt Mama felt guilty, especially after you came in last night half-dead.”

“Did she stay the night?”

“God, no.” He shook his head. “She went home, but Aunt Beatrice is here. She’s in the room across the hall, said I needed looking after, but she dropped into dreamland from exhaustion, no doubt, as soon as she went up to change after the rout ended.”

“I rather like her. She reminds me a bit of my mother.” Once she drained her teacup, Cornelius took it from her and set it on the tray. “Do you think Lady Stover will make good on her threats to kill you and your friends? Because I must tell you, I don’t know how all of you go through your lives knowing there is someone out there who wishes you dead.” A trace of panic skittered through her expression. “How can you

go on, live your life, plan anything without terror holding you captive?”

The time had come to have that much-needed talk with her. “Some things in life require a fair degree of trust, sweeting. And sometimes, though we feel that fear to the core of our being, we must live our lives anyway. That’s where courage is formed. I have found the best things in life we want to keep with us require hefty degrees of bravery, and to that end, I have thought over what I want to say to you, but first, a dance.”

This would either be the best night of his life or the most dismal, and he couldn’t decide where the needle would land just now.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:10 am

“What do you mean by a dance?” Samantha asked in a whispered voice, for suddenly the mood in the room had shifted and tension fairly crackled through the air. His free use of endearments had almost addled her mind, or perhaps she was delusional from being deprived of air when she thought she might drown.

“Just this.” Cornelius stood up from the chair. He crossed the room then closed the door as quietly as he could. Once he returned to her bedside, he held out a hand. “If you are strong enough for a dance, I would like to claim this one.”

“Are you mad?” She frowned even as her heartbeat increased. “There is no music and nor are we in a ballroom. Neither of us is dressed properly.” Not that she minded, for he was deliciously handsome as he was right now. The shirt rolled up to his elbows made her mouth water from the vee of the open placket that allowed her a peek of black hair on his chest and arms while the black satin evening breeches without hosiery or shoes put her in mind of a pirate rogue and called attention to his muscled calves.

“I don’t care.”

“What about my father? He’ll be worried—”

“Aunt Beatrice went over there to check on him yesterday. He is as well as can be expected but apparently delighted to see her.”

“He remembered who she was?” How extraordinary.

“Yes, and from all accounts, they have made plans to visit again today.” The dratted

man wagged his eyebrows, and she giggled. “Perhaps there is a romance in the offing.”

“Oh, I’m not sure if that is what Papa needs...” Almost as if she were entranced, Samantha slipped her fingers into his palm. Heated tingles shivered up her arm as he gently tugged her from the bed.

“It is his life, not yours. And right now, you are going to dance.”

“But my limp...”

“Will be accommodated for, but since I was cheated out of a dance last night, I want to claim it with you now... before I lay claim to other things this night.” The intensity of his gray eyes and the wicked gleam there promised lovely, naughty things later.

“Oh.” If she wasn’t already in love with him, this would have done it. “But I...” Words flew right out of her mind when he pulled her into his arms and began to move with her in small, tight circles since the floorspace was rather abbreviated in the room. And good heavens, he smelled so good. Always she would associate sandalwood and cedar with this man.

“Hush, Samantha. I am doing my part in trying for romance as well.” So saying, he slipped a hand down her back, and since her nightwear was thin—and probably borrowed from Annabelle—the heat of him seared her skin. When he came to the curve of her rear, he gave it a quick squeeze that had a squeak escaping her. “You are receptive to that, aren’t you?”

Was he serious?

She peered upward into his eyes, caught his budding grin, and nodded. “Yes, but...” There was no sense in denying this. Last night, she truly thought she was going to

die, and she'd been beside herself that she hadn't told him how she felt.

"Enjoy the dance. Then we'll talk." If possible, he held her closer until she was all but layered against him.

Then he did the only thing he could have in order to win her heart—he softly sang a Christmas carol into her ear, one of the same songs that her father used to sing for the family when times were good. All the while, he continued to move them in small circles through the free space in the room, going slow enough to accommodate her limp. During the last stanza, he pulled enough away that he could peer into her eyes, and she was lost.

They drifted to a halt, and when he finished with the carol, the silence in the room was almost deafening. And still they stared at each other as if they were the only two people in the world. Each breath she took, he gave her the air, and she did the same for him.

"Cornelius?"

That shook him out of the spell. "Right. As I said, there are things I would say to you, that I'd planned to tell you after the rout until everything was nearly taken from me." As he spoke, he sank to one knee before her, and he took one of her hands in his. "Samantha, when I asked—or demanded—that we become engaged to make your father happy—"

"—and to keep an eye on me because you thought I stole the bracelet," she helpfully added as tears formed in her eyes.

"There is that." He chuckled, and that grin threatened to steal the strength from her bones. "It happened, and I wasn't ready to accept any woman into my life in such a capacity. Except, there is something about you that made me want to know more.

And you have this air of vulnerability that compels me protect you as well as bundle you in my arms for other reasons entirely.”

Heat filled her cheeks as a few tears fell. “I am only me.”

“Thank goodness for that.” His Adam’s apple bobbed with a hard swallow. “Everything I discovered about you as we went along only endeared you to me more, but then Annabelle told me you defended my reputation on the street, and that started my slippery slide into love, and sweeting, I have fallen in love with you, quite desperately in fact.”

“You have?” Never had any words felt as sweet as what he’d just said.

“Oh, yes. You crawled beneath my defenses, kicked down those walls around my heart, and you set up housekeeping, making me a better version of myself. You accepted me, flaws and all.”

“What else was I supposed to do? The man that you are is still valuable, still worthy, and when you allow him to shine through the cracks, it’s breathtaking.”

“Ah, dearest.” When he brought her hand to his lips, he kissed the inside of her wrist. Heated tingles followed in his wake. “And now, I...” He blew out a breath. “Well, will you marry me? For truth this time? Will you enter into an engagement with me knowing that marriage is the goal?”

“You want to marry me.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes.”

“Knowing everything you know about me, knowing that I care for my ailing father, spend much of my time at the orphanage, have a limp, am not of the beau monde ,

and am a spinster?” When she listed out those things, there was nothing much to recommend her.

“Sweeting, I fell in love with you, not pieces of you, and if you were any different woman, I would never have noticed you .”

How much did she love him back? Her heart was near to bursting. “Well, then it is a handy thing to know because I have gone and fallen in love with you too. And there isn’t any one thing about you, I only know that I’m more myself when I’m with you.”

“That’s exactly it!” He vigorously nodded. “I have the freedom to be myself in your company. You have no idea how long I’ve needed that in my life.”

“So have I, and I knew when you kissed me that first time, everything would change. Oddly enough, I couldn’t wait, and now here we are, with everything indeed changing.” More tears fell, and she wiped them away with her other hand the best she could. “Because of you. There is no one that I would rather spend the rest of my life with.”

Joy glimmered in his eyes. It was one of the first times she’d seen him thusly. “Then that is a yes?”

“Yes! Oh, Cornelius, yes, I’ll marry you.”

He surged to his feet with a muffled shout of joy, took her into his arms, and then kissed her soundly. Several moments went by as they communicated without words while he brushed his fingertips along the ribbon-edged bodice of her nightdress.

“You have made me the happiest of men.”

“I’m so glad, for you deserve that.” How she’d missed him like this. She placed a

palm on his chest. His heartbeat raced beneath her fingertips. She returned his kiss, touched her tongue to his, and hoped he felt all the emotion behind it. There was much she hadn't told him yet, but she would when she could catch her breath. In him she would always be protected, needed... loved, and she hoped he realized the same from her.

Cornelius trailed a line of heated kisses beneath her jaw. He eased his lips along the column of her throat. At her collarbones, he nibbled the sensitive skin and a giggle escaped her. "I adore that sound." But he wasn't nearly done, for he pressed feather-weighted kisses to the cheek that retained slight bruising from Lady Stover's slap. "I shall kill the woman for laying a hand on you."

"Do hush, Timelbury. It is all part of what led me to you." She traced a gentle fingertip along his cheek that had been abused so many times she'd they met. "I have a feeling we shall both be in danger until the threat of her is quelled, but we will fight."

"Together." Cornelius slid his fingers into her hair. "For I don't intend to let you out of my sight any time soon." With a tug, the ribbons that kept her wrapper closed came untied.

"Good. Someone needs to keep you from being lost to the nightmares, and the best way to do that is to make you exhausted with other things." Was that too forward of her for what it implied?

"Clever girl." He then caressed his fingers down her sides, pausing at each rib then smoothing then over her hips while the wrapper slipped from her shoulders with a soft sigh. "But then, I expected nothing less. After all, you did agree to marry a member of the Rogue's Arcade."

"I did." Gooseflesh raced over her exposed skin as her nipples tightened. When

would he touch her? “What are you doing?”

“Being direct enough to show you the depths of my regard.” Cornelius chuckled. The sound sent tremors down her spine. “A man is less likely to be misunderstood this way, and mark my words.” His gaze bored into her. Determination and desire burned in the depths. “I want you to understand exactly what I mean.”

“Oh, but I think I already know what you mean...” She made no protest as he pushed the night dress from her shoulders and guided it off her body. “Why am I the one standing naked but you aren’t?”

“It is my prerogative to gaze at my soon-to-be wife, for I finally have you all to myself.” He kissed a path from her ear to her collarbones. “I want to explore every inch of your body with my hands and mouth, my tongue and teeth.” He cupped her breasts, brushed her nipples with the pads of his thumbs. “Are you of the same accord? After all, you nearly died last night, and I don’t want to rush this...”

“I swear that I am nearly as good as new. Perhaps tired, but I need you quite desperately.” She moaned and would have stumbled if not for his strong form keeping her steady. At the next pass of his thumbs, she shuddered.

“Ah, then we must somehow find a remedy for that.” Without hesitation, he went to his knees before her, gripped her hips and placed a kiss on the soft swell of her stomach. “Is there any wonder why I’m a besotted fool for you?”

A stilted sigh left her lips as he pressed a kiss into the curls hiding her sex. “You could merely be unlucky.” Her knees had the strength of porridge and liquid heat ran through her veins, but oh how she couldn’t wait to feel his hands on her! “Or deluded.”

“You might not be far from the mark.” He urged her legs apart, and when she

resisted, he licked a loop around her navel until she did as he bid. “I would rather find misfortune with you, lose bits of my mind because of you than enjoy anything else without you. Come what may, we have each other.”

“I’m glad of that, for I’ve been alone for much longer than I’ve wanted, and when Papa dies...” She couldn’t finish the sentence, mostly because her limbs shook with reaction.

“I will always be there for you, in whatever way you need.” He caressed the inside of one thigh followed by the other. Tingles trailed in his wake. “Because I love you.”

Warmth suffused her blood that had nothing to do with his erotic ministrations. “I love you too, and I never thought that would happen to me.”

“Do you think it was fate, then, that brought us together, or my mother’s machinations?” He eased his hand upward and his fingers found her sensitive folds.

“It is difficult to say, but if it was your mother, perhaps we shouldn’t let on that is so.” She grasped his shoulders to remain upright, gripping him, forcing him to look at her as her heartbeat accelerated.

When he chuckled against her skin, reverberations tickled through her chest. “You are absolutely right about that, for I’d never hear the end of her bragging.” He encouraged her left leg over his shoulder, her knee resting near his ear. Obviously, his physical needs didn’t distract him as they did her. How unfair! “Not that it matters. We are here now, and I’m delighted with the results.” Adoration shone in his eyes, mixing with a hunger that left her shaking.

“As am I.” Her body heated more from those words than from his attention.

When he glanced up into her face and smiled, the skin at the corners of his eyes

crinkled. “The moment I thought I’d lost you...” His swallow was audible as horror reflected on his face. “I was ready to follow you into that void. That’s how much I didn’t want to be without you.”

“Oh, Cornelius, I’m so sorry.” Her breath came in tiny pants. “But I wouldn’t want you to do that.”

“Thankfully, we are both still here, and we have a future.” A wicked grin curved his lips. “And now, I’m going to make you fly, because I have wanted nothing else since our last scandalous meeting.” Cornelius leaned in. His breath steamed her mons, and she shook from the exquisite anticipation. “Then I’m going to make love to you on the bed, taking care not to wake my aunt, but I can’t go another night without knowing you are exquisitely, exclusively, eternally mine.” With his fingers, he spread her quivering flesh, his mouth a whisper away from her throbbing button.

A shiver lanced down her spine. “Why are we still talking then?”

“Still leading me on a merry chase?” He chuckled and the sensation vibrated through her lower limbs.

She thought she might faint dead away when he touched her with his tongue. She tugged at his hair, but he didn’t stop. “Merciful heavens, that was as lovely as the last time.”

“Lovely, eh?” With a stroke of his tongue, her thoughts scattered. “Then I need to apply myself more. And I was rushed that time.” He nibbled at the places no one had ever laid eyes upon, that no one had ever touched but him, licked her opening and dared to penetrate her with that talented organ, but when he encouraged the tiny bundle of nerves that was the center of her pleasure out of hiding and suckled it, Samantha shattered from the exquisite wonder of it all.

Voracious waves of desire smacked into her each time Cornelius worried that nubbin. She dug her fingers into his shoulders. He was her anchor in a world that had suddenly gone topsy-turvy, her compass when she couldn't find her way, her home when she required a place of safety. "I can't bear it any longer." She tried to pry him away, but he wouldn't be deterred. Pressure banded and coiled tight within her again. His touch was as steady as everything he did with her, always guiding her, always protecting her.

"Have I convinced you that I love you?" Cornelius smoothed his free hand up the back of her thigh then stroked her buttock. He flicked his tongue over her flesh, teasing, taunting, torturing. He chuckled while he worked, and the sound vibrated through the heated skin to kick off an avalanche of pleasure.

"Yes!" She cried out, whether in encouragement or affirmation to his question as her defenses crumbled along with her strength. Her knees buckled as blessed relief swept through her, bigger than anything she'd known before. Fluttering bands of ecstasy rippled along every nerve ending leaving her pliant.

"The best is yet to come." As he stood, Cornelius caught her into his arms and lifted her. He carried her the few feet to the bed, where he gently deposited her onto the mattress. "I'll join you in one moment." After moving the tea tray to the bureau top, he then slipped onto the bed, rolled onto his back, and then pulled her on top of him so that she straddled his waist. When she glanced at him with surprise clouding her eyes, he claimed her lips with his. Never would he tire of kissing her; he'd finally won that right.

"I am feeling quite naughty, Timelbury, and since you started us on this journey, I need you to finish me rather more sooner than later."

Was there any wonder why he adored her? She was his perfect match in every way. In her he would have someone to protect and coddle, as well as depend on her to pull

him from being lost in the nightmares. “Do you doubt that I will?” He grinned as need tightened his shaft. “We will have such fun together.”

“I think so, too, but please don’t tell Papa our first engagement was a sham.”

“Of course I won’t.” He pressed a line of feather-weighted kisses beneath her jaw. Damn but her silky skin called to him like a siren’s song. “Besides, I like him. We should probably marry more sooner than later in the event his mind leaves him permanently.”

“Agreed.” As tears welled in her eyes, he pulled her down for another kiss. “At least we can do that for him. He’ll be so proud.”

“Haven’t you realized by now that I would do anything for you?” He drew his hands up her sides to cup her breasts and grinned when she shivered. The mounds of flesh were the perfect size to fit into his palms.

Fate or the magic of Christmas? It did matter when she was the greatest gift he could have been given?

“I do, and I adore that you wish to spoil me.”

“Someone has to.” Just thinking about how happy she was when they ice skated in the entry hall sent another round of awareness over him.

“You’re such a sweet man.” Her kiss-swollen lips curved into a smile. “I cannot wait to be your wife, and I welcome everything we’ll encounter on this new path.”

“As do I.” For long moments, he nipped and nibbled the skin of her throat, beneath her jaw, under her ear, followed the slopes of her breasts before she stirred restlessly on his lap.

“You turn me into an insatiable vixen,” she whispered then giggled. “I rather like it.”

“So do I.” Not able to resist her charms, Cornelius kneaded her beautiful breasts, fondled them, practically worshipped them.

“Ooh, I adore your hands on me.” A shiver racked her shoulders. “However, my mind is far too muzzy when you do that.”

“No thoughts. I want you to enjoy every moment of this.” He encouraged her onto her knees so he could better suck a pebbled nipple into his mouth. A squeal came from her as she snaked a hand to his nape. “You’re mine, Samantha. Now and always.” Damn, he’d never thought to feel so possessive, but he was with her, and he would protect her with his life. “Not forced together, not out of obligation, but freely chosen.”

“I love how protective you are, how you make me feel wanted,” she whispered as her back arched and she dug the fingertips of one hand into his shoulder while encouraging him closer with the fingers at his nape. “Oh!” A moan followed when he rolled the other tempting rosy bud. “I like that too. More, please.”

It was so damned erotic when she begged so politely. It still stunned him that his mindset regarding love and marriage had changed so drastically since meeting her. When she wriggled on his lap, his shaft tightened to the point of pain. “I’ll see about securing a license later this week, and I want the rogues to attend our ceremony.” Unaccountably, moisture welled in his eyes. “They are my family.”

“They truly are,” she whispered to him, and her breath steamed his ear.

“We shall tell my mother tomorrow at dinner.” Then he spent the next several minutes taunting and teasing Samantha’s breasts, reacquainting himself with the feel of those pebbled tips against his tongue. There was so much he didn’t know about

her, but a lifetime ahead to discover. When her breathing hitched and she pressed kisses to the side of his neck, he took back control, found her lips with his, and set out to make her forget her own name.

As was true with the whole of their history, it was him who soon found himself lost. The warmth of her in his hands, on his lap, the faint sounds of pleasure she made, the way her fingers curled into the hair at his nape, the elusive scent of roses all worked to hurtle him close to the edge and they'd yet to couple. This one woman had managed to not only turn his world upside down and change his mindset. It was no wonder he'd fallen for her.

"Mmm, Cornelius, yes." She pressed a line of tiny kisses to the underside of his jaw, and every time she moved, his engorged shaft grew and pulsed. "I want all of you." She parted the placket of his shirt and pressed her lips to the hollow of his throat. "I want to feel you everywhere."

The urgency in her whisper stoked the fires already burning through his blood. "As if I could deny you anything." Then he spent the next several seconds kissing and licking her neck, the slope of her shoulder, exploring the curves of her breasts until she quivered with need.

"So charming." Samantha tugged the front shirttails from his breeches, and when she put her hands on his bare skin, he hissed from the contrast of feelings suddenly coursing over him. "I want to see you, taste you, learn your secrets."

"We have time enough for that. And remember, you are supposed to be resting." He was moments away from exploding, but he wanted to prolong the foreplay, to feel her satiny skin against his. Because he couldn't wait, he continued his exploration until his fingers furrowed into the curls hiding the swollen bud at her center.

"Oh..." Her eyes briefly closed, and she caught her bottom lip between her teeth.

With a groan, Cornelius once more claimed her mouth for the sheer joy of kissing her. With his free hand, he tangled his fingers into the waterfall of her hair. Once he opened her flesh, he strummed his fingers along that all-important tiny button, and as she gyrated her hips against his hand, he continued to kiss her, taking every sound of pleasure into himself, gathering them all as if they were the finest jewels.

“I want to see you spend,” he whispered against the delicate shell of her ear. “Show me that I am exactly what you want.”

“But you already know...” When Samantha hit release, it was the most gorgeous thing he’d ever seen. She threw back her head and arched her spine while grinding her hips into his. To know that he’d done that to her, stole his breath. While she was still lost to bliss, he played with her nipples until he’d brought her to the edge once more. “Cornelius!” That soft hiss of his name spurred him onward.

So damned perfect. He nibbled the side of her neck. When he withdrew his hand from between her thighs, she protested.

“No!” Samantha’s hands were at his frontfalls, pulling, yanking the buttons from their holes. “I will explode if you don’t finish me.” The petulant annoyance in her voice tugged a grin from him.

“I wasn’t going to leave, love.” He batted her hand away in order to complete the task of freeing his hardened shaft.

“Good. I don’t think I could bear that.” Her eyes winked with wicked promise. “Tonight, though, I am doubly thankful I’m here with you instead of at the bottom of the Serpentine.”

“So am I.” You have no idea.

She nipped at his chin, pressed tiny kisses to his cheeks, his forehead, the side of his neck then finally claimed his lips, he was gone.

It was amazing how rapidly he'd fallen down that slippery slope and still did, continually going tip over tail in a relationship that was so much different than the last time. With her, he knew she would be there to catch him, to claim him, to help him put the pieces back together when his mind felt all too shattered. She was the balm he never knew he needed.

"I love you." Truly, there was nothing more to say, and it left him with a lump in his throat. Encouraging her onto her knees, he guided the head of his member to her opening. She had done this to him, shown him there was another way, that there was hope, that he wasn't a broken product of the war. As she slowly, so damned slowly, impaled herself on his length, a shuddering sigh left his throat.

Would that he never forgot how grateful he was for this chance.

"This is so different and lovely." Up and down, she moved her body, sliding with exquisite perfection along his shaft, over and over and over with her gaze holding his with each pass while he guided her with his hands on her hips. Her breath came in small pants. "I need to feel you more deeply, to know you would choose me again and again." Desire mixed with love in the blue depths of her eyes. "Show me that you will always protect me, take care of me, that you have no regrets."

"You know I will." He kissed her, claimed her mouth with urgent passion. "There are no regrets." As if she were made of the finest china, he urged her off his lap and helped her to lie back on the bed. He was primed and ready to explode, and damn if this coupling wouldn't end in embarrassment. The flush over her chest and cheeks was darling, her spread legs as he followed her down were divine.

She lifted her arms and pulled him close, and there was the sudden feeling of

homecoming he hadn't expected. "I love you, and you were correct. There is nothing else to say."

"Ah, sweeting." Cornelius settled between her splayed knees, planted his elbows on either side of her to encompass her body within the cage of his arms while holding her head in his palms. "Is this what you need?" With a powerful thrust of his hips, he speared into her, burying himself in her tight honeyed heat so deep he didn't want to find his way out.

"Yes!" The enthusiasm was muffled when she buried her face in the crook of his shoulder. A sigh escaped her as she wrapped her arms about his shoulders and held his hips between her knees.

There was no more need for words. Cornelius set out to worship her body with his, to show her how much he adored her, and that he couldn't wait to begin their life together. Over and over, he stroked into her, losing himself in the wonder of his fiancée. She held him close and that caring shook him to his very core. With the subtle tightening of her fingers and legs, she told him where she needed him to be. And still he stroked into her, couldn't have enough.

Thanked her with his actions for everything she'd given back to him.

As he stared into her eyes and she gazed back with all the trust in the world, a piece of his soul flew into her keeping, and with a gasp he realized he had received that same thing from her. She was the piece he'd unconsciously been missing since he came home from the war, and it was damned overwhelming to feel whole again.

Emotions clogged his throat. Cornelius pressed his forehead to hers, cradled her to him as best he could while he continued to work her body. When a moan escaped her, that precious sound broke the hold on his control. Need tingled through his stones; his shaft pulsed with urgency. He changed his rhythm, quickened his movements, and

after delving a finger between them, played at her nubbin with varying degrees of friction until she bucked beneath him. He stroked into her harder, faster, deeper, almost demanding that she go over that edge ahead of him.

So he could catch her when she fell.

“Cornelius!” That squeaky utterance was the last before she hit release. Samantha slipped into bliss with a muffled scream that made her beyond adorable.

“Beautiful.” He kissed her, selfishly took her sounds of release into himself, and with another deep, powerful thrust, he joined her in pleasure. The swirling vortex sucked him under, and for the next few seconds, he was lost with her.

In her.

Because of her.

After minutes, hours, perhaps another lifetime, he came back to himself. She still clung tightly to him, and slowly he untangled their limbs merely to move them into a more comfortable position in which he pulled her to him and covered them both with the bedclothes.

Eventually, the candle guttered out. The scents of candle wax and smoke filled the air, and he put his nose to her hair. Unexpectedly, moisture welled in his eyes and a few tears escaped to his cheeks. He’d been given a second chance at life, at love, at living since meeting Samantha, and he didn’t intend to muck it up.

“I should probably leave you to your rest,” he whispered, but didn’t make a move to leave the bed.

“Stay with me until I fall asleep.” Her arms about his waist were comforting and

provided a level of safety he never thought he'd attain.

"Of course I will." Then he pressed a kiss into the top of her head. "Thank you."

"For letting you bed me?"

"No." But he snorted with laughter. "For everything, but above all, for not giving up on me. I know throwing your lot in with mine is daunting."

"Everything worth having in this life will come with challenges. Why should loving you be anything less?" She brushed her lips over his and then snuggled more closely into him. "Love is like snow, Cornelius. It blankets all things and gives you a fresh start."

"And when the snow melts?" Would she eventually think him too much?

"Then spring comes, and the flowers grow, because that is when everything you've hoped for manifests in your soul." With a pat to his back, she sighed. "All will be well. As long as we go through it together."

Wise words, indeed. He couldn't wait to see where they would both go from here. No longer was there fear and darkness there.

Because of her.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:10 am

December 30, 1819

Harding Manor

Surrey, England

Cornelius crept along the corridor as quietly as he could. When he arrived at the nursery suite, he paused just inside the large room. The nursery maid had a room off the nursery, and there was another bedchamber on the other side that would eventually house a governess once the nursery was turned into a schoolroom.

His wife stood gazing down into the cradle, for their three-month-old son slept peacefully in the silence of the night, and quite frankly, she was just as beautiful now as she'd been when he'd wed her on Old Year's Night last year. Her blonde-brown hair was loose and flowing down her back in soft curls. The nightdress and matching wrapper in a lavender silk trimmed with dyed black lace suited her figure wonderfully well.

"When I woke, you were beside me in bed," he whispered as he came abreast of her so that he could peer into the cradle as well. "I missed you." Ever since they'd wed, they'd not spent more than a couple of nights apart.

Life over the past year had been rewarding but it had also been harrowing. The threats from Lady Stover had not only continued but had ramped into horrific attacks with lives in the balance and more than one rogue at the club had been injured along the way. And since his wife had been increasing during the year, he'd been anxious to keep her safe.

Eventually, though, Lady Stover had been dealt with and her criminal network ousted and neutralized, but at what cost? Had it been too high? It was something they would all need to ponder over the coming years, but then, in the effort of keeping loved ones safe and hanging onto happiness, there was no cost too high to gather those things around.

Still, the memories would prove bittersweet.

When Samantha slipped an arm about his waist, he pulled himself out of his thoughts. “I was a bit restless and didn’t wish to wake you. Though it seems a lifetime since the events of the summer, it also feels like yesterday when everything happened and our world was held in jeopardy, so I let you sleep.”

“Thank you.” He put an arm about her shoulders as his free hand drifted to the side of his face that had been a bit damaged by a fire. “But we are safe now; everyone is safe, and we can all breathe deeply while resuming normality in our lives.” Tears stung the backs of his eyelids. Over the past year, he had been far more emotional and uninhibited in showing those feelings, for life was too short to remain stoic. “I’m so grateful for our son. It still amazes me that he is here and that we are parents.”

“I feel the same. Sometimes at night I sneak in here just to watch him sleep.” Her voice broke and she went into his arms seeking comfort. “But he has my father’s name, and that was simply a perfect choice.”

Midway through the year, Samantha’s father had been killed, along with a few other members of various rogue’s families, but perhaps that was a blessing in disguise, for his mind was gone more than it wasn’t, and he’d rarely remembered who they were, but that didn’t negate the hole in their lives from his passing.

“Agreed.” When a tear slipped to his cheek, Cornelius brushed it away. “It is my hope that our little Henry ‘Major’ Harding will grow into the large footsteps he’ll follow behind.” For long moments, he watched his son sleep with his tiny fist tucked

beneath his chin and the shock of curly black hair. "I wouldn't mind trying for a daughter once you're fully recovered from the birth," he said a few minutes later.

"Ah, have you missed me in a carnal capacity, Lord Timelbury?" she asked with a dose of teasing in her whispered tones as she peered up at him in the darkness.

"You know that I have." In his wife's arms, there was always a welcome as well as peace.

"Well, since it is our first anniversary, why don't we retire to our room and see if we can't make inroads into putting a second babe in my belly." She pushed her hands up his bare chest, for he'd wandered into the nursery in only a pair of breeches. "We do have much to celebrate, don't you think?"

"Absolutely, we do." Then he dipped his head and claimed her lips in a kiss designed to be tender and caring, and to remind her of how much he loved her. Those two pillowy pieces of flesh cradled his and gave him such a gentle, enthusiastic welcome that it wouldn't be long before he was carried away with emotion and desire.

It was Samantha who pulled away first, and when she smiled at him with affection and need sparkling in her eyes, he was lost. "In fact, I would like as many children as you wish to give me, for I'm just so grateful we are both here and that we are so rich with everything we've been given."

"You can have whatever you want, sweeting, for I have you, and that is enough." Once more, he kissed her then he took her hand and led her from the nursery. "Let me show you how fortunate I am to have you in my life and how damned proud that you're my wife and the mother of my child."

Life was oftentimes messy, and there were times a man could find himself lost in the noise in his head, but the trick to surviving the darkness was to have a partner by his side that would remind him of his worth and who would shine a light so he could

wander back to reality.

Be it by fate or Christmas magic, it didn't matter, for there was nothing quite like falling in love with the right woman, and he couldn't wait to see where their lives would go from here.

The End