



One of a Kind (Singular Sensation #7.5)

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Category: Historical

Description: He's made a name for himself with his fists, but will he fight for her?

For far too many years, Hugh Tetford—Earl of Hazelton—has enjoyed his bachelorhood by surrounding himself with fellow club members from the Rogue's Arcade and prowling London with those brothers-in-arms. As he continues to ignore the responsibilities to his title in favor of indulging in illegal boxing in his leisure time, a valuable piece of jewelry with ties to his past suddenly comes into his possession and leads to him being beaten bloody.

Miss Annabelle Harding—sister to Lord Timelbury—has never understood the arbitrary and snobbish rules of beau monde society. More comfortable playing the hoyden and living as a headstrong miss, she's done as she's pleased while in the country, but now that she's in London, it's difficult to fit in, until one evening when she finds an unconscious, bleeding man left for dead in Hyde Park, which is when she truly discovers her purpose.

As it becomes apparent the earl has lost his memory, Annabelle does all she can to help him restore them, especially since there's a spark of desire between them. He's forgotten how to box, so his fellow club members rally around in order to give him fisticuff lessons. In the course of retracing his life through London, the two develop feelings for each other but when a man intent on taking back a moonstone necklace threatens them both, Hugh will need to dig deep in order to fight for everything he now holds dear.

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Hyde Park

Mayfair

London, England

Andrew Culpepper—Earl of Hazelton shifted in his chair in the private room at the Rogue’s Arcade club and grinned at his fellow brothers-in-arms.

“I thank you for the conversation and sharing a meal with me, but now I wish to be off to continue my celebration.” It had been a lovely night, for after years of searching, he had finally managed to track down a piece of jewelry that had once belonged to his mother. She’d been given it from his father on the occasion of her wedding.

One of his friends—Viscount Winteringham—nodded. His red hair gleamed in the candlelight. “Sounds as if you had a proper good day.”

“Indeed.” Unable to keep it a secret, Andrew drew the necklace from the interior pocket of his tailcoat and held it up for his friends to see. “This was once my mother’s. It was stolen from her when I was one and twenty. Ever since I’ve searched for it and finally it surfaced.”

Oval cabochons an inch in length and half an inch in height made up the main part of the necklace of moonstones and milky opals with silver and diamond stars between

the ovals. Each piece had a diamond star set in silver at the bottom where a teardrop-shaped opal or moonstone hung.

The viscount raised an eyebrow. “Where did you find it?”

“That’s the best thing.” Andrew passed the necklace to one of the other men at the table so they could examine it more closely. “All of my adult life, I’d been on the hunt for it. My father had called the necklace the Fallen Moon and Stars. For years, I kept tabs on auction houses, pawn shops, and private sales throughout London and parts of the Continent. The good thing about being a former jewel thief myself meant I’d kept fingers in the criminal networks. Unfortunately, I was always one step too late in claiming the piece. Then, this week, the necklace surfaced. At the wagering tables in Brooks of all places. Yesterday evening, I played faro until I was seated at the table of the man who offered it up, for his fortunes hadn’t been strong. With one fell swoop, I won the coin plus the necklace, and now it’s mine once more.” He couldn’t keep the pride or excitement from his voice.

A newer member of the Rogue’s Arcade—Lord Stanchfield—glided his fingertips over the separate stones when it was his turn to hold the necklace. “How did your mother lose it?”

“It wasn’t lost in the traditional sense.” Some of the joviality faded from his person. “There’d been a break in. On that particular evening, my parents weren’t supposed to have been home, there was a rout they’d been invited to, but my mother suffered from a megrim and stayed behind.” He forced a hard swallow to alleviate some of the dryness in his throat.

“You needn’t continue if you don’t wish,” Lord Winteringham said in a soft voice, for all the rogues had suffered anguish and sadness in their lives. Some of it stemmed from being in the war, but some did not. It was another reason they had all bonded so well. “You are allowed to keep some chapters of your past private.”

Andrew waved a hand. “It’s all right, and I long ago made my peace with it. Nearly twenty years will do that to a person.” Still, there was a fleeting tightness in his chest that he experienced every time he thought of his parents and that night. “In any event, I was away at university. Mama was in bed when the thief came in through the window. He’d climbed the ivy on the outside, was quite nimble, really. She must have woken from a sound he’d made, and she witnessed him raiding her vanity, her jewelry coffins. Perhaps she cried out, perhaps she challenged him, there is no way to know for certain, but when my father came home later that night from his club, Mama was dead in a pool of blood on the floor with an empty jewelry box beside her and most of her jewelry missing.”

Both men wore matching expressions of shock on their faces.

Winteringham passed the necklace back to Andrew. “Dear God, I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you.” He slipped the piece into a secret pocket made in one of the tails of his jacket for just this purpose. It also helped that he was well versed in being a jewel thief himself, which was how he had enough coin to fritter away while in university and the military afterward. “Despite the years, it never grows easier with the remembrance.”

“No, it never does.” The viscount frowned.

Andrew shrugged. “That moment changed me. As soon as I finished schooling, I went into the military, where I met the Duke of Edenthorpe, but surviving the war—as much as any of us did—didn’t bring me peace as I’d hoped, so I took up boxing.”

Stanchfield snorted. “I’ll wager you learned how to box in the event you ever met the bastard who stole the necklace and killed your mother.”

Heat crept up the back of his neck. “There is that.” Now finding the necklace meant he was one step closer to that possibility. Just because the man who’d lost it at the gaming tables had it didn’t make him the killer and thief, but Andrew meant to investigate accordingly. Yet ever since he’d taken up fisticuffs as a way to spend his leisure time and work off excess energy, he’d found a sort of contentment in his life it had been lacking before. “Well, I should be going. I’d like to take a walk through Hyde Park tonight and hope the rain holds off.”

“It’s a bit chilly though,” Stanchfield rejoined with a shiver.

“Eh, I’ll be fine. The whiskey I had with dinner will keep me warm.” Slowly, Andrew rose from his chair. “Anyone wish to take in the night air with me?”

Both men declined.

“Very well.”

Then Winteringham cleared his throat. “Have you seen Baselford since that disastrous ball a few weeks ago?”

“I have not, but I’ve heard that Edenthorpe and St. Vincent were here at the club a few days before All Hallow’s Eve when the earl stumbled in, his memory apparently gone.” It must have been horrid to lose one’s identity as Baselford apparently had.

A few weeks ago, he showed up at a ball his wife had co-hosted with another man after the earl was presumed dead for years. Wasn’t dressed for a formal society event, had no recollection of who he was or who his wife was, and before anyone could question him, the earl ran out into the night.

The viscount frowned. “Where is Baselford now?”

“I would have no idea, but I hope wherever he is that he can find the help he needs beyond the rogues.” He rubbed a hand along the side of his face. “Of course, we will do all that we can to help him... but he will need to resurface in London for us to do that.”

Everyone knew that Baselford had served in the military, but he hadn't been in any of the regiments the members of the Rogue's Arcade had been in, but Edenthorpe enjoyed a friendly connection with him, and apparently remembered the earl from years before, and there were rumors the man had been shot in such a way that there was still shrapnel lodged in his body. Had it contributed to his memory loss? It was anyone's guess, but until Baselford ceased going to ground and sought out real help, no one could help him or try to puzzle out the real story.

The viscount nodded. “We shall keep an eye open for him.”

“And if you do manage to locate him, bring him to the club, find him a room here, and then notify all of us. He's going to need help piecing his life together and support to move forward.” It would be all too terrifying to not remember anything about the life he once had. “I'd imagine his wife is worried sick.” Not to mention confused after accepting that he'd been killed only to find him more or less risen from the dead after she'd moved on.

Sticky wicket, that, and one he was grateful that he wouldn't need to struggle though.

The other man nodded. “We will do our best.”

Andrew tugged on his gloves. “I'm off but hope to see at least some of you at the Patterson's rout in a few days.”

Winteringham's grin was this side of cheeky. “The gossip mill says you're in the market for a wife soon. Is that true?”

Bloody ton serpents. If one of them happened to overhear a piece of conversation, they grabbed onto it like a dog with a particularly toothsome bone. “Considering it’s no secret that I’ve reached the age of forty and my contemporaries at this damned club keep falling to parson’s mousetrap, I suppose I ought to turn my attention to the responsibilities of the title and what will happen once I pop off this mortal coil.”

Over the course of a year or so, a handful of his good friends and fellow brothers-in-arms had fallen in love and were now consumed with being domesticated. Hell, when was the last time he’d seen Edenthorpe or even St. Vincent? Did he want the same for his life? He’d already made his fortune knocking about India after his stint in the war against Napoleon had ended. What was the purpose of that if he hadn’t anyone to pass it on to?

Both of the other men laughed. “We all must fall to the marriage trap at some point, my friend,” Stanchfield joked as he raised his brandy glass to the earl. “Better you than us at the moment.”

Yet Winteringham’s eyes were shadowed with secrets and sadness. “And good luck to you if you choose to give away your heart, for if you happen to lose the woman you love, you will always feel like an outsider.”

Belatedly, Hazelton remembered the man’s wife had died and had left behind a son who was now seven years of age. “No offense, my friend. It cannot have been easy for you, and neither should you rush to replace your wife,” he said softly as his mood sobered once again.

“It is a hazard of life. Love and death seem to go hand in hand.” But he took a deep sip of his own brandy as all joking faded from his eyes. “I truly think losing someone is the price we pay for daring to ask fate for love.”

Andrew’s chest tightened for the pain in his friend’s voice. “Come to the boxing

salon if you need to work out aggressions, and bring the boy as well. It's good for him to learn how defend himself at a young age." Then he said his goodbyes.

By the time he'd summoned his carriage and stood outside the club, he was obliged to turn up the collar of his greatcoat for a light drizzle had descended upon the city, and with it brought an ethereal mist that rolled across the grassy patches in the squares.

The drive to Hyde Park was relatively short, for the club wasn't that far. Andrew exited his vehicle at one of the main arches, instructed his driver to return in an hour, and then proceeded to follow his favorite paths on foot while the darkness and drizzle closed around him.

Did he wish to marry? It had long been on his list of things to ponder. Not that the life of a bachelor was something close to his heart. He wasn't a monk and had enjoyed a willing woman in his bed every now and again, but he wasn't a rake by any stretch of the imagination. Yes, he drank and gambled, but not to excess, and he had a fortune that he had no use for since his holdings and properties ran like the proverbial clockwork.

Beyond that, it seemed for the past couple of years, he'd lived for the excitement, action, and intrigue he'd found within the Rogue's Arcade club, and with so many members with questionable pasts and even more delicate mental states, there was always trouble somewhere.

But then, it was in his nature to rescue his friends, save them from themselves if need be... because he hoped that if he ever needed the same, they would all rush in to do just that.

A drop of rain dripped from the brim of his beaver felt hat, but Andrew didn't care. He was never happier than being outside or doing some sort of activity that moved the muscles and exercised the lungs. Though some of the parts of the path were

slippery, he walked with care, for he was well familiar with every aspect of the park.

When a man rushed at him from a shadowy path and plowed into him, Andrew exclaimed his surprise and annoyance. They both careened to the ground. His hat tumbled from his head and rolled a bit down the path.

“What the devil is wrong with you?” he asked as he shoved the assailant’s form from his.

The man didn’t answer. Instead, he renewed his efforts to get off a punch, one of which landed in Andrew’s midsection.

Pain exploded through his belly. Instincts rose to the forefront; he wasn’t a boxer in his leisure for nothing. He scrambled to his feet and at the same time peered at the brigand who’d dared to accost him. “Who the hell are you? What do you want?”

“You know what I want. Give me the Fallen Moon and Stars.” The other man who was dressed in black and a slouch-style cap pulled low over his eyes sprang to his feet, fists raised. “If you do, I might not clean your clock.”

How the deuce did this man know the name of the piece? Only his family had known that. “You can try, but you should buggar off right now. That necklace belongs to me.” Andrew struck out with an answering punch, which caught his assailant in the chin and sent him staggering backward. “I also have a fair knowledge of fisticuffs.”

“You nobs always think learning how to fight in a fancy salon is the same as surviving on the streets.” The shorter, slighter man retaliated with a punch of his own. It connected with the side of Andrew’s face, spinning him about.

“Try me, then.” As hot annoyance rose in his chest, Andrew took a punch to the jaw and one to the stomach, but he gave as good as he got. His footwork was better and

faster than the man who'd attacked him. Additionally, as he circled his opponent, his jabs were quicker and sharper, which caught the other man by surprise.

With a groan, his attacker came back with a renewed purpose that had Andrew stumbling backward on the slick path. "Give the bauble over else my employer will not be pleased."

"Then your employer can call on me in the morning and we'll talk like gentlemen." Under no circumstances would he give up the jewels. Thank goodness they were hidden in that secret pocket. It was highly unlikely they would be found. He jabbed with a fist, delivering a quick punch to the attacker's chin.

"I'll be taking the jewels right now." With surprising force, the other man flew at Andrew as if he were a whirling dervish from Constantinople.

Blows rained left and right in a flurry he couldn't keep up with let alone defend against, so he did the best he could, but a punch to the temple rendered him temporarily helpless and he fell to his knees as pain exploded through the side of his face. The world spun and tilted crazily about him, and no amount of shaking his head would clear it.

Andrew attempted to rise to his feet, but his balance was off, and when the attacker kicked at his chest with a booted foot, he had no defense. With a cry of both pain and denial, he flew backward only to strike his head on a boulder at the side of the path.

Stars entered his fading vision. Pain became his world. As he slumped to the wet ground, the urge to defend himself was still there but his limbs wouldn't obey the commands of his brain, and as the attacker dressed in black loomed over him, he slipped into the cloying, grasping darkness that enveloped him and dragged him into the nothingness.

He came back to consciousness some time later to several flares of pain in various portions of his body. The ache in his head was quite fierce, enough that he retched upon the wet path on which he laid. As he slowly maneuvered his battered body to his side, he frowned, for there was something very wrong. It felt as if there was a great nothing in his head, as if his brain had suddenly been shrouded.

Lifting his head, Andrew's frown deepened, for he had no blessed idea of where he was. He only knew it was the dark of night, but no amount of pondering could put a location to the forefront. Beyond that, he had no knowledge of anything. It was quite disconcerting.

As he sat there in the light drizzle on the slightly muddy path, the sound of a horse's hooves echoed in the air. He felt the vibrations through the ground. Was the rider a friend or foe? Though his head still ached, he attempted to push himself to his feet, but his body refused to cooperate, and he tumbled back to the path like an invalid.

"Hello?" The sound of a woman's voice echoed through the damp night. "You there. Are you alive or are you simply a bundle of rags that my imagination has convinced me is a person?"

Why the devil was the woman speaking aloud if she thought he wasn't alive? Before he could attempt to puzzle it out, a dark bay mare came into his hazy line of vision and the light from a lantern on the rider's pommel temporarily blinded him. He held up a gloved hand to ward off the sudden burst of illumination, and as he narrowed his gaze, the rider dismounted, and to his surprise, there was a flash of tan breeches and gentleman's riding boots beneath her skirting, hidden once she landed on the ground.

Perhaps she was part of a dream or a figment of his imagination, but he watched her approach with neither fear nor anticipation, for truly he was out to sea on why he was here to begin with.

Wherever here was.

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Miss Annabelle Harding was acutely conscious that every moment she spent riding within Hyde Park bordered on the scandalous.

Especially since it was well past midnight, she was riding unashamedly astride, and she wore breeches beneath her skirting. Since her brother Cornelius—Lord Timelbury—was currently in Bath seeing their mother settled for a couple more days, she dared to misbehave as much as she wanted. After all, since she'd been banished to the Essex countryside by that same brother for being too much a hoyden and therefore troublesome by way of falling into scrapes and scandals, why shouldn't she act the same way here in London?

She'd always felt an affinity for the nighttime, for it was far more freeing for a woman in this world than the day was. There was no one to judge, no prying eyes to watch, no sharp-tongued vipers to gossip about her. As she manipulated the reins, she lifted her face to the light drizzle in the air. Yes, it was slightly chilly, but her cloak kept the worse of the dampness from her body, and simply moving through the midnight-darkened park was beyond freeing and a far cry from the stifling rules and restrictions placed upon her in the daylight hours.

Being a prim and proper miss, and even sitting around with embroidery or painting waiting for suitors to come and call, simply wasn't her. Annabelle would rather be out and about doing something with her life by riding or walking or touring sites. Ladylike activities that were sanctioned by the matrons of the beau monde were simply too dull and didn't hold her attention.

Why couldn't her brother acknowledge that? It had been his idea to bring her up to London, for he'd decreed it was high time for her to be married and settled, most

likely so he wouldn't need to worry over her future any longer.

As if her obtaining her thirtieth birthday just last week and still remaining unmatched was a cause of alarm. There had been suitors, of course, and a few of those men had asked for her hand, and even though they'd passed muster with her brother, she'd considered them not quite right for her, and shouldn't she have a say in her own future? After all, she'd be the one leg-shackled to the man for the rest of her life, so he ought to be at least a little interesting.

And devastatingly handsome wouldn't hurt.

When her horse suddenly lifted its head and gave a low snort, she frowned. "What's wrong, girl?" Though her brother kept three horses while in London and he'd taken two of them with the traveling coach, the one left behind was her favorite anyway, and Bess was a gorgeous bay mare with an easy temperament.

Her mount refused to go further, and as Annabelle peered through the darkness up the road, she sucked in a breath, for there was a dark obstacle on the riding path. Granted, this was one of the more secluded portions of Hyde Park, but she'd been through the area often enough that the location didn't provoke fear. When Bess didn't appear to wish to go forward, she sighed.

"Fine. You can be afraid, but I'm going to investigate." Seconds later, she slid from the back of her horse, and then taking the lantern's handle from where it rested on the pommel of the saddle, she held it aloft. "Hello?" No one answered the hail. "You there. Are you alive or are you simply a bundle of rags that my imagination has convinced me is a person?"

Bess uttered a low whinny and tossed her head.

"Shh. It's all right, girl, and I rather doubt it's a specter." After petting the horse's

muzzle, Annabelle left the relative safety of being with her horse, and with her lantern held high, she slowly approached what she thought looked like a bundle of discarded rags. Yet the closer she came, she was able to discern it was a person.

Oh, dear.

Her heartbeat accelerated. Though it wasn't uncommon for criminals to dump unwanted corpses in the park or for the transient to expire here, she has never seen a dead body. With every step closer, her pulse pounded that much harder, and as the golden circle of light from her lantern encompassed the whole of the man on the ground, she gasped. "Hello?"

The pile of rags and the dead body wasn't dead at all. Instead, it was a man slumped over and leaning on an elbow. "Who goes there?" The voice, though a low and thrilling baritone, sounded garbled and graveled.

Well, she certainly wasn't going to give out a name to this ragamuffin person. He could be dangerous, yet the longer she gazed at him, the more alarmed she grew, for he had the look of a man who'd been in a fight and had come out somewhat worse for wear.

"Hello?"

The man blew out a breath. "Why do you keep saying that?"

"Because you keep not answering." The response shot out of her mouth before she'd thought about it. Then she frowned. "You're hurt." It wasn't a question. Immediately, Annabelle dropped to her knees on the path beside the man, regardless that it was muddy and wet. "Did you fall from a horse?"

He looked at her but there was a vacancy in his eyes she didn't quite trust. "I am not

certain.” Evidence of him casting up his accounts lay on the ground nearby.

Had he been in his cups and gotten lost? But if that were so, why had he been roughed up? “Hmm.” The man wasn’t dressed for riding, however. After setting the lantern down on the path, Annabelle proceeded to help him into a seated position. “Let’s see what we’re working with.” She peered into his eyes that were a beautiful hazel, almost whiskey colored in the dark and shadows. “Forgive the trespass but I need to assess your physical health. Are you in pain?”

“I...” He winced as she explored the back of his head. When her ivory kid gloves came away with traces of blood, he gasped. “That would explain the pain in my head.” Culture threaded through his tone and his word usage. “There is also an acute ache on the side of my face.” He touched his left temple with a gloved finger where an ugly purple and black bruise was beginning to form. “And here.” He put that same hand to his belly.

“Were you in a fight with someone?” As she slipped her finger through his thick light-brown hair that was slightly longer than fashion demanded so that it curled at his collar, she felt for other injuries on his skull. Thankfully, there were none.

“I cannot remember,” he said in a low voice as he watched her.

“That could be a result of either the blow to the back of your head or the injuries to your temple.” With a glance about the immediate area, her gaze fell to a small boulder to one side of the path. A streak of blood decorated the rock. “Ah. Perhaps you fell and hit your head there.” She pointed to the boulder. “Where you with someone?”

“I don’t know.”

“You must have been, for you look as if you were in a fight.” Yet his evening

clothing and great coat suggested he was a member of the aristocracy instead of the gentry or a laborer. “Did you have a society event on your schedule for this evening? Perhaps you were led astray into the park for an assignation?”

A man as handsome as he surely had someone in his life that might know him intimately.

“Again, I couldn’t say. There is nothing in my memories, just a sort of... blankness there, a darkness.” He shifted as panic reflected on his face. “What happened to me?” That same emotion wavered through his voice.

“I’m not certain but we will find out.” Making sure her voice sounded soothing, Annabelle moved so that she was fully in front of him. “Look at me. Watch my finger.” She held up her index finger and moved it to the right and the left, steadily watching his eyes as they followed the movement. Then she guided her hand up and down. Again, his eyes went in those same directions without incident. “Can you see me? Am I blurry or doubled?”

The only reason she knew to perform the tests was because her brother had fallen off his horse a few summers ago when he’d been at the Surrey property, the same summer his wife had died of an allergic reaction to something she’d come into contact with. Annabelle had been the one to find him, and after ascertaining that he’d hit his head on a fence rail, she’d had to examine him. The difference there was that he’d retained his memory while it didn’t seem as if this man had.

“I can see you clearly.” A trace of relief went through his voice.

“Good.” She ran her hands over the wide breadth of his shoulders beneath his greatcoat then swept them along the impressive plains of his chest. His hard, solid chest that spoke of physical labor or activity that kept him fit and well-muscled. “Obviously, I can’t see your torso or abdomen, but if you say you have pain there, I’ll

wager you engaged someone in a fight, or an attacker came at you while you were in the park.”

“Then that would explain why my hands, my fingers feel tight.” He frowned as he spoke, kept eye contact. “Perhaps I needed to defend myself with my fists.” When he removed the gloves, a sapphire in the signet ring on his right pinky finger glimmered in the lantern light.

“You must be titled.”

“Why?”

She caught his hand in hers and examined the signet ring. A hawk rested on a shield with a spear beneath it, but she didn’t recognize the coat of arms. That didn’t mean anything, for she was rubbish at knowing members of the beau monde . “This signet ring means you have a title, which would explain the cut and quality of your clothing. Perhaps you had left a club earlier tonight and were attacked on the way home, and that means you should have a carriage nearby.” She again swept the area with her gaze, but of course they were too far into the park for vehicles to go.

“Ah.” That was all he said. “In the park and engaged in a fight. I suppose it’s plausible.”

“Anything is possible at this point.” Oh, dear. He smelled so good! Like citrus and sage with hints of leather. It was both comforting and alluring all at once. He definitely had aristocratic lines in his face, and there was a slight crook in his nose that spoke of it having been broken at one point and a barely visible white scar over his right eyebrow in the shape of a slivered moon.

How had he come by that? And if he was a member of the beau monde , why was he engaged in fisticuffs to begin with?

“Well, you obviously cannot stay here.”

“No, I suppose not.” Then he winced. Before she could ask what was amiss, he shifted, frowned, and put a hand to his backside. He fussed with one of the tails of his coat, and a few seconds later, he pulled out a gorgeous necklace from the hidden pocket. “What the devil is this and why do I have it? It was poking at me.”

“Oh, heavens. That’s beautiful,” she breathed. The necklace was like milk and magic in the dim illumination. Tiny diamonds on silver stars sparkled like mad, while moonstones and opals spoke of secrets and romance. “That must be worth a king’s ransom.”

“I wouldn’t know, for I don’t recognize it.” As if it had burned his hands, the man gave it over into her possession. “Keep it.”

“Uh...” It was far too expensive a piece for him not to remember. Perhaps his memories were truly faulty due to being hit on the back of his head and would return with time. Once that happened, he would demand the return of the necklace. “You will want this later.” But Annabelle slipped the necklace down the front of her shirt to rest between her camisole and her stays. “Do you know your name?”

Confusion and sadness warred for dominance in his eyes. “Unfortunately, I do not.” He clutched at her hand. “What is going to happen to me?”

“I don’t know.” Perhaps all he required was a large shock that might rattle his brain enough to reconnect his memories. Taking his dirty and bloody cravat in her free hand, Annabelle tugged him closer and then she pressed her lips to his in a quick kiss. When she pulled away, she searched his eyes that had darkened slightly. “Do you remember anything now?”

“Not exactly, but I wouldn’t mind continuing what you started.” He cupped his free

hand about her nape and drew her against his body so that she awkwardly leaned into him while he claimed her mouth with his.

Over the course of her adult life, Annabelle had the opportunity to experience kisses from various men with degrees of experience, but there was something about this man's overture that stole her breath and sent tiny flutters into her lower belly. And she enjoyed the kiss more than she thought she would, for when he settled her more comfortably in his embrace and she more or less reclined in his arms between his splayed legs, she smoothed her hands along his shoulders and gave herself over to returning his kiss. Who would know? They were the only ones in that section of the park. His lips were firm but supple and they cradled hers so perfectly it was almost a tragedy to pull away, for the desire crashing over her had happened far too quickly and was much too intense for only having just met.

"Well, then." Nothing except scandal lay down that path, and even though she'd spent a good portion of her life chasing exactly that, this felt new, different, almost frightening, and she didn't know if she was ready for that. "We should go," she said as she scrambled to her feet and tried to ignore the patches of mud on her skirting.

"Where? I have no idea where I belong."

For the first time, Annabelle put herself in his place, and the results were terrifying. Imagine not knowing who you were, where you were, or how you came to be there. With a sigh, she held out a hand. "You are coming with me." If he indeed took a carriage to the park, he'd no doubt missed meeting with that driver, which meant someone would be looking for him soon. "It is not too long after midnight, and we cannot do anything right now. You can have the guest room at Harding House, and in the morning, we'll decide what to do."

"All right." He nodded and put a hand into one of the pockets of his greatcoat. "Ah, is this a calling card?"

After retrieving her lantern, she glanced at the embossed card that had the words “Rogue’s Arcade” written on it with the image of a gemstone in the corner. “Perhaps not, but it’s a lead and I’ll follow it up tomorrow.” She took the card from him and tucked it away in the same place as the necklace. “Come on. Hopefully you can remember how to mount a horse.”

“I guess we’ll find out.” Once he stood, he swayed a bit with a hand to his head.

Oh, dear. Annabelle guided him over to where Bess grazed beside the path, but before she could make another decision, the man swiftly mounted the horse and settled into the saddle. “Give me a hand up?” As soon as he did, she slipped her fingers into his palm. Faintly heated tingles danced along her arm to her elbow. Seconds later, she slid into the saddle in front of him. “Hang on. We’ll be there shortly. I’m in Manchester Square.” Then she took up the reins as the man slipped his arms about her waist.

Her brother was a member of the Rogue’s Arcade, so since this man had one of their cards, he was either a member or he knew someone there. Those men stuck together, cared for each other as if they were family, and because they’d all been in the military together, they had each other’s backs. Trying to ignore the accidental brush of his thumbs at the undersides of her breasts, she nodded to herself. Tomorrow, she would take him to the club.

Except she wouldn’t be granted entrance due to being a woman. Drat these antiquated laws and a pox on men’s backward thinking! Fine, then she would summon a couple of the men from there. Perhaps they could help identify him.

“Dear God, the pain in my head will kill me yet,” he whispered as he leaned hard into her back.

“I’m sorry, but it’s likely to prove worse before it gets better, for the jostling of the

horse will exacerbate the ache.” Softly clicking her tongue to Bess, she guided the horse back onto the path and then urged her mount at a decent pace toward the front of the park. “Just hang onto me and please don’t die before I can get you home.”

Wouldn’t that just be the scandal to end all scandals? If her brother came home to find her nursing a nearly dead stranger back to life that she’d found in Hyde Park while riding astride? With a huff of frustration and a quick prayer, Annabelle held onto one of his arms in an effort to keep him upright in the saddle while her mind wandered back to that kiss they’d shared and the sensations of temporary freedom she’d found therein.

If nothing else, the arrival of this man had chased the dull boredom from her existence. At least she was grateful for that.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:27 am

November 5, 1817

Harding House

Manchester Square, Mayfair

London

When Andrew came awake that morning, the ache in his head wasn't as fierce as it had been the day before, but as he explored the area with his fingertips, there were strips of linen wrapped about his head, possibly to stop the bleeding from the blow.

He frowned at the window in the room in which he'd been shown into the night before. The navy drapes were still drawn, but glimmers of sunlight sneaked through as the fabric moved gently from a relatively chilly breeze. The clatter of carriage wheels combined with the soft drone of conversation were also clues that someone had opened the window slightly, perhaps to encourage fresh air into the room while he'd slept.

Though the slumber had been restorative, and he felt a bit refreshed, he still didn't remember his name or even who he was. For that matter, the woman who'd essentially rescued him from the park last night remained unknown to him. They hadn't introduced themselves other than that kiss.

Heat sneaked through his chest and into his face, for he'd kissed the unknown woman with more aplomb than he should have. It hadn't been well done of him, but there had been a certain undefinable something about her that had invited him close, as if she

were his only lifeline in the sea of confusion he currently found himself in, and he'd wished to cling to that.

Still did, if he were honest with himself.

Yes, he heartily appreciated the kindness she'd showed toward him when she'd rescued him and checked him over for further injuries. Without her help, who knows what would have become of him, and she was lovely in a serene sort of way that had belied the breeches she'd worn or the fact that she'd ridden back to Mayfair astride.

A heady conundrum indeed.

Upon rising from the bed and after doing the necessary behind a silk privacy screen painted in pastel colors featuring a shoreline with white birds taking flight in the sky, Andrew left the tailcoat as well as his cuffs, collar, waistcoat, and cravat on the foot of the bed. Apparently, he'd fallen asleep with his clothes on, and someone—God love his rescuer—had taken it upon themselves to remove his shoes and hosiery. Besides, the coat stunk to high heaven, for he'd cast up his accounts last night before he'd met his angel of mercy. Without the luxury of having a wardrobe nearby, he wandered out of the room in just his fine lawn shirt and evening breeches.

The townhouse floorplan was easy enough to navigate, and when he arrived at the morning room, the robust scent of coffee complimented the more savory smells of breakfast foods waiting on a sideboard, but before he could attend to the needs of his stomach, his gaze landed upon the woman who'd plucked him out of crisis.

“Good morning.” His voice sounded like a rusty gate as he greeted her while she read a copy of the most recent London Times newspaper. A longcase clock in a corridor chimed the eleven o'clock hour. Damn, he must have been exhausted if he'd slept that long. “I... uh...” What the devil did one say to someone who'd taken pity on them? “Thank you for bringing me here after last night. I rather think I would have

fared poorly on my own.”

“You are quite welcome.” The woman carefully folded the paper and set it next to her plate of half-eaten food. “I’m glad to see you up and around.” Her dulcet tones flowed over him like warm honey and immediately encouraged a sense of calm in him. “Are you feeling more the thing this morning?”

“Slightly, yes.” He took the opportunity to study her. Past the first and even second blooms of youth, he estimated her age to be around thirty or perhaps just over. Her honey-brown hair sparkled in the morning sunlight with strands of blonde and brass, and her blue eyes were the hue of a lazy, slightly overcast summer day in the country. The dress of saffron-dyed cotton lined with red embroidery somehow suited her and put him in mind of golden autumn days. “Though the memory hasn’t returned, unfortunately.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Her lips turned down in a frown, and he dropped his gaze to her mouth. “I’d hoped after sleep things might have improved.”

“So did I.” How well he remembered the silky plushness of those two pieces of flesh pressed against his last night. The bottom one was slightly fuller than the top. He would give up many things for the right to kiss her again... assuming he had anything to his name, that was.

“Please sit.” She gestured to a chair across the round table from her location. “The footman can fix you a plate. Would you prefer tea or coffee with your breakfast?”

“I... To be honest, I have no idea.” His laugh sounded all too forced as he sat in the indicated chair. When his gaze connected with the silent footman who stood near the sideboard, he said, “Perhaps bring me both?”

“Of course,” the younger man said and then turned to his task.

“I assume you don’t remember your name.” It wasn’t a question as she lifted her teacup to her lips and took a sip.

God, if he wasn’t careful, he’d wax poetic about her mouth, and he wasn’t given to flights of fancy. Was he? “Uh, I do not.”

“Unfortunate.” She watched him from over the rim of her cup. “Well, at times there is comfort in anonymity.”

“Perhaps.” Andrew nodded his thanks to the footman who brought over a silver pot of tea as well as a pot of coffee. At least there was a footman in the room, for something in his mind told him it was folly to remain alone with an unmarried woman, especially while in his state of undress. But he didn’t know why. Seconds later, the servant put a plate loaded with breakfast foods in front of him. Sitting there, talking of banalities with this woman was far too domestic. Suddenly he wanted that for his life... whatever that was. When he took up a fork, he gave a tiny chuckle. “At least I know how to use utensils.”

That tugged a grin from her. “I suppose there are things one doesn’t forget.”

He lowered his voice. “Like kissing?”

The trill of laughter that left her throat was quite intoxicating. “Exactly.” They ate in a companionable silence for a few minutes before she spoke again. “By the by, I’m Miss Annabelle Harding. You might know my brother Cornelius, or rather Lord Timelbury. He is a member of the Rogue’s Arcade club, which I suspect you might be.”

“Why?” All of this information was fascinating.

A shrug lifted her slim shoulders. “That calling card from your greatcoat.”

“I’m sorry but none of that sounds familiar.” Though he tumbled her Christian name through his otherwise empty mind. It was both sweet and scandalous.

“Well, on the chance that you belong to said club, I have invited a couple of members over to take tea with us this afternoon. They can talk with you and if they identify you, they can give us some insight on how to proceed.”

Hot panic welled in his chest. “You mean to wash your hands of me?” She was the only link he had to his past, for she was the one who’d found him, the one who saved him.

“Not necessarily.” Miss Harding’s eyes rounded. She reached across the tabletop and briefly laid a hand atop his. “Until you are settled and in a good place, I don’t intend to leave you to your own devices. And there is still the mystery of this.” Withdrawing her hand, she reached for a velvet bag to one side of the table. From the bag, she withdrew the same necklace he’d given her last night. “Are you certain you don’t recognize this?”

“I am quite certain.” While he frowned at it, something glimmered on the edge of his consciousness, but it never came to fruition. The milky moonstones fairly gleamed while the opals flashed internal fire. “I wish I could say that I did. It is a beautiful piece.”

“Agreed, and since it was found on your person, hidden, I’d wager it must be important.”

He nodded. “It might be. I hope it is.”

Miss Harding frowned. “Why?”

“Why not?” Andrew shrugged. “Because then it might mean something to me. I

might have someone waiting for me to whom that necklace belongs.” He focused his gaze on the piece that almost dripped from her fingers. “Why would I go to the trouble of hiding it if it didn’t mean anything to me?”

“That is probably true.” She eased her fingertips over several of the stones while longing lit her eyes. Eventually, she returned the necklace to the velvet bag. “I hope you do either discover its origin or regain your memories therein. You seem like the sort of man a woman can really find contentment with.”

“Ah. I appreciate the compliment.” A wave of sadness fell over him, and as he turned his attention back to finishing his breakfast, he frowned at the two cups he’d poured out. “It is somewhat disconcerting to exist but to not know who I am.” After tasting the liquid from both cups, he made a face and shook his head. “I don’t believe I would prefer coffee over tea. There is something quite soothing about tea. When I drink it, I feel as I do in your company.”

Was that too revealing to say aloud?

Miss Harding’s eyebrows rose. “How lovely.” A faint blush went through her cheeks. “I’m glad I can give you comfort during this trying time.”

“Uh, you said you live here with your brother. Could I possibly borrow some clothes until someone somewhere might recognize me?”

“I wish I could, but Cornelius is shorter and doesn’t have as wide of shoulders as you, so nothing in his closet would fit you.” As she spoke, her gaze roved over his person, and a wave of acute awareness slipped over his skin. “Hopefully, one of the men who call this afternoon can help.”

“Perhaps.” With his knife and fork, he moved things around on his plate. “And if they do? What then? They might know me, but I still won’t know myself. I won’t have my

memories.” It was maddening to think he would always be lost.

“At least you would be able to walk through your home, touch your things, wear your clothing. Talk to people you used to know.” The smile she gave him was encouraging. “Doing familiar things might help jar your brain enough to unblock whatever it is that is prohibiting your remembrances. Don’t give up quite yet.”

“Right.” That did not cheer him. “Thank you. Without your help, it could be worse.”

“I do hope everything turns about for you.” Slowly, she stood up from the table. “In the meanwhile, feel free to make use of the library until the other gentlemen arrive. Perhaps reading will help stretch your mind and unlock memories. I’m going riding. While I’m gone, I’ll keep an ear pricked for information of a missing peer, in the event you are one.”

“I appreciate that.” He huffed as she left the room. He hoped regaining his memories would be as easy as conversing with his rescuer.

When he was summoned to the drawing room later that afternoon, he was groggy from sleep, for he’d napped on and off in the library, but he felt incrementally better than he had that morning. Upon arrival, he immediately grinned at Miss Harding but frowned at the two men who were also in the room with her. One was tall with golden-brown hair and lines of fatigue on his face while the other was slightly shorter with red hair and a jolly expression.

“This is the Earl of St. Vincent.” Miss Harding indicated the taller, older man. “And this is Viscount Winteringham.” She waved a hand at the red-haired man. “They are both members of the Rogue’s Arcade, the same club that my brother belongs to, and they do recognize you.”

“You do?” His heartbeat accelerated as he bounced his gaze between the two men.

“Who am I, then?”

The earl grinned. He resettled on a sofa near to the chair nearby. “You are the Earl of Hazelton. Your name is Andrew Culpepper and you are forty years of age.”

“Yes.” Viscount Winteringham nodded. His fiery hair gleamed in the sunlight. “For many years, you’ve been a member of the Rogue’s Arcade, which means at some point in your past, you were also a jewel thief.”

“What?” Andrew recoiled in his chair and stared at the two men. At least he wasn’t a beggar, that explained the fine clothing he’d been wearing the night before. “A thief as well as an earl? How is that possible?”

St. Vincent chuckled. “It is a very long and convoluted story, my friend, but suffice it to say, that is but one truth.” He grinned. “Also, you fought alongside me in the last few years of the war against Napoleon. You are a hero having saved a number of us on those battlefields while some of us have done the same to you.”

“And recently, you fearlessly entered a townhouse on fire in order to bring out one of our mutual friends,” the viscount said in a low voice. “On that day, you saved Lady Caroline, who is the Duke of Lockwood’s sister while I followed you in and located the Viscount Aldren, and eventually he married the lady, and you were instrumental in that.”

“Well, I guess I am someone of importance.” When he glanced at Miss Harding, his chest tightened with worry, for he would need to leave here. Would he see her again?

Though relief was stamped on her face, there was also apprehension there. “I knew you would be, Your Lordship.”

He did not enjoy that formality between them, and the title sounded foreign as well.

“Please, since you rescued me, I would like it if you would refer to me by my Christian name.” As his two contemporaries frowned, he released a huff of annoyance. “Or possibly Hazelton if you must. I just thought with everything else going on, I’d like one thing to be simple.”

“I beg your pardon, but how did Miss Harding rescue you?” This from the viscount, who glanced between them with speculation in his eyes.

Quickly, she related the story. “I’d been riding in Hyde Park late last night when I came upon what I assumed was a dead body. When it became apparent he was not, in fact, dead, I immediately dismounted and sought to discover if Lord Hazelton was wounded.”

Andrew nodded. “Miss Harding tells me I must have either been in a fight or accosted, which explains the various bruises and aches over my body, but then I must have fallen and hit the back of my head on a boulder, which rendered me unconscious and took away my memory.”

The viscount’s expression reflected concern. “You were at the club last night, but in jovial spirits and decided to take in the night air with a walk.”

“I don’t remember that.”

It was St. Vincent’s turn to talk. “Incidentally, if there was a fight proffered, you probably gave as good as you got, for in your leisure, you box at DeBeyers Salon, have even done a few matches for prizes.”

“Ah.” Andrew opened and closed his right fist. “That’s an interesting development. Do you know if I was to meet with someone in the park?”

The viscount shook his head. “Not that you mentioned.”

Softly, Miss Harding cleared her throat. “This was on his person when I found him, hidden in a secret pocket at the back of his tailcoat.” She held up the necklace. “Do either of you gentlemen recognize it?”

When the earl declined, Lord Winteringham nodded vigorously. “Hazelton showed that piece to us last night before he departed. Said it belonged to his mother, that his father gave it to her on their wedding day and that he’d waited years to have it back in his possession after it had been stolen when he’d been only a lad of one and twenty.”

“Oh, dear.” She left her perch on another chair and brought the necklace over to Andrew. “You should take this home, then. It belongs to your mother, and she’ll no doubt wish to have it back.”

The viscount paled. “His mother was murdered at the time of the break in, Miss Harding.”

“Oh.” A blush entered her cheeks as she met Andrew’s gaze. “I didn’t know. I’m so sorry for your loss.”

Though his chest tightened with the knowledge, since he didn’t remember who his parents were, the truth of her being dead didn’t bring a shock with it. There was only a mild curiosity for his past and his history. He waved a hand at her. “I would prefer you look after the necklace until I can remember why I apparently spent so many years chasing after it.”

“All right.” She nodded as she once more tucked it into the velvet bag. “It’s obviously valuable and someone wanted it enough to beat you bloody to get at it.”

“This is true.” Viscount Winteringham stood. “Perhaps if we take Hazelton to the boxing salon, he’ll remember the familiar environs and that might put his memory back on track.”

“It’s worth the chance,” Miss Harding agreed. “Just be certain to take him home and impress upon his staff that he’ll need constant supervision.” The delicate muscles in her throat constricted with a hard swallow. “And if one of you rogues could keep him company when he’s not at home? He shouldn’t be alone while he’s going through this.”

“Of course, Miss Harding,” the Earl of St. Vincent said as he also stood. “When your brother returns, he can help us in the event my child arrives too early.”

She nodded. “Thank you.”

The earl motioned to Andrew. “Come with us. We’ll take you home and show you around and get you cleaned up.”

Another wave of panic welled in his chest in a hot wave, and this time it brought fear with it. Miss Harding was all he’d known since awakening in the rain. He scooped up her free hand and clung to it. “Don’t let them take me away, Miss Harding.”

A blush stained her cheeks. She made hushing sounds as she glanced between the two men and him. “You need to do this. I’ll come visit tomorrow and we’ll go to the boxing salon.”

Excitement and relief twisted down his spine. “You’ll go there with me?”

“I will.” When the other two men offered protests, she stared them both down. “Even if it’s not customary to do so due to my being a woman.” She flicked her gaze back to him. “I feel responsible for you.”

Lord Winteringham sputtered. “If you go, it needs to be a quick visit.”

She blew out a breath. “And if he remembers a bit and wishes to box?”

“Perhaps Lord Aldren wouldn’t mind us using the private salon in his home—”

“Or a can appear in the salon disguised by a young man,” Miss Harding interrupted with annoyance stamped on her face.

Andrew appreciated the fact she wouldn’t abandon him. “I would appreciate that. Thank you.”

St. Vincent frowned. “Why do you care about Hazelton’s well-being, Miss Harding? You’d never met before last night.”

She narrowed her eyes on him. “I feel responsible for him, since I was the one who found him in need at the side of the road. It is only natural I should wish to follow his care.”

“Thank you. I feel better knowing that you will check on me.” Andrew flashed her what he hoped was a confident grin before he looked at his friends that he couldn’t remember. “I suppose we should go. The sooner I can coax my memories back, the better off we all shall be.”

And if he couldn’t? He would meet those troubles when—or if—they came.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:27 am

November 6, 1817

Culpepper House

Berkley Square, Mayfair

London, England

Throughout the previous night, Annabelle had worried and wondered how the Earl of Hazelton had fared on his own. For the first time, she wished her brother was in residence so that she could seek his counsel as well as to ask for more background surrounding the man.

By the time the noon hour struck, she felt far too restless to sit at home, so she took a hired hack to the earl's residence and didn't give much thought as to whether such a call was scandalous or not since she didn't bring a maid or a companion. Not that the ton would be surprised by her behavior—it had been why her brother had sent her to the country to begin with—but Cornelius might be disappointed.

It can't be helped.

A butler of indeterminate years answered her knock.

“Miss Harding to see the earl, please.”

He frowned at her. “His Lordship isn't well. He is not seeing visitors.”

When the door began to close, Annabelle put a gloved palm to the panel, stopping it. “I am the person who found Lord Hazelton in Hyde Park last night. If it wasn’t for me, he could have been preyed upon further or even rendered dead, and quite frankly, I’m worried about him.” She blinked away the quick tears that stung her eyes. “I would feel better if I could see for myself that he is well.”

For long moments, the butler assessed her with his faded blue gaze fixed on hers from over the tops of his half-moon spectacles. Finally, he nodded. “You may enter, but the earl is with his private physician presently. He shouldn’t be disturbed.”

Hardly daring to believe the boon granted, Annabelle darted into the entry hall, and as her heartbeat pounded through her veins, she said, “I’ve taken your words under advisement but have found the need to believe the evidence of my own eyes more important than that.” Wagering on the fact the earl was in his private rooms, she ran toward the marble staircase, and as the butler called half-heartedly after her, she lightly trotted up the treads to the third level.

From there, it was a relatively simple task to locate his suite of rooms, for the door off the corridor was half open. She arrived in a bedchamber tastefully decorated in shades of navy, mauve, and gold. It was an exceedingly masculine space filled with heavy, cherry wood furnishings and decorated with oil paintings of English countryside scenes hanging in gilt frames.

Both Andrew and an older man glanced up upon seeing her.

“Miss Harding.” A soft grin curved the earl’s lips, and the gesture was so genuine, flutters went through her lower belly. “You’re here.” When the older man harrumphed, he sighed. “This is Doctor Carsons. He has attended to my needs for the better part of fifteen years.”

She nodded to the man. “Hullo.”

“You shouldn’t be here,” the doctor said in a gruff voice with an even gruffer expression.

The earl huffed. “Miss Harding was the one who found me in the park last night.” He touched his fingertips to the bruising on his cheek and temple, but at least the bandage from yesterday was gone from about his head. “Without her, I wouldn’t be here.”

“Very well.” Doctor Carsons nodded. He cleared his throat. “As I was about to say before we were interrupted, your memory might never return, but you should certainly do the things you have regularly done in the hopes it will help your memories to come back.”

Concern creased the earl’s brow. “I can’t remember anything about my life, so how can I do my regular routine?”

She agreed that it made no sense, but at least it was a start. “Thank you for taking such close care of the earl, Doctor. I will counsel Lord Hazelton on doing exactly as you say.” With an encouraging nod, she gestured to the door. “He will send for you if he should need your again.”

Surprise reflected on the older man’s face. “Your Lordship, do you concur with Miss Harding’s statement?”

“I do,” Andrew answered without hesitation. “Thank you.”

It was a task to mask her amusement while the physician packed up his instruments then picked up his black bag.

“Very well. I shall pay you another visit next week to check your progress.” With his nose in the air, the doctor left the room, leaving her alone with the earl.

“I’m glad you are here, Miss Harding,” he said with a return of that charming grin. “It’s felt far too empty here, and I’ve been far too alone, like a stranger in a strange land.”

Oh, dear.

Belatedly, Annabelle realized she probably shouldn’t be standing in this man’s bedchamber with him. “Perhaps we should order tea. You look as if you could use a good dose of calm. Especially after that news, hmm?” If the same thing had happened to her, she would have been quite upset and possibly inconsolable.

“That sounds like a fine idea.”

She nodded. “Would you like to lead the way?”

A ruddy flush crept up his neck into his cheeks. “I’m afraid I’m not as familiar with the layout of the house as I should be, but if you wish to bumble along with me, I would be delighted to escort you.”

“Poor thing.” Taking pity on him, she went to the navy velvet bell pull and gave it a good tug. “Perhaps instead we should take a tour. It might help with your missing memories.”

“Anything is possible at this point.”

When a footman arrived at the door, Annabelle was already in the corridor beyond.

“Please ready a tea tray and set it up in the drawing room. His Lordship and I are going to tour the house in an effort to jar his memory back into place before we partake in tea.”

“Of course, Miss...?” Confusion reflected on the young footman’s face.

“Miss Harding,” she said with a nod. “I shall keep the earl company for a bit before we go out for the afternoon.” For she meant to take him over to the boxing salon, propriety be damned. Making this man whole was more important than observing the arbitrary rules of a prejudiced society.

“I’ll see to it myself, Miss Harding.”

As the footman scuttled off, she glanced at Andrew.

“We might as well get to it. What did you do once you arrived home yesterday afternoon?”

He shrugged as he fell into step with her toward the stairs. “Those men from the Rogue’s Arcade club talked with various members of my staff. I was shown upstairs to my rooms and had a bath drawn. After, I took dinner with the men.”

“Your friends. Those men are your friends. They would do anything for you, or at least that is how I understand your bond through what my brother has said over the years.” Though her imagination was temporarily snagged on the thought of the earl naked and immersed in a bathtub, Annabelle nodded. “Did you sleep well?”

“Fitfully. There are too many worries filling my mind for rest.”

“Understandable.” She led the way to the second floor where a study, the drawing room, and a morning room resided. “This townhouse is lovely. Can you remember the scenes that inspired some of the paintings? They are quite lovely and tranquil. I wouldn’t mind visiting the property depicted in some of them.”

By that time they were inside the drawing room, paused before the vista of a lake

with slight fog rising off the surface and a colorful sunrise in the background. The earl peered at it with his hands clasped behind his back. At times, it appeared that he might recognize the place, but then he shook his head.

“I’m sorry. No. I’m seeing it for the first time just as you are.”

“Don’t try to rush it. This will no doubt prove a process.”

Over the course of the next hour, they went slowly through the rooms on that floor before moving on to the library and parlor on the ground level. A few times he became animated as if he either recognized various pieces of art or paintings or even furniture, but then in the end, he grew frustrated.

“I’m sorry but this isn’t working!” Andrew shoved a hand through his hair. He stormed back up the stairs to the drawing room where a silver tea tray waited on a low table. “This is a stranger’s house; it isn’t my home. I have no idea who any of the staff is, don’t recognize anything contained within these walls.” In the center of the room, he turned abruptly to her. “What if I never do? How am I supposed to go on?”

“Honestly, I don’t know.” Sadly, there was no advice, but when a trace of fear went through his whiskey-hued eyes, her reserve crumbled. “Please don’t fret.”

“That is far too easy for you to say.” Vulnerability etched through his expression as he bounced his gaze between her and the windows. “You aren’t the one being held captive in an empty room, so to speak, with no history and nothing personal to define you.”

“It sounds horrid,” she said on a whisper as she slowly approached him. He was genuinely upset, and she had no idea how to comfort him. Perhaps no one or nothing could. “But I can promise you this: I’ll be there to help you through it if you so desire.” It had been a reasonable assumption, but when he closed the distance

between them and enfolded her into his arms, holding her close, an underlying current of attraction between them left her breathless.

“I would enjoy that, suspect I might need it.” The warmth of his breath wafted against the shell of her ear while the sound of his voice rumbled in her chest. Then he immediately released her while clearing his throat. “Uh, Miss Harding, perhaps we should partake in tea.”

“Yes. That seems like the safest thing at this point.” With awareness prickling over her skin, Annabelle stumbled over to the nearest chair and collapsed into it. The man was quite potent even in an embrace that hadn’t been romantic or sexual. “Please, refer to me as Annabelle.”

“I think I prefer Belle. It suits you better.” As he sat on a sofa near her position, he flashed a grin. “Now, how do you take your tea? At least this is something I can make certain to remember while we discuss plans for the afternoon.”

Oh, dear. Too much more of this and I believe I’ll be in a spot of bother, for he’s just the sort of man a lady can fall for.

Once tea had concluded, Annabelle had proposed a trip to DeBeyers Salon, and the earl had agreed with alacrity.

The sound of his voice brought her out of her thoughts. She turned her attention from watching the streets of Mayfair slip slowly past to focus on his handsome face. “I beg your pardon? I was woolgathering. What did you ask me?”

“It is not fair that both of us remain strangers, so I would like to become familiar with you.” He grinned and resettled the brim of his top hat at a rakish angle over his left eye. “How did you reach the age of what, thirty, without being married?”

“Well, you certainly don’t waste time or words.” In many ways, she appreciated his directness as she clasped her hands in her lap. “I have never been what ton matrons would call the ideal society lady.”

The earl snorted. “Is there that much emphasis put on such things?”

“Sadly, and surprisingly? Yes.” A sigh escaped. “If you listen to my brother, he’d tell you I was a walking scandal, and I suppose it’s true. I dislike all the proper things ladies are supposed to be in our world, and I truly detest embroidery and certainly cannot sing.”

“None of that explains why you haven’t been snapped up.”

Heat infused her cheeks. “I’m afraid I’m quite picky on the man I would choose for a husband. Because of that, I refuse to settle merely to avoid being a spinster.” Annabelle shrugged, for she wouldn’t apologize for how she felt. “That being said, I haven’t merely sat about wringing my hands in the hopes a man would take notice of me. I went out and enjoyed myself, had fun, and sometimes that meant finding myself in scandal with a man every now and again.”

Would he know what she referred to without her actually saying it?

“Ah.” To his credit, Andrew didn’t drop his gaze from hers. “There is no shame in enjoying the physical side of life with men, as long as both parties are aware of the possible consequences of those actions.”

She nodded. Relief twisted down her spine when there was no judgment from him. “After a while, my brother grew annoyed with me flaunting the rules, so he packed me off to Essex as punishment in an effort to keep me from the temptations of scandal, but apparently he failed to realize it’s far easier to do what I wish unsupervised.”

A grin tugged at the corners of the earl's mouth, which caused her regard to slip. Would he ever kiss her again? "Did he recall you to London?"

"He did." A chuckle slipped from her throat. "In an effort to keep watch and throw hopeful matches my way." Some of the joviality fell from the conversation. "I don't wish to marry some 'mere' man simply because he is in need of a wife. I want someone who is willing to become an actual partner to me, who will support me in everything I might do in my life."

"That is understandable and noble." Then he frowned. "What are your dreams? What sits on your heart the most just waiting to be given permission to move forward?"

No one had ever cared to ask her that before, and the fact that Andrew did wasn't lost on her. He was a man without an agenda; he had no idea that he should be making connections or securing promises. The earl was a blank slate who could forge his own path, so his interest in her was nothing except genuine. It was both breathtaking and slightly overwhelming.

"I want to help people," she said in a whisper. "Like I did with you in the park the other night. I might not have skills society wants, but I have talents some of those people need. I can match people with others or services that can heal or help them." She pressed her lips together. "When a person is at their lowest point, they want to be understood, they want a listening ear, they want support, and until they are ready to request council or aid, I can sit in the silence with them and wait."

"You do have enormous amounts of patience," the earl agreed, but one of his eyebrows lifted. "But you are also a woman with an air of making things happen, as if you see puzzle pieces out of order and simply must refit them."

"What an interesting observation." There was a certain freedom in telling a stranger about her life and her concerns, and it helped her to feel better about her own failures.

“It wasn’t always like that, though. Just as you spoke about consequences, there was exactly that in my life a handful of years ago. I was quite alone with no one to talk with, for my mother is constantly out of sorts with me because I am not proper, married, nor have I given her grandchildren, even though my brother hasn’t the same.”

“Ah.” He frowned. “Where is your brother now?”

“Cornelius is helping Mother settle in Bath. She spends a portion of the winter there to take in the waters and the clearer air.”

“Does she suffer from health problems?”

“Of course not. She only pretends that she does so people will wait on her hand and foot.” Oh, the skeletons in the family closet. “She wasn’t always that demanding, but once my father died, those tendencies came out.”

For long moments, Andrew stared at her. “I remember Timelbury telling us he had a sister who was quite the hoyden. I always wondered if that were true, and tried to hint around that he should introduce us the next time you were in Town.”

They both uttered a gasp.

“What?” Annabelle’s eyes widened. “You can recall that? Or did one of the rogues tell you that last night?”

“No, I remember distinctly when your brother said that.” Surprise reflected on his face. “I can recall Timelbury is your brother but nothing else. That particular memory flitted through my mind without me truly thinking about it.”

Her heartbeat accelerated. “Perhaps relaxing is the key to regaining your memories.

We were chatting about matters that had nothing to do with you. Perhaps if we continue to do that in a way where you don't feel anxious or hopeless, other memories will come to you." Oh, dear, it was both encouraging and disconcerting at the same time.

"It might be one step closer to solving the mystery of... me." He gave her the grin that started a butterfly ballet in her belly. "It would seem you do, indeed, know how to help people who desperately need that."

"Oh, I don't know." But her cheeks heated from his praise. For the first time in her adult life, she felt as if she'd found a place where she belonged.

The rest of the trip to the boxing salon was conducted in silence.

"Perhaps I should wait in the carriage," Annabelle whispered as the vehicle came to a halt on a short side street off Bond Street. "I don't want to plunge your name into rumor simply because I am a woman, and respectable females do not frequent boxing salons."

"From what I've managed to gather about you, I suspect you are fearless in every avenue of your life. Why should escorting an amnesia victim to one of his favorite haunts be any different?"

"I suppose it wouldn't." Though she fretted as he left the carriage and then handed her down the steps.

"However, if you feel strongly about it, you can wait here, and I'll make certain the driver remains with you for protection." Without hesitation, the earl proceeded through an unassuming doorway of the equally unassuming building with a plain "No. 6" on a placard on the side.

How did he know where to go? Were some things embedded so deeply into memory or consciousness that one did them without knowing? Interesting. There was no way she would stay behind or let him face any of this alone, for she was all too curious.

“I promised I would accompany you, and so I will,” she said as she trotted up the stairs behind him. Above the door at the top of the stairs, a plain wooden sign bearing the words “DeBeyers Salon” swung in the gentle breeze. “Good luck.”

“Thank you.” Without hesitation, Andrew opened the door, stood to one side, and let her pass, then closed the panel behind them. Instantly, his body relaxed, and he no longer held himself with the nervous tautness he had since she’d met him.

“I can see why you enjoy spending time here,” she whispered as they moved forward into the acutely masculine space. She wrinkled her nose at the scents of sweat and chalk infiltrated and man in the air. Grunts and groans broke the relative silence, punctuated with barked instructions and corrections of form from a man who was obviously a trainer. Throughout the long, open room, men stood at various stations—punching bags filled with sand or straw—she assumed—were hung from the ceiling where men practiced punches and kicks. Roped off sections that presumably served as rings fascinated her; mats on the floor where basics were taught had a few men doing just that upon them, and wooden contraptions where men built their upper body muscles were being manipulated by two such individuals.

As she and Andrew passed through the room, all activity paused as the men in various states of undress gawked and stared at her, some even went so far as to ogle her. It didn’t matter to Annabelle, for she ignored all of them in favor of taking in the whole atmosphere.

The earl, however, was extremely conscious of the stares. “Stay behind me as much as you can,” he whispered to her and attempted to shield her from the men’s view.

“Pish posh, Your Lordship. Let them look, for I am unattainable.” Still, she was glad for her moss green brocade pelisse that hid her form.

A couple of men hailed him. It took a few moments, but eventually Annabelle recognized the man lying half-dressed on a mat as the Earl of St. Vincent, one of the men who’d taken Andrew home yesterday.

“Oh, dear,” she whispered and didn’t know where to rest her gaze, so she averted her eyes, but every once in a while, peered past the shallow brim of her bonnet.

“St. Vincent.” Andrew nodded to the man. “I’m surprised to see you here, didn’t know you enjoyed fisticuffs.”

Did that mean he remembered? It was too difficult to tell.

“Only upon occasion, but since I’m far too anxious regarding the impending birth of my first child, I thought to pop into this salon and work off some tension.” He accepted the hand a gorgeous man of Caribbean descent offered, and then stood. His gaze shifted to Annabelle. “Miss Harding, you shouldn’t be here, for your own protection and reputation.”

She waved a hand. “It wasn’t that sterling before. Ask my brother when he returns to Town in a couple of days.” Yet knots of worry pulled in her belly. This was deliberately dangling herself in front of the ton tabbies for no discernable payoff.

Amusement danced in the Caribbean man’s eyes as he bounced his gaze between her and both of the earls. “I appreciate her courage.” He turned to her with a wide grin. “I am Loftus Nathaniel Ward, and I’m a part time instructor here.” The veriest hint of a Caribbean accent threaded through his voice.

“Hullo, Mr. Ward.” Annabelle wished Andrew remembered this man, for he looked

as if he held a secret or two in those dark brown eyes. Unlike St. Vincent who'd stripped down to breeches, this man wore breeches along with a flowing linen shirt. "I won't take up much of your time, but I did wish for Lord Hazelton to be back in familiar surroundings in order to help."

"Ah, yes. St. Vincent has informed me of what happened." His gaze slipped to Andrew. "It is good to see you, man." A smile lit the man's face. "I wondered where you were when you missed our session yesterday."

"Unavoidable." Andrew tapped his temple with a finger. "Lost my memories, and Miss Harding thinks if I visit familiar places, I might have them back."

"I agree with her." Mr. Ward waved a hand toward one of the empty rings. "Feel like having a friendly round, Hazelton?"

Slowly, the other men in the room returned to the activities they'd engaged in before she and Andrew had entered.

The earl glanced at her. Annabelle gave him an encouraging nod. "I suppose, though I'm not certain I'll have a blessed clue what to do." Already, he was well on his way to removing his greatcoat and his jacket of sapphire superfine, which he handed to her. "But there is always a chance..."

Her chest tightened for his circumstances. How must he feel? "Perhaps utilizing the muscles and stretching your body might encourage the brain to do the same."

"Right." Without another word, Andrew struggled out of his waistcoat and then removed his lawn shirt, handing them silently to her.

Oh, dear.

Whatever she'd imagined his body to look like, it was nothing compared to the truth. Broad shoulders gave way to a wide chest that showcased well-defined muscles and more than a bit of bruising. A sprinkling of light brown hair covered his skin. It formed a tantalizing ribbon that moved down a flat abdomen and disappeared beneath the waist of his buff-colored breeches. She clutched his clothing to her body, and the scent of him that clung to the fabric was far too intoxicating. What she wouldn't give to explore that chest, those shoulders, that navel with her fingers and lips! A shiver of need tripped down her spine to lodge between her thighs. It was something she hadn't felt for a few years at least, and the fact she had such a reaction to the earl left her speechless.

"If you are feeling squeamish, Miss Harding, you can wait outside." Obvious amusement threaded through St. Vincent's voice as he and Annabelle followed Hazelton and Mr. Ward over to one of the rings.

"I shall be quite fine, Your Lordship. As long as Lord Hazelton is here, so shall I be."

Andrew shot her a look of gratitude then slipped beneath the slackened ropes and onto the mats that crunched beneath his booted feet. Were they filled with straw? "I appreciate that, Miss Harding."

Mr. Ward followed, and then they both raised their bare fists. As the other man tried to circle the earl, Andrew frowned and mimicked the steps. Confusion showed on his face, and it was rapidly certain he didn't remember anything about boxing.

"Don't think too much about your movements just now," St. Vincent called from the opposite side of the ring from where Annabelle stood. "You have done this countless times before; it should be embedded deep within you."

"I'll give it a try." Though he swung out with a fist, it was obvious even to her that it wasn't in the proper form.

Easily, Mr. Ward dodged the blow. He got off a gentle punch to the earl that tagged him on the shoulder. "Come now, Hazelton. You can do better than that," the man said with good-natured teasing in his accented voice.

"I'm beginning to wonder." Frustration wove through Andrew's tone as he once more circled his opponent. Though his next strike found purchase in Mr. Ward's midsection, it was sloppily done and hardly slowed the other man.

Again, Mr. Ward's next punch struck, catching the earl on the chin, which caused Andrew to stumble backward a few steps. "Damn, my friend, you really don't remember this, do you?"

"Obviously not." He held up a hand. "Enough." Embarrassment was evident in his face along with annoyance. "Let us not continue this torture." In high dudgeon, he clambered out of the ring, nearly tripping when the toe of a boot caught on a rope. One by one, he yanked the various pieces of his clothing from her hold and donned them with jerky movements.

"It's all right, Your Lordship," she said in what she hoped was a soothing tone. "We shall just keep trying until something works."

"We won't do anything of the sort." As he yanked the greatcoat from her hands, he headed back through the long room toward the door. "I'm the one who must endure this damned blankness in my head, and you have no idea how frightening or frustrating that is."

Well, drat.

With an apologetic glance at the other two men, Annabelle ran after Hazelton. She followed him down the stairs and to the street where his carriage waited. When he slammed open the door and then flung himself into the vehicle, she pointed her gaze

to the heavens. To the driver, who had scrambled down to assist with the steps, she said, “Please take me home. Harding House.” Quickly, she gave the direction. “Then you may take the earl to his, and God help you all with his disposition.”

Was this who he was in his regular life? Not that she could blame him, for her heart went out to him and his circumstances. Who wouldn’t be frustrated?

“Of course, Miss Harding.” Once she was in the carriage, he put up the steps and closed the door.

Only then did she settle onto the bench next to the earl. “You had a setback. It is not the end of the world. We will try again tomorrow.” When a sullen expression crossed his face, she shook her head. “No matter that you wish to be cross—with good reason—I still plan to support you until your memory returns.”

“Why?” Raw emotion propelled the word. “Why would you bother with me when I am useless like this?”

“Struggling doesn’t mean you are useless, and neither does it mean you should give up.” She rested a palm on his chest while peering up at him. “It means you are trying, and sooner or later, you will succeed, but you will never do that if you quit.”

“I appreciate the prodding.” As the carriage sprang into motion, he hooked a hand about her nape, drew her close, and then brought his mouth crashing down on hers.

With a sigh of pure indulgence, Annabelle leaned into the kiss, and she unashamedly returned the overture, for he was quite a good kisser. Daring much, she parted her lips, touched the tip of her tongue to his, but the earl proved he was more a gentleman than anything else. After a few silent heartbeats of him moving over her mouth, he gently set her away from him.

“As much as I would very much enjoy seeing where that kiss might lead, I refuse to take advantage of the situation.” The grin he flashed had flutters creating havoc in her belly. “I’m not sorry though, and fully hope to indulge in that again.”

Oh, he was adorable and would be trouble if she would let him. “Then keep trying to regain your memories, Andrew. Don’t you think that reward will be well worth the effort?”

“Quite.”

“Cheeky.” Yet she couldn’t stop her own grin. Life certainly wasn’t dull anymore.

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November 7, 1817

DeBeyers Salon, Mayfair

London, England

Andrew frowned as he once more entered the boxing salon. After his failure from yesterday, he had hearty misgivings about continuing this activity, but the Earl of St. Vincent had come 'round and insisted that he get out of the house and start making inroads of creating some sort of life and schedule for himself.

"I am not certain indulging in fisticuffs is what I'm comfortable with," he said as they moved further into long room. There were different men inside than there had been the day before, but when his gaze met that of Loftus Ward and the other man gave a cheerful nod, some of his anxiety quieted.

"That is only because it is still new. Once you become used to it again, you'll look forward to it." The earl gave him a tight grin. "The man I knew spent a good portion of his leisure time here, so perhaps you will eventually come to that realization again. You'd even made a name for yourself with your boxing in illegal matches held on the outskirts of Town."

"How interesting." Especially after his poor showing.

"Indeed. So what do you want to start with today?"

Well, he certainly didn't wish to repeat his performance from yesterday in the ring. "I

need to familiarize myself with the basics of the sport.”

“Absolutely, you do.” Mr. Ward joined them, and his wide grin was infectious. “If I might suggest the sandbags? Or Lord St. Vincent can don padded mittens and you can punch into his hands. Both options will help you find a rhythm and know what punching feels like and how to hone that power.”

Andrew looked at his friend for guidance. “Perhaps the bags first. I want that tactile feel of my fists hitting the fabric. Perhaps it will bring something back to me.”

“Excellent choice. I’ll meet you both over there, then.” The faint lilt of a Caribbean accent in the man’s voice spoke of foreign places far away, and made Andrew crave travel and adventure. Yet, as he walked beside St. Vincent to the middle of the room where two rectangle bags of sand were hung vertically by the ceiling on chains, his mind jogged to Annabelle. How did she fare today? He missed her calming presence. Without her by his side, too many fears crept in to undermine any peace he might acquire.

“You are thinking far too much, my friend,” the earl said as Mr. Ward indicated a chair where Andrew might lay his clothing. “What has you bothered?”

“Beyond the large issue of not knowing anything about myself?” He couldn’t keep the sarcasm from his voice.

“Yes, but I can see it in your eyes. There is something else troubling you.”

“Am I that transparent, then?” He removed his greatcoat and then draped it over the back of the straight-backed wooden chair.

“Now? Perhaps a bit, but the man you used to be was not, which is why it’s so strange seeing you like this.” The earl frowned while Andrew removed his jacket. “It

is almost as if you are haunted.” He shrugged. “But then, most men in the Rogue’s Arcade are. One cannot escape that by-product of returning from the war alive.”

“Ah, that explains much.” His hands shook as he struggled out of his gray satin waistcoat with the black embroidery then his fine lawn shirt followed. He put both on the chair. “I woke a couple of times last night due to odd, disjointed nightmares regarding being abroad, fighting, cannon fire, blood, and oddly enough, jewelry.” Balancing on one foot, he removed one of his boots. “It made no sense.”

“On the contrary, it makes perfect sense.” One of St. Vincent’s eyebrows went up as Andrew took off his other boot. “You saw several battles during your stint in the war. Hell, you fought alongside me and a few of the other rogues. None of us could have survived without the others.”

He blew out a breath. “Do you suffer nightmares?”

“Occasionally, and I have found they aren’t something one can easily ignore or even forget. It is something men like me—like you—must suffer through, a hallmark of our freedom, of England’s freedom.”

“It’s terrifying.” In his mind’s eye, he recalled one of the more strenuous nightmares. They’d been rushing over muddy fields, intent on beating back the French. All around had been cannon fire, the scents of mud, blood, and smoke, while his ears still rang with the screams of dying men and horses. “I can still feel the weight of the rifle in my hand.” He flexed his fingers. “Feel how the mud sucked at the soles of my boots.”

“Just a part of who we are; we’ll never forget.” St. Vincent rubbed a hand along the side of his face. “The best we can do is come to terms with what we did on those battlefields, what we had to do in order to protect England, and sometimes, we cannot do that alone.”

“Even though I am unable to remember who I am, I now have to contend with the nightmares from the man I used to be. It’s maddening.” Once he was barefoot, he sighed and positioned himself in front of one of the bags while the earl stood behind it to hold it steady. “Perhaps retraining in fisticuffs will help with that as well.”

“It has seemed to work with Aldren and Twinsfield.”

Though Andrew didn’t recognize the names—perhaps titles—it was lovely knowing there were so many men he could call on as friends who would understand. The Caribbean man drifted back over to them and patiently instructed him on how to form the perfect fist and how to guide his hands so that his punches would find the best purchase in a target.

Holding up his fists felt comfortable, right, as if his body remembered this in the vast emptiness of his memory. The first time he drilled his right hand into the supple leather of the sand-filled bag, the sensation of pure joy and satisfaction filled every portion of his body.

Damn, that’s lovely.

When the two men exchanged grins, Andrew did the same. “I rather liked that.”

Mr. Ward beamed. “Good! Now use that excitement, that energy, and discover what else you can do. I’ll be around if you should need me.”

After another couple of punches into the bag, Andrew found a rhythm, and each time his fists connected with that leather, his confidence grew. He glanced at the earl. “How are we friends? Where did we meet?”

“Beyond being members of the Rogue’s Arcade?” St. Vincent smiled. “We met in the military as we both came up the ranks, but being jewel thieves in our pasts is what

bound us together along with the remnants of the war.” Shadows clouded his eyes, and Andrew felt those things to his core.

Another couple of punches into the bag helped to focus his thoughts. “You said I would never rid myself of the nightmares.”

“This is true. We all suffer to an extent. Some of the rogues more than others. Hell, one of our members has difficulty even leaving his home. Marriage helped some, but I rather doubt he will ever overcome that fear.” St. Vincent shrugged. “From what I could see of your life—or rather your former life—you seemed to handle yourself—and your nightmares—well.” He stumbled back a few steps when Andrew’s punches came harder and faster. “From all accounts, you are quite popular amidst the ton . Never lack for dance partners or bed partners but keep those personal details close to your chest.”

“Ah.” Heat went up the back of his neck. “Do I keep a mistress?” If he had, the woman obviously didn’t care all that much if she hadn’t come to seek him out or show concern.

Interestingly enough, there had been a blurb about Andrew in the papers yesterday, small enough that it wouldn’t attract much notice. The writer called him the stranger earl, who had been attacked and had no memory. The writer had gone on to say Andrew was still a bachelor, so now was the time to throw society daughters his way. At the end of the piece, it had been stated that Miss Harding had the rescue of him, that she was the one to restore him to the ton . Then they’d speculated if that would be enough to restore her reputation.

“Not that I’m aware.”

“Am I courting someone?” He gave the bag another one-two punch.

“I don’t believe so.” St. Vincent shrugged. “You are free, so once you come to terms with the new life you might have, perhaps you should put yourself on the Marriage Mart and make use of the upcoming Christmastide season in society.”

“Thank you. I shall bear that in mind.” Though his mind might be empty of memories, the only recent one that mattered was Annabelle, and how everything seemed infinitely better when she was near.

Annabelle alighted from a hired hack in front of Hazelton’s residence. It was a pretty townhouse, all brick with ivy clinging here and there to that facade, some of the green leaves turning brown in preparation for the colder winter.

When she knocked on the gray-painted door, it was opened by the butler, who immediately told her that the earl had gone out to his boxing salon.

“Oh.” She hadn’t been aware of his schedule, of course, but she had thought he might have shared some of his plans. “Uh, do you know when he will return?”

“I’m afraid I do not. However, the Countess of St. Vincent is taking tea in the drawing room as we speak if you would like to visit with her.” One of his graying eyebrows rose in question.

“That would be lovely. Thank you.” No sooner had she been shown into the drawing room than she was given an enthusiastic welcome by the countess. Annabelle frowned. “I’m certain we’ve never met, Your Ladyship.”

The woman waved a hand in dismissal while scratching a finger of the other into her honey-brown hair. A saucer with a teacup resting on it balanced precariously on her very swollen pregnant belly. Perhaps several years older than Annabelle, there was a glow about her and an air of supreme happiness that was enviable. “No, we have not, but my husband told me all about how you found Hazelton in the park the other night.

Please, join me for tea.”

“Thank you.” She sat on a chair near the countess’ position and then poured out a cup of tea for herself. “If I may ask, why are you here?”

“I told St. Vincent I’d wait for his return instead of going back home.” The countess shrugged. “It’s easier than trying to travel in my condition, and Hazelton’s staff makes a lovely tea.” She took a sip from her cup. “I’d imagine the men will return presently.”

“I’m content to wait.” The urge to fill the silence grew overwhelming. “I just wanted to check on Hazelton and find out how he fared. Ever since I came across him in the park, I’ve felt responsible for him somehow and perhaps a bit protective of him.”

“I heard the story, and I can’t say as I blame you.” Amusement danced in the older woman’s eyes as she regarded Annabelle over the rim of her cup. “I haven’t seen you at society events.” Yet there was a question there.

Heat stung her cheeks. “That is because over the past several years, I’ve been more or less banished to my brother’s estate in Essex.”

“Ah, you’re more familiar with scandal than propriety.” The countess chuckled. “That means you are vastly more interesting than most people.”

“I’m glad you think so. While it’s freeing not to follow a crowd or fit in with other women my age that are all doing the same things, there is a certain amount of loneliness and a bit of confusion mixed in there.”

“Understandable.” The countess lowered her voice. “After my first husband died, I was much like you and often chased scandal because it was much more exciting.”

“Is that how you managed to attract St. Vincent?” Though she didn’t know much about the members of the Rogue’s Arcade or their wives, it always seemed as if those stories were fraught with adventure and excitement and romance.

The other woman laughed as if that was the funniest thing she’d heard in a while. “Absolutely it was. In fact...” She lowered her voice further. “I had met St. Vincent years before but life took us away from each other, so when we came back into each other’s lives, it was the height of scandal.”

“How so?”

“Well, for one, I was waiting in a bedchamber for a very different man, and for another, my wrists were secured to the headboard when the earl came in through a window...”

“Oh.” Annabelle frowned as she thought upon the problem and then her eyes widened. “Oh!” When the countess nodded, she gasped. “Did he and you...? Was there...?”

“He did and there was.” Lady St. Vincent winked. “Quite scandalous, and we carried on from there, along with arguing like cats and dogs throughout.”

“I suppose that goes along with the men from the Rogue’s Arcade.” Had her brother conducted affairs of that magnitude? And if he had, would he have told her?

With a wince, the countess shifted her position on the sofa. “Pardon. I’m a bit uncomfortable.” She set her cup and saucer onto the cushion next to her. “While I adore being expectant, it is rather annoying here at the last.”

Annabelle wouldn’t know. “Uh, you won’t give birth right here, will you?”

“Of course not.” The older woman waved a hand as she laughed. “I still have a month yet.” She settled her gaze on Annabelle. “However, now that I’m here, we might as well discuss something else.”

“Like?”

“Do you fancy the earl?”

“What?” She frowned. “Your husband?”

“No!” But the countess chuckled as if that were a merry joke. “The Earl of Hazelton. St. Vincent tells me the two of you have been together quite often since the incident.”

Heat invaded Annabelle’s cheeks. “I am concerned about him. Imagine how difficult it would be to forget everything about yourself and the world you live in, but you are expected to move forward anyway.”

“That is something I cannot fathom.” The countess shivered. “Surely you’ve had cause to see how handsome he is.” A knowing twinkle appeared in her eyes. “My husband also told me you went into the boxing salon the other day without regard to scandal or reputations.”

“Again, I wished to make certain Andrew was settled.”

“Ah, he’s Andrew, is he?”

Drat. The heat in Annabelle’s cheeks intensified. “Perhaps it’s a bit more confusing than all of that.” Quickly, she related the facts as she knew them, including the necklace she’d been encouraged to keep safe. “However, we have shared a couple of kisses.”

“How lovely!” The countess rocked to the edge of the sofa. “If you feel even a smidgeon of a spark or connection between you and the earl, please pursue it. There may come a day when you both fall back on those feelings and that might be the only thing you have for a time. Especially if his memories never return.”

“But he’s an earl.” That was intimidating, for she’d never talked with let alone contemplated anything else with someone so high on the instep.

“What does that matter? You could be a magical creature from fairyland and he a chimney sweep, but if there are feelings between you, none of that matters.” Her grin was wide. “And I shall need a juicy story to hang onto that will distract me from the remainder of this pregnancy.”

Annabelle heaved a sigh. “I shall think about it.” She shrugged but couldn’t help a grin of her own. “He does have some skill with kissing.”

“Even better!” The countess’ merry laugh helped to chase away self-doubt. “I’ll wager that’s not the only thing he’s skilled at, and if that is true, you are one fortunate lady.” She winked. “Not that I have anything to complain about in that subject. However, if you want to move things along, and because men oftentimes require visual stimulants, perhaps you should wear the necklace and only your chemise the next time you see him.”

A gasp escaped Annabelle’s throat, but before either of them could add to that statement, voices in the corridor beyond heralded the arrival of both earls.

As soon as the men came into the room, Annabelle stood, and while the countess struggled to her feet, St. Vincent bounded over the floor to assist her.

“I trust the two of you had a lovely time?” she asked as she wrapped her hand around his upper arm.

“It was a good session. Hazelton has all the earmarks of regaining his previous skill quite quickly if he makes regular visits.”

Andrew grinned. “Thank you. The lessons are thought provoking and distracting.” He encompassed them all in his gaze. “Would you care for a refresh of the tea service?” The surprise in his expression strengthened when he looked at Annabelle. “If I had an inkling you were waiting on my return, I would have hastened back.”

“I merely wished to pay a call and check on you.” Drat the warmth in her cheeks! It was a silly reaction, for she had been in a male’s company before.

St. Vincent bounced a speculative gaze between them, but he declined the invitation. “I should escort my wife home. No doubt she’s fatigued and should really rest.”

“Oh, he’s overprotective.” With a snort of laughter, she gave his chest a mock smack. “However, I’m more bored than tired, though I wouldn’t say no to a nap, and I did wish to check the progress of the nursery painting. And the cradle maker is supposed to finish his project today as well.”

“I hope everything is as you wish it to be,” Annabelle said. “Thank you for letting me keep you company.”

“Any time you should wish to converse or need advice, please call on me.” Sincerity sparkled in her expression. “Knowing St. Vincent as I do, he’ll soon forbid me from leaving the house, and then I truly will be bored.”

“I will. Thank you.”

After a flurry of goodbyes, Annabelle was left alone in Andrew’s company.

“You seem much happier today.” Perhaps he was slowly acclimating to his

circumstances.

“I feel rather uplifted, but perhaps it’s the effect of boxing.”

“No doubt you had good form today.”

A grin tugged at the corners of his mouth. “While boxing or in general?”

The humor caught her unexpectedly, so she laughed, for he was quite witty. “Does it matter?”

“No, I don’t suppose it does. I am merely grateful to be here. Memories or not.”

“Ah. I could learn much from you.” Once more, confusion came rushing back. “I do have a question.”

“Oh?” Slowly, he closed the distance between them.

Awareness prickled over her skin. Oh, dear. “Did you mean to kiss me yesterday or was it simply a reflexive action, something your body remembered you doing with other women?”

His whiskey-hued eyes darkened with the same desire tripping and twisting down her spine. “Does that matter?”

“Yes.” Actually, it did, for she wouldn’t remain in his company if he was merely trifling with her.

“Why?” That lovely gaze was intense as he held hers.

Heat renewed itself in her cheeks. She lowered her voice. “Because I want to repeat

the gesture right now, but only properly.”

“Ah.” The earl snaked an arm about her waist and drew her close to his body. “Well, there is a certain... connection between us. And I’ve never been one to disappoint a lady. I think,” he said with a self-deprecating laugh. Then he lowered his head and claimed her lips with his.

Immediately, a cloud of comforting warmth enveloped her. Slowly, she pushed her palms up his chest to rest on his shoulders. At the same time, she lifted onto her toes and sought to return his kiss while reining in the abandon she wanted to show. Oh, how she reveled in the strength of his arms about her and the heat of his mouth as he moved it over hers. When he deepened the embrace, sought out her tongue with his, she surrendered with a tiny sigh.

For the next few minutes, she was lost in a world where only they existed, where shivery sensations slipped through her lower belly and she could easily see herself with a man of his caliber, but when the chiming of the long-case clock in the corridor made its way to her ears through the fog of passion, reality came crashing back in along with the fears and insecurities about the differences between them.

As he set her at arm’s length, he peered down into her face with a grin that said he wasn’t the least bit sorry. “Was that proper enough?”

“Not nearly,” she responded without thinking, which pulled a chuckle from him.

“I suspect I should escort you home, or the two of us will set London on its ear with a whole new set of scandals.”

And that would be so terrible? But she didn’t say that. Instead, she nodded and wiped the lingering moisture from her lips. “I look forward to seeing you again soon, then.” In what capacity, though?

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:27 am

November 10, 1817

DeBeyers Salon, Mayfair

London, England

Andrew wiped this face and neck with his handkerchief, for he'd just completed another round of training with Loftus Ward as well as Lord Winteringham.

"Now that was a good session. I might not remember engaging in fisticuffs from my past, but I certainly do enjoy it now."

It had been a few days since he'd last seen Annabelle, which hadn't been a planned decision on his part, but she'd had other things on her schedule. Additionally, her brother had returned to Town, and she'd wished to spend time with him, but there had been a note of concern in her voice when he'd last spoken with her that had alerted him to the fact something hadn't been quite right between her and that sibling.

The natural pause in their relationship was fortuitous for Andrew as he was trying to make the best of his life as it was. The memories hadn't returned, and perhaps they never would; he would see his physician again in the upcoming days, but it was time for him to acclimate to things as they were. He was an earl, after all, and there were certain responsibilities he needed to attend to, so some of that routine was popping into the boxing salon to retrain and solidify his skills in fisticuffs. Oddly enough, the exercise was cathartic and helped to order his jumbled thoughts.

Having Viscount Winteringham with him today for solidarity had been lovely, since

St. Vincent was stretched too thin by domestic matters. Andrew considered how the earl treated and cared for his wife a bit of a goal for his own life. Did that mean he wished to take a wife, to have the chance at that same bliss and companionship? Perhaps, but it was something that required more pondering.

Mr. Ward grinned as he, too, wiped at the sweat on his own brow. “You have always had a proclivity for the sport. It wouldn’t be any different now.”

Winteringham shrugged. “It’s a shame you’re a titled gentleman. If you weren’t, you could easily enter prize fights more often than you do.”

He snorted. “I could do so anonymously.” Though he didn’t think he was good enough to win in an actual bout for a purse of coin. “But as much as I enjoy the fights, I need to meet with my man-of-affairs, find out which charities and causes I sponsor, figure out how to conduct my life as it is now.” With a huff, he moved toward the chair where he’d draped his clothing. “There is a good chance I’ll never be the same man that I was, so I need to do the best I can for my future, and that means gravitating toward responsibility.”

Loftus chuckled. “Where is the fun in that?”

“That depends on what responsibility entails.” Winteringham glanced at Andrew with speculation. “Thinking about courting a lady?”

Heat crept up the back of his neck as he tugged his shirt over his head and smoothed the fine lawn over his torso. “Perhaps.” He grinned as they both stared. “What do you know of Annabelle Harding? Is her family of good standing in the ton?” Though he didn’t care about that sort of thing.

Did he?

Winteringham and Loftus exchanged glances of amusement. “Well, to start, she’s the younger sister to Lord Timelbury. He was given the lordship and a monetary award to buy an estate for extraordinary services rendered to the Crown during his service in the war.” The viscount donned his discarded clothing while Andrew continued his own toilette. “She’s always been headstrong, I suppose you could say. Never followed society’s dictates with any sort of regularity.”

“Oh, I can see that about her.” As he shoved his arms into his jacket of bottle green superfine and struggled into the garment, he couldn’t help but grin. “She has the makings of a stubborn miss, but she is also determined. To say nothing of the fact that she is helpful and caring. Doesn’t seem all that bad a mix, honestly.”

“No, it does not.” Loftus wiped his hands on a rag. “If I may ask, Your Lordship, do you fancy the young lady? From what I saw of her when she was in here the other day, she’s got some looks.” Then he winked. “If you’re into the females.”

“Of course I am.” Not understanding the chuckle that passed between Loftus and the viscount, Andrew ignored the heat that went up the back of his neck. “I suppose I could be interested in her. Miss Harding has been the one constant in my life since I woke up with no memory.”

Winteringham frowned. “So then, you would feel the same way about any woman who more or less rescued from the park.”

“Fair point. Let me think about that.” If it had been someone else who’d come upon him, would he have bonded so quickly with them? Would he have kissed a woman who wasn’t Annabelle? Would he even now be wondering how she was spending her time? He rubbed a hand along his jaw. “There is something about Miss Harding I cannot ignore, and what’s more, there is a connection between us I think is worth exploring.”

The viscount nodded. “Then you wish to pursue a courtship with her?”

“A courtship with the end result of marriage?” he asked, merely to clarify the objective of the conversation.

Loftus snorted. “Unless you merely wish to bed her.”

“In which case, Timelbury will have your head,” Winteringham said in a teasing whisper. “She might bedevil him as a sibling but he’s protective of her.”

“Oh, indeed, which is why he wants her matched and married soon,” the Caribbean man said with a wide grin.

“Yes.” The viscount nodded. “He mentioned to us before he left for Bath that when he returns, his first and foremost task was finding her a suitable husband.”

“I see.” Hazelton frowned. Though he’d only just met the lady, he didn’t find it fair that she might be taken away before he could come to know her better. “What if I wish to court her, then?”

The two men again exchanged glances.

Winteringham sat heavily on a chair. “Do you think Miss Harding is worthy of possibly being a countess?”

“I would have no idea since I only know what she’s told me.” Andrew grabbed up one of his boots and then shoved his foot into it. “Do you assume she cannot rise to the occasion?” From everything he’d seen of the lady, she could be a force when reckoned with.

“That depends.” The viscount shrugged. He then applied himself to the task of

donning his own boots. “London gossip holds her reputation isn’t as sterling as it could be. Ton tabbies might tear her apart if you suddenly elevate her position in society. Especially with a hasty engagement.”

Loftus nodded. “To say nothing of the fact she might not wish to marry a title or even reside in London. Hasn’t she spent much time in the country?”

“Ah.” Andrew’s frown deepened. There was much he didn’t know about Annabelle. Perhaps she didn’t wish to remain within society any more than she must. “I shall talk with her, get a feel for what she wants from life.” Beyond wishing to help, but something within him knew that anything he was had only come about due to her short influence.

Silence reigned amidst the group for the space of a few heartbeats before the viscount spoke again.

“Do you suddenly wish for domesticity?” Doubt clouded the younger man’s eyes. “You had only recently discussed the possibility of marrying the last time we saw you, but I never assumed it was a serious discussion.”

“I’m not sure.” Slowly, Andrew shrugged. “Is it so terrible, then? If that wasn’t who I was before, that man might be lost forever. I need to square with the man I am, the man I might be from here on out.” The thought was frightening, and he couldn’t bear to go forward if Annabelle wasn’t there with him. “Right now, that man has the desire to be wanted, needed, I suppose you could say. Miss Harding is interesting, and I feel there might be something there between us I should explore.” Everything was both confusing and exciting at the same time with a bit of terror thrown in for interest. “The sooner I accept things as they are, the better things will go.”

At least he sincerely hoped so.

“Well, I wish you good fortune in those plans, and I hope I’m around the day Miss Harding’s brother meets this new you.” The viscount snickered with amusement. “Out of our little group, he’s the one who knows you the best.”

“I’m certain I can state my position in a way that will prove fruitful.” He stood. “I plan to return to the salon tomorrow afternoon if there is nothing pressing on my schedule. If you gentlemen wish to join me, I would enjoy that.”

“I wouldn’t miss it and cannot wait to see what sort of man you truly are now that Town boredom and ennui have fallen away.” Winteringham clapped a hand to Andrew’s shoulder. “I have a feeling fate is not nearly done with you yet.”

Why wasn’t he looking forward to that?

Culpepper House

Berkley Square, Mayfair

London, England

By the time he returned home, his stomach rumbled with the nice hunger he’d built up from exercise, but as soon as he stepped into the entry hall, the first thing his gaze fell upon was a footman lying slumped on the floor, unconscious.

“Tobbert?” Andrew rushed over the floor and knelt on one knee at the man’s side. After wrenching off his gloves, he put two fingers to the pulse point in the footman’s neck. There was a heartbeat, and it was steady. A good sign. “Where the hell is Banks?” A gasp escaped him as he stood. He’d remembered the butler’s name, and he’d been quite sure the man hadn’t told him the name since he’d come home from the park.

A steady pounding reached his ears as he moved deeper into the house. “Banks?” He bounded up the stairs, taking the treads two at a time. When the pounding continued, he darted into the butler’s pantry that rested across the narrow corridor from the dining room. Inside, Banks had been bound and gagged. Using his feet, he’d knocked them against the wall to apparently call for help. “Dear God.” Quickly freeing the older man from his bonds, he helped the servant to his feet. “Are you injured?”

“A bump on the back of my head. I was caught off guard when I found Tobbert and assumed he was slacking on the job.”

“What happened?”

“I couldn’t say.” The butler shrugged. “But the man who attacked me might still remain in the house. I heard him yelling at the maids, forcing them all into the kitchen. He no doubt told them to remain there.”

“Damn it.” With cold foreboding snaking through his gut, Andrew looked about and finally showed the butler to a stool. “Rest here until I come back, or, if you’d rather, go to the entry hall and see if you can rouse Tobbert.” Once out of the pantry, he darted across the hall only to find that the drawing room had been ransacked. Paintings had been pulled off the walls; bric-a-brac had been flung to the floor. Some had been smashed into pieces while some had merely tumbled to the carpets. Here and there, pillows and cushions from the furniture had been scattered about.

Clearly, the intruder was searching for something.

Was he still in the house? Needing to protect not only himself but his staff, Andrew careened out of the drawing room, ran to the stairs, surged up them, and when he burst into his suite of rooms, he stopped short, for a man dressed all in black with a domino mask over the upper portion of his face and a slouch-style cap pulled low over his forehead was systematically pulling things out of a bureau drawer. Clothes,

personal journals, and other random bits had been flung everywhere.

Disjointed memories assailed him. Broken pictures danced through his mind of when he'd received the news of his mother's death. It was his father who'd told him the grisly details therein, of what his mother had looked like when his father had found her, of what the robber had taken after he'd killed her. With a gasp and a yelp that startled the intruder, he demanded,

"Who the devil are you?"

"That doesn't matter. I work for a man who wants the necklace you stole from him." Then the man lunged toward Andrew, got off a punch that connected with his jaw and sent him reeling backward.

Pain exploded through his face, but he was so thankful that piece wasn't in his possession. "I do not have it. Perhaps you should talk to the nearest pawn shop." At least the misdirect would keep the thug busy.

"Why would you do that?"

Andrew threw a punch of his own that found purchase in the intruder's gut. "It was mine; I did with it what I pleased." When he reached for the man once more, the robber evaded his capture.

"This is not over." Then he ducked out of the window and used a rope tied to the leg of the bed that he'd already flung down the side of the house.

As Andrew dashed to the sill, he peered outside, but the intruder was much too quick. He'd already jumped to the ground and fled around the garden to gain access to the street toward the back of the house. "Well, damn." Rubbing a hand to the side of his face and gingerly exploring the spot where he'd been tagged. What the hell was so

special about that necklace? Why did the man want it back if the piece had originally belonged to Andrew's mother anyway?

While untying the rope from the leg of the bed, another thought occurred to him that had the power to chill his blood. Since the necklace was in Annabelle's possession just now, did that mean his attacker would go after her? How would he even know that's where the piece was? He yanked the length of rope, continuing to do so until the full coil came back into the room. Protection for her welled in his chest. "No harm will come to you, I swear it," he whispered into the silence of the room.

But in order to do that, he would need help, and it didn't matter that he couldn't remember the names of all his friends or what they meant to him. If the Rogue's Arcade was truly a band-of brothers who refused to leave any man behind, then he believed it. And he couldn't move forward in his life now without them. A visit to the club was in order, and perhaps he would take tea there over a council of war.

First things first. He needed to locate his staff and talk the situation over with them, since at least a few of them were harmed by the intruder's arrival. And perhaps he would ask some of the older members of his staff what they remembered regarding his parents and the necklace that was apparently suddenly at play.

I am the Earl of Hazelton, damn it, and no one comes into my house and harms anyone who I care about. Not even Annabelle.

After that, he would set his mind on just what he wanted from his life and if the lady would feature heavily in those plans. The urge to call at her house grew strong, but he had other more insistent matters at hand, so romance would have to wait.

But how lovely it was to think that romance might be waiting for him.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:27 am

November 12, 1817

Harding House

Manchester Square, Mayfair

London

Annabelle huffed in frustration, for her plans for the afternoon were scattered now that her brother had returned home.

Though he'd been inundated with business since he'd arrived back in London a few days ago and she was happy to have him with her again, now that he wanted to sit down and talk seriously with her, she had misgivings, but it was teatime and Cornelius had just come into the room. There was no avoiding him now.

"I'm glad you are home," she said as she poured out a cup of tea for him and handed it over. "However, I'm also glad Mama isn't here."

They exchanged a laugh, for their parent was acerbic on a good day and highly critical on the bad ones.

"I can certainly understand that, but here's hoping the waters will help her arthritis and ease the aches in her muscles." For they both knew those things made her even more grouchy than usual. "She has indicated a wish to remain in Bath through the end of the month."

“What else?” As Annabelle poured out her own cup of tea and then put a small lump of sugar into the amber depths, she frowned. “I can see it in your eyes there is more.”

Cornelius snorted. “Mama said she was two days away from washing her hands of the care and responsibility of you because you were hopeless when it came to matchmaking and courtship.” He took a sip of tea, but amusement danced in his eyes. “As if we all didn’t know how headstrong you’ve been since birth.”

“I cannot help what I am.” She settled more comfortably in her chair as she looked at her brother. His dark brown hair—almost black—had been arranged in a popular style. Always a well-organized person, he wore his clothing instead of the other way around, and he enjoyed garments tailored to his form. “Before you went away to fight Napoleon, you were just like me.”

Ever since he’d come back from the war, though, he was a different man. More quiet and introspective. More worried about the people in his life. More plagued by memories and nightmares. She couldn’t begin to assume she could understand what it was he wrestled with, for he rarely talked about it to his family.

“That seems a lifetime ago, Belle.” Shadows darkened his eyes, almost as if he were haunted by things he couldn’t escape. “Though it has been years, I am still struggling to find myself in civilian life, yet I feel I’m failing far too much.”

“Oh, don’t say that.” Her heart went out to him, for it must be horrid to never be able to leave the war behind. “You are doing a marvelous job of things, and if you could manage to stay out of my life, you would be nearly perfect.”

For the space of a few heartbeats, he rested his gaze on her, then he sighed. “I’m afraid that won’t be possible at least through Twelfth Night, for there are a few of my contemporaries I would like you to meet, and they all are looking to marry.”

“What?” She’d known he wished to encourage potential suitors her way, but she didn’t realize it would be so quick upon his return to Town. “You are serious that I need to find myself engaged?”

“I am. It’s far past time for you to settle down, and more than that, I would like you to have someone in your life who will look after you, who will be more than a friend for you because I believe you need that.” He met her gaze. “Even though you have never told me what happened to you a few summers ago, I can suspect, which is why I’d like for you to have someone in your life you can go to and tell them of your troubles and fears, someone who can soothe your nerves and calm your anxiety.”

“It sounds like a fairy story, but I wasn’t aware you believed in such things.” When she narrowed her eyes, a flush of color raced up his neck. “Why don’t you chase that for yourself?”

“I won’t until you are settled and happy. It’s the least I can do.”

She frowned. “What makes you think I’m not happy now?”

“Are you?” When she didn’t answer, he shrugged. “I believe you act out and cause scandals as a way to hide, as a shield of sorts to mask the fact you are lonely and aching to belong to someone.”

Was that true? As confusion poured over her, Annabelle blinked away the tears stinging her eyes. She dropped her gaze to the contents of the teacup. “As if marriage is the solution to any of that.”

“It is not, obviously, but it can be a start.” Leaning forward, Cornelius picked up the teapot and refreshed his cup before setting the pot down once more. “However, I’d like to see you married and away from Mama’s clutches.”

“That would mean you’d be stuck.” What was his end game?

“True, but I have learned to handle her with more patience than you.”

“And without banishing her to the country.”

The flush returned to his neck. “I’ll admit, that was a mistake, but I was out of sorts with you—still am—but the longer I’m alive and see how the rogues let their sisters grasp at their own lives and helm them, I’m more inclined to have you do the same.”

She snorted. “Except you’ve already picked out men for me to meet.”

“I have, and I won’t apologize for that.” His grin bordered on cheeky. “Fate, I think, needs to be helped along at times. You deserve to be someone’s wife, someone’s mother, to live a full life that has purpose.”

“That is the problem with you men in the ton . You all see women as possessions, as people who need to be rescued, or that marrying us will make you heroes.” She shook her head. “You assume that marriage and love will completely turn our lives around, as if those things are the pinnacle of existence.” Not that she would turn up her nose at love if the right man came along, but it wasn’t the key to unlock a life.

“Ha.” He shook his head. “I’m not certain I believe in love.” There was a certain tinge of bitterness in his voice that gave her pause. Had he been thwarted in that emotion at some point and hadn’t revealed it all to her?

How interesting. “Regardless, I do, and it’s not something that can be forced merely because you wish to see me settled all right and proper so your conscience can be soothed.” Though Annabelle wanted to be cross with her brother, she couldn’t quite summon the energy to do so. “I’m flattered you are worried about me. It means you care beyond how my scandalous activities have reflected upon the family name.”

“But?”

A grin tugged at the corners of her mouth. “But I’m not certain I should let someone else pick out a man I’m to marry, if that is even what I wish for my life. It is quite the personal choice, don’t you think?”

“Perhaps. Do you have a man in mind?”

“For marriage or to become mistress to? One role is very much more exciting than the other, wouldn’t you say?” Oh, she did so love to tease her brother!

“Perhaps in the short term, you might enjoy the role of mistress, but I rather doubt that is who you are as a woman.” An eyebrow rose in challenge. “Regardless, the last we spoke, I didn’t think you were interested in domesticity or being tamed.”

“Which is why I suggested being a mistress.” She snorted as ruddy color appeared beneath his cheekbones. “I never said anything about wishing to be tamed.” Quickly, Annabelle finished her tea and then laid the cup into the saucer and set them both on the low table in front of her. “However...”

“Yes?” Interest and concern etched through his expression.

“While you’ve been gone, certain things have happened.” Had he read the papers and seen the short blurbs about Hazelton’s rescue? Had he gone to the Rogue’s Arcade and been told how much time she’d spent with the earl already?

“Are you, perhaps, hinting at when you rescued Hazelton from Hyde Park?” The concern in his expression deepened. “I popped into the club last night and was given an update.”

In a way, it was good he knew, for it took some of the pressure from her. “A bit, yes,

but there is more to that story.” As knots pulled in her belly, she clasped her fingers together in her lap. “Was, ah, Andrew there?” God, did it make her seem desperate?

“He had already departed by the time I arrived.”

“I see.” Then there would be no news of the man. With a sigh, she shrugged. “Since his memories are lost, he truly doesn’t remember the man he was before. I didn’t know him then so am no help, but he seems all too lost and alone now. I have felt responsible for him, which has led to me checking on him daily. That was until you came home and have kept me busy.” How had the earl been passing the time? Had his memories returned? Did he give her a thought?

“You always did have a caring nature, Belle.” He leaned over and patted her shoulder. “It is one of the things I admire about you.”

“That is good to know. I feel it will help propel me into the life I need to live, where I can help others in some capacity.” Should she tell him that she and the earl had kissed a couple of times? Perhaps not. It might scandalize the poor dear. “In any event, I probably should pay a call on him this afternoon, so he doesn’t think I’ve abandoned him.”

“I would really rather you didn’t. Unmarried women—as well as unaccompanied ladies as is your wont—shouldn’t pay calls on bachelors. It isn’t proper.”

“As if I’ve ever cared a fig for that.” Annabelle briefly pointed her gaze to the heavens. She blew out a breath of frustration. “You and your rules. I might as well be back in the country.” If she had, then she would never have met Andrew, and that would have been a travesty. With a surge of confidence, she met her brother’s gaze and held it. “I am well past the age when I need to worry about rules or reputations or scandal.”

“Hardly. That will always be the case.”

She ignored him. “You obviously think the same if you wish to bring me here to have them look me over as if I were a piece of cattle at Tattersalls.” Annoyance filled her chest in a hot cloud. “However, why can I not pursue a man like Hazelton? I think if given a chance, we could be the best of friends.” Lovers, certainly. The thought of seeing him fully nude, of being able to explore his excellent form with her fingers and lips had tingles of need racing down her spine.

For long moments, Cornelius stared at her as if were assessing her statement. Then he frowned. “In all honesty, choosing anyone from the Rogue’s Arcade is a bad choice. Not just for you, but I would say the same to any woman. A tall order, that, for we all have our problems. And picking Hazelton as a potential husband? It’s a singularly bad choice.”

“Why? Is he not titled? Isn’t that what you and Mama both want for me?” Perhaps she could use their own dictates against them.

His sigh sounded long suffering. “I merely want you to be happy, but a man like Hazelton? Though he is one of my best friends, he has changed now. He has no idea who he is and might not ever regain those memories, that knowledge. It makes a man both dangerous and a target. And the men from the club, we were badly affected by the war. Our minds will certainly never be healed. We might not ever be whole again. What sort of life is that for you if you were to marry him?”

“It would prove a challenge to be sure, but from your own words, men of that ilk are too far gone to deserve care and attention. Should you all be shunned, locked away, then?” Honestly, she hadn’t truly given the matter thought beyond annoyance at her brother’s interference. “But surely he is a better choice than some man I don’t know.”

Cornelius snorted. “You didn’t know Hazelton until a week ago, and frankly, I’ll

wager you don't know him now since he hasn't shown you who he truly is. Because he can't." He shrugged. "The man I knew was a confirmed bachelor. He enjoyed prowling about London, taking beautiful women to bed when the occasion called for it, spending large sums of money at the gaming tables, and generally spending his time at the club."

"Yet he hasn't shown those proclivities now! He has been nothing but lovely toward me." In her agitation, Annabelle launched from her chair to pace the area between the windows and the fireplace. Perhaps it was time to be honest with her brother. "When I'm with Andrew, he makes me feel wanted, needed. He might be lost, but aren't we all in some way? And we all deserve peace, understanding. With him, I feel as if I finally have a purpose beyond waiting for someone to take notice of me. With the earl, it doesn't matter that I'm miserable at painting or embroidery or fail at being a ton lady. He merely appreciates... me. And not for what I might give him down the line—being his hostess, bearing his children." Her voice broke, for she had that tiny dream at one point, but fate had taken it away.

"Oh, Belle." Cornelius rose to his feet. He caught up with her at the window and slipped an arm about her shoulders. "You think I'm being unreasonably heavy-handed, but I only wish you to be safe and content. I don't wish for you to reach your death bed and have regrets."

"Then you and I agree on that point."

He blew out a breath. "Hazelton is a wild card just now. His life isn't stable. I don't know if it will ever be. He will essentially need to re-learn how to be an earl, how to handle his estates."

"And what is so wrong if I want to help him with that?"

"Nothing, really, but that path is fraught with unhappiness. What happens if you and

he do rub along well now but sometime down the road, his memories return, and he reverts back to his former self? What happens if you don't like that man, or he feels he's made a terrible mistake, and you don't suit at all? Should you and he marry, you will be trapped."

"All valid points, I suppose," she managed to whisper, for she'd been caught up in the romance and the excitement of everything. As she laid her head on his shoulder, tears crowded her eyes. "I don't know how else to explain to you what I feel for the earl. There is something about him that calls to me, as if being with him is where I've been meant to be all along."

"Effects of rescuing him. Nothing more." For a long time, they stood at the window, peering out onto the Mayfair streets, watching the afternoon traffic. Finally, he spoke again. "Promise me you will give the men I've selected a chance. There is no harm in having dinner with them; the first one is scheduled for next week. If you find that you abhor my choices, we can revisit the idea of you making a potential match with Hazelton... only after I've spoken with him, interviewed him, essentially. I refuse, in good conscience, to give you over into hardship or a life that might shatter about your feet."

Well, it was more than she'd had five minutes ago, and suddenly a glimmering future appeared just out of reach. Though she didn't want to meet any of Cornelius's choices, if it would gain her the earl in the end, she'd endure it. "I promise," she said in a low voice.

But then, when had she ever been docile or done what was expected of her before?

"What are your plans for the afternoon?" he asked as he pulled away in order to peer into her face. "Nothing troublesome, I hope?"

"Hardly. I have two books to return to the lending library, then I'll take out two more.

How much trouble can one possibly find in a library?" Though how delicious would that be, kissing amidst the stacks? "Afterward, I shall return here to resume my dull existence that apparently won't be worthwhile until a man takes notice of me and turns me into the image of a proper ton lady. Hardly a fairy story one dreams about."

"There are worse things in life, Belle. You could become bitter like Mama."

"That is true." She lifted an eyebrow, daring him to deny her claim. "Truly, Cornelius, there comes a time in every woman's life when she desires someone to partner with her, to give her the freedom to chase after her unorthodox dreams, no matter how frivolous they sound to you." Almost, she felt sorry for her brother, always the devoted British citizen, keeping his nose clean within the beau monde. "I'm not like you, not like Mama. Papa understood my need to be different, to forge my own path. And I like to think there are other men out there, progressive enough to understand some of us need to break the mold, to show others they can aspire to... more."

A hint of admiration reflected in Cornelius's eyes. "I truly think London needs more women of your strength and conviction." His smile held a tinge of sadness. "Let me think upon all that you've told me. Perhaps you might be what Hazelton needs after all. Only time will tell."

As a matter of course, Annabelle did indeed visit the lending library. She borrowed two new books, one a Gothic novel that promised thrilling chills as well as a sentimental romance where there was always the promise of a happy ending, but it was on the street where fate once more intervened in her life, for as she flipped through the pages of one of the books, she ran bodily into a man on his way to the library. When she glanced upward into his face with a murmured apology on her lips, she gasped.

"Andrew!" If there was perhaps more feeling and welcome in the exclamation, she

couldn't help it, for she was heartily glad to see him. "How are you?"

"Well, but worried about you." His gaze roved over her face and there was no mistaking the concern at the backs of his eyes.

Oh, dear. He's thought about me? Warmth filled her chest, but even hotter awareness rippled along her skin. "Why?"

He lowered his voice. "A few days ago, I came home to an intruder in my house, who did harm to a few of my servants. During our altercation, he told me he wanted the necklace. Which means it's only a matter of time before he realizes that you have it."

Shock plowed through her chest. "Were you hurt?" Now that she looked closer, he had a fresh bruise on his face. Her fingers itched to trace it, to make certain he was well.

"Marginally, but perhaps you should give me the necklace, so you are out of harm's way."

"Which means an end to our relationship," she said softly as cold disappointment circled through her belly. "I knew it was too good to be true." To her horror, tears welled in her eyes. "Of course I'll give it back to you, if you'll be so good as to drive me home? I took a hack here." How she would manage to keep herself composed during the trip through Mayfair, she didn't know.

"Damn it all to hell," he uttered in a low voice, but he put a gloved hand to the small of her back and guided her toward the street where his carriage waited not far done. "I refuse to believe this is the last I'll see of you, and please don't mistake my need for the necklace as a sign I don't wish for anything else from you."

When she once more stared upward into his face beyond the brim of her bonnet,

caught the desire in his eyes which matched the molten need flowing through her veins, she gasped again. “Oh? What else do you need from me?” Dare she even ask?

For the space of a heartbeat, he stared as his steps slowed. Then he grinned, and it was this side of wicked. “What else do I need from you?” he asked in a barely audible voice as he ignored the pedestrian traffic around them. “Everything, but I’ll start with a kiss then go from there.”

She gripped the books so tightly in her hand the spines bit into the backs of her gloved fingers. “And if that kiss should ignite something scandalous?” There must not be any misunderstandings.

“Then it does.” His gaze dropped briefly to her mouth before he met her gaze once more. “We shall discuss the ramifications of that later, but after the incident in Hyde Park, I have found life to be fragile and fleeting. I don’t want to know I could have made choices but didn’t out of fear or wanting to wait to see if my memories returned.”

“I rather think that way myself.” And she lost a tiny piece of her heart to him in that moment. “Lead on, my lord.” As her heartbeat tripped through her chest, she allowed him to guide her to his carriage.

There was no turning back, and she couldn’t help but feel she was one step closer to that glimmering future.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:27 am

Bloody hell. I more or less propositioned Annabelle.

That didn't deter his current plans, for after he handed her into the carriage, he told his driver to go through Hyde Park before eventually coming back to Mayfair and Harding House. Then he brought up the stairs, closed the door, and settled onto the bench opposite hers.

"I have missed you these past few days," he said without delay, for there was no point in denying what was the truth. "How have you kept yourself?"

"Well enough. Spent time with my brother. Cornelius said he just missed you at the club last night."

Andrew nodded. Awareness of her crawled over his skin. The subtle scent of lilies-of-the-valley teased his nose, and he couldn't wait to kiss her lips, explore her skin. "I left early. Didn't feel much like socializing. Was a bit out of sorts."

"Oh? Why?" The breathless sort of inquiry went straight to his stones.

"Because I'd wanted to see you, but knowing your brother had returned rather intimidated me and I wasn't certain of my reception." He tamped down on the urge to sigh when the closed carriage finally lurched into motion. "Besides, I truly had business to occupy my attention." And it had been hell, for he didn't have a head for numbers. "I'm realizing how fortunate I am to have retained an intelligent man-of-affairs. I'm quite rubbish everything just now."

"Don't say that. It's merely a matter of learning about these things again. You need to

give yourself time.” She frowned and then peered around the black velvet curtain at the window. “Where are we going?”

“Hyde Park. I thought it would be the most private place. Relatively speaking.” He glanced at her in profile, and his heart constricted. Twin threads of anxiety and exhilaration went up his spine. Dear God, after this afternoon, we will be irrevocably bonded. “More private than being stuck in Mayfair traffic, but there is still the driver,” he said in a low voice as he yanked the kid gloves from his hands and tossed them to the bench next to him.

Not that it mattered, for his want of this woman superseded his embarrassment of doing anything where his driver might hear.

“I suppose it is rather difficult to sneak about clandestinely in London. We cannot very well march up to your front door and then go upstairs without there being a few wagging tongues.” Annabelle let the curtain drop back into place. Her eyes rounded with anticipation and a trace of apprehension. “Do you mean to...” She gestured between them with a hand. “To do that here, in this carriage?” Twin spots of color stained her cheeks. When he nodded, she sucked in a breath. “How lovely. I’d always heard of people doing such things in vehicles, but had never indulged in it before.”

“Does that mean you’re keen to try?” Never had he met a woman like her before...at least he assumed he hadn’t.

“Yes. If you are.” Slowly, and while watching him the whole time, she peeled off her gloves. Once she laid them on the bench next to her, she then took off her bonnet and set it atop the gloves. “Though I would have preferred to do this after a boxing match. You are quite impressive while engaged in fisticuffs.”

“Ah, you are good for my ego.” Andrew grinned. He couldn’t help it. She brought out so many things in him, and he refused to analyze why. It was enough to know he felt

better when she was near. “Two people can get up to mischief any place if they’re inventive enough.”

“Why do I feel you have experience in this?”

He shrugged while a bit of heat went up the back of his neck. “While I cannot say I haven’t done it before, I can promise that this time will no doubt prove to be the best.”

“That assumes you are confident of your skill.” One of her finely arched eyebrows rose in challenge.

“You shall be the judge.” Need tightened his shaft, for her teasing made him hard like nothing else. Then, because he couldn’t bear to remain parted from her any longer, he took her hand, tugged her over the narrow aisle, and encouraged her onto his lap so that she straddled his hips. Skirting bunched between them, rose up her legs as she settled. The sensations imparted merely by that slight friction threatened to end the session before it got started. “Unless you’d rather not?” he asked against the satiny skin of her neck. “I thought I sensed a bit of either sadness or annoyance when we met just now, and I don’t wish to add to that confusion.”

“I want you, Andrew.” That throaty affirmation had him reeling but brought clarity with it he couldn’t understand. “I’ve been nearly out of my mind from desiring you since I first saw you box.” She held onto his lapels as she stared into his face, her expression entirely too somber for his liking. “But you are correct. Life is trying just now, for my brother thinks I should be matched more sooner than later and has set up meetings for me with men he knows.”

“What?” A wave of protectiveness welled in his chest. His hands drifted to her hips, and the warmth of her was all too tempting. “Is that something you want?” Fear played icy fingers down his spine. If she went out of his life, he would truly be even

more lost.

“Not to them.” Her blue eyes darkened. “Which is why I’m here with you now.”

God, if he couldn’t puzzle out her underlying meaning, he was a bigger nodcock than he assumed. In the end, he was far too curious to know what she was thinking. “Do you only want me for the physical release or for something else beyond that?” His chest hurt as he waited for her response.

“Andrew, listen to me.” She lifted up on her knees, leaned her body into his, put her hands on either side of his head, and then peered into his eyes so intently there was no escape. “I have always chosen the men I partner with carefully even if it might seem hasty, and when I tell you that I don’t wish to be with anyone else in this moment, I am being nothing except forthright.”

“I appreciate that.” Slowly, almost unsure of his welcome even though she’d set his mind to rest, he drew his hands up her sides to cup her breasts. The half-stifled sound she made when he applied slight pressure spurred him onward and stoked the flames already sailing through his blood. “I feel much the same where you are concerned.”

“Good.” With a smoky chuckle, Annabelle delivered a fleeting kiss to the side of his mouth. “Now, show me I’m not wrong sensing that inexplicable connection between us.” While she watched him, she unfastened the frogs that held her moss green brocade pelisse closed.

“Gladly.” If he wasn’t the most fortunate of men, may God strike him dead.

“Ooh...” She sighed when he eased her bodice down on her moss green gown. “Such anticipation.” With a grin, he kneaded those glorious breasts, palmed them, rubbed the pads of his thumbs over her nipples until they hardened into dark pink nubs. A moan escaped her throat, and she gave into a shiver. “I have long waited for this ever

since you first kissed me.”

“As have I.” It took all his willpower not to throw her onto the bench and claim her body. Instead, he kissed her, met her lips with his time and time again until the overture became something else entirely when they dueled with tongues for control of the embrace.

A shiver racked her shoulders. “I can’t think when you are touching me, kissing me.”

“Then give yourself over to me and merely enjoy.” With the sensation of freedom moving through him, Andrew drew a pebbled nipple into his mouth and set out to explore the charms her body held. Moments later, he wrenched away only to whisper, “Remember, though, that Bert is sitting right above us, but if you don’t care that he might hear your responses while being pleased, I care not either.”

Wicked promise twinkled in her eyes. “Hmm, is that a challenge, Hazelton?” As he continued his ministrations, her back arched and she dug the fingers of one hand into his shoulder. “It matters not, for I’ve wanted this—” a moan interrupted her words when he rolled the other tempting pink bud from the root to the tip. “Wanted you from the start,” she finally finished in a rush.

“There is something about a woman who isn’t afraid of meeting scandal.” And she continued to amaze him with every passing moment.

“If only you knew the stories.” Concern clouded her eyes before desire engulfed it. When she wriggled her hips, ground her pelvis against his, the exquisite friction against his hardened shaft tugged a groan from him.

“Ah, Annabelle. Perhaps it was fate who led you to me after all.” With a certain smugness to his grin, Andrew spent the next several minutes teasing her breasts with fingers, lips, and tongue, and as her breathing became increasingly shallow, he set out

to kiss her senseless, for he hadn't had enough of that either. Every moment in her company, each time she returned his kisses, or her fingers went exploring, it was the sweetest welcome he'd ever had.

With her, he knew exactly who he was.

All too soon, he became lost without regrets. The warmth of her in his hands, on his lap, the lilies-of-the-valley scent, the faint sounds of pleasure she made, the way her fingers curled into the hair at his nape and into his cravat all worked to hurtle him closer to the edge. How was it that meeting this one woman had managed to turn his world upside down but had him contemplating a future where every possibility existed?

"Andrew." The minx pressed a line of feather-weighted kisses to the underside of his jaw. When she found a spot he was particularly sensitive to that had him nearly launching off the bench, he eased backward merely to peer into her face.

"God, you're beautiful." She could be the angel of death or mercy and he wouldn't care, for in this moment, she was his, and he would promise her anything.

"Such gammon." Her eyes were wide and dark, vast blue pools he would happily drown in. "Being beautiful is commonplace, for anything can be that. Tell me why you think so."

And she was intelligent to boot. "I adore your cleverness, your unwillingness to bow to traditions or silly rules." At each point, he kissed a different part of her face. "Your determination to rise above the expected steals my breath, but the fact you embrace who you are without shame makes me want to do the same." Lightly, he bit her earlobe, and when she gasped, he chuckled. "Teach me how to be strong and resilient in the face of this ever-present fear I have of not knowing who I am."

“I’m not going anywhere,” she said into his ear then she followed that with a nip to his bottom lip. “The way I see it, since I found you, that means you belong to me for as long as you should have need of me, but I do ask that you get on with it else I’ll melt into a puddle right here.”

The urgency, the affirmation, in her whisper matched the hunger prowling restlessly through him. “As if I could deny you.” Because he could, Andrew spent the next several seconds kissing her neck, the curve of her shoulder, exploring the curves of her breasts, nipping and nibbling when the occasion demanded until she shook with need.

“Rogue.” Annabelle tugged at his cravat, loosening it so she could delve a hand beneath his clothing and kiss the bit of skin she’d exposed. Those heated lips were like heaven to him. “Touch me, Andrew. I want to feel your hands on every portion of my body.” Her voice caught. “I want to... You make me feel as if I finally belong.”

“Well, damn.” If he wasn’t seconds away from exploding, those words would have sent him there. “That is how it is for me,” he said in a barely audible whisper and held her closer. Never had he felt the way he did at this moment.

At least not that he could remember.

However, perhaps he was a selfish bastard, but he wanted more foreplay, so, he burrowed a hand beneath her skirting and didn’t stop until his fingers brushed the curls hiding that swollen bud at her center. Dear God, she was heat and heaven, sin and scandal all in one.

“Oh, yes.” Her eyes briefly closed. “I adore this moment when I’m hovering, before I climb that hill.”

How fortunate was he? Not knowing what to say, Andrew claimed her lips and kissed her as if that were his only task in the world, couldn't have enough of her. Was it wicked to pleasure her in a carriage where a random stop could expose them to prying eyes or where the driver could get off his rocks from the soft sounds Annabelle was making? Yes it was. Did he care? Not in the least, for in this moment, she was his, and life was as perfect as it could get. Over and over, he strummed his fingers along that slippery button at her center, and as she gyrated her hips against his hand, as she plucked at various portions of his clothing, he continued to kiss her, taking every sound of pleasure into himself, gathering them all as if they were the finest jewels while he ignored his throbbing shaft.

“Andrew, oh dear, yes, continue that.” Obviously in great need, Annabelle pressed a hand over his, guiding him to where she wanted him, and damn but it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. Seconds later, she fell into release, and he was awestruck as she threw back her head and arched her spine. Her body shook, and he took full advantage by deviling her slippery nubbin. He nipped and licked and suckled her nipples until he'd brought her to the brink once more. “Argh!”

“Bloody hell,” he breathed and lifted his head. “You will haunt my dreams like that.” Always, he would remember how she looked in this moment. Seeing her so responsive to his touch was incredibly erotic, and he couldn't have enough of her. “I can't wait to see you laid out on my bed, naked and needy,” he whispered against the satin skin of her neck. Was it odd he'd only just met her a week ago yet she was all he could think about?

“You and I are thinking along the same lines, but in my fantasies, you are the one naked, and I'm the one exploring,” she said, her dulcet tones breathless. “In the interim, you must work on your patience.”

How much was he coming to adore her? “It's not one of my virtues—I think—but if you'd rather I leave off...”

“No!” She fought her way through layers of skirting before her fingers fumbled at the buttons of his frontfalls. The initiative she showed both shocked and exhilarated him. “Don’t leave me feeling as if I’ll explode with no recourse.”

“Not a chance, for I adore your daring and enthusiasm for this and everything else in life.” He batted her hand away in order to complete the task of freeing his hardened shaft. “I cannot wait until you show me the depth of your determination and how you will change the world.”

Annabelle snorted. “Let me start with London, then we’ll see.” Her eyes winked with humor and something he couldn’t readily identify. “Either way, I intend to take you with me.”

“I don’t doubt it.” In fact, he was counting on it. Did that mean she wished for marriage, or was seeking release in a carriage the only thing she wanted from him? “Are you sure you wouldn’t prefer a younger man? I might not be able to keep you satisfied.” The new worry lodged in his head and wouldn’t fade. “I’m rather aged compared to others—”

“Do hush, my lord.” She nipped at his chin, pressed tiny kisses to his cheeks, his forehead, the side of his neck in a dizzying pattern that left him impossibly hard and heated. “You are not a doddering old fool, and the last I checked, aged lords didn’t possess the form that you do.” When she claimed his lips, he was lost, falling down in a dizzying slide, nearly going tip over tail, but not knowing where the tumble would end was both terrifying and exciting. “Unless you are a disappointing lover, I believe we’ll have much to discuss regarding the future.”

“Let us pray to all the gods that I don’t make a poor showing.” Again, his hands gravitated to her breasts, and after he spent copious amounts of time bringing her to the shuddering edge, he thought he might explode right then. When she rose onto her knees with a knowing glint in her eyes, he guided the head of his member to her

opening, and as she impaled herself on his length, never stopping her movements until he'd fully penetrated her honeyed heat, a broken sigh left his throat. "Damnation, this is the closest to heaven I've been."

He rather hoped he didn't say that any time he bedded a woman, for since he didn't remember most of his life, sharing this act with Annabelle was much like being a green boy at university all over again, except it felt as if he were coming home to a place where he'd never been before.

"You are all too flattering, and too much more of that talk and I might just decide to keep you around." Annabelle paused long enough to gently kiss his lips. Then, she moved again, and for the third time that afternoon, he was at sixes and sevens. Up and down, she moved her body, sliding with exquisite perfection along his shaft, holding his gaze with each pass. "This position is rather interesting, but I fear I'm far from a master of it," she whispered against his lips and then was apparently distracted in kissing him or learning the secrets of his mouth.

Not that he minded, for there was much to discover about her. "If you are uncomfortable, we can shift positions." In this, he felt comfortable that he could accomplish the task.

"Perhaps that's the best. I need to feel more of you, feel your body sliding against mine." Passion clouded the blue pools of her eyes and made her voice throaty. "Being here like this with you makes me feel protected, wanted, as if I'm not quite the failure I suspect that I am." The tiny sliver of worry in her tone tugged at his heart.

"You could never be that, my dear." Gently and with care as if she were the most valuable trinket, he urged her off his lap. If he weren't careful, he'd explode, and their outing would end in embarrassment. With his lips at the shell of her ear, he said, "Lie on the bench. That should give me enough purchase." As she did so, he followed her down and her skirting trailed around them. "Oh, if we were somewhere

private...”

“Soon, perhaps,” she whispered as she reached for him, smoothed her hands along his shoulders, pulling him to her.

He settled between her splayed legs, 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. It seemed right, as if he were always meant for this moment. “More comfortable?” With one powerful thrust of his hips, he speared into her, burying himself in her tight heat until they were irrevocably joined. “Damn, but you are perfect.”

“Yes! Oh, dear lord, Andrew, yes.” Tears filled her eyes as she tucked her legs about his. “This is... This moment is one of my favorites, and you are...”

“Hush. I rather agree.” Then there was no more need for words. He set out to worship her body with his, to show her how much he was coming to adore her, how grateful he was that she’d come into his life and saved his.

Again and again, he stroked into her. Over and over, he lost himself in the glory of this marvelous woman. She held him close, encouraged him even closer with the subtle tightening of her fingers and legs, and he obeyed with an alacrity that both surprised and amused him. His body seemed to remember the steps of this ancient dance.

The rocking of the carriage, the clatter of the wheels over the road became an almost soothing backdrop, and for the first time since he’d awoken in Hyde Park, he felt at peace. As he stared into her eyes and she looked back, another piece of his heart flew into her keeping. Little by little, she’d sneaked into his life, accepted him, the mystery of his life, and all his flaws as if none of that mattered.

Forever, he would be grateful for that, almost as if he were coming to love her.

“Well, damn,” he whispered but he didn’t stop moving. Was that true? Was what he was feeling for her love? Or was it merely a by-product of her rescue and his thankfulness? The longer he joined with her, their bodies coming together in a primal ritual, the more he suspected it was the former. He was falling in love with Annabelle, and in that moment, he relinquished his hold on anything that would stop the slide.

Perhaps this was always how it should have been.

Emotions clogged his throat. His pulse roared in his ears while he blinked back the sudden moisture in his eyes. “I’m so damn grateful for you.” Andrew pressed his forehead to hers, hoped she understood to what he referred. When a moan escaped her, that tiny little sound broke the hold on his control. Need tingled through his stones, drawing them tight to his body. His rhythm changed, quickened, rubbing against the swollen button at her center, and as she whimpered, softly pleaded for more, he stroked into her with more authority, wanting to send them both flying.

“Oh, dear. Oh, dear. Oh... dear!” Already primed, the sweet woman slipped over the edge into bliss with a cry of surprise.

He kissed her, selfishly taking her sounds of release for himself, and with another forceful thrust, he hurtled into the abyss where the vortex sucked him under, and bright stars burst behind his closed eyelids. There was something sacred and magical about sharing this moment with her, and again, emotions surged into his chest. “You are amazing.” He ground his hips into hers in an effort to prolong the wild sensations coursing through his body. Damn, it seemed as if it had been an eternity since he’d bedded a woman, but lying there with a warm partner wrapped in his arms with her body fluttering around his member, that he remembered.

Eventually, his shaft ceased to pump, and he lay still with her cradled in his arms. For her part, she’d wrapped hers about his middle with her cheek resting against his and

the echo of her heartbeat in tandem with his. “It wasn’t well done of me to do something like this in a carriage in the middle of the afternoon,” he whispered into her ear.

“Oh, do hush, Hazelton!” She playfully smacked his shoulder while a few tears fell to wet her cheeks. “I am as guilty as you, but I’ll tell you a secret.” With the swipe of her hand, she dashed the moisture away. “I never feel guilty, and I have no regrets.”

“There might be consequences from this coupling.” Would a babe result from this indiscretion? “I refuse to abandon you if there are.”

“Please stop talking else you’ll ruin it.” Gently, she laid the fingers of one hand against his lips. An odd sort of longing mixed with pleasure in her eyes. “I don’t want you out of obligation, for you will only resent me later even if you deny it now.” When he tried to protest, she tapped her forefinger on his lips. “There will be more than enough time to discuss a possible future. Not in this moment.”

An image of her and him standing by a lake somewhere glimmered to life in his mind’s eye, and what was more, he held a boy on his shoulder, perhaps not more than two years old, and he was the spitting image of her except with his hair and chin. “Annabelle...”

“I mean it, Andrew.” She didn’t remove her fingers. “A few years ago, that scandal I told you about resulted in a babe, but I miscarried in my fourth month, so I cannot guarantee you—or myself—anything. Thinking about that life, hoping for such, is irresponsible until we can both have several conversations about various realities and expectations.”

In this, as in everything, she had proved she was stronger than he would ever be. It left him in awe even as his mind spun at the implications of... everything. Slowly, while watching her the whole time, he took her index finger into his mouth, swirled

his tongue around the digit before just as slowly withdrawing it. When her eyes darkened and the delicate tendons of her throat worked with a hard swallow, he grinned.

“I will wait. You deserve that, and I want to move forward with no secrets and my eyes wide open, but I will promise you this.” He took her hand and pressed a kiss to her palm. “You are the one I wish to court,” they both gasped from the admission, “and you are the one I am becoming enamored with, not what you might be able to do in the future, and certainly not to measure your worth in whether or not you can bear children.”

“Oh, Andrew.” The whispered exclamation sounded far too tearful, but she buried her face in the crook of his shoulder and held him all the tighter.

Not wishing to destroy the moment, he simply kept his arms about her, keeping her safe, hoping that he had managed to reassure her that all would be well... unless she wouldn't want a man who couldn't remember who he was, but he didn't dare to ask.

For the moment, she was his and it was enough.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:27 am

November 14, 1817

Loverly House

London, England

“Oh, dear. Why am I so nervous?” Annabelle frowned at the people milling about the corridor while she tightened her fingers on her brother’s arm, for he was her escort tonight. With her other hand, she drew her gloved forefinger along a few of the stones in the opal and moonstone necklace around her neck. “I have attended balls before.” Albeit not hosted by a duke.

“Calm yourself, sister dear. There is no reason to find yourself intimidated. The Duke of Broadmoor is quite a lovely fellow, and the fact that he let his aunt throw a ball is telling.”

“Why?” She knew next to nothing about his friends in the Rogue’s Arcade, but now that Andrew was in her life, she suddenly wished to learn everything to provide context.

“When his aunt hosted a ball last November, it was nearly a travesty but as a result, he met the woman who would become his wife there, so I expect nothing less than another piece of news that will set tongues wagging.” When Cornelius peered down at her, admiration twinkled in his eyes. “He is a recluse, you see, for his mind was warped during the war and he is oftentimes afraid to go out in public. And you will do well tonight, I think. That saffron color is quite striking and will be guaranteed to make people notice you.”

As curious as she was about the duke's romance and story, her mind refused to concentrate on that. Instead, there was only one man she wanted to see tonight, but as of yet, the Earl of Hazelton hadn't arrived. When he'd sent a note 'round the day before asking her to meet him at the ball—since Cornelius already had an invitation—she'd been reluctant to accept. After the scandal they'd indulged in the other day while in his carriage, she rather thought his intentions toward her were muddled, but that event had been a turning point for her, and she couldn't wait to see him again.

“Thank you. I didn't know if I would have occasion to wear the gown.”

“Whose fault is that, little sister? You have refused so many invitations since coming to London all on your own.” The teasing note in Cornelius's voice made her smile. “Could it be there is a special gentleman you'll meet tonight who has put that flush in your cheeks and stars in your eyes?”

Warmth invaded her cheeks as he guided her into the ballroom. Everywhere, decorations in a harvest theme lay tucked away in corners, on windowsills, above the windows, and anywhere gourds, pumpkins, apples, collections of colorful leaves, and candles could rest. “I won't lie and say there isn't, for you would discover the truth sooner or later, but yes. I am hoping to see the Earl of Hazelton tonight. I, uh, happened to run into him the day before yesterday at the lending library where we caught up on a few things.”

He snorted. “I'll wager you did,” he said beneath his breath, but she wasn't certain she'd heard him correctly.

“I'm telling the truth.” The heat intensified, for she would never forget that day or what he did to her in that carriage, how that bond they'd enjoyed after their initial meeting had only strengthened. “I know you don't wish for me to tarry with a Rogue's Arcade member, but there is something about the earl I cannot ignore.” A

dreamy sigh escaped her. “Certainly, he is one of a kind, and it matters not that he might be broken.”

Where was he? Surely, he hadn’t changed his mind about seeing her?

“Belle, listen to me.” Cornelius tugged her over to one side of the room so they would be out of the way from the crush of people in the room. He rested a hand on her shoulder and sought her gaze with his. “I spoke with Hazelton last night at the club.”

“Oh?” The muscles of her belly clenched with apprehension. Had he warned the earl away from her out of a misguided attempt at protection?

His grin was genuine. “If you wish to pursue a relationship with him, you have my blessing.”

“What?” Shock ricocheted through her insides. “You said he was a risk, that I shouldn’t set my life up for heartache.” What exactly had the men discussed last night?

“The two of us had a long conversation, which was overdue anyway. Though he doesn’t remember the life he led before, he is the most genuine that I’ve ever seen him, and he is making great strides into embracing his new life and all the responsibilities therein.”

A bit of cold disappointment snaked through her gut. “Is that all he mentioned?”

“No, but I’d imagine he will tell you that himself.” His grin was quite cheeky and mysterious. “Whatever you choose to do with your life, I hope happiness and contentment comes along with it. You deserve that.”

Unexpected tears welled in her eyes. Annabelle blinked them away as she nodded. “I

have always strived for that. Sometimes I find it, sometimes I don't, but I don't regret any of my decisions along the way." Again, she brushed her gloved fingertips over the necklace. "Yet..."

"Hmm?" One of her brother's eyebrows rose in question.

"What if I fail? At marriage, at potentially being a mother, at being the society lady I suspect I will need to be if things move forward?" The glimmering future she'd seen earlier was still exciting, but it was also slightly terrifying.

"Life is a series of ups and downs, but you have such determination and spirit, I rather doubt you will fail in this." He gave her shoulder an encouraging pat. "And with the right man at your side? I fear that London will never be the same." Something beyond her left shoulder caught his attention and he nodded. "Hazelton is coming this way, and from all accounts, it seems he is equally determined, so I will check on you later." Quickly, he bussed her cheek, gave her a wink, and then melted into the crowds filling the room while avoiding the country reel that was currently in progress.

Slowly, Annabelle turned. Her gaze immediately fell on Andrew. Oh, dear! Flutters filled her belly, for the earl was quite dashing in his evening attire. The tailcoat on his tall form highlighted the breadth of his shoulders while at the same time tugged her notice to the nip of his waist. A waistcoat of maroon, moss green, and gold brocade invited her gaze down to his flat abdomen, and then heat slapped at her cheeks once more, for could so easily imagine him sans clothing with desire in his eyes.

More than that, she saw him in her mind's eye as the decorated war hero, hosting social events by her side, fighting the good fight, and speaking in the House of Lords where he gave voice to those in England who had none.

Suddenly, she wanted that life above everything else.

“Good evening, Miss Harding,” he said in greeting, and the low, baritone of his voice sent waves of awareness sailing over her skin. “You are quite ravishing in that color. My eyes were immediately drawn to you.”

“Thank you.” Never the one to simper and flutter eyelashes at a man, Annabelle couldn’t hold back her smile. “You are quite handsome tonight. I especially like your waistcoat and its autumnal colors.” Not even the bruising on his face could detract from that.

A grin flirted with his sensual lips, and she couldn’t wait to kiss him again for the sheer pleasure of such an act. “I selected it in the hopes you might notice.” Then his gaze dropped to her décolletage, and the grin vanished beneath a frown. “I remember that necklace.”

“You’d given it to me for safe keeping. I found it with you in Hyde Park that night.” Barely aware of the revelry happening in the ballroom, she held the earl’s gaze. “In a hidden pocket.”

“I know all of that, but I wasn’t referring to that night.” He came forward a few steps so that only a couple of feet separated them. “A few times as a youth, I watched my mother sitting at her vanity in the evenings when doing her toilette to attend some society function or another with my father. That necklace was always the last thing she put on. I remember how it glowed and gleamed in the candlelight those nights, how she looked like an angel or a ghost with those gems around her neck, how my father was always so pleased when he saw them on her.”

“Oh!” She sucked in a breath, for he’d never told her that before. “How did that happen, then, that you remembered such things?”

He shrugged and looked as shocked as she felt. “I’m not certain. As soon as I saw the necklace on you tonight with that gown under the candles in the chandelier, the

memory was just... there.”

“That’s encouraging. Perhaps the remainder of your memories will come back as well.” Though, would he be the same man she knew right now? If he reverted to the earl he was before, would he wish to remain a bachelor and change his mind about her?

The country reel came to a close and soon the dance floor cleared of couples.

“I can almost hear you thinking.” With concern etching his brow, Andrew extended a hand. “Even if I remember who I was before, I promise that I will never forget you.”

“How can you know that?” Confusion knotted in her belly. This was exactly why she’d never given away her heart, for the process of falling in love was acutely painful. “You might find that you have a woman somewhere waiting for you, not understanding what happened to you. I refuse to pull you from a relationship.”

“Stop.” When she didn’t slip her fingers into his hand, he took it anyway, rubbed the pad of his gloved thumb along her knuckles. “No one has come forward to claim a relationship. Even the men at the club have remained adamant I wasn’t attached.” Nothing but honesty shone in his eyes. “What you and I share, that inexplicable connection, is too strong to break.” Gently, he pulled her toward the dance floor where couples were settling into place, preparing for a waltz. “That is worth everything to me.”

That was, perhaps, the most romantic thing anyone had ever said to her. “How lovely,” she breathed, and she tightened her fingers on his. “You should write such musings down, for that prose would be wildly popular with the masses.”

One corner of his mouth quirked with a grin. “I am not concerned with impressing the masses, Annabelle. Only you.”

The sound of her name in his whispered voice had tingles crashing down her spine. “If you are trying to make me melt, then I’m about to become a puddle at your feet.”

Nothing else was said, for the string quartet struck up the first notes of the waltz, and Andrew set them into motion.

As luck would have it, the dance was a Continental waltz instead of the more popular Viennese, which meant they wouldn’t need to exchange partners, and neither were the steps as complicated. Thank goodness she’d learned the dance while in exile at her brother’s country estate to stave off boredom. Even more wonderful was the strong, steady feel of Andrew’s hand at the small of her back and the lithe way he moved.

With every turn and twirl, he pulled her a bit closer until her body brushed against his with each movement. Her skirting swirled and twisted about her legs and his. The earl’s presence was big and powerful, such that he compelled her to lift her gaze to his. Delight and something else she didn’t dare guess at lay reflected in his gorgeous whiskey-hued eyes, and it would be so easy to let herself drown in those warm depths.

The longer the waltz continued, the more the people around her on the dance floor disappeared. The lively, haunting sounds of the music became a distant tinkle in her ears while the crisp clean scent of the earl teased her nose, encouraged her ever closer to the edge of a steep hill that she was nearly tumbling down, secure in the knowledge that he would catch her.

That he always would, no matter what. The life he represented, that she was coming to want more and more was both hopeful and frightening, but he would be there, greeting her with that slightly crooked grin and that specific gleam in his eyes that made her heart flutter.

Was he coming to feel the same? Or was she simply a ninny, for it was too soon after they'd just met?

When the waltz came to an end, she nearly cried, for it had been all too magical and she didn't want to leave the security of his arms. But she couldn't very well remain standing there while the floor emptied of couples, so she put a hand on his arm, let him lead her over to the side of the room while her heart still floated somewhere about their heads.

"Thank you for the lovely dance." Would he ask another woman to go out with him on the floor? After all, he was an earl of some significance.

"I would delight in sharing the next set with you."

"Oh?" Mad little tremors went through her heart. That was paramount to announcing to the world that he had specific intentions toward her. "I would like that very much."

Before he could answer her, another man sauntered over to them. Perhaps a few years older than the earl, there was silver at his temples, and it ran through his black hair to gleam in the candlelight. Since she'd been away from London for far too long, Annabelle hadn't a clue who he was within the beau monde, but power exuded from him. Annoyance snapped in his dark eyes.

"Actually, Hazelton, I would like the opportunity to take Miss Harding out on the floor tonight in this set." There was nothing threatening in his voice, but the tone had the hairs on her nape prickling with warning.

"Oh, I—"

Andrew frowned at the man with confusion in his expression. Did he know the man?

"I beg your pardon, Churchfield, but the lady has already promised me the rest of her

dances for the night, and if fortune remains smiling upon me, I hope to make an announcement by the end of the ball.”

Excitement buzzed at the base of her spine. Tremors of need went through her core, so intense that she shivered. Surely, he didn’t mean…?

“No matter.” The other peer refused to back down. His gaze dipped to the necklace Annabelle wore. “I shall gain her attention at some point this evening.”

Andrew’s jaw tightened. A muscle ticced in his cheek, a clear indication his teeth were clenched. “What part of my refusal did you not understand, man?” One of his brown eyebrows went up in challenge. “The lady is off limits. She is mine.”

Oh, dear. The possession in his tone had heightened awareness sailing over her skin. It was rather lovely. No one had ever staked a claim over her before. Her pulse accelerated, and oh goodness did she want to kiss the earl!

For long moments, Churchfield glared at the earl while Andrew glared back. Finally, he nodded. “Very well, but I don’t give up that easily.” At last, he walked away, melting easily into the crowd.

Then the mood shifted again, and all the anger faded from the earl’s countenance. “I rather believe we need some fresh air.” Expectation lined his face. “Would you accompany me outside for a few minutes. Perhaps we could talk privately while there.”

“All right. Did you know that man?”

“I remembered his title, but not why he is familiar to me. Perhaps that will come as the evening wears on.”

“He doesn’t seem like the type of man you would keep company with.” So then who was he? Perhaps it didn’t matter, for her pulse tripped through her veins as she followed him from the room. It was quite scandalous to do so, for tongues would wag if any of the society matrons caught sight of them leaving together, but she didn’t care. In all honesty, she would follow him to the ends of the earth.

Once outside, he went down the short walk and through the gate at the front of the house to stand on the pavement. Though there was an autumnal chill in the air, she relished the coolness on her overheated skin. “Look how pretty the stars are tonight!” In fact, it was as if a thousand diamonds had been spilled over a black velvet canvas.

“While you admire the stars, I must admit that the whole of my attention is taken up with something equally as moving,” he said in a low voice filled with emotion. Before she could respond, he pulled her into a loose embrace despite being in public and in full view of the windows where anyone could see them. “I feel as if I’m the most fortunate of men tonight.”

Her heart squeezed and she laid a palm on his chest. “Oh, Andrew, this week has been such a wild ride that I’ve scarcely had time to catch my breath let alone think, and all the while, I’ve been so worried about you.”

“Understandable.” The golden illumination from the windows reflected in his eyes as he bent his head and gently kissed her.

All too soon, Annabelle was lost on a sea of sensation, for kissing this man was much like finding herself in a storm yet at the same time it felt as if she’d drawn the softest blanket about herself for warmth and comfort. No sooner had she looped her arms about his shoulders and pressed her body into his than she was wrenched violently away from him and out of his hold.

A pair of rough hands went about her waist while at the same time, a man dressed in

black threw a punch that caught Andrew on the chin. When she screamed and fought against her own assailant, she was roughly handled by a man in clothing as black as the first. She managed to turn about and rained blows to his face and chest, even went so far as to kick his shins, but the satin, thin-soled slippers had no effect in that regard. “Unhand me this instant!”

Another punch sent Andrew reeling backward. He staggered but couldn’t keep his footing. Ultimately, he tumbled to the pavement where his attacker kicked at his ribs, laughing when the earl groaned.

Annabelle tried to yank herself from her own assailant. Indeed, she’d almost succeeded, but then he struck out. Horrible pain went through the side of her head and cheek. Darkness flirted with her vision. No amount of blinking could keep it at bay. She teetered, not able to maintain her balance, and as she felt herself falling, she screamed again.

“Andrew!” Then that pair of rough hands were once again at her waist, pulling her along the pavement, dragging her toward a carriage, but then the effort of staving off the darkness proved too much, and she slipped inside its waiting maw with naught but a whimper.

The last thing she heard was the earl calling out her name.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:27 am

Andrew was unceremoniously dumped onto the cool, slightly damp ground, and when he looked about, despite the darkness, he immediately recognized the area as the place in Hyde Park where he'd been attacked just over a week ago.

When he'd been assailed on the outside of the Duke of Broadmoor's home, his first concern was for Annabelle, for as he'd fought with his opponent, she'd done the same with another one. Then she'd been rendered unconscious and the rage that had welled within him had been the most acute he'd ever felt. But as he'd tried to break away to help her, he'd been knocked out with a sharp, accurate jab to the cheek where the jawbones connected.

Now, a dull ache bothered him in that area as well as pain in various other parts of his body that had received blows or kicks. "Where is Annabelle?" If something dire happened to her while he was with her, he would never forgive himself.

His attacker, dressed completely in black, grunted. As of yet, there was no one else around. "Get to your feet and go down the footpath, not the riding trail." The tone was vaguely familiar, but from where?

Oh, he'd stand, all right, but he had no intention of following orders from a thug. "What the hell do you want?" he asked while staggering to his feet. Since the man declined to answer, he charged at the other man, caught him in the chest with a shoulder, and once they both were thrown to the ground, Andrew threw a punch that connected solidly with the man's nose. Blood immediately gushed from the broken appendage. "Where the devil is Annabelle?"

"I'm not paid to answer questions." The man spat blood from his mouth as he

struggled for dominance. Then, as if clawing its way from a morass of emptiness, a memory came forth. This was the same man who'd attacked him that night in Hyde Park when he'd been left for dead!

“And I’m not someone thugs like you should trifle with. You were the one who took away my memories, now why I am here once more?” The attacker kept silent, which only stoked Andrew’s growing anger. Knowing he could find out more information on his own, Andrew delivered another quick jab, and this time when his fist found purchase at the man’s temple, the attacker went down and didn’t come back up. “I’ll be damned if anyone takes advantage of me again.”

With hot rage filling his chest and righteous indignation burning in his throat, Andrew loped down the path as he’d been instructed. The cool air kept his mind clear, for he planned to thoroughly pummel whoever took him and Annabelle captive. As he followed the well-worn foot path that deviated from the bridle trail and jogged south, cutting through the less populated areas of Hyde Park. A nearby stream gurgled and blended with the nighttime sounds in the undergrowth and trees, and closer to the water supply, a thin mist rose from the lower lying places.

Eventually, the narrow path winded around and leveled off into a clearing of sorts with the stream ten feet ahead and a worn wooden footbridge going over the ever-moving water where the path continued. At the other side of the bridge, lying in a heap on the cold ground was Annabelle. The fabric of her gorgeous saffron-colored gown was rumpled and rucked up about her stocking-clad legs with no consideration to decorum or privacy.

“Annabelle!” As he ran toward the bridge, the second he put a first foot upon it, a man in black stepped out from a collection of evergreen trees to stand guard over her form while another man—the same one who’d asked her to dance earlier in the evening, skirted around Annabelle and her keeper. He moved in Andrew’s direction. “What the devil is the meaning of this?”

“Come no further, Hazelton, unless you wish for your pretty little plaything to have a knife plunged straight through her heart.” Lord Churchfield held up a gloved hand. “You and I have unfinished business.”

“I cannot fathom why.” Truly, except for the little niggle in his brain, he had no recollection of this man.

“Ah, the mystery earl, the man with no memories of his previous life.” Churchfield came a few steps closer until he stood in the middle of the footbridge. An errant breeze toyed with the panels of his dark gray greatcoat and ruffled his hair beneath the beaver felt hat. “I’m the man who couldn’t pay at the gaming tables a week ago, the man from whom you took the necklace that currently graces Miss Harding’s delicate neck.”

The aggravation in Andrew’s chest reached the next level. “You leave her alone. She is not part of this.” A few glimpses of Annabelle showed her pale face that already had the shadows of bruising, but then her guard moved in front of her and blocked her from his view. “If any further harm comes to her, there will be hell to pay, and I will start with you.”

“Bragging words from the man who can’t recall who he is.” Churchfield shrugged. “I want the necklace.”

“It doesn’t belong to you; never did.” His heart gave a great thump when a slight sound came from Annabelle, which meant she was slowly coming back to consciousness.

The other man sighed as if his time was wasted simply by being there. “Do you want to know why I chose Hyde Park as the setting to finish this job?”

That was... odd. Andrew frowned. “Because you’re a prick with a desperate need for

power?” He crossed his arms at his chest, refusing to let this man intimidate him.

“Your attempt at humor is beneath us both and has no place in the proceedings.” Clearly, the other man wasn’t impressed. “One of my contemporaries was the Duke of Winthrop. I learned much from him before his unfortunate demise.”

“That man was the worst sort of scourge on this earth. He was responsible for torture, oppression, attempted murder, and many other crimes while he lived.” How the deuce did he know that? As he thought about the duke, memories came swirling fuzzily into his mind, for he had tangled with the duke more than a few times. Perhaps some men were so evil not even amnesia could keep them hidden.

“It’s much a matter of opinion, but then, men like you, who bend the rules to suit you wouldn’t understand.” Churchfield glanced backward at Annabelle as she stirred on the ground then he looked at Andrew once more. “Regardless, Winthrop knew everyone’s secrets as well as their weaknesses. Mine has always been beautiful things I couldn’t afford, things I was cheated out of due to my father’s fondness for high wagers, cheap women, and mid-range brandy.”

What difference did that make? “Why am I here?”

Churchfield’s grin was a mockery in the shifting shadows as clouds moved over the moon. “Perhaps I like the symmetry of it and wish to finish the job of doing away with you in the same place where you should have died to begin with.”

This was ridiculous. “If you want the damned necklace, why don’t you just take it? As long as you leave Miss Harding alone, I care not.” What was a handful of gems compared to the life of the woman he suspected he loved beyond all reason and explanation?

“It isn’t that easy.” The other man peered into the nighttime sky and frowned, as if

even the heavens had managed to disappoint him. “Perhaps I want to teach you and the rest of the damned rogues that you don’t rule London’s jewelry world.” When he rested his gaze back on Andrew, abject hate glittered in those dark depths. “There are those of us whom you’ve either stolen from in the past or prevented sales recently, took what we wanted before we knew what was happening.”

Though he didn’t remember stealing anything at all let alone jewelry, that didn’t mean he didn’t, for he’d been reminded by Annabelle’s brother being a jewelry thief was requisite in order to be a member of the Rogue’s Arcade. “You’re mad. That necklace was my mother’s, given to her by my father on their wedding day.”

“So you assume.” Churchfield came closer another step. “However, your father bought it out from under my father, who’d brought those raw opals back for the Regent as a way to curry favor. Unfortunately, the Regent didn’t like that particular gemstone, so my father sold them to a jeweler, who shaped and polished them.” He blew out a breath as if he were bored and had told this story too many times. “The gems were then assembled into the Falling Moon and Stars piece, but your father offered the jeweler much more coin that the man couldn’t possibly refuse. He sold the necklace to the earl, and my father was left with nothing.” Bitter vitriol fairly dripped from the words.

“Then that was a matter between our fathers. I have nothing to do with it.”

“Oh, but you’re wrong. I demand satisfaction, and because of that, I will beat you bloody and leave your lady love here in the park.” His laughter raised the hairs on Andrew’s nape, for it was quite an unhinged sound. “If she survives the night with more than her dignity intact, you can consider yourself fortunate, but this area of the park is not known for being safe after dark.”

The hold on his temper snapped. “You can try, but first you’ll need to come through me, you blackguard, and I don’t intend to lose this fight.” With a growl, he charged

onto the footbridge, and his fist connected solidly with Churchfield's jaw enough that it sent the other man reeling backward a few steps.

"You should have left well enough alone, Hazelton." Churchfield sprang forward, grabbed onto Andrew's cravat, and then yanked him around so he could no longer see Annabelle. With a push that sent the earl stumbling, he advanced. "Do you truly think I can't best you—with fists or anything else?" Apparently led by his ego, the other man delivered a hard punch to Andrew's midsection. Pain exploded in his stomach. "You are nothing special, and a man with no memories is merely someone else's pawn waiting to happen."

"I remember enough." With a powerful uppercut that landed on the other side of Churchfield's jaw, his grin was slight as the other man retreated.

"Then you can go to your grave knowing I was the one who ended your life, and you can wonder what became of your whore." He threw another punch, but since Andrew darted away, the blow clipped his shoulder. "Ah, did you think I didn't know about your scandal in the carriage?"

Andrew grunted. He came back with a strong uppercut that smashed into Churchfield's cheek. "How?"

Both pugilists broke apart in order to circle one another.

"I pay your driver better." His laughter grated across Andrew's nerves. "When the master can't remember who is on his staff and who is not, it makes spying easy for people like me."

"Bastard!" Andrew flew at his opponent. He threw a punch, but Churchfield ducked and skittered away thanks to fancy footwork. Obviously, the man had had some training in fisticuffs. While Andrew regained his position, the other man got in a

quick series of jabs to his already abused stomach. A groan escaped Andrew's throat, and he briefly doubled over, for the pain was intense.

"Not quite. Just a man who knows exactly what the world owes him."

Andrew surged upward. "The world—or everyone in it—owes you nothing!"

As if they had all the time in the world, they both exchanged blows and punches. The silence of the night was punctuated by grunts, groans, and the sickening sound of flesh hitting flesh, but in an odd way, Andrew craved that symphony, for he found both comfort and encouragement in that familiar scene. Churchfield struck out a fist. Pain exploded through Andrew's face. Sticky, warm blood oozed down his face. No doubt his nose had been broken.

"Damn you." But it wasn't as if his nose hadn't been broken before. For as long as he could remember, it had always been crooked, especially since he'd started training in the boxing salon. But he was nothing if not persistent. He came roaring back, a veritable storm of fury, cuffing Churchfield's ears and then delivering a powerful blow to the man's midsection. While his opponent stumbled, Andrew planted the sole of his boot into Churchfield's chest and shoved.

The other man faltered. He retreated unsteadily on his feet, and when his bootheel caught on an uneven plank on the footbridge, he tripped, landing hard on his arse. "This proves nothing, Hazelton!" There was no time to rest, for with a cry of pure rage, Churchfield surged upward, easily finding his footing. He came at Andrew, pummeling with his fists as if one possessed.

"Andrew!" Annabelle's cry of warning spurred Andrew into renewed strength. He defended his ground, not only dodging and deflecting most of the other man's rage but also giving as good as he got. An uppercut to Churchfield's chin sent the man reeling back. His side crashed into the railing of the footbridge, where he paused,

winded. Another lightning quick jab to the man's midsection left him winded and gasping for breath.

"I refuse to go through the remainder of my life being threatened with no account men like you." With the hot fury of rage in his chest, Andrew pounced once more. Striking out with a powerful punch that caught Churchfield in the temple and left his opponent wilting against the railing, he grunted. "And by the by, every man in the Rogue's Arcade steals only what was once stolen and then returns it to the rightful owners or sells those pieces. In those cases, the coin goes to help the less fortunate. It's a concept men like you simply will never understand, since all you care about is power and money." One final punch to Churchfield's nose sent the man tumbling over the railing into the shallow stream below. With a last passing glance at the spot where the other man lay sprawled face down, Andrew spit the blood from his mouth. He didn't give a damn if the man drowned in that six inches of water or suffered hyperthermia.

It was in fate's hands now. No one kidnapped him or Annabelle then planned to leave them both for dead over the shaky provenance of a damned necklace.

Wiping his face with the sleeve of his tailcoat, Andrew ignored the pain that lit up his whole body, for a scream was ripped from Annabelle's throat and reminded him there was still danger about. His steps echoed hollowly on the bridge as he crossed it and ran toward the place where he'd last seen her.

Upon arrival, he was shocked to not only see Annabelle on her feet, but also, she'd come into possession of a rather large tree branch. Had she pulled it down or merely found it? There was no way of knowing, but she currently brandished it like a sword and was beating her guard about the knees and chest as if swatting at a rodent in a kitchen.

"Let up, bitch!" The man in black couldn't keep up with a defense against her

apparent annoyance, for she continued to whack the man's person without prejudice. Yet somehow, he found an opening and grabbed Annabelle's hair. With a mighty yank, he dragged her to him. "Enough!"

"Leave her alone!" Andrew bounded over to them as they tussled, but that spooked her attacker enough for him to release her.

"Damned titled nob's." He grappled for the necklace, took it in hand, and then wrenched it from her neck. "I'll sell the fucking piece myself." Just as Andrew reached out to grab him, the man turned tail and ran from the scene. Obviously, he didn't care about his employer who still lay in the stream.

He assumed, but Andrew had no more energy to give over to the man, for the whole of his focus was on Annabelle. Breathing heavily, he put a hand on her shoulder. "Sweeting—"

"No!" She swung about with a cry and swung the branch at him, which thudded against his right side.

"Oomph!" Damn, that hurt.

"Oh, dear. Andrew!" Her eyes widened with surprise then mortification. Instantly, she dropped the branch seconds before she threw herself into his arms. "I thought you were another attacker."

"Understandable." Dear God, she felt so good, all soft and warm as he held her close, partially to assure himself that she was well. He buried his aching nose into the loose tresses of her hair. The fragrance of flowers and sweat seeped into his nostrils. "Churchfield is, I hope, lying unconscious in the stream. The man who kidnapped me is knocked out at the top of the path where I assume we were let out from a carriage."

“I don’t care as long as you are unharmed.” She peppered his face with feather-weighted kisses, without regard to the blood and grime that clung to his skin. “I was so frightened, waking up and seeing you fighting that horrible man.”

“Not any more than I was not knowing if you were dead or alive.” He kissed her forehead and then pulled away, being sure to take possession of her hand. “Come. Let us head up the path to where all of this began.”

“Why?” But she clung to him and that gave him the strength needed to proceed up the sloping ground.

“There is no better place to give you this speech than where I first met you, where you changed my life with a simple act of nurturing and courage, where you put me onto your horse and carried me into your life.”

Without her, he was truly nothing... ..no one, but when Annabelle was with him, it didn’t matter. He had the capacity to be anyone he chose. There was a certain freedom in that, and he wouldn’t waste the second chance.

By the time they reached that spot at the top of the hill where the footpath converged with the riding trail, exhaustion had begun to set in, but he wouldn’t rest this night until he’d won her hand as well as her heart. “Stop.” He put his hands on her shoulders, adjusted where she stood, looked about, adjusted her again, realized his gloves were grimy with dirt and blood, then sighed. “Right here.” Dear God, she was a vision in her slightly torn and dirty saffron-colored gown with her caramel hair flowing about her shoulders. After removing his gloves, he tossed them away. “This is the very spot.”

She frowned. “This was where I first found you.”

“Exactly.” Did she not consider that moment as monumental as he? While slight

panic rose in his chest, Andrew framed her face in his hands and peered into her eyes. “This is the very place where my life changed, and all because I met you. Or rather, you saved me. Literally, and in every other sense of the word.”

“I couldn’t just leave you here,” she whispered as tears welled in her eyes.

“Of course not. You are an exceptional woman, sweeting. A singular sensation amidst a sea of the same sort of women all thinking the same sort of things.” Buggar, he was in danger of cocking this up.

“Andrew?”

“Hmm?”

“Just speak from the heart.” She laid a palm on his chest. The dear woman had lost one of her gloves. “That’s the best way to make your point.”

“Right.” Slowly, he lowered his hands, but then it didn’t feel right to not touch her so he held her in a loose embrace so he could still look into her upturned face. “I don’t know how to explain it. I might not have all my memories and I might not know who I was before, but perhaps that doesn’t matter.”

“Why?”

He breathed in deeply and let the breath out in a shuddering sigh. “Because when I met you, from that very moment I became a new man. I had the opportunity to do everything over again, in a new way presumably, to be a better man, do a better job in the hopes that...”

“Yes?” A look of expectation filled her face.

How much did he adore her already? “There is nothing for it. I’m falling in love with you, but I know it’s only been a week, and that isn’t enough time to even know such a thing, but—”

“Hush, my lord.” She rose up on her toes and pressed her lips to his, regardless of the mess his face surely was. “I believe that I’m falling in love with you too, and to be honest, love doesn’t follow a timeline, doesn’t depend on how long a person knows another, doesn’t care about society’s rules or ages, or any of that. Love just is.”

“It is, quite.” Yes, he was a nodcock, but somehow, when she was there, he didn’t feel it was a bad thing. “That being said, I would adore it above all things if you would consent to be my wife, my countess.”

“Oh!” Worry clouded her eyes, barely seen in the darkness. “I might disappoint you, for I have a healthy dislike of the ton and the society we both live in as well as the privileges we enjoy.” The delicate tendons in her throat constricted with a hard swallow. “But if you can look past that, ignore my other failings, understand that I enjoy being scandalous far more than being proper...” A few of the tears fell to her cheeks. “I would be delighted to marry you.”

He was floating, falling, sinking, drowning from her words, but he had one last thing to say to her. “Annabelle, my love.” Again, he framed her head in his hands. “You are perfect for me. I never wished for proper, and we will work through any other challenges together. There is some comfort in knowing I’m going into the unknown with you instead of alone this time.”

It made all the difference.

“I understand completely how you feel, and I wouldn’t wish to go forward without you.”

With a soft cry of victory, Andrew pulled her fully into his arms and brought his mouth crashing down on hers. He claimed her lips over and over again, wished to leave no doubt in her mind that he would choose her every time.

“From the looks of things, we arrived far too late to be of help, especially after seeing a goon out cold near the arch.”

Andrew ended the embrace at the sound of Winteringham’s voice. As he peered through the dark and shadows, the forms of the viscount and Timelbury approached their location. Illumination from the lanterns they each carried bounced about the area. “How did you even know we were here?”

It was Annabelle’s brother who answered. “I noticed you both were missing from the ball. Once I asked around to the other rogues in attendance, they agreed they hadn’t seen you for a bit. Then, one of the servants offered up the information that they’d seen a scuffle on the street and that they saw someone matching Annabelle’s description being carried into a carriage.”

“I’m so glad you’re here,” she said as she broke out of Andrew’s arms to hug her brother. As she quickly told him about what happened, he glanced at the viscount.

“Churchfield was behind everything.” He relayed the drama surrounding the necklace. “I knocked him out. He landed in the stream just under the footbridge.”

“Understood. Timelbury and I will check it out.” He motioned to Cornelius. “We need to make certain the threat is neutralized.”

“Right.” Cornelius looked at his sister. “Don’t go anywhere.”

She nodded, but once the other men left the immediate area, she sighed and came back into Andrew’s arms. “I’m sorry.”

“What the devil for?”

“That I lost the necklace. If I hadn’t worn it—”

“Stop.” He put a hand beneath her chin and lifted it until their gazes connected. “You are infinitely more valuable than a necklace, but I can always remember mama wearing it.” He shrugged with a wry grin. “Some memories are sneaking back while others are simply lost, and while that’s marvelous, I have you, which makes me the happiest of men.”

With a soft cry, she nestled into his form and slipped her arms about his middle. “We are going to have such fun.”

“We will, and I cannot wait to see what we can do together.” Then, because he could, Andrew took her into his arms again and kissed her quite thoroughly. By the time he pulled away, his friends had returned. “What of Churchfield’s status?”

The viscount shrugged. “He wasn’t there, which means you’ll have to watch your back.”

“But you won’t be alone,” Timelbury added with a grin as he bounced his gaze between them, amusement clear in his expression as he held the lantern aloft. “The rogues don’t leave anyone behind.” He winked. “And what sort of soon-to-be brother-in-law would I be if I left you alone with that potential problem?”

Annabelle gasped. “You knew?”

“What did you think Hazelton and I discussed at the club last night?” He snickered. “Let us return to the ball, hmm? They should be sitting down to dinner soon.”

“Oh, and by the by, Broadmoor and his duchess made an announcement shortly

before we realized you were missing,” Winteringham said as they made their way back toward the arch. “They are apparently expecting their first child, due sometime in mid-May next year.”

“How lovely,” Annabelle said as she touched Andrew’s hand.

“Indeed. I’ll be sure to wish him well.” He closed his fingers about hers and couldn’t help his own grin. “It seems everyone is moving forward.”

“As it should be,” she said softly. “Otherwise, you’ll stay in the same place, and that is not where the adventure and challenge lie.”

This new life was a bit intimidating and allegedly different from his old one, but he heartily looked forward to filling it with new memories.

And love.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:27 am

December 24, 1818

Culpepper House

Berkley Square, Mayfair

London, England

“You’d best hurry and dress else we’ll be late for Timelbury’s dinner party.”

Andrew turned at the sound of his wife’s voice with a grin of his own. “Whose fault is that? You are the one who encouraged me to fit in a quick bout at the boxing salon before I needed to dress.” He stood half clothed in the middle of their shared dressing room, for though she’d had all afternoon to complete her toilette, he would need to freshen up at the basin.

“I won’t apologize for adoring your body in this prime condition, so I will do everything I can to encourage you to keep it.” As she came toward him, the satin of her orchid gown rustled in the silence. The color was as vibrant as she.

“You won’t find dissent with me.” He offered no protest when Annabelle closed the distance between them and layered herself against him while he removed his fine lawn shirt. “While I enjoy engaging in fisticuffs, either bare knuckle or with the mittens,” he snagged his pair of worn leather gloves and held them up by their tied strings, “I adore it even more when you distract me by exploring.”

Which had happened quite often during their newlywed existence. In fact, they’d

been married just over a year, and in that time, life had been turned on its head and sent in what felt like a hundred new directions. Since that glorious day, he had only fallen deeper into love with her. She soothed his ruffled nerves after long sessions in Parliament, she listened to his fears and concerns if he awoke in the night from terrors and horrible dreams, and she embraced the trips they took to his country estate. Through it all, she had tried several things on her own until she'd found a cause she felt comfortable with—a counseling service for women of the aristocracy who had lost pregnancies but felt they couldn't talk to anyone close to them for fear of censure or shame. They'd renovated the downstairs parlor into a private apartment where her clients could feel safe and secure.

Damn, but he was proud of her.

“Speaking of that, do you think we have time for a quick romp before we set out? After all, you are halfway naked.” Her voice was much a purr as she glided her fingertips over his bare chest.

He dropped the boxing mittens. “You said we would be late before you brought this up.”

“Mmm.” As she pressed her lips to his left pectoral, she slipped one hand down his torso, past his abdomen which caused his muscles to tense, and when she arrived at the growing bulge at the front of his breeches, he gasped, and she giggled. “That isn't the only thing that will be up before too long, I'll wager.”

“Sweeting, if you don't stop, not only will we be hopelessly tardy to your brother's Christmas Eve dinner, but there's a good possibility we won't leave this room.”

“Is that such a bad thing?” But she sighed then teased one flat disc of his nipples until the bud hardened. “Fine, though don't you find it suspect that Cornelius of all people is having a group of us over for dinner and dancing later?” When she pulled away from him, Andrew sighed, for she was quite potent. “I think it's because there is a

woman in his life.”

“If that is true, that is his affair, not yours.” Andrew strode across the room to the wash basin. He spent the next few moments washing the sweat from his skin. “Timelbury can live that life as he sees fit without your interference.” He tugged off his boots and rested them to one side of the wash stand.

“He did the same to my life, so turnabout is fair play, don’t you think?” She drifted to a comfortable winged-back chair and flounced onto it.

“I do not.” Did he know what was going on in the man’s life? Yes, yes he did. Would he spoil it by telling the man’s sister? Absolutely not. Cornelius was a fellow brother-in-arms, and he refused to break that trust. He might not remember his time in the military clearly outside of the nightmares, but he took his blood brothers’ privacy seriously.

“I suppose that’s just as well.” Oddly enough, she didn’t sound miffed about it.

“Why is that?” He peered into the small oval mirror that hung on the wall above the wash basin and caught her gaze in the reflection. “You usually don’t give in this easily.”

“Honestly, I’m not going to have time for him and whatever scandal he’s undoubtedly gotten himself into in a little while.”

“Again, I’ll ask why?”

A slow smile curved her pink lips, and there was a certain glow, a definite wonder in her expression that caught his imagination. “There is something I need to tell you that I’ve been holding back in the event my suspicions were wrong.”

“Oh?” As he turned to face her, Andrew’s heartbeat accelerated.

Annabelle nodded. “Darling, would it bother you too much to know that if we are fortunate, we will have a new member of our family in about five months’ time?”

Shock plowed into his chest as if he’d been punched. “Do you mean to say...?” He couldn’t finish the inquiry lest he was wrong.

“Yes.” As she nodded, tears sparkled in her eyes, magnifying the blue so that they matched the sapphire stones in the engagement ring he’d given her on that seemingly long-ago day. “While you were out meeting with your man-of-affairs this afternoon, I had the midwife in. She confirmed what I already knew. I am increasing, about four months along.”

“Damnation, but that is wonderful news.” Not caring he was still wet from the quick bath, he hurried over to her chair and dropped to his knees before her. “Are you well? I haven’t noticed symptoms of a pregnancy, but then, perhaps I’ve missed them.”

“They’ve been there, and though sometimes I feel sick, it’s usually in the afternoon when you’re away.” She put a palm to the side of his face. “Are you happy? We hadn’t discussed the possibility of having children in-depth during our marriage, for it didn’t truly matter, but...”

“I’m ecstatic.” Andrew turned his head and pressed a kiss into her palm. “But if fate decides this isn’t to be, I shall still have you, and I am quite content with that.” Then he rested a hand to her belly that was just beginning to round. “To think, after everything, I am to be a father.” Even he heard the awe in his voice. “I hope I won’t prove a disappointment.”

“You can never be that, have never been that,” she murmured then encouraged him close so she could briefly kiss his lips. “Thank you.”

“For what?” Truly, he didn’t know why she would say that.

“For everything. I think that night I found you in Hyde Park, you rescued me as well. Saved me from a strangling, dull ton life by giving me the freedom to explore who I was and who I needed to be.”

“Sometimes, paths were just meant to cross.” Then he stood and tugged her into a standing position. “Come with me, Lady Hazelton.”

“Where?” But she followed him without protest.

“The bedchamber because I am going to show you just how much I love you.” He grinned when she gasped. “Cornelius will just have to understand that his sister was delayed, for she and her husband were celebrating some much-hoped-for news.”

She squealed as he tossed her onto the bed. “Oh, my gown will be hopelessly crumpled.” But his wife was quite enthusiastic when she reached for him as he joined her and covered her body with his.

“As if that is such a bad thing,” he whispered in a fair mimic of what she’d said earlier. Then nothing else was said for a long time afterward, for they didn’t need words to communicate their joy and affection.

It truly went to show that living a whole new life wasn’t as terrifying or daunting as he’d originally thought, as long as he had a loving, supportive partner by his side. Those memories were etched upon his soul and would never be forgotten.

The End