



Only a Lyon Will Do (The Lyon's Den Connected World)

Author: *Sherry Ewing*

Category: Historical

Description: Can a chance encounter turn desire into love?

Asher Tyler, Earl of Rowley, has guarded his life as a carefree bachelor by avoiding romantic entanglements and the debutantes of each Season. When his world is turned upside down by a mysterious woman who saves him from a fall, Asher wishes to know her better but she refuses to reveal her identity. Asher cannot forget the woman at the Lyon's Den and remembers every delectable detail about her.

Mrs. Patience Moore, a widow with a complicated past and ties to the Wicked Widows Club, was disowned by her merchant father when she married without his consent. Now a widow, she lives with her friend, Cassandra, who pays the matchmaking fees of the infamous Mrs. Dove-Lyon, the Widow of Whitehall, to find a husband for Patience.

But Patience doesn't want an arranged marriage. She wants to fall in love but not with the man who stumbled into her one night at the Lyon's Den who appears only interested in one thing. She knows his type. She should stay far away from him. Her heart tells her differently.

Mrs. Dove Lyons matchmaking brings Asher and Patience together, but the road is complicated. Asher insists he isn't interested in marriage, his brother is vying for Patience's affection, and an enemy from Asher's past is seeking revenge.

Only time will tell if love will win over a woman who is afraid to trust and a man who refuses to see that the perfect woman is right before his eyes.

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The Lyon's Den

Whitehall, England

January 1818

Asher Tyler, Earl of Rowley, lifted a crystal glass of brandy and took a long sip. He sighed in pleasure. If there was one thing he knew, it was that Mrs. Dove-Lyon provided only the best to her customers when it came to food, drink, and other gentlemanly pleasures. The sound of male laughter echoed through the main gambling room, filtering into the smoking room Asher sat in. Satisfied after a good meal, he was more than ready to try his hand at a game of cards.

“You appear like you’re ready to head home instead of only beginning our evening,” his friend Lucius, Earl of Blackthorn, drawled before setting down his own glass.

Asher gave a shrug. “A nice meal, a good drink, and the company of a good friend... I won’t find that returning to my empty townhouse.”

“We’re two friends down now that Saxton and Wickes have married,” Lucius grumbled looking around the room as if the two men might appear.

Asher chuckled. “You can forget about either of them showing up,” he said as if he had read his friend’s thoughts. “Marital bliss has both men held by their balls.”

Lucius laughed. “Although I can certainly appreciate your humor, you make it sound as though they aren’t perfectly happy. You know very well they are.”

“At least we have each other,” Asher laughed, again taking up his drink and downing the contents. “I managed to remain unhitched through the last Season and I’d like to remain a bachelor in this one, too.”

A snort left Lucius’s lips. “We can’t remain single forever,” he warned. “We have to marry and sire heirs to carry on the name and all.”

“Don’t remind me. It’s as though I can hear my father’s voice from the grave reminding me that I can’t spend the rest of my life with a mistress,” Asher said with a grimace. Even his mother had been demanding Asher settle down.

“It’s inevitable, but as you said... we made it through another Season. Although you avoiding an arrangement with Lady Maribel Johnson had to be sheer luck.”

Asher rubbed the back of his neck while visions of the brown-haired beauty flitted through his mind. “She was... determined. I’ll give her that.”

“Determined? Is that what you call her seeking you out at every event you attended?” Lucius roared in laughter. “Why, I’m surprised she didn’t compromise your reputation just to see the two of you wed!”

His cravat felt suddenly tight, and he ran a finger over the neckline of his shirt. Lucius was right. The wedding noose had come close on more than one occasion where Lady Maribel was concerned. “I finally got rid of her,” Asher muttered.

Lucius pointed a finger at him. “And yet here we are with another Season about to begin. I thought you might stay in the country a while longer until Parliament returned to session at the end of the month.”

“I’ve been here a while now and need to see that my younger brother Gideon is settled,” Asher replied knowing the weight of his responsibilities toward his sibling.

“Bad luck he was injured while serving our country,” Lucius replied before continuing. “At least he’s still alive.”

Asher winced, feeling as though he could still hear his mother’s wailing from that horrible day over two years ago when she’d received word that her youngest son had perished in the Battle of Waterloo. After that, then to have word that he yet lived had been a miracle, even if it had been coupled with the revelation that he’d been wounded severely enough to leave him with no memory, resulting in him spending those two years in a hospital in France with no notion of the family miles away that was grieving his loss.

When Gideon’s memory had suddenly returned, allowing him to reach out to his family, he had been transported back to England and was now in residence at the home of a local doctor who took in wealthy patients. The arrangement was only temporary, of course. Asher was making arrangements at his own townhouse to convert one of the lower floor rooms for Gideon’s use. Their mother had insisted his brother shouldn’t be alone and needed to stay with Asher. For his own peace of mind, he had agreed to her wishes. It was clear to see that Gideon needed help and support beyond what any hired assistance could provide. The Gideon who left with stars in his eyes was not the same man who had returned home.

“Mother has had a hard time of it while visiting him at Dr. Thornberry’s but yes... at least Gideon’s alive,” Asher replied while thinking of the young man who left for war thinking he was going to change the world, or at least his small part of it. Back then, Asher had thought his brother foolish and naïve—but nowadays, he found himself missing that naivete. It would be better than the bleakness Gideon currently carried.

“Hopefully you will still have plenty of time to enjoy our clubs,” Lucius said standing up. “In the meantime, I think we can find something better to do than mull over unpleasantries.”

Unpleasantries ? His brother's welfare was certainly more than just unpleasantries. Gideon's health weighed heavily on Asher's mind. He had always felt as though Gideon enlisting had been Asher's fault—not for anything he had done, exactly, but just from the awkward fact of his existence as the elder brother. The heir. Gideon had argued persuasively that as a second son, it was his duty to make his own way in the world. Asher's protests that they could well afford Gideon's allowance and that he had no need for a soldier's pension had been ignored.

Asher tried to push those thoughts away as the two men went into the main gambling room. For a moment, Asher enjoyed the distraction of wondering which table might be safe. It was well known to everyone who entered this establishment that the bets carried stakes that could be far more...unusual than mere money. From slightly poisoned drinks to see who passed out first, to who could eat the most food without tossing the contents of your stomach soon after, and anything and everything in between. Sometimes men would come to find that they had gambled away their bachelorhood and that the loss of the game meant having a match arranged for them by the proprietress. But still Asher continued to come here. The risk was part of what made it so tempting. And anyway, he had no reason to fear that he'd been targeted for matrimony. He was hardly on the radar for the Widow of Whitehall. Why would he be when there were dukes and even several marquises in attendance with deeper purses than his?

He saw Simon, Earl of Rockliffe, sitting at a table and it appeared he had a fair number of coins piling up in front of him. Simon was the brother of Wickes's new wife and Asher had witnessed this man's downfall a time or two at the Widow's tables.

Asher made his way over to where Simon sat while Lucius went in another direction. He took the empty seat and waited until the round was over.

"Place your bets, my lords," the dealer, Cobweb, said as he shuffled the cards.

“A good night, Rockliffe?” Asher asked tossing in a coin.

“Fair enough,” Simon answered before picking up the cards he had been dealt. His face showed nothing and Asher couldn’t judge whether the hand the man had been dealt was good or bad.

So much for small talk , thought Asher as he gathered his own cards in his hands and began to play. Hours passed uneventfully, but then he began to feel as if someone were watching him. He gazed up from the game to see none other than Mrs. Dove-Lyon who raised a fluted champagne glass in a silent toast.

He gulped and folded his hand. God forbid! He could only hope this wasn’t some kind of an omen that he was next on her list. The last thing he needed was the Widow of Whitehall meddling in his life. He had enough to worry about as it was.

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Mrs. Patience Moore stared in the mirror at the face looking back at her. Her maid had arranged her brown hair in a pleasing enough coiffure, but it was her hazel eyes that were her best feature... or so Patience had always thought. Not that it should matter. At the age of one and thirty, she was so far on the shelf that a permanent layer of dust had settled. She had held very little hope that she would marry again. That was, until her dear friend Cassandra Vaughn made a deal with the Widow of Whitehall.

Patience never asked Cassandra the amount she paid to see their other two friends happily married. Moriah and Josephine were both now marchionesses. Who would have ever thought that two members of their Wicked Widow's Club would now be respectable ladies within the ton ? But Cassandra had made that happen for them with the help of Mrs. Dove-Lyon and now it was Patience's turn. She took a deep breath to calm her nerves for what the evening ahead might reveal.

Fastening the earbobs to her lobes, she stood smoothing down the fabric of her light-green dress. Picking up a light shawl, she at least looked like she was ready for whatever the night had in store for her at the Lyon's Den. She left her bedroom closing the door behind her. It was as though she just closed off a part of her old life—and perhaps this wasn't too far from the truth as the memory of her first husband flitted through her mind. She had been so young and in love. She never expected to become a widow in the early years of her marriage.

Her hand slid down the well-polished mahogany banister as she descended the stairs. Once she reached the bottom, she went to stand at the entrance to Cassandra's parlor. The lady was holding back the sheer curtain and staring out into the darkness of the night.

“Is everything all right, Cassandra?” Patience asked watching the lady let go of the fabric and plaster a fake smile on her face. Something was troubling the woman, but Patience wasn’t sure what the issue might be.

Cassandra gave a light laugh, but it sounded strained even to Patience’s ears. “Everything is perfectly fine. Never better.”

Patience raised one of her brows. “How long have we been together, Cassie?”

Cassandra went to a table and poured herself a sherry. “Long enough, I suppose.”

“After ten years, I think I should know you well enough to know when something is troubling you,” Patience replied shaking her head no when Cassandra silently offered her a drink.

“Ten years? Has it really been that long?” she murmured until she all but folded herself into a nearby chair.

A memory flickered in Patience’s mind... They had become friends the day Cassandra had come into her family’s mercantile. A bond that began with a friendly conversation as though the two women had known each other a lifetime. Patience had been completely innocent to Cassandra’s lifestyle until the lady one day confessed she was the mistress of an earl. Patience never told her parents knowing she would never be allowed in the woman’s presence ever again. But Patience would never judge the woman, and she would sneak away whenever she could to join Cassandra and talk about their day-to-day lives.

Their lifestyles couldn’t have been more different and yet a sisterly bond had formed that Patience never could explain. There was something about Cassandra that made Patience wish she had experienced even half of the excitement that seemingly filled Cassandra’s life, even if society might frown on the fact that she wasn’t married to

the man she professed to love. Perhaps this was why Patience had jumped at the chance to marry so young. She thought she would be seeing the world by following her husband to his assignments. The reality had been far from what she had hoped for.

Patience remembered joining Cassandra one day for a walk in the park. Patience had not realized it at the time but Cassandra began following none other than Neville Quinn, Earl of Drayton, and Lady Gwendolyn Worthington as they, too, walked the pathways on that sunny day. Cassandra had kept her distance, shielding herself from view behind the trees. But Patience would come to learn that Cassandra's heart had broken that day when the couple stole themselves behind another tree and began to kiss. That was the day Cassandra knew for certain that there was no hope the earl would return her affection in kind. Not that the earl hadn't been generous when he left Cassandra a huge settlement after their affair ended. In fact, he had been so liberal that Cassandra never had to take another lover again, unless she wished it. But while money could make her comfortable, it couldn't make her happy—not when she could see the love that she'd wanted given to someone else instead.

“You’ve come a long way since your days with Drayton, Cassie. Look how much better you’ve made our lives by helping those of us who were in need,” Patience reminded her gently.

Cassandra raised her green eyes toward Patience. “You were never in need of my help, Patience. Your reputation was only ruined because of your association with me.”

“You were my friend and needed me. I wasn’t about to let you wallow away alone in self-pity because of some man. Besides, I had nowhere else to go after my husband died. My family wouldn’t take me back—not after I’d disobeyed them by marrying against their wishes. It was kind of you to take me in.”

A half snort, half laugh left Cassandra's lips. "I made so many bad choices in my life, but I've tried to change that over the years by helping others who were forced into the same situation."

"My point, exactly. Moriah and Josephine would never be accepted back into Society without your help. And to have each of them married to a marquis! Why, who would have ever thought such a miracle could happen?"

"It wasn't just me. Don't forget the role played by Mrs. Dove-Lyon. Without her matchmaking business, we might all still be sitting here together in this very room." Cassandra sighed apparently lost in thought.

"But she wouldn't have acted without your generosity. Let's not forget the huge sums you paid her. And now you're doing the same for me," Patience replied patting her hair. "I don't know how I'll ever repay such a kindness."

"I never asked for Moriah or Josephine to pay me back for Mrs. Dove-Lyon's fee nor will I ask such from you." Cassandra reached over to take Patience's hand. "You didn't deserve to have your reputation smeared just because you stood by me all those years ago when you returned to England after your husband died. There was nothing wrong with you marrying a military man and traveling with your husband while he served our country and your parents should have understood you loved him and not ostracized you for marrying against their wishes. It was purely selfish on my part to take you in when they refused to let you back into the family. You deserved better than what being associated with me got you."

Stuart ... Patience closed her eyes in remembrance of a man she had fallen in love with. He had been on leave when he strode into her parents' mercantile store on a warm spring day. His uniform had been spotless, and his blond hair had become tossed from the wind. He had been in the process of pushing back an errant lock when Patience bumped into him while carrying a stack of books. They tumbled from

her hands and with a cry she had knelt to pick them up. The gentleman offered to assist her, and she raised her head to stare into the gaze of a man whose smile reached his hypnotizing blue eyes. She had been struck at first sight and their romance had practically happened overnight.

They had married shortly thereafter much to her parents' regret. They had wanted her to take more time, but Patience knew what was in her heart. Even when her father swore he would disown her for marrying a man she barely knew, she still decided life with Stuart would be far preferable than the boring existence she led back then. Besides, what need had she of her father's approval when she would have her husband to provide for her? She'd been so young, so naïve. She hadn't realized the terrible risks of being a soldier's wife.

Life in the midst of a war was hard and she did her best to keep herself occupied when he was on the front. She never thought after one battle, that she would be asked to help the doctors with the injured. She had seen more blood and gore than any lady should see at such a young age. Somehow, she had managed and even became skilled at nursing the injured. A month later, her own husband was laying on one of the gurneys. With one look, she saw there was no hope for him. As she watched, his expression went blank and empty as his life drained away. And still she'd stared into those eyes that would never look at her with love again.

"Patience?"

She shook herself from the memories of her past and remembered how this whole conversation began. "I'm fine. The question is, what is troubling you?"

"I was just thinking that this place will be lonely without you," Cassandra said giving her a weak smile. "I will miss your friendship."

Patience waved her hand in the air. "Whatever are you talking about, Cassie? I'm not

going anywhere except to the Lyon's Den with you tonight.”

“Yes... but tomorrow will be a new day when we set into motion your return to polite Society.”

“Bah! I was never in Society, and you know it. I was a shopkeeper's daughter and then a soldier's wife. I hardly rubbed elbows with the ton .” Patience stood and went to the window taking up Cassandra's original position, feeling unsettled at the idea of rising to a level of society she had never known before. Maybe this plan wasn't such a good idea after all. Pulling back the drapery revealed nothing but the darkness of the night. She let go of the material as it floated back into place.

Cassandra also stood and rang a bell. When a servant came to the parlor entrance, she asked to have her carriage be brought to the front from the mews. “You leave all the arrangements to me. My plans haven't failed yet, have they?”

Patience snapped open the fan dangling from her wrist. “You know that I trust you more than anyone, but do not forget that I am different than Moriah and Josephine. They at least had connections and grew up within Society. If you and Mrs. Dove-Lyon think you'll fetch me some titled lord, then you both have been tipping one too many sherries.”

Cassandra gave a laugh. “We shall see...”

Patience followed along as Cassandra whisked her into the foyer, helped her don her pelisse, and took her arm as they went down the walkway to the waiting carriage. She could only wonder what the night at the notorious Lyon's Den might bring her.

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Asher lounged back on the velvet-covered chaise, a glass in one hand and a cigar in the other. Amusement flitted across his face as he watched Simon stagger across the room before he fell into a nearby chair. Asher had bet Simon wouldn't be able to perform with one of the women upstairs considering the amount of alcohol he'd consumed. Simon had retorted that he hadn't had that much to drink and taunted Asher so much about his abilities to perform that the two men had left the tables together and paid for the pleasure for two of Mrs. Dove-Lyon's... ladies. The prostitutes at the Lyon's Den were not your typical women of the night that you might find elsewhere in London. As with everything else at this establishment, these women were of the highest caliber.

A blonde-haired beauty with her bosom spilling from the gown came and sat directly in his lap. He sat back to enjoy her attentions, knowing that his chances for such pleasures would be severely limited once he took over his brother's care.

The woman began untying his cravat with an expertise that showed that she knew her way around an intricate knot. She smiled warmly into his eyes with a promise of what was to come. She ran her fingertips through his blonde hair before she leaned forward to breathe into his ear.

"Can we leave your friend and head to my room, my lord?" she purred sweetly.

Asher put down his glass and cigar on the nearby table before he pulled her close. "You must have read my mind, my dear," he replied with a wicked grin. He tried to claim her lips, but she suddenly pulled back.

"No kissing. That's too personal," she warned before she began opening his shirt.

Those same silken fingers ran over his slightly furred chest as if to distract him from attempting to kiss her again.

“But I paid well for the privilege to have you,” he declared taking her about the waist.

“Yes... and you shall have me anyway you’d like—but no kissing,” the woman replied.

“What if I pay you more?” he asked.

Her eyes went wide. “You couldn’t pay me enough to break my one rule.”

“I’ve been told I’m a fair enough kisser. You might just like it and not ask for the extra coin,” he teased her.

“No man is that good,” she said laughing.

“Care to put my ability to the test?” he asked lowering his eyes to her mouth. She licked her lips as though giving the suggestion a fair amount of thought. She gave him a smile as if she would concede and began lowering her head.

The door to the salon burst open and Asher frowned at the interruption.

“I told you I’d find them here,” Lucius muttered to the two men who followed him into the room. Valentine, Earl of Carrington was a friend of Lucius’s. They had met on several occasions over the years. The other gentleman was Benjamin Barclay, Earl of Somerford, whom Asher knew only from seeing him from time to time at the Lyon’s Den and various other places around town.

“Ben!” Simon yelled from across the room. “Come join us in a bit of sport.”

“I think not,” Benjamin declared before he turned back to Lucius and Valentine. “I think the Earl of Rockliffe is in more need of our aid than your friend.”

Lucius nodded and returned his gaze back to Asher. “If you’re done here, your presence has been requested.”

Asher laughed, fondling the woman who remained on his lap. “Done here? We’ve barely begun.”

Lucius crossed the room and held out his hand to the woman. Her fingers slipped into his, and he pulled her to her feet. “If you would give us a moment,” Lucius insisted focusing on Asher who took up his glass again.

“Of course, my lord,” she said seductively. Her hand lingered on his arm before she crossed the large room to stand near a sideboard where she poured herself a drink.

Asher sat up on the chaise and watched with a frown as Valentine and Benjamin assisted Simon to his feet.

“But I paid good money for that woman,” Simon complained bitterly as he stumbled across the room.

Benjamin shook his head. “And I’m certain she’ll appreciate the reprieve from your fumbling attempts to make your little man work.”

“I’m not that drunk,” Simon slurred.

Valentine laughed and then spoke over his shoulder. “We’ll see that his carriage is brought around. He’ll have a splitting head come the morning, but we will, at least, ensure he gets home safely.”

Asher chuckled. "I think I have won our bet, Simon," he taunted as Simon cursed as he was led from the room. The woman he had paid for left as well to find other company for her evening.

"What foul substance did you put in his drink downstairs?" Lucius asked before he ran his hand through his black hair.

"Not a thing. He was well into his cups to celebrate his good luck of having a winning streak at the tables. He'll be fine come the morning with the exception of one hell of a hangover," Asher proclaimed before he tipped his glass in his friend's direction. "So, what is of such importance that you had to interrupt me?"

"Mrs. Dove-Lyon would like to see you," Lucius stated with a wicked grin.

Asher choked on his drink and Lucius began pounding him on his back.

"The devil you say!" Asher finally managed to say once his coughing subsided. "What in the world could she want with me?"

Lucius shrugged. "I didn't ask. It's none of my affair. I was only told where to find you so you might meet with her. You best hurry. It's never a good idea to keep the Widow of Whitehall waiting."

"I'll be down directly," Asher replied as his gaze traveled to the woman across the room who beckoned to him with her eyes.

"Don't be long," Lucius said as he headed to the door.

Asher stood and the woman who had been in his lap returned to his side.

"Now..." she said pressing her body against his, "where were we?"

“I believe I was about to show you what a good kisser I am,” he grinned as he began following down a hallway to her room.

The Widow of Whitehall could wait, he thought as he pulled the woman into his arms to ravish her mouth. He heard her moan proving his point that he was indeed very good at pleasing a woman. Sometimes it was very satisfying to be right.

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Patience fiddled with the beading on her reticule as she sat waiting for Mrs. Dove-Lyon to enter the ladies' parlor. By the time she and Cassandra arrived at the side entrance to the Lyon's Den, Patience's nerves had been stretched to their limits. She had a moment of surprise to see two women who guarded the door and was even more taken aback when they were shown to the parlor and the few women who lounged there had been politely asked to leave. Patience wasn't sure if she should feel honored or scared out of her wits for whatever was about to happen to upend her life.

"Ah... Mrs. Vaughn and Mrs. Moore... how kind of you to take a few moments from your evening to meet with me," the owner of the establishment said as she entered the room.

Patience jumped up from her seat and dropped into a curtsy while the lady dressed all in black strode across the room and sat in her chair. She motioned for them to do the same. Cassandra had told her that no one had ever seen the widow's face, so it was no surprise to see the heavy veil that concealed everything. She was hard pressed to detect even a hint of the woman's features.

"It was very generous of you to see us," Patience said when the awkward silence as the woman apparently inspected her became too much to bear.

"Yes... well... I like to take a few moments to meet all my new clients who have been so good as to pay for the matches I can make," Mrs. Dove-Lyon proclaimed with a wave of her hand. "You, Mrs. Moore, are a bit different than some of the other ladies who are seeking a husband."

Patience was startled by the woman's words. "Me? Why I'm nobody of any

importance.”

“Perhaps not yet , but that will change once you are matched with a member of the ton . A sterling reputation will be mandatory.” The veiled figure turned her attention to Cassandra. “I thought she was prepared to do whatever it took to make a good match.”

“She is,” Cassandra answered taking Patience’s hand. “Are you not, dearest friend?”

Cassandra’s pleading eyes could only have Patience nodding her head. “Of course, I will do whatever it takes,” she agreed before continuing. “I meant no disrespect and appreciate all your efforts on my behalf.”

“Very well,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said nodding. “If you are prepared to move forward, I will then tell you that I have procured a nursing position for you. Mrs. Vaughn informed me of your nursing skills.”

“You know of someone in need of a nurse?” Patience asked with wide eyes. She had never thought that she would be asked something of this nature. True, her skills as a nurse had been invaluable during the war and she did what she could to help. But she certainly never thought that those skills would be of any use to her now.

“The position is with a local doctor who administers his treatments to wealthy patrons in his home so he can better manage their care. Wilbur Thornberry is the family doctor for the Worthingtons. The Duke and Duchess highly recommend him.”

Patience still failed to see how this situation might aid in her becoming accepted by the very people who had snubbed her for most of her life. There was great value in nursing, to be sure, and yet she couldn’t imagine it was the kind of task a high society lady would undertake.

“I can see for myself you are still skeptical about working for Dr. Thornberry, but I assure you, he is a good man and is looking for nurses with your skills. He will hold you in the highest esteem and only has the best interests of his patients in mind. There is nothing wrong with lending aid to those who are in need, Mrs. Moore, and this will fit perfectly well into my plans for you,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said.

Cassandra leaned forward. “This doctor still attends to the Duke and Duchess of Worthington?” she asked confirming that he was well established.

“Yes. If they have no issue with this doctor bringing their children into the world, I see no reason why I, too, can’t trust him.”

Cassandra turned to gaze upon Patience. “What do you think?” she inquired.

Patience nodded her consent. “Very well, as long as you feel this will better my chances.”

“I will send over all the particulars to Mrs. Vaughn’s residence.”

Cassandra smiled. “We cannot thank you enough, Mrs. Dove-Lyon.”

“I am only too happy to help those who are in need of my special abilities,” she proclaimed as she came to a stand. “One last thing, Mrs. Moore.”

“Yes, madam?” Patience said waiting for the rest of her fate to be sealed by this woman.

“Staying with Mrs. Vaughn will not be acceptable for much longer. She will need to be working on her own reputation soon enough. Instead, I suggest you make amends with your family and return to their household. They are good, honest people from what I have been told. It would be in your best interest to reach out to them. Now...

best of luck at the tables and enjoy your evening at the Lyon's Den."

Her family ? Does she honestly think it would be that simple after her father had cut all ties with her? After the shock wore off and the widow left the room, Patience finally took a deep breath and turned to her friend.

"This is far more than I was prepared to take on, Cassie," Patience confessed. "Whatever made you think I could accept her terms?"

"The Widow of Whitehall is known for her matchmaking skills, Patience. She knows how best to restore tarnished reputations and ensure her clients are matched with their perfect person."

"I'm just not certain this is going to be worth it. Why do I need a husband anyway? I'm perfectly fine the way things are now," she huffed.

"You know as well as I that things are not fine. Not when living with me has made you out to be one of those wicked widows even though that is so far from the truth."

Patience gave her friend a smirk. "I don't mind the association, and you know it. Honestly, I've rather enjoyed it. It makes me feel like I'm one of the ton . The articles in the Teatime Tattler never mention my low birth. I suppose it makes for a less interesting story to talk of a fallen woman who truly didn't have very far to fall."

"Well, we are going to change all that. You've already had the worst of what society can bring with its censure and judgment, but I intend to see to it that you finally have the best, as well. I bet by the end of the season, if not before, you'll be married to at the very least a viscount," Cassandra said with a bright smile.

The two women left the parlor and Cassandra began telling Patience all about the specifics of what she should and should not do within the Lyon's Den. There weren't

a lot of rules to follow and Patience didn't need to worry about running into men, since their gambling took place on a different floor. Aside from the staff working for Mrs. Dove-Lyon, which included a number of women in various roles, the only time ladies and gentlemen encountered one another was when Mrs. Dove-Lyon arranged for their meeting. Both Moriah and Josephine had met their prospective husbands in the Lyon's Den garden, but she had heard of others who met in a private office or a salon of the widow's choosing.

After sampling the buffet table and with a flute of champagne in her hand, Patience and Cassandra made their way to the observation gallery on the ladies' floor where the women could observe the men down below as they gambled the night away. Cassie informed her it was another way to be seen without being required to interact, and that sometimes the gallery was private when the Widow of Whitehall was arranging a match. Luckily, such was not the case on this evening, and Patience had a clear view of the men below. The men were the elite of Society. Dukes and marquises. Earls and barons. All men who came to gamble the night away—risking their purses, their pride... or perhaps even more.

She heard Cassandra give a heavy sigh of pleasure and she turned to watch her friend as her gaze traveled to the men below.

"I've seen that look before, although I admit it has been some time. Which one of them has you all breathless?" Patience asked as she began scanning the men for a viable candidate. There were so many fine-looking gentlemen in attendance it could have been any number of them.

"Middle table, center of the room with the woman dealer wearing a mask," Cassandra answered never taking her eyes off her target.

Patience found the table but there were four men sitting there. One she immediately discounted. She couldn't imagine Cassie would sigh over a bald-headed man who

appeared as though he had eaten his way through the entire buffet table. But any one of the other three might be the man she watched.

“Which one?” Patience finally asked.

“He just placed his bet,” Cassandra whispered before she reached for her fan and began fluttering it before her overheated face.

Patience watched the gentlemen who had tossed his bet into the center of the table. Good heavens! That man was beyond handsome, and Patience could understand Cassie’s infatuation. And beyond his fine features and excellent figure, he also had an air of command to him, as if he was accustomed to exerting his will on the world until it reframed itself precisely as he wished. Every strand of his black hair was perfectly in place. His clothing immaculately cut from materials of the highest of quality and showed not the slightest rumple or crease. He tossed his cards on the table when he apparently lost the round, but his look showed that he didn’t care that he had lost a small fortune, and that fascinated Patience. A man like that appeared as though he had the reckless disposition of a daredevil, and despite his good looks and wealth, she wasn’t sure he was the type of man Cassandra should pursue. He would only break her heart... again.

“Who is he?” Patience finally asked.

“Lucius, Earl of Blackthorn.”

“Are you acquainted with him?”

An unladylike snort left her friend. “Only by his reputation. When it comes to women, he’s considered quite a rake. I heard he only recently took up a new mistress.”

“That doesn’t sound very promising,” Patience replied placing her hand on Cassandra’s arm. “Please be careful. I don’t want you to get hurt again.”

“You don’t need to worry about me. You know how I always land on my feet.” Cassandra turned away from the men below. “Let’s go try our hand at one of the tables. I’m feeling especially lucky tonight.”

Cassandra didn’t wait for Patience who continued to stare below at the man Cassandra clearly had feelings for. She shook her head thinking how unlikely it was that the two of them would come together. With thoughts of her friend occupying her mind, she left the balcony and entered the women’s gambling room but playing cards wasn’t appealing to her as she worried about Cassandra. Instead, she skirted around the tables toward the back of the room where she saw an area with stairs leading up and down to the other floors. Curiosity got the better of her and she made her way inside the alcove.

The sound of footsteps coming from above made her realize that the brothel was most likely on the next floor. She was about to turn around when she heard someone rushing down the stairs far too quickly. Moments later, a man came flying into her view as his feet flew out from under him.

To her horror, the man—grasping for anything to keep him upright—ended up latching on to Patience. She was taken about the waist as he ran into her, sending them both skidding on the marble floor. They avoided a tumble, thankfully, but they could not avoid an uncomfortably close embrace.

“Good heavens,” she murmured staring at the knot of his cravat that was greatly askew.

“You saved me from a most unpleasant fall, my lady.”

Patience shivered as she listened to the baritone of his voice as though the vibration of his tone went straight through her. She raised her eyes to see his hazel ones staring at her with what she took as a seductive gleam. A lock of his blond hair fell rakishly over his forehead, and he took a hand to push it back into place. A brief, unaccountable flicker of disappointment filled her that he had denied her the pleasure of doing the task herself.

It must be the blond hair... the shade had always been her downfall. She had placed her hands upon his muscular chest to steady herself, and she could feel the strength of him beneath her fingertips. If she were to guess, he was most likely magnificent beneath the linen of his shirt. Sculpted like the smooth stone of statues of the Greek gods. She shook her head from the thoughts of his naked body as the voice of reason entered her head and reminded her that she was still touching him.

She gave him a gentle push and she saw his own disappointment when he released her. She tried not to think about how handsome he was from his chiseled cheek bones to the slight cleft in his chin. She shouldn't be interested in a man who obviously had just been upstairs with a prostitute. It just had to be those golden locks that were impairing her ability to think clearly.

"Thank you for releasing me," she said quietly.

"Thank you again for saving me," he said, and Patience swore his voice was even huskier than it was the first time he spoke these words. "Might I inquire as to your name?"

She widened her eyes at his request but shook her head no. "I don't think that would be wise. Please excuse me." She turned to leave but her gloved hand was gently taken into his warm one. His thumb ran over the back of it, and a thought crept into her mind about how she wished she could feel his skin touching her own. She raised her eyes to his and her heart leapt into her throat.

“Please don’t rush off. How am I to find you again if I don’t know your name?”

“I’m certain mine is not the first woman’s name you don’t know here at the Lyon’s Den, sir,” she replied softly. She certainly didn’t want to become familiar with anyone when Mrs. Dove-Lyon was using her matchmaking skills to ensure Patience found a suitable husband. Cassandra had paid an abhorrent amount of money and she wouldn’t disappoint her dearest friend. Besides... what were the chances that it would be this exact stranger that the Widow of Whitehall had in mind for her? Hardly likely.

“No but then it’s not my custom to practically fall into a woman’s arms. It’s usually the other way around.” Though his tone was teasing, she could see for herself that he had charm and plenty of it, so he likely did have a number of women falling into his arms. But she would not be one of them.

“I will have to take your word for it.” A small laugh left her causing his smile to broaden.

“Tell me who you are.”

Patience wasn’t about to tell him her real name. Considering some preferred to use an alias here, she decided to do the same. “Do you really wish to know my name, or is this some sort of intrigue where you are now determined to get your way since I had the audacity to tell you no?”

“Perhaps it is both.” He flashed a smile.

“And you seek a name,” she tilted her head questioning, a smile playing at her lips.

“Any name, my lady,” he urged taking a step closer.

“Any name?” she murmured with a touch of devilment building up inside her. Her eyes met his. “You may call me... Persephone.”

“Persephone,” he echoed, his smile widening.

Laughter escaped his lips and for just a moment she wondered what those lips would feel like on her own. She must be losing her mind and really should return to the ladies’ gambling room. She should leave his side. She shouldn’t continue to stay here with a man who was a complete stranger and most likely a rake of the worst kind.

But for whatever the reason—and the first time since she became a widow—Patience wanted this one moment to last for a bit longer. She had the notion after tonight she’d never see this man again anyway. She couldn’t figure out why but he intrigued her. Maybe there was a little bit of a wicked widow in her after all...

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A sher stared down at the vision he had physically bumped into. Clear porcelain skin was framed in a round face with hazel eyes with hints of golden flecks in them. Her brown hair was done in a pleasing enough fashion with ringlets hanging at the sides of her face. A sprinkling of freckles ran from under her eyes and across the bridge of her nose giving him the impression she must enjoy the sunshine unlike other women of Society who insisted on always using a parasol. But it was that little bow mouth that made him want to taste her lips. She was an enchanting surprise and he wondered where she had been hiding each Season since they had never crossed paths before to his recollection.

You may call me Persephone . Her quiet words had jolted inside him like a bolt of lightning. The lady had a fair amount of gumption, he surmised and he certainly liked what he saw.

“Persephone?” he chuckled. “Daughter of Zeus and the Goddess of Spring.”

“Indeed,” Patience whispered.

“Then I suppose you might consider me Hades?” he asked in a husky tone.

Her mouth opened in an O of surprise. “Her husband in the underworld?”

“Is there any other?” he inquired stepping closer as he watched her carefully. A sudden gleam entered her eyes before a slight smile spread over those perfect lips.

“Considering where you just came from, perhaps Hades might fit. However, I may not be your Persephone.”

Laughter erupted from him, and he noticed that her eyes went wide as if even she was surprised by her daring words. “What a delight you are.”

“Perhaps I am too bold in my assumptions, my lord. I am only speculating since I’ve made an educated guess as to where those stairs lead,” the lady declared before taking her fan dangling from her wrist and snapping it open. She waved the device frantically in front of her face as though the flames of hell were indeed igniting the room.

“You are bold, my lady, but I can’t say that I am not impressed with your banter,” he replied. “I shouldn’t have teased you so, but I also admire that you can throw caution to the wind and return my jesting. Now, tell me, how can I find you again?” he urged hoping she would tell him her real name.

“I fear that you ask the impossible...” his mystery lady said softly with a look of disappointment. Now that was an interesting development.

But any further conversations were interrupted when one of the Lyon’s Den’s wolves returned from whatever had taken him away from his position near the stairs in the first place.

“My lord, you know the rules. You must go back downstairs where I believe Mrs. Dove-Lyon is waiting for you in her private office,” the bouncer ordered crossing his arms over his chest.

Asher frowned at the man. “Your timing couldn’t be worse, Flute,” he grumbled as he watched the man shrug before holding out his arm toward the stairwell.

“I must go but I hope to see you again... Persephone ,” he said emphasizing her false name before bowing over her hand.

“My lord... Hades ,” she said with another delightful laugh.

Then she left him standing alone with only the bouncer for company as she returned to the gambling room. Asher watched her move around the gambling tables before she stole a glance in his direction. He continued to linger in the alcove watching her before Flute came and ushered him toward the stairs. He swore she gave him a seductive look before she was lost to his view but perhaps that was just wishful thinking on his part.

Asher made his way down the remaining stairs and across the gambling area to the widow’s private office.

“I believe I am expected, Lysander,” Asher drawled wondering what awaited him beyond the door.

“Indeed, you are, my lord,” the bouncer said opening the door for him.

There was a soft click behind him that sounded oddly ominous. Or perhaps the sense of dread he felt was merely because he had no idea why she would wish a private word with him.

“Lord Rowley,” the lady said from behind a large mahogany desk. “Please have a seat.”

Asher came to stand before the desk and gave the lady a nod. “Mrs. Dove-Lyon... a pleasure.” Sitting down he glanced around the room before looking to the woman dressed all in black. No one had ever seen her face and little was known about her except the rumor that after her husband died, he had left her with a mountain of debt and nothing with which to support herself except for this building, which had been her home. But then she created the Lyon’s Den and it had become one of the best-known gambling establishments for the rich. Though everyone knew the Lyon’s Den

was mostly a front to her matchmaking business which was the real moneymaker for her.

“You wished to see me,” Asher finally said when the black shrouded lady remained silent and he perceived she was inspecting him.

“Yes, I did and thank you for indulging my whim. You’ve been here a lot as of late. Do you enjoy my gambling tables, my lord?” the lady asked.

“They’re the best in London despite some of the bets being on the unusual side,” Asher remarked casually wondering where this conversation was going.

“And yet the cream of Society still comes here knowing... well... sometimes a lady must do as she must to achieve the end result of her plans.”

“And am I a part of your current plans, Mrs. Dove-Lyon? If I am, I suggest you find another candidate. I have no intention of settling down any time soon,” Asher said hoping his remarks would be the end of any further ideas the woman had for him.

“You do not need to marry, Lord Rowley? Surely every man with a title eventually needs to settle down and sire an heir.”

“I have an heir in my brother. And if I do decide to have children, it doesn’t need to happen any time soon,” Asher drawled wishing he had a drink.

A laugh left the lady across from him. “Oh, Lord Rowley, gentlemen of your age amuse me so. You think you have all the time in the world at your disposal when some of the greatest pleasures life can offer are already passing you by.”

“Like a wife?” he asked and his thoughts immediately went to the lady upstairs he had just bumped into.

“The right wife, Lord Rowley,” the widow proclaimed sitting forward at her desk. “You will not find her upstairs with the women whose company you pay for, nor with any mistress you might keep.”

Of course, this woman would know he had paid for the pleasure of an interlude with one of her ladies on the third floor. “I don’t have a mistress, not that that is any of your business,” he lied knowing he had been thinking of letting Florinda go. She had become demanding of late, which was the reason why he hadn’t visited her townhouse for some time.

She waved a black-gloved hand in the air. “I make it my business to know the particulars of each and every man and woman who walks into the Lyon’s Den—including their current entanglements. Hopefully your plans include releasing Mrs. Pickering from your arrangements with her at your earliest convenience.”

Damn ! Of course, Mrs. Dove-Lyon knew about Florinda the intrusive woman. “Again... this is none of your business.”

The woman sat back in her chair. “I understand. You think I’m a meddlesome woman who is trying to upend your life.”

“I would never voice such a thought aloud,” Asher replied knowing he had in fact thought just that.

A weary sigh emitted through the blackest veil he had ever seen on a widow. Her head tilted as though she were weighing her options where he was concerned and he pondered what else she might have in store for him.

“Very well, Lord Rowley. Perhaps you’re not the man I thought you to be,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said quietly.

“Are you insulting me?” he asked thinking he must have heard her wrong.

“I would never voice such a thought aloud,” she said repeating his own words. “But the lady I was thinking would make a perfect wife for you needs a special gentleman. One who is caring enough to see past the fact that she has no title.”

Asher sat back in his own chair feeling as though the noose that felt like it was tightening around his neck when he entered the room now had loosened. “I’m certain the lady is lovely. However, I’m not interested.”

“A pity...” Another light laugh came through the veil. “You men never are ready for what I propose. Or at least, you think you aren’t. Regardless, I will mull over your situation further, Lord Rowley. Please continue to enjoy my tables this evening.” She made a wave of her hand toward the door.

Asher stood and gave a short bow knowing his interview with the Widow of Whitehall was over. As he entered back into the gambling room, his eyes traveled up to the women’s gallery and he saw the lady he had met near the stairs. He could only wonder what he had possibly turned down with Mrs. Dove-Lyon. Perhaps if that woman had been the widow’s choice for him...but no, the chances of her matching Asher with his mysterious lady from above were hardly in his favor.

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Patience quickened her pace down the upper floor of Dr. Thornberry's home. She had learned her way around to the different rooms and patients well enough in the past week. Mrs. Dove-Lyon had been correct in everything she had said when she had vouched for the good doctor. He was a fair man and hadn't had Patience perform any task that was more taxing than the general care of those who needed her.

"You're late," one of the higher-ranking nurses declared taking Patience's elbow and making her rush further down the hall.

"I'm sorry. It took longer in the last room than I expected," Patience answered as they continued to move down the hall.

"You're the only one who can calm him. Please hurry," the woman declared.

If she hurried any faster she'd be at a full run, Patience thought before taking a calming breath knowing the patient her superior referred to. She squared her shoulders, took another deep breath, and entered the room to see his dishes upended and the remains of his breakfast littering the floor. His attention was currently on a young girl who was sweeping up the mess, giving Patience time to stare at the soldier in the only bed in the room—a man who had returned from France after losing his memory for almost two whole years.

"Good morning, Captain Tyler. Are you ready for your shave?" Patience asked as she came to stand at the end of his bed.

He turned his head to stare at her with soulless green eyes and Patience made sure to keep the bright smile on her face. She didn't flinch at his appearance. She had seen

worse than a ragged scar that ran from the middle of his forehead down the entire right side of his face. At least he hadn't lost his eye. He brushed down a lock of his sandy colored hair, as if to hide the old wound. Not that that would work.

"No need to bother with me today, Mrs. Moore," he said and his voice sounded as though he had lost all hope. For her part, she saw no reason for his despair. Though it was true that in addition to the injury to his face, he also had sustained a leg wound and would limp for the rest of his life, she had witnessed worse. He was lucky he hadn't lost his leg.

"It's no bother, Captain, as I have told you many times this past week," Patience said as she motioned to the girl cleaning the mess he had made. "Would you be so kind as to please bring me a basin of warm water for Captain Tyler's morning shave."

"Right away, Mrs. Moore," the woman replied as she went to the fireplace where a kettle hung on an iron rod.

Patience returned her attention back to her patient. "Let's get your propped up better for that shave." She went to take his arm to help him sit up, but he pulled away from her.

"I'm not a complete invalid. I can do it myself if you must make a fuss over me," he grumbled.

"You wouldn't want to get me in trouble with Dr. Thornberry by not allowing me to do my duties, would you?" Patience asked. She took no offense at his curt tone, knowing this young man was only have a rough morning.

"My apologies, Mrs. Moore. Of course, I wouldn't want you to get into trouble because I am in an irritable mood." The captain sat up and Patience fluffed the pillows behind his back before he leaned back against them.

“You are too kind, Captain.”

“No, I’m not, but at the very least the sight of you has brightened my day,” he said with a weak smile.

“The day has only just begun. I’m certain your family will be here soon with news on when you will return home. That will be something to look forward to,” Patience declared with another bright smile.

“You do not know my mother,” he muttered. “She will fuss over me until I will wish I had died at Waterloo.”

“Don’t say such a thing,” Patience said with a scowl. “You are alive, young, and have your whole life ahead of you to look forward to.”

A curse left him while he turned his head away from her. “I have no future except to be a burden to my family.”

“From what you have told me from our previous conversations, nothing is further from the truth, Captain. You have a mother and brother who love you. And one day you’ll find a lovely young lady who will love you even more.”

Those green eyes turned to her gazed upon her with admiration and possibly affection. She had seen that look before so many times in the past when injured soldiers looked upon her as though she were the answer to all their prayers. Soldier after soldier had professed his love to her when she attended their injuries. They were misled by the turmoil of the situation into believing their emotions held tender devotion when in truth, what they felt was gratitude for her care when they were at the lowest point in their lives.

“Do you honestly think so?” he asked in a husky whisper.

Another nurse entered the room with a tray holding the other necessary items for the captain's shave. She placed the contents on the side table next to the bed, within easy reach for Patience to begin her task. The other girl returned with the hot water.

"The right lady will come into your life when you least expect her, Captain Tyler. I have no doubt of it," Patience said reaching for a towel and dipping it into the water. She rung the towel out getting ready to put the cloth on his face. She was about to lower it into place when he gently took hold of her wrist.

"Maybe I have already met her," he said in an encouraging smile.

"The right lady, Captain Tyler. I am only your nurse... Now, let's get you shaved and then we can begin our stroll through the hall. I will not allow a patient of mine to grow lazy. It's imperative that you exercise that leg on a daily basis."

His hooded eyes continued to watch her every move while she began working the soap into a lather. She had just removed the towel and lathered his cheeks when his mother entered the room.

"I will see to shaving my son," the woman declared throwing her shawl into a nearby chair and then holding out her hands for Patience to give her the razor.

"Of course, my lady. Captain Tyler... I will leave your personal care to your mother and see you later this afternoon," Patience said as she left his side.

She swore she heard a groan of despair when the lady began to shave his face but she didn't turn back. Perhaps it was best that Patience left his care in his mother's hands. Shaving him might be considered rather too intimate a task if he had begun to believe he had deeper feelings for her. Dr. Thornberry depended on her to assist with Captain Tyler as none of the other nurses had been able to handle his temper, but Patience would have to balance seeing to his care while making the boundaries between them

clear.

The day progressed with alarming speed and before long she was again heading toward the captain's room. When she entered, she saw him sitting in a chair near the window but became alarmed when she saw a towel covering his face.

She rushed over to his side. "Whatever happened, Captain Tyler?" she asked full of concern.

"You, madam, left me with a butcher," he said accusingly.

Patience unwrapped the towel covering his cheeks and saw so many nicks and cuts she was surprised the poor man hadn't bled to death.

"Captain Tyler, I am so sorry. I thought I left you in good hands with your mother."

"Please never allow her to attend me in such a manner," he answered. "I may not survive another manhandling."

"As you wish, Captain," Patience said trying not laugh at the man's plight.

"Won't you call me Gideon?" he asked softly.

"I think it best that we maintain a professional manner between us, Captain Tyler. Now, would you like to walk about the hall to get your daily exercise?"

"With you? Of course," he beamed with sparkling green eyes.

Inwardly she gave a heavy sigh. It appeared he was not yet ready to accept that she saw him only as a patient. But she chose not to press the point, for now. Not when he'd already had a trying day. If she could lighten the burden of whatever kept this

man's spirits low, so be it. She refused to add to any problem he might carry within him. There would be time later to make the lines between them clear.

In the meantime, as she helped him from his chair, she did her best to show with her manner and demeanor that she viewed him in a strictly professional light—but nothing she did dampened the light in his eyes when he looked at her. She might need to speak with the good doctor to see if she could be reassigned to another patient if he continued to hope for more between them besides her caring for his health.

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Mrs. Florinda Pickering quickly shut her bedroom door in her maid's face and made a mad dash for her silken robe that was still laying on the floor. She pushed her arms through the sleeves and went to her vanity mirror to check her appearance. With her disheveled hair and kiss-swollen lips, she looked like she had just crawled from a man's bed—which she had. She tore her gaze from the mirror to the man lounging in her bed. Lord Oliver Pitt was a handsome devil with his brown hair and eyes and certainly knew how to pleasure a woman in the bedroom. But as much as she'd enjoyed his attentions for the past hour, his presence in her bed now presented a serious problem.

"Is something wrong, my pet?" Oliver inquired as he stretched his muscular body.

Florinda took a second to appreciate the view considering the sheet had slid down to barely cover his manhood. "Asher's carriage just pulled up."

A chuckle left the man. "That is unfortunate."

"Unfortunate?" she shrieked. "It's a catastrophe and you know it, Oliver."

The man shrugged but continued to lounge where he was. "I don't mind sharing you with Rowley, my dear, but not at the same time. I do have some standards. I thought you said the two of you were done."

"He hasn't been here in over a month. I just assumed..."

"I see." He put one hand behind his head and watched her frantically rush across the room.

“What is that comment supposed to mean?” she snarled, near frantic with worry. How would she explain to the man who was responsible for her current living arrangement that she had brought another lover into the bed he paid for?

“Only that a person should never assume anything, my dear. If you and Rowley were finished, I would have thought he would have arranged a settlement for you. That is all,” Oliver replied.

“Do get dressed, for heaven’s sake, while I try to think of an excuse why you’re here,” Florinda said in a panic.

His laughter erupted in the room. “No man of any worth would see you looking like that and believe any story you might concoct of my having come to play chess or borrow a book. He’ll know what we’ve been doing, so why bother to lie? Get rid of Rowley and come back to bed. I certainly know how to keep a woman like you satisfied between the sheets.”

God help her... Oliver had no plans to leave. “You are a beast, Oliver.”

He chuckled again. “And you love every moment of what I can give you, Florinda.”

She paused what she was doing to stare thoughtfully at the man in her bed. She shook her head and returned to frantically get dressed. “If I thought for one moment that you would see to my needs financially, I might consider never taking another lover,” she huffed, but Oliver’s response was more laughter. He took no care to muffle the sound.

“You know me better than that, my pet. I certainly have no intention of making our arrangement permanent—nor do I see any need to pay for what you offer me for free,” Oliver said in a tone that was almost a warning.

She scowled. "As I said, Oliver... you're a beast!"

"If so, then what does that say about you, that you can't get enough of me?" he retorted.

Their time together confirmed how right he was but she couldn't dwell on that now. Asher would be waiting downstairs for her by now and he hated to be kept waiting.

Placing her feet into slippers, she left her bedchamber to the sound of Oliver's voice taunting her one last time to hurry back. She took her time going down the hallway to try to calm her racing heart. By the time she made it to the front parlor, she could only hope that she appeared calm and collected. Asher stood at the window, his hands behind his back. When he heard her approach he turned to face her. One look at Asher's face and Florinda knew, without any doubt, he was aware what she had been doing. One corner of his mouth turned up before he gave her the briefest bow.

"Good afternoon, Florinda," Asher said watching her intently.

"What a pleasant surprise, my love. I wasn't expecting you," Florinda purred stepping into the room.

A short laugh left him. "Obviously."

"Would you care for a drink?" she asked stalling for time so she could attempt to come up with a way to explain herself.

Asher ignored her offering. "I won't take up too much of your time so you might return to your... afternoon," he said reaching into his coat and handing her an envelope.

"What's this?" she asked breaking the wax seal and seeing a bank draft. She widened

her eyes at the sum of money. She could live comfortably for the next six months on such an amount.

“A settlement,” Asher replied casually as though this was as any other business deal he had done in his past.

“And the house?” she asked quickly wondering if she would need to vacate the lovely townhouse she had called her home for the past year.

“Keep it. I’ll transfer the title into your name.”

A gasp left her. She had never dared to hope he would be so generous. “That is very kind of you, Asher. I will miss our time together.”

One of his brows rose. “Since I haven’t visited in quite a while, I figured it was best for us to part ways. This would allow both of us to... move on with our lives.”

Florinda could take that to mean several things, but she wished to know for sure. “You’re getting married?”

“Eventually, yes, and having a mistress on the side goes against even my tainted morals.”

“You were anything but tainted, Asher.”

He shrugged and strode across the room. “I won’t take up any more of your time so you might return to your... guest.”

“Asher...” She felt as though she should say something more to this man. He had been an excellent lover, but she had realized long ago that he was never going to marry her, much to her regret. At one time she had hoped for such an outcome, but it

had been a foolish fancy. The most she could have hoped for was that their affair would continue indefinitely, but he wasn't the sort of man to continue keeping a mistress once he had decided to settle down and seek a wife.

He pointed to the bank draft she held in her hand. "That settlement buys your silence, Florinda. I expect you to keep your promise that you gave me when we first made our arrangement not to go around spreading gossip on the brief time we were together."

"I've never said anything against you, Asher," she said in a huff of anger. "I've sat here for over a month wondering when you might drop by."

"And you will no longer have to do so. Besides... I believe you have already found my replacement. I wish you all the best with whomever he might be."

Asher didn't wait for any reply. Instead, he strode into the foyer to retrieve his hat and let himself out without another word. Florinda could only stare at the wooden portal in stunned silence. She shouldn't feel anger towards a man who had chosen to treat her generously, even when faced with her infidelity, but a small part of her was outraged. How dare he just pay her money and leave without even a hint that she had meant something to him!

She returned to her bedroom in a huff almost forgetting that Oliver was still in her bed until he threw back the covers and strode across the room. Admiration at his naked body filled her, and when he tore off her robe and crushed her body into his, she gave a sigh of pleasure.

"Are the two of you over?"

"Yes."

"It's about damn time," he breathed into her ear. "Now... Where were we before you

had to leave?”

His lips slid across her own and her arms went around his neck. She held onto him when he lifted her and took her back to bed. Any other thoughts of Asher left her and she gave the man above her, her undivided attention. He was, after all, more than ready to prove that Asher was no longer in her life and Oliver... Oliver knew just what she needed right this instant.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

Asher's gaze traveled to the women's gallery on the upper floor of the Lyon's Den for what seemed like the hundredth time. He had noticed his Persephone on the balcony earlier in the evening. She had even tilted her head in a slight nod when their eyes had locked. He had been wracking his brain for over a week trying to remember even a glimpse of this lady in the past Season so that he might know where to seek her out, but to no avail. It was as though she had just appeared from nowhere. And yet, for whatever reason, this woman filled his head both day and night.

Why? He obviously didn't know her nor had he spent more than a few minutes in her company. But there was just something about the lady that intrigued him. There were not many of his acquaintance who would give as good as they received from his teasing. Most of the women his mother put in his path had one thing on their mind and that was to marry a man with a title. Generally, any title would do and an earl was a good catch as any. Far from bantering with him, those ladies were eager to agree with anything he said, no matter how outlandish it might be.

Perhaps that was why he found every last one of them dull as dishwater. None of them had ever left any sort of an impression on him, nor had he felt anything toward them other than mild distaste. He far preferred the company of women like Florinda. While she, too, had been flatly accommodating and agreeable, at least the activities he enjoyed with her held his interest. Asher had been enjoying his life as a bachelor despite how Saxton and Wickes spewed how married life now suited them. As far as Asher was concerned, there were more women to please in the world and he would make his way through a number of them if he could...

Until now ... the voice inside his head whispered as he watched the very lady who had filled his thoughts of late being escorted by two wolves to the entrance to the

garden. Asher watched her disappear through the doorway and something lurched in his gut. If Persephone were downstairs it could only mean one thing. The Widow of Whitehall had found the lady a match.

“My lord, will you place your bet?” Mustardseed inquired with a nod toward the table. It always amused Asher that all the dealers were named after characters from Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s favorite play *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* .

Asher tossed in his bet not paying the least bit of attention to the cards he had been dealt. He finally gathered the cards and fanned them out in his fingers, hiding the frown threatening to give away his hand. He had nothing. Not even a pair. As he looked up into the eyes of the dealer, he knew the game had been rigged.

He tapped the cards on the velvet table and returned his attention to the entrance of the garden. This time he couldn’t hold back the scowl that raced across his features. The Earl of Carrington adjusted his waistcoat, and ran his fingers through his black hair, before he walked through the entryway. He didn’t appear any happier than Asher was. Asher could only ponder what arrangement Valentine had made with the Widow of Whitehall over his Persephone.

Mustardseed asking the two men at the table to show their hands took Asher out of his musings. He fanned out his losing hand. The man sitting across from him gave him a smirk.

“Bad luck that, Rowley,” Oliver Pitt said as he pulled the coins toward his growing pile of winnings.

Asher stood, his purse all the lighter from another round of bad cards. “I’ve had better nights,” he replied. Maybe he needed a drink to wash away any further bad karma that might be headed his way.

“Hurts to lose something you once had, doesn’t it?” Oliver taunted causing Asher’s eyes to narrow. The man’s words sounded a little too knowing.

“What is that supposed to mean?” he asked as curiosity got the better of him.

Oliver stood and went to stand next to Asher. He leaned in so his words would be heard by Asher alone. “I’m not certain how you could let a woman like Florinda go but I thank you for it. Best sex I’ve had in years.”

Pitt gave a hard smack on Asher’s shoulder before he left him standing there alone. Not that Asher cared. He had been aware that Florinda was seeing someone else. That was one of the reasons why he hadn’t visited her of late. He wasn’t one to be second to anyone and least of all another lover of his mistress.

Asher shook his head as he let Pitt’s words go. Once again his eyes turned toward the garden, which Val had exited, looking no happier than when he entered. Surprisingly, there wasn’t a bouncer standing at the entrance and Asher took the opportunity to make his way across the gambling floor to slip inside. Luck was finally on his side tonight.

He slowly strode through the doorway. The garden looked almost barren, though that was inevitable, given the season. It would still be several months until this area would be back into what he would expect a garden to look like. He was, however, surprised to see a hearth set into the far wall. It was currently ablaze to provide whatever heat could be found to warm those who might decide to brave the cooler weather.

His Persephone stood there. She was holding her hands out toward the fire but Asher still noticed her shivering from the cold. With the tinkling sounds of water flowing from the fountain, she didn’t hear his approach. He pulled his jacket from his shoulders and placed the garment around her. A gasp left her as she quickly turned to meet his gaze.

“Hades,” she exclaimed in surprise. “What are you doing here?”

“Good evening, Persephone,” he whispered. He pulled the edges of his jacket closer to provide what limited warmth it would offer. “I saw you enter a while ago and thought I might take advantage of the situation to speak with you again.” Was that disappointment that briefly flashed across her features?

“Good evening, my lord,” she answered. “I thought perhaps... never mind.”

“What did you think, my dear?” he asked in a husky whisper. He reached out with his thumb and forefinger and gently took hold of her chin, tipping her face upward so he could stare into those striking hazel eyes. The green of her eyes was only on the edges with a golden-brown center.

“It doesn’t matter,” she finally answered in a breathy tone.

“I beg to differ. Tell me,” he urged stepping closer. Her mouth was so tempting and he couldn’t resist running his thumb over her lower lip. She gave a sigh that went straight to his heart among other places.

“You’re here now. Nothing else matters,” she murmured instead of telling him her thoughts. She raised those hopeful looking eyes to him and he swore a little piece of the ice surrounding his heart cracked.

He knew he shouldn’t. She was a lady and not some woman of loose morals like those upstairs. But he couldn’t stop himself when he leaned down to brush his lips gently over hers. A startled soft gasp escaped her as their breath mingled together. His heart hammered inside his chest and he began to rethink the wisdom of tasting her lips. But then she stepped closer and wound her arms up and around his neck. He suddenly became lost in the feel of this woman’s body pressed intimately against his own.

His arms went around her as he deepened their kiss and when she opened her mouth, they were able to begin a dance with their tongues that sent sensations coursing through his body more powerfully than he'd ever felt from a mere kiss. Asher came to the harsh realization that he may just have met his match in this lady. The soft moan that came from deep within her made Asher break off their kiss as reality sunk in. Anyone could walk by and her reputation would be in ruins.

When she opened her hazel eyes, he had to blink for he swore he saw the promise of a future staring right back at him if he only allowed himself to believe in it. He shouldn't have kissed her and the words of the prostitute who lived upstairs filled his head. Kissing was too personal, he realized too late, now that the damage was done.

"My apologies, Persephone. I shouldn't have kissed you," Asher said noticing the brief hint of hurt that flashed across her face.

A slight smile crept up at one corner of that luscious mouth. "No need to apologize since I was more than willing. Besides... I would expect nothing less from Hades to steal a kiss from a lady."

A chuckle left him. "You know me too well."

A light laugh left her. "Hardly, my lord. I think there is much to learn about you and that you are hiding behind this facade of a devil-may-care man."

That thought was sobering, reminding him of the responsibilities that awaited him in the coming days especially with his brother.

"I don't consider myself as a reckless person," he said as he carefully watched her.

"And I am not usually careless with my reputation despite what just happened between us," she replied patting her hair into place, not that she looked at all

disheveled.

He then remembered the beginning of their strange conversation when he first entered the garden. “I never gave you time to tell me what you were thinking when I arrived,” he said raising his hand to push a tendril of hair from her cheek.

“I thought perhaps Mrs. Dove-Lyon had sent you to meet me.” A becoming blush rushed across her face and he couldn’t help but wonder just how far down her bodice did her embarrassment go.

Then her words registered inside his head. He hated the thought that he would disappoint her.

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Patience watched multiple emotions rush across the face of her Hades. Longing was swiftly replaced with shock and then disappointment as her words registered within him. He stepped back from her as though his fingertips had just met the fires of hell when he had pushed back her hair. Whatever this connection that had briefly consumed them, it obviously wasn't going to be repeated. What had she expected from him in the first place? Obviously he was a rake of the worst sort and she had no business thinking there would ever be anything more between them.

An unbidden sigh escaped her. "It appears I was mistaken," she said trying to appear as though the thought of never seeing him again didn't wrench at her heartstrings.

"You're looking for a husband," he muttered as though even the thought of marriage was displeasing to him.

"Why else would I be escorted into the garden area?" she replied trying not to show how hurt she was that Mrs. Dove-Lyon hadn't sent him to meet with her.

"I am sorry to disappoint you but I am not looking for a wife nor have I come to an arrangement with Mrs. Dove-Lyon," he proclaimed, though Patience swore there was a touch of sadness in his voice.

A sarcastic laugh left her lips. "Don't you mean that you lost at her tables and now have a debt that needs repaid?"

He shrugged trying not to think of the last game he played and lost with Pitt. That had been solely for money—his honor was not engaged. Still, the memory wasn't a pleasant one. He turned his head toward the entrance of the garden as though he

expected the Widow of Whitehall to let her presence be known.

Patience peered at Hades intently. “You expect her to show up? Did you perhaps lose a game of chance?”

“Not tonight. Anyway, I doubt Mrs. Dove-Lyon will consider me for a husband for you since I made it clear I didn’t need a wife,” Hades said chuckling.

“You make light of a situation that holds merit for most men—indeed, it is a necessity for those who wish to one day have an heir to carry on their name. Does marriage to a woman seem so abhorrent to you, Hades?” she dared to ask.

“You and I may rule the underworld together, Persephone, but we will not rule this world,” he declared with a small bow.

“What a shame...” she murmured shyly before she continued. “I always heard that a reformed rake makes the best husband. I guess now I’ll never know.”

“Trust me when I tell you that you don’t want me for a husband,” he replied before he ran a finger down her cheek.

She took a glance at him from the corner of her eye before she stepped closer to run her own slim finger down the edge of his jacket. She swore the golden hue in his hazel eyes deepened the closer she came. “Well...” she purred softly, “I will admit I wouldn’t want a husband who wasn’t capable of being faithful to me. That, Hades, would never do.”

He snatched her about the waist and pulled her close. “I never said I couldn’t be faithful... that is... to the right woman.”

“And you don’t think I’m that woman?” she asked, her emotions running wild in

spite of herself as he held her close.

“I didn’t say that either but we hardly know one another.”

“And yet you are already dismissing something that could be incredible between us if you only gave us a chance,” she whispered.

“I’ve never been one to believe in love at first sight,” he declared.

She gave another light laugh. “There’s a first time for everyone, my lord,” she teased wondering how she dared to continue to be so bold. She had never acted this way with Stuart. They had had a mutual respect for one another but never flirted like she was doing with Hades. Why was he so different? Somehow their banter made her more confident in herself and what she wanted for her life. Their time together allowed her to truly be herself.

A frown marred his forehead. “And what of the Earl of Carrington?”

“What about him?”

“Did Mrs. Dove-Lyon send him to meet you?” he inquired while his frown deepened.

“Why else would I be standing downstairs in this garden?” she repeated, continuing to watch him. Clearly, he didn’t care for the fact the earl had met her. “Not afraid of a little competition are you?”

A roar of laughter left him. “Hardly, but Val is a friend. I’d hate to lose a friendship over a woman.”

“I thought you weren’t interested in marriage, Hades? Mrs. Dove-Lyon has gone to great lengths to make a match for me. I won’t accept anything less than to be married

to a man I can come to care for.”

“And you think Valentine is a better option than me?” he laughed as though such a thought was completely ridiculous.

“I know the earl even less than I know you, Hades. But you and I have just shared a kiss. I would dare to say that gives you an advantage over him.” Patience gave him a sweet smile and the man before her began to dip his head as if to offer her another kiss.

She placed her fingertips on his lips before he could continue his descent. “But that doesn’t mean I shall continue to allow such a liberty. I think you’ve had enough of my kisses for one day, my lord, especially if you’re not looking for a wife.”

“I wouldn’t mind one more taste,” he urged stepping closer.

“And I’m just as sure that I will save my kisses for a man who will be worthy of me,” she said though something inside her decided to raise up on the tips of her toes and kiss his cheek. “I’m sure you know where Mrs. Dove-Lyon can be located if you change your mind about me, Hades.”

“Tell me your real name,” he urged.

She gave him another sweet smile and instead took his jacket from her shoulders, handing him the garment. “You may need this again if you decide to come up from the warmth of hell, my lord,” she replied and began to leave the garden.

As she reached the entrance, Mrs. Dove-Lyon stood just outside and out of sight. She handed Patience a red pomegranate fruit.

“Toss this to him. I’m sure he’ll know the reference,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon proclaimed as

she left Patience's side.

She stood staring at the fruit that formed an integral part of the legend of Hades and Persephone, since she was required to stay with Hades in the underworld a month for each pomegranate seed she had eaten. She saw the man's approach and realized how much she, too, wanted to know his real name. She tossed the fruit to him and he caught it.

"Think of me, Hades, as I'll be thinking of you," she said sweetly before one of the wolves came to escort her back upstairs. "It was nice meeting you."

She would spend the remainder of her time that night at the Lyon's Den staring down at a man who constantly watched her every move. Maybe he would change his mind about the idea of marriage. Stranger things had happened here at the Lyon's Den. Only time would tell if the man she only knew as Hades would one day claim her heart or if she could even begin to trust him with its care.

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Asher was in a foul mood as he sat at a table at White's, where he had come for a change in scenery from the Lyon's Den. Lucius, Simon, and Benjamin had joined him for a drink but each man seemed to be lost in their own thoughts. When Valentine entered the room, he made straight for their table.

"Bloody Hell, I could use a drink," he cursed waving his hand toward a servant who quickly came with a glass of brandy. He gulped it down before placing the crystal on the table.

"What has you in such a state?" Lucius drawled taking a sip of his own brandy.

"It's the Widow of Whitehall. She's back to matchmaking and she thinks a certain lady might make me a good wife."

Asher's memory of Persephone in the garden had him clenching his own glass tighter. "You didn't care for the lady she chose for you?" he asked as his curiosity got the better of him.

"She was like a timid little mouse. Barely spoke a word or two. I can't imagine being with a woman like that the rest of my life. I'd be bored to tears and taking a mistress in no time," Val complained bitterly.

Timid ? Persephone ? Why, she was anything but timid in her banter—and in her kiss.

Benjamin chuckled. "I'd like to see how you get out of this one, Val," he said giving their friend a knowing look. "Mrs. Dove-Lyon doesn't take it light when she has her

mind set on making a match. Don't forget the dangers of defying her. She could ruin you in an instant if she so chooses."

Val ran his fingers through his hair before downing the rest of his brandy. "I know and it's the last thing I need right now. My parents are already urging me to find a wife this Season."

Simon swept his finger in the men's direction. "You're all for the marriage market if you continue to go to the Lyon's Den."

Asher chuckled. "Don't count yourself out, Simon. You've been there a time or two as well, and your luck has not always been good. Nor have you always been careful to seat yourself at the tables where the wagers are only for money."

Simon sat back in his chair. "Why do you think I'm here at White's?"

"Why do you think we're all here at White's?" Benjamin chimed in causing the men at the table to laugh.

Asher rubbed the back of his neck trying not to think of Persephone and what she might be doing at the Lyon's Den while he was here, far away. He tried to push the worry aside. He couldn't spend every night watching her on the balcony at the Lyon's Den. Or could he? He shook his head out of his thoughts and knew for certain he would lose his heart to the woman if he couldn't manage to get himself under control. He dared not to think of the alternative... that she would be paired with one of his friends as a husband. Bloody hell ... Asher didn't want her paired with anyone.

Asher stood knowing the duties to family called and he could not put off the inevitable any longer. "I'm off, gentlemen. My brother has been staying at Dr. Thornberry's house to ensure he is fit after his return from France, and I need to check in on him."

Lucius nodded. “My best to your brother. You’re lucky to have him back after thinking him lost forever.”

“Yes,” Asher said with a nod. “We’re very grateful he lives although his spirits will still take some time to heal.”

Benjamin waved his empty glass to a passing servant to have it refilled. “At least he made it back... so many didn’t.”

The men became lost in thought as they presumably thought of those who had been lost to war. Asher bid his friends farewell, retrieved his coat, and made his way to his carriage which had been brought around.

The drive to the doctor’s townhouse didn’t take long and Asher was soon being escorted up the stairs and down a long wood paneled hallway. He entered his brother’s room and saw a fresh bouquet of flowers, which indicated that his mother had been there recently. Asher wasn’t sure how flowers would brighten his brother’s mood. Nothing he had been able to say thus far seemed to crack through the demons that filled Gideon’s head.

“Hello, brother,” Asher said brightly as he went to the heavy curtains. He pulled back the drapery to let in the light of the day. “Why are you laying here in the dark? It’s a beautiful day outside.”

“What does it matter? I’m not going anywhere,” Gideon mumbled.

“There’s no reason why we couldn’t go to sit outside for some fresh air,” Asher said hoping maybe the outdoors might do his brother some good. “It might lighten your mood.”

“There’s only one thing that would lighten my mood,” Gideon proclaimed and got a

far-off look in his green eyes.

Asher watched in fascination as his brother's whole demeanor changed. Something was of interest to him, and he was curious what could spark such a total transformation from the brother who was like a stranger to him.

"If I can make your day all the better, then by all means... tell me what I can do to make you happy," Asher urged pulling a chair close to his brother's bed.

His brother gave a weak smile, but it was encouraging. Asher hadn't seen such a look on his brother's face since he began visiting. "Pull the bell cord and ask for my nurse. She's the only person who has raised my spirits since I set foot back in England."

Asher let out a laugh. "Of course, a pretty face would cheer you. Tell me of her."

Gideon gave a heavy sigh. "She is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

"There are plenty of beautiful women in the world, brother. I'm not certain a nurse is who would be best for you. They have a reputation—"

"She's not like that. Don't you dare speak ill of her since you know nothing about her," Gideon said firmly with a clenched fist.

"You are right. My apologies," Asher declared trying to pacify his brother.

"Dr. Thornberry thinks very highly of the nurses he hires. He prides himself on providing the best of care, and he would not expose his patients to anyone disreputable. I'm certain you already know how much you've had to pay for all he is providing," Gideon said as he ran his fingers through his sandy colored hair.

Asher nodded. "I will have to take your word for it since I have not met the lady."

“She has been kind to me, Ash,” Gideon began, “not even flinching when she saw the scar left on my face. I won’t even discuss the limp the war has left me with.”

“I hate what your time serving our country has done to my carefree sibling.”

“Those days of me being carefree are long past gone, Asher,” Gideon replied turning to look at him. “What woman would have me as I am now?”

“Any of them would be lucky to have you,” he proclaimed.

A heavy sigh left his brother. “No woman in her right mind would be able to look past this scar.”

Asher reached over to take Gideon’s forearm. “The right woman won’t even notice it. Personally, I’m more concerned with the mental wounds you continue to deal with.”

A sob left his brother. “Two years of my life, Ash!” he moaned in frustration. “Do you know what’s it’s like to have no memory of your existence for so long?”

“If I could take away that pain, you know I would. I’m just thankful my brother still lives,” Asher replied wishing there was more he could do for him. He went to the bell cord and gave it a tug. If his nurse would brighten up Gideon’s mood, then so be it. A servant entered shortly thereafter. “Please send for my brother’s nurse. Now... let’s get you dressed.”

“I don’t want to get dressed,” Gideon complained turning his head away from his brother.

“Mother will be here soon with her carriage. As I said, it’s a lovely day and the weather is holding. Maybe we can convince her to take you for a short ride to get you out of here for a while until Dr. Thornberry feels comfortable enough to allow you to

come home.”

“It’s all I want, Ash. I just want to go home,” Gideon said as he sat up and began to dress.

“Soon, Gideon. Soon, you’ll be back where you belong,” Asher answered letting Gideon dress himself. The more he did without any assistance, the faster Asher could take him home. Now, they just waited for his brother’s nurse. Hopefully, this woman would once again put a smile on Gideon’s face.

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Patience finished tying the bandage around the woman's shoulder to keep her broken arm in place. Her gaze went to the doctor who watched her from the other side of the bed, and he nodded his approval. The lady had been recovering from a recent illness and the plan had been to allow her to finally return home. That was until she slipped and fell. With a broken arm, Lady Kennedy had moaned about her fate of not being allowed to go home now that she was injured again.

"Good job, Mrs. Moore. I couldn't have prepared that sling any better," Dr. Thornberry said taking off his spectacles and nodding to his patient. "Keep this on to help your arm stay immobile, Lady Kennedy."

"I just want to go home, Dr. Thornberry," Lady Kennedy complained.

The doctor nodded. "I see no reason why your son and daughter can't take you home. They're already waiting downstairs. I'll come over to your townhouse in two weeks' time to examine the bone to see how it's mending. There's no need to return here. I believe your stay at my convalescent home is at an end."

"Thank you, Dr. Thornberry. I'm so very thankful for the care you've given me but I must admit, I'm looking forward to finally returning home," the lady said as Patience assisted her to stand.

"Would you be so good as to see Lady Kennedy to the front door before you make the rest of your rounds, Mrs. Moore?" the doctor asked.

"It would be my pleasure," Patience answered before she began to walk with the woman. The lady began to prattle on about her adult children and all the things she

planned to do once her arm healed and she could resume her normal duties in her own household.

“You’ve been a dear, Mrs. Moore,” the lady declared.

“Please be careful when you get home and don’t overdo things, Lady Kennedy. You will still need time to rest and heal,” Patience said before the butler opened the door for the woman to leave while her son and daughter each took care to help her outside.

The lady waved her good arm in a farewell as another carriage pulled to the front of the townhouse. Patience returned the gesture as she waited inside the door. Captain Tyler’s mother alit from the conveyance and entered the foyer.

A servant came rushing down the stairs and whispered to Patience. “The captain has asked for you, Mrs. Moore.”

“I’ll be right up, Emily. Thank you for letting me know.” Patience turned to address the captain’s mother, but the lady gave her a glare that caused Patience to clamp her mouth shut. She never cared for Patience. She supposed that would be the case with most women who would only see the job Patience did as... indelicate and unladylike. But she wasn’t here to pacify some snobby woman. She had a job to do and she was damn good at it.

The lady took a step forward as though challenging Patience who only returned her stare. She finally spoke up. “I’m here to see my son and possibly take him for a ride but I need to first speak with Dr. Thornberry about Gideon’s possible release,” the lady said with a jaunty tip of her chin.

“Of course, my lady. A carriage ride would be perfect to help with his recovery,” Patience said politely. “I’ll have the butler show you into the front salon and I’ll send another servant to find the doctor and have him sent to you directly.

The butler whisked the lady to the front room where she asked for a cup of tea. Knowing she would be occupied for some time, Patience began making her way up the stairs toward the captain's room. She saw a servant coming down the hallway and asked her to find Dr. Thornberry and tell him Lady Tyler was waiting for him in the front parlor. Patience continued toward the captain's room but stopped short of entering when the conversation from within halted her forward motion.

"I'm telling you, brother, you've never seen a more beautiful woman in your life. Wait until you set eyes on her," Gideon was boasting.

A chuckle came from the room. "I can imagine," a familiar voice resounded.

She took a deep breath trying to get control of herself. She needed to prepare to at last meet the captain's elusive brother. However, she was more concerned that her patient had put her on some pedestal as though she were a goddess. But even the thought of herself as a goddess had her thinking of her Hades—even though she knew there was no sense giving further thoughts to him. He had made it perfectly clear he wasn't interested in getting married any time soon.

She peeked around the doorframe and saw the captain sitting in a chair by the window. His brother had his back to the room and stood in shadows. One hand was pulling back the drapery. The other was bent behind his back.

"Good afternoon, Captain Tyler. Your mother is downstairs having a word with the doctor, but I understand she'd like to take you on an outing to get some fresh air," Patience said as she began making her way into the room.

"Ah... here she is now. The woman who brightens my day by just smiling in my direction," Gideon beamed happily. "May I present—"

His brother dropped the curtain and turned giving a bow and Patience's mouth hung

open at whom she saw. “Hades?”

“Persephone?” Her name from the Lyon’s Den fell from his lips like a soft caress.

“What are you doing here?” they said in unison while Gideon frowned as he looked between them.

Gideon wagged his finger from one to the other. “You two know one another?” he asked scowling.

“We have not been... formally introduced. Please do the honors, Gideon,” Hades urged stepping forward.

“Mrs. Patience Moore... may I present my brother, Asher Tyler, Earl of Rowley,” Gideon said looking none too pleased.

Patience gave a curtsey. “Lord Rowley.”

The man crossed the small bit of distance to take her hand. Patience thought he would only bend over and kiss the air between her skin and his lips. Instead, he pressed his lips to her suddenly fevered skin.

“Finally... I have a name to go with my goddess,” Asher said in such a husky tone and Patience wished, for the briefest of seconds, that they were alone.

She raised one of her brows at him and tugged gently at her hand to free it. “I am hardly yours, my lord,” she whispered. “Not today, nor was I yesterday, or at any of our other previous encounters.”

A small hum left him as he tilted his blond head at her. Those hazel eyes of his were going to be her undoing. And then he spoke, and a little thrill went right through her.

“And yet you tossed me a pomegranate the last time I saw you. One seed for every month Persephone was to spend with Hades in the underworld if I recall correctly. Do you know how many seeds are in one fruit, Mrs. Moore?”

“What difference does it make when you made it clear you are not interested in me?” she inquired while trying to keep her composure.

“I never said I wasn’t interested in you , Persephone. I’m just not interested in getting married. There is a difference,” he stated as he stepped even closer.

“Excuse me ...” Gideon interrupted. “Will one of you kindly inform me what the hell is going on?”

Patience looked around the man who seemed to take up all the air in the room to look at the younger gentleman, who currently had an angry scowl set upon his face. “It’s nothing to worry over, Captain. Your brother and I have a different view on the meaning of marriage and its importance.”

Gideon’s laughter rang out in the room. “Ash has no intention of marrying anytime soon, Mrs. Moore. Of that I have no doubt. When he does, he’ll end up with one of those high society debutantes he can’t stand.”

Her heart sank at the captain’s words. Not that she wasn’t perfectly aware of the situation. She had guessed that her Hades was the sort of man who moved in elevated circles, and who would need a wife on his level. After all, they didn’t let just anyone into the Lyon’s Den. But she knew how the world went and she was never a part of the same circle he moved in.

She apparently didn’t check her emotions fast enough as the earl took hold of her chin. Lifting her face, she noticed his own rush of emotions sweeping across his features. From what she could gather, he reflected mostly concern.

“Pay my brother no attention, Mrs. Moore,” Asher said softly as though to calm her racing nerves.

She broke the spell he was weaving around her by stepping away from the warmth of his body. “It’s hard to ignore the facts, Lord Rowley. You are titled and expected to marry well—when you finally concede to marry at all. I am certainly no debutante nor any of those women who are considered acceptable within the ton .”

“You are beyond compare to any of those ladies who could be found in a ballroom, Mrs. Moore,” Gideon interjected forcing Patience to give a nod of her head toward the younger man.

“I appreciate your kind words, Captain Tyler, but the reality of my situation doesn’t change the facts,” Patience answered grimly. It was an honest evaluation of all her problems that a good marriage might fix.

Asher reached again for her hand. “Perhaps we can change all that together,” he suggested with an encouraging smile.

She widened her eyes but his words only caused Patience to frown. Was he offering to make her his mistress? She had no interest in such an arrangement. She would never dream of looking down on those who had accepted that lifestyle—her dearest friend among them—but even beyond the so-called “sin” of being a kept woman, Patience feared the uncertainty of it. A mistress could be discarded on the slightest whim. It was not a position that offered any guarantee of security. No, far better to be a wife, even to a man who did not stir her passions, than to be the temporary plaything of a man she could not trust.

“Would you excuse us for a moment, Captain Tyler. Your brother and I need to discuss something,” Patience said not giving Gideon time to respond. She pulled at Asher’s hand leading him out into the corridor where they could speak privately.

“Just exactly what are your intentions, Lord Rowley? Are you after some meaningless affair?”

“That’s extremely direct, Mrs. Moore,” he exclaimed with a startled expression sweeping across his handsome face.

“Given the circumstances, I see no reason to not be direct, sir, as my future depends on honesty and finding myself a suitable husband.”

“Suitable? As in rich?” he said as though the words were sticking in his throat.

“Suitable as in someone I can trust and come to care for. I don’t give a fig how much money the man has as long as he doesn’t gamble his fortune away and as long as he treats me with kindness and respect,” Patience said moving her hand to her forehead. She sounded like a mean-mouthed old maid. How had such a conversation turned from flirtatious to demanding? This wasn’t like her at all.

“You’re upset with me...” Asher murmured with wide eyes.

“Of course, I’m upset with you. Has no other woman in your life ever been miffed at your behavior?” she asked in wonder that this man possibly had never been turned down by a woman.

“Besides my mother? Not that I’m aware of.”

“Well, I suppose here’s another first for you, my lord. Not everyone is going to fall for your irresistible charms.”

A chuckle left him. “So, you find me irresistible, Patience?” he asked using her given name as if she had given him permission to do so.

“Right now, I find you irritating, and you have me sounding like a shrew. You seem to bring out the best and the worst in me,” she huffed in annoyance not only at how he was acting but how she was, too.

“I have enjoyed seeing you at your best but what has you so upset, my dear?” he whispered. He advanced a step while she retreated. He had that look about him like he’d had in the gardens at the Lyon’s Den. Any closer and she was certain he would kiss her.

She held up her hand to halt his progress. “I am upset with you because of your apparent dismissal of this insane connection between us.”

“Dismissal? Did I not just say that I would be quite willing to change your situation?”

“By setting me up as your latest mistress? No. That is not an offer I will accept. I seek marriage, sir, as you know perfectly well. I should like to be married to a man I believe I could love.”

“And you think that could be me?” He sounded as if he wasn’t certain whether or not he liked the idea.

Patience took hold of his hand. A tingling sensation raced up her arm and for the briefest second, she knew he felt it too when his hazel eyes turned to a seductive gleam. “It could be, Asher. I know that something incredible happens between us when we’re together.”

A frown marred his otherwise attractive face. Before he could reply, his mother came down the hallway and looked between the pair of them.

“Mrs. Moore... you are to accompany us on our ride this afternoon in case my son has need of your services. I have cleared the matter with Dr. Thornberry,” the lady

proclaimed.

“Yes, my lady. I’ll go get my bonnet for the ride. Please excuse me, Lord Rowley,” Patience said as she quickly retreated down the hallway.

With her heart racing, she left the man standing in the hallway with his mother. She would be spending the remainder of the afternoon in a carriage with Hades... or, as she should now think of him, Lord Rowley. It was only then that she realized she had murmured his given name when she attempted for him to see her point. God help her!

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Florinda sat next to Oliver in his open carriage as they made their way around the park. Looking around it appeared as though all of Society was taking advantage of the uncommonly good weather. The sun shone brightly as she adjusted her parasol as they turned the corner. Couples and families walked the pathways of the nearby park, some stopped by a lake to watch the birds that swam on the surface, and others also took in the warm weather as they rode in their own carriages or on horseback. It was a pleasant day for a stroll.

Until she saw Asher riding in his own conveyance with another man and two women. The gentlemen rode backwards leaving the two ladies the forward view. As their carriages passed one another, Asher didn't even give her the briefest of nods as their eyes met. He continued his animated conversation with those he rode with and Florinda's heart lurched at the snub. It shouldn't have bothered her as much as it did but a little part of her heart cried out for her ex-lover.

"I thought you were over your feelings for Rowley, my pet," Oliver sneered while he examined the sleeve of his jacket with feigned nonchalance.

"I am," Florinda murmured as she masked her face in what she hoped appeared as unconcern. She was becoming increasingly aware of Oliver's jealous side, and it had begun to make her uncomfortable and wary of triggering it. Although Oliver had been generous with his gifts to her of late, his performance while in bed had become a bit rough for her tastes and she wasn't entirely sure she wished to continue their association.

"Your face tells me differently. I must admit I enjoyed taunting the man at the Lyon's Den recently when he lost a fair number of coins to me in one hand of cards, but I

was disappointed to learn he did not seem to unduly regret the loss of his funds or the loss of you. He didn't seem to care one bit that you had taken me as a lover," Oliver said with an evil looking smile.

"You told him about us?" she said.

A chuckle rumbled within his chest. "Oh, I did and I took great pleasure in doing so. Rowley has been a thorn in my side since our days together at Oxford. He was always a step or two ahead of me and it made me... well... let us just say I don't like coming in second to him—or anyone, for that matter," he snarled while watching her intently.

But you were second to him, she thought. That can't be changed. Oliver was her lover now, but there was no denying that he had come into her life only after Asher had grown disenchanted with her company—he had been a happy diversion when Asher's absence made her lonely. And he had been a magnificent lover until the last few days. What had changed? Did the confirmation that Asher no longer had any interest in her diminish her value in Oliver's eyes? Everything between them had certainly changed after Asher had given her a settlement and left her the townhouse.

A snort and some other grunt that sounded much like displeasure left the man sitting next to her. "You think of him even now, don't you, my pet?" he snarled in disgust. "But no matter. You are mine to do with as I please. However, I think my patience and our outing for the day are both at an end."

She stole a glance at the man who clearly felt he had some kind of hold on her. Instead of responding to the latter part of his words, she answered the first part. "I never said I was thinking of Lord Rowley."

He reached over to roughly take her hand. "You didn't have to. I am not some simpleton that you can wrap around your finger to get whatever you may want, nor am I foolish enough to think your feelings for Rowley are at an end just because he

no longer desires you.”

She couldn't help the flinch that followed his assessment and his laughter rang out in the afternoon air. When his fingers tightened around her wrist, she gasped at the pain before she quickly recovered. “I would never call you a fool, my lord.”

He let go and Florinda rubbed away the ache from his touch. “Good! Then we understand one another.”

Oliver quickly gave instructions to his driver to return to her townhouse. Florinda could only dread whatever the remainder of the afternoon would hold for her. As soon as they returned to her townhouse, she would end her association with Oliver Pitt. If the knowledge that he held some long-standing grudge against Asher hadn't convinced her, then his recent treatment of her certainly did. She would be better off alone than under his dominating control.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

Much to his regret, Asher could no longer deny he had growing feelings for Persephone... Patience, he quickly corrected inside his head. Although she had remained mostly silent during the carriage ride the other day, he could see for himself the natural grace the lady comported herself with. She was indeed a rare jewel compared to the ladies who had previously been thrust upon him in Society. His brother had been right... she was one of the most beautiful women Asher had ever beheld.

Which brought to mind the problem with Gideon. Clearly his own brother felt some claim upon the lady. Asher halted his thoughts and downed his drink before asking a servant to bring him another. He had to admit that he had completely forgotten all about poor Gideon once Patience had been properly introduced to him, even though in the moments before Patience had entered the room, all of his thoughts had been for Gideon, and his clear excitement.

His brother had been so happy knowing the nurse he held some affection for was about to meet his older brother. His gushing admiration for the woman had only made Asher wonder if this woman could possibly do any wrong. But when Asher had turned from the window to see for himself the lady his brother cared for, any further thoughts flew from Asher's mind. Unfortunately, that included any thoughts of consideration for the feelings Gideon clearly had for the woman.

The reality of the situation was brought to his attention after their ride when Asher had been assisting Gideon back to his room at the doctor's residence. His brother had ranted about how Patience would just be another thing that he would lose to his titled brother. The hatred that had spilled from Gideon's lips tore at Asher's heart until he left the room. His brother was dealing with enough mental anguish from his time in

France. Asher didn't want to be the cause of more.

But what was the solution? To avoid Patience and allow a romance between her and Gideon to develop? No, he couldn't reconcile himself to that when after just one look into the eyes of the lady, Asher became completely besotted. The sound of her voice haunted him day and night for the past week. A flash of memory when she would gaze upon him with those mesmerizing hazel eyes would pop into his head at the most unexpected moments. And that kiss they shared... Bloody Hell! A part of him rose to the occasion whenever he thought of her in his arms too. It was as though she had been made just for him. Yes... as Patience had mentioned, there was a first time for everyone and Asher had to finally admit that he was falling completely under the lady's spell.

"Your drink, my lord," a servant said pulling Asher out of his thoughts and returning back to the present.

Asher nodded as he returned his attention to his friends who stood before him. But Lucius and Valentine were both conversing as though Asher had been listening the entire time. Even when Asher stood to tell them he would see them in the gambling room, they continued their discussion leaving Asher alone with his thoughts—including the dreaded realization that if he didn't do something quickly, he would lose the one woman he had ever met that had held his fascination. He couldn't allow her to marry some other man, not when there was any breath left in his body.

He made his way into the gambling room and went to the first bouncer he saw. "Demetrius, would you find out if Mrs. Dove-Lyon would see me?" Asher inquired. He could only imagine what the woman's face would appear like once she learned that Asher was requesting an audience with her.

"Right away, my lord," the wolf said as he went to find the widow.

She kept him waiting for a full half of an hour. When Demetrius finally returned, he informed Asher that Mrs. Dove-Lyon would see him in a private salon. He followed the bouncer to another place in the Lyon's Den Asher hadn't been before—a pleasing room filled with roses of every color. The widow must have a hot house somewhere on her property to have roses in full bloom at this time of the year.

“Lord Rowley... what a pleasant surprise. I understand you wished to have a private word with me,” she cooed sweetly.

Asher could only imagine the smug look of satisfaction the lady had on her face beneath her heavy veil. “Thank you for obliging me, Mrs. Dove-Lyon.”

“I do what I can for my most... wary clients,” she declared raising a blood-red rose to her veil. She held the bloom there for several seconds before she dropped her hand to her side.

“And am I?” Asher inquired as politely as he could manage. He felt as though he had become trapped in a plan of this woman's making despite Asher's best attempts to remain unentangled.

“Are you what, my lord?” The woman's voice practically dripped with sweet sarcasm.

“One of your wary clients?” he finally admitted.

A light laugh emitted through her veil and she finally went to an empty chair to sit. “You tell me, my lord. You have certainly been one of the more difficult men I have dealt with. I can see for myself that you are definitely guarded.”

“Can you blame me?” he asked as he took the vacant seat she pointed toward.

“You are not the first man who has refused to see that his days of being a bachelor are over, nor will you be the last. But in your case, Lord Rowley, you have been slipping through my gaming tables and somehow winning when the opposite should hold true.”

“Call it gambler’s luck,” he said with a crooked grin knowing how often her games were rigged in her favor.

“I could call it many things, Lord Rowley, but luck isn’t one of them.” She remained silent for a moment, tapping one black-gloved finger on the edge of the chair’s arm. When she finally spoke her mind, her words sent his world reeling. “I offered you perfection, and it was plain to see that you were charmed by her, yet you still turned your nose up at the lady who would make you the perfect wife.”

He couldn’t help himself when his eyes widened. There were only two women he had interacted with here at the Lyon’s Den. One of them was the prostitute on the third floor so he knew Mrs. Dove-Lyon couldn’t be referring to her. Could it be possible... “Are you suggesting you wished to set me up with Patience Moore?” he finally asked when he found his voice.

“Don’t you mean Persephone ?” she inquired pleasantly as she waited in silence for his answer.

“But I thought—”

“Did you honestly think my wolves left their posts unattended, my lord?” she asked, laughing when Asher didn’t answer immediately. “You did! How utterly delightful.”

Bloody Hell ! The whole thing had been a setup from the very beginning. This woman had orchestrated their every move, down to their first meeting in the stairwell. The one consolation to this whole damn mess was that Patience was also in the dark

about the fa?ade she put into place. Or was she?

A frown marred his brow as he began thinking about their every encounter. “Did she know?” he finally managed to ask through pursed lips.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon leaned forward in her chair and pointed a finger toward him. “Mrs. Moore is a kindhearted lady of the highest caliber and knows nothing about my machinations behind the scenes. If you believe her to be capable of that kind of deception, then I fear I have made a horrendous mistake with my attempts to match you two together.”

He sank back into his chair while relief rushed over him. Running his fingers through his hair, he took a deep breath before he turned his attention back to the Widow of Whitehall.

“I need your help, Mrs. Dove-Lyon,” he said and for the first time there was hope that maybe... just maybe this lady had found his match.

“I couldn’t agree more.”

“There is a complication in this whole mess. My brother has developed an attraction to Mrs. Moore,” he admitted as he stood and began pacing the room.

“I was afraid this might happen when I arranged her employment with Dr. Thornberry.”

Asher halted his progress across the floor. “You knew she was working as a nurse?”

He heard a sigh leave the woman. “I am certain, my lord, that you and Mrs. Moore have much to learn about one another including your lives before you met. But I stand by my decision to pair the two of you together. She may not have been born

into your class, but you would have been bored within the year to have one of those Society misses meddling in your life. Patience is different and different is exactly what a man like you needs in your life.”

“So, you’ll help me?” he asked to stand before the lady.

“Of course, I’ll help you, Lord Rowley. For a price...” she said as she came to a stand.

“I’ll pay whatever you ask,” he replied wondering what her fee for such a service might actually be.

“I’ll have Mrs. Moore sent to meet with you. If she agrees to continue on with a possible relationship with you, I’ll send an invoice for my continued services to your townhouse this afternoon. Along with it, I will also include an invitation to a charity ball next week to announce the beginning of the new Season. I will see to it that Mrs. Moore is there.”

“I appreciate your help, Mrs. Dove-Lyon.”

She halted with her hand on the door. “Do not disappoint me, Lord Rowley. I would hate for my track record to become tarnished because you decide to recant your decision.”

She left him abruptly with her words lingering in his mind. Recant his decision regarding Patience? That was the furthest thing from his intentions toward the woman. His only thought now was if she would agree to see him outside of the Lyon’s Den and her nursing position. He held his breath waiting for the lady to enter the room, calming his nerves and wondering when he had become so smitten with a lady he barely knew.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

Patience's body physically shook when she stood at the entrance to a private salon. When one of the bouncers had interrupted her game at one of the tables in the ladies' gambling room, Cassandra and Patience had shared a knowing look. The summons could only mean that the Widow of Whitehall had another prospective husband for her to meet.

As she began to accompany the wolf down to the lower floor, Patience tried not to think of her encounter with Hades on these same stairs. Nor did she let herself think of his hazel eyes boring into her when she had met him by accident in the garden. There was no point looking in that direction. He would not be there.

She hadn't seen him since their carriage ride. When he did arrive for a visit with his brother, she made sure she was in a different wing of the house attending other patients. It would do her no good to pine over a man who only wanted one thing from her.

"You only need to call out if you have need of me, Mrs. Moore. I'll remain right here outside the door," Demetrius said politely.

"Thank you, Demetrius," she said far calmer than she felt inside. She had no idea who might be on the other side of that door but there was only one way to find out.

"Ready?" the wolf asked and at her nod he pushed opened the door for her.

It closed behind her with a soft click and she stared in disbelief at who she saw. Was this some sort of a trick? If so, it was far from funny.

Asher stepped forward and gave her a very formal, and proper, bow. “Good evening, Mrs. Moore. May I say you look beautiful tonight,” he said so politely they could have been in a ballroom.

She remembered herself and the fact that he was a titled gentleman and must be greeted as such. She dipped down into a curtsy. “Lord Rowley... good evening to you, sir.”

He pulled a rose from behind his back and presented it to her. She took the pink bloom into her gloved hand. He gestured to a chair and she made her way to take a seat before her legs buckled beneath her. She set the rose down on a small table next to her chair and clasped her hands together.

As he pulled the other chair closer to her own, she could only stare at the man in a silent question. “You must be wondering why I am here,” he began quietly.

She nodded her head. “It has crossed my mind. Especially since I have seen so little of you as of late. I thought perhaps you might be trying to avoid me.”

A slight smile lifted at one corner of his mouth. “To be perfectly honest, I have done nothing but think of you since I last saw you.”

She raised an eyebrow, questioningly. “You have?”

“Yes. I have.”

“In what respect?” she asked. “If you wish to propose once more to take me under your protection, you should know that my opinion has not changed. I will not become your mistress, sir.” She would not have thought Mrs. Dove-Lyon would arrange a meeting between them for such a purpose...but perhaps Asher had misled the widow as to his intentions.

“No, that is not what I wish to offer. You, my lady, have changed my mind about the prospect of marriage,” he murmured.

“I don’t understand how I could have possibly managed such a miracle,” she said with a shrug. She still wasn’t sure the man before her was talking with a sincere heart. A rogue, after all, was still a rake at heart and until he proved otherwise, she could think of him in no other way. How could she trust him and believe that he spoke the truth?

He reached out so quickly she didn’t have time to prepare herself before he pulled her glove off and took her bare hand. Those same tingling currents raced up her arm and when his thumb began to make a small circular motion on her skin, she knew with complete certainty that he felt it, too.

“ This is how you have changed my mind, Patience,” he said repeating the gesture she had performed on him previously. But it was the sound of her given name in such a husky tone that had her heart fluttering inside her chest. Such a tone could be interpreted in so many different ways. The sound was like that of a lover, and she shivered inside.

“You feel it too, then,” she replied hoping he would confirm his feelings.

“I will no longer deny the connection between us that you spoke of. If marriage is the only way I can explore it, then I will not close myself off to the idea. The only question now is will you allow yourself the time to get to know me so we can find out together if we might suit?”

“How can you assure me that you will not take advantage of my kindness, using the ruse of courtship to persuade me into intimacies I would only allow to my husband?” she inquired softly while lowering her eyes.

He took hold of her chin giving her no choice but to look directly at the man who was slowly opening his heart to her. “I promise I will never hurt you, Patience, and will never ask more of you than what you are willing to freely give.”

“I am at a loss on what to think,” she said in a breathy whisper.

“Then don’t think. Let us take each day as they come.”

“And how will we spend the coming days, my lord? I suspect you are not entirely happy about the possibilities of rounds of balls and other Society events for the Season.”

“As much as I would like to spend as many hours as possible of the day alone with you, I fear that we will most likely not have many moments such as this for private conversations,” he said, and she swore she saw a small bit of unhappiness flash in his eyes.

She gave him a small smile as she had cherished the rare moments alone with him. “No more teasing between Hades and Persephone?”

He chuckled. “Maybe only when we do have a stolen moment or two together.”

“I pray you know what you’re getting yourself into, Lord Rowley. I didn’t lie to you when I told you I was not raised within Society. I would hate for your reputation to be tarnished because of your association with me.”

He pulled her to her feet and stood close. “And I didn’t lie when I said perhaps we can fix things together. I will have my mother help with getting you accepted within the ton .”

“Y-your m-mother?” she gasped out. “She hardly thinks the best of me and only

tolerates me because of my care of your brother.”

“She will come around. Trust me.”

“My lord—”

“Call me Asher when we are alone,” he replied interrupting her. “I loved hearing my name as it passed your lips when you learned my identity.”

She smiled at him shyly again. “Asher...”

“Patience...” he whispered in reply before he leaned forward until their lips barely touched.

He gave her the opportunity to either step forward to lean into his kiss or step back to refuse the offering. But she still had concerns. She had done her own bit of investigating Asher Tyler, Earl of Rowley once she learned his identity. He was known to have dallied with multiple different women in the past few Seasons and there was at least one woman he had kept as a mistress. Unfortunately, Cassandra wasn’t able to find out if Asher still had one. How was she to know the true nature of this man? He might only be telling her what she wanted to hear. And heaven forbid if she fell in love with him and he later left her rather than going through with their marriage. She wouldn’t be able to stand it.

“I understand you have your reservations. Tell me what is troubling you so I might set your mind at ease,” he said stepping back to give her some space but also so he could watch her intently.

There was no reason to not be completely honest with him and what she was feeling. “How am I to know you are being truthful in what you are saying to me?”

“What do you mean?”

She lifted her chin and spoke her mind. “When I first met you, you were coming from upstairs. I can well imagine what happens on the upper floor. You have told me repeatedly that marriage doesn’t interest you. You say you have changed your mind because of the attraction between us, but what’s to stop your mind from changing again? If the intensity of your feelings begins to fade, will you discard me to return to your lifestyle from before?”

He shook his head and stepped closer. “Dearest, I would never dishonor you in such a way. If we are to be together, I will be with you and you alone. You will hold my heart, and I will gladly give it.”

“Perhaps I am too bold in my assumptions, but I have to be wary.”

“I understand but even a rake can change for the right woman.” He gave a grin. “The fleeting attraction I’ve held for women in the past bears no comparison to the depth of my feelings for you. And while you might doubt my morals, please know that my loyalty is beyond question. Those I truly love remain in my heart forever. If you can place your trust in me, I guarantee my affection for you will never diminish.”

“You have given me much to think on, Asher,” she said using his given name. “You may just have to prove the sincerity of your words to me in the coming weeks. Do you think you are up to the challenge?”

“If it takes the rest of my life to convince you of my feelings, then I shall do so but the choice is yours, Patience. I now only wait here for you to take a step toward me to show me that you are willing to continue the journey with me at your side.”

Asher once again leaned forward, but as their breath mingled on a heartbeat, her intuition where this man was concerned took over. She stepped forward into his

embrace and wound her arms around his neck bringing him closer. His eyes sparkled in delight as he gently kissed her.

And that kiss... It was everything she had hoped for and held a promise of what was yet to come. Patience took advantage of the moment. Flashes of what their future could hold ran rampant through her mind and she held onto the man as if for dear life as she accepted that he might be the one to claim her heart completely.

A sound on the other side of the door was an unwelcome reminder that their time alone would have to come to an end—and yet they still stood there with heaving chests as they returned together back from the brink of what might be. Two souls captured in an instant of time. Both bound to the other as if Fate had finally found them and would never allow them to be apart again. For Patience, her life would never be the same.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

Patience looked out the window of her carriage with a fair amount of trepidation rushing through her entire body. She was a nervous wreck and was still unsure this was a good idea. How many years had it been since she had seen her parents and siblings? Or even her cousin? After her father had disowned her after running away with Stuart, she had never returned. They never understood how much she had loved her husband and now... here she was about to see if she could mend the strain that had followed in the years since they were parted.

Cassandra, Moriah, and Josephine had all accompanied her for moral support. She could only hope that bringing two women who were now titled ladies might change her father's mind. And if that failed, at least she'd have the support of her oldest friend.

Cassandra poked her head back inside the carriage. "Patience, darling, are you coming? You won't find your answers sitting here, dearest."

Patience gulped before she at last took the first step toward the unknown. She stared up at her family's store sign: Barnet Mercantile . A flood of memories rushed across her mind before Moriah took hold of her arm.

"Come along, Patience. For better or worse, let's get this over with," Moriah said as she led Patience toward the front door.

"What if they throw me out?" Patience managed to whisper.

Josephine took her other hand. "Then you will have your friends here to offer you comfort at such a happening. Never fear that you are alone. We will always be here to

support each other.”

“The Wicked Widows Club ladies unite?” Patience teased looking to each of the ladies surrounding her as if she had just created their new motto.

Cassandra nodded. “Something like that. Now, enough stalling. There’s no sense putting off the inevitable. Let’s meet your family.”

Without any further delay, Cassandra opened the mercantile door. Immediately the familiar aroma of the place hit Patience, transporting her to the past. Everything was exactly as she remembered it. Barrels of flour, sugar, and various spices lined one wall while another held bolts and bolts of fabric. Ribbons and trim were waiting to be picked to adorn a dress or hat and Patience almost staggered into the familiarity of her parents’ store.

“Welcome to the Barnet Mercantile, ladies,” a male voice boomed over the noise of other customers waiting their turn at the counter. “Let me know if you need any assistance.”

Patience would have known that voice anywhere and took in a deep breath, steeling her courage to face her father for the first time in eight years. She excused herself from her friends and walked toward the counter where her father busied himself packaging a bag of flour. When he turned to face her, his expression hardened, though she saw a quick moment of vulnerability before he masked it away. He excused himself from his customers, asking a store hand to take over as he approached her.

“Hello, Father,” she said softly as she stared into his familiar face. Clearly, she was the last person he expected to walk in his door.

“Patience,” he said, though there was no softness in his tone.

“Father—” she started, but was interrupted by another customer coming up to ask a quick question. Patience’s father politely answered, the tone of a kind man she had missed. But there was no kindness in his expression when he looked at her. Not anymore. Once the customer left, he turned back to his daughter.

“Come with me, Patience,” he demanded.

He started walking toward the back of the store. Something fragile—glass or porcelain, perhaps—shattered and she heard her mother’s voice call out her name. Her father made a motion with his hand for her mother to follow them before he barked further orders.

“Jane, be a good girl and clean up the mess Mrs. Barnett made with that plate. Harry, take over at the counter while I have a talk with my... your ... niece,” her father said before they entered the back room.

Patience followed slowly, feeling her mother rush up behind them. She could hear her mother sniffle, and she held back her own tears when her mother reached for her hand to give it a brief squeeze.

They didn’t stay in the storage area they entered but continued through the room packed with boxes of every size until her father reached a door in the back. Patience held her breath knowing the door was the back entrance to her old home. When she walked through it, her knees began to buckle, and she quickly stretched out her hand for a nearby chair to steady her.

Her father pulled her mother to stand next to him before he turned angry blue eyes to her. “What are you doing here, girl?” he snarled. “I thought I told you not to come back.”

“David, this is our daughter,” her mother said softly, reaching her hand to touch his

arm. He shook it off. Her mother turned to her, tears filling her eyes. "Patience, dearest."

"Hello, Mother," Patience said, her voice shaky from trying to keep her composure.

"David, surely you must forgive her after all these years. She has finally come home. She's our daughter!"

"Deborah, quiet," her father snapped at his wife. He turned back to Patience, though his face was still lined in anger. "She is no daughter of mine."

Patience bit the inside of her lip, tears burning her eyes as she stared at her father. "Papa."

"Don't," he said. "You deserted us years ago. I have no wish to hear your previous name for me."

"But, David, she was in love. Such devotion to the man she cared for should be commended not frowned upon."

"She married without our consent!" he bellowed.

Patience stepped forward. "Please, Father, can we not put the past behind us? I came here to make amends, to try and repair the rift between us."

"How are we to know this is genuine and not some cruel ruse to insult us further?" He began before he pointed to her clothing. "By the way you're dressed, I suppose you're a lady in high society. We are surely too low for you to bother yourself with."

"I wouldn't say that, no. I just have friends in higher places."

“Is that a threat? You would send your rich friends to come take my shop from me?”

“Never!” Patience said wondering how this conversation had turned in such a terrible direction.

“David! Such an accusation is abhorrent!” Deborah snapped at her husband.

“After all the scum who have recently been trying to persuade me to sell our shop to convert it for a pleasure den, I wouldn’t be surprised if someone decided to change tactics and use our daughter to try and sway me to sell it. You came in with fashionable women—have they paid you to come here and persuade me?”

“Father, I simply came to make amends. My friends are only that, my friends. They have no other motives except to support me by coming here to see you. You may berate me all you want, but take care as to how you speak of them.”

“I don’t give a fig about who your friends are. If you’ve said your peace, you can leave the way you entered.”

“Father, please,” Patience said making one last attempt for him to truly hear her. “I know what I did was wrong. I know that I hurt you and mother when I left. But I loved Stuart and he loved me, and he treated me with kindness and respect. That is the only thing you ever wanted for me, and though you did not consent to our union, he was everything you would have wanted for a son-in-law. He was a good and honorable man who died serving his country. I’m proud to have been his wife.”

“Thank goodness for that,” Deborah said, coming over and taking her daughter into her arms for a hug. “I’m so glad you are here, dearest.”

“I’ve missed you, Mother,” Patience whispered, her tears falling lightly onto her mother’s shoulder. She looked up toward her father, who watched them stubbornly,

though his expression had softened. “Papa.”

She held her hand out to him. He took a moment before he walked over. He stood there in indecision before he finally reached out to take her hand. He gave it a light squeeze as they used to do when she was a child.

A moment after she finally heard him give a heavy sigh, she and her mother were enveloped in her father’s embrace. It was a start and Patience would be grateful for this moment of finally reuniting with her family.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

Asher's life seemingly took on a whole new meaning with Patience at his side. Getting his mother on board to act as a chaperone had taken some doing but even now, she had finally taken a liking to the lady when she had seen how much Asher was coming to care for her. While she might not be the titled lady his mother had anticipated as a daughter-in-law, his mother was quite happy to note that Asher was finally showing signs of being willing to settle down. Gideon was still another story. He had become sullen of late, which was particularly noticeable since he was now living under Asher's roof where he could keep a close eye on the younger man.

But maybe that was also part of the problem. Gideon had no intention of getting himself out into Society even when Patience urged him to do so. His brother was still in a mood that no one could lift. Perhaps with more time, he would eventually come around. Asher wasn't sure what else he could do for his brother who still pinned away for Patience. She was the one thing Asher wouldn't give up.

It had been three weeks since that fateful day at the Lyon's Den when Asher's world had completely changed. Three weeks of dancing with Patience at balls and escorting her to the theater. Everything seemed like a brand-new experience even for him as he watched his lady blossom like a beautiful spring rose. Yes... there were some who continued to turn up their noses at her but overall, she had been accepted as one of them.

What had come as a surprise was to learn that she was already friends with the Marchionesses of Saxton and Wickes. What had been the chances that her friends and his had married? And yet... God help them all if Mrs. Dove-Lyon hadn't arranged everything to happen exactly as she had planned. Asher could only wonder what she had in store for Lucius. He was the last for the original four men who had known

each other for more years than any of them could remember. The last bachelor standing since Asher considered himself off the market.

Not that the new slate of debutantes didn't try to wiggle their way in his direction. He still adhered to protocol which meant he would only dance with Patience the appropriate two dances per evening. Any more when they were not yet officially engaged would be grounds for gossip, and he refused to tarnish her reputation. But he didn't have to dance that number with anyone else and he limited the times he did head to the dance floor to one with the other ladies of his acquaintance. Even that was often too much as the young ladies saw an eligible man with a title who was unmarried and fair prey for their advances.

Patience handled all the attention she received with the grace of a goddess and her dance card was filled at each ball they attended. Luckily, Asher was able to fill in his name first so he was ensured he could dance with his lady.

There was only one occasion that Asher kept a careful eye on her and her partner. When it came to Oliver Pitt, he swore he would call the cad out if he so much as dropped his hand to any place inappropriate on Patience's body.

"You're lost in thought, Ash," Gideon mumbled through a bite of his eggs. "Thinking of her, I suppose?"

Asher shook his head to clear his memories of the lady who his brother was referring to. Looking down the length of the breakfast table, he saw that his brother was watching him intently. He supposed he owed Gideon an apology for what his brother would consider stealing his love interest away.

"I fear I've done you an injustice, Gideon," Asher began until a snort of disdain from his brother filled the room.

“You mean the lovers’ quarrel you found fit to have in front of me? That injustice?” Gideon said reaching for his cup of coffee.

“It wasn’t my intention to hurt you. Patience and I had met previously. I can’t explain how we had such an instant connection but it’s there,” Asher began reaching for his own cup and taking a sip.

“It was like I wasn’t even there once she entered, Ash. I had just spent the previous half hour spewing my feelings for her to you. You seemed sympathetic...but then your actions showed your complete disregard for how I felt.”

Asher rose from his place at the table and went to sit next to his brother. “I’m sorry, Gideon. Truly, I am. You must know I would never hurt you intentionally. But Patience and I... well... we just seem to belong together. Can you forgive me and wish us well?” Asher waited while a flood of emotions swept across his brother’s features.

Gideon pushed his plate of food away and sat back in his chair. “I can’t say that I am happy I’m not the one she has feelings for. But if her heart is already taken, I’m not one to stand in the way of her true happiness. But all the same, I hate coming in second best.”

“You’d never be second best to the right woman, Gideon,” Asher said quietly.

“That is easy for the winner to say.”

Asher leaned forward. “I say that because it’s the truth. The right woman will come along for you. And if it happens like it did for me, she’ll show up when you least expect her.”

“As long as you care for her, Asher, and she’s just not some woman you’ll get over in

a few months, then I wish you well... both of you," Gideon finally admitted with a half-smile.

"Thank you, brother," Asher said with a sense of relief that all would be well between himself and Gideon. "What plans do you have for today? I have to meet with Mrs. Dove-Lyon later tonight at the Lyon's Den. Maybe you'd like to come along," Asher suggested.

"Is she checking in on your progress? Or making sure you haven't changed your mind?" Gideon asked with a smirk.

"I won't change my mind where Patience is concerned but yes. I suppose she wants to ensure I am still behaving myself. Would you like to meet me there?" Asher asked again hoping to get his brother out of the house.

"Maybe another time, Ash. I've had another terrible headache all morning and think I might retire to a dark room," Gideon replied honestly.

"I'll have a maid bring some cool water and cloths. Maybe that will help," Asher suggested. "Should I send for Dr. Thornberry to come examine you?"

"No need. The dark room should help." Gideon nodded toward his brother and left the room leaving Asher alone with his thoughts.

He made his way to his study and began to go over the paperwork regarding some of his investments that he had been neglecting. It was mundane work but needed to be done. He couldn't spend all of his time with the lovely Patience... or could he? A smile lit his face knowing he would meet her briefly at a ball before heading to his appointment with Mrs. Dove-Lyon. Maybe Patience had also been summoned to see how their relationship was going. He smiled again knowing he might just catch another glimpse of his lady where they had first met.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

Patience entered the Hampton townhouse with Moriah and Josephine by her side. Their husbands trailed in behind them and were deep in conversation. It was clear to Patience that Mrs. Dove-Lyon had made the perfect matches for Moriah and Josephine for reasons far beyond the two of them being once again accepted into Society, now that they were wed to marquises. The couples were truly happy and loving, complementing each other perfectly. She could only hope her match with Asher would turn out as well.

She missed having Cassandra with her since moving back in with her parents after their reconciliation. In the days since Patience left Cassandra's townhouse for the last time, she had come to feel the loss of no longer seeing her friend on a daily basis. Cassie had promised her that they would see each other again soon and that Cassie's time to reenter Society was coming. She just needed to ensure that Patience was also settled with the man chosen for her. The fact that all three men were friends seemed to say much and Patience wondered who the widow had in store for Cassandra.

Patience had a difficult time convincing her father to allow her to attend the Hampton affair until he learned that she would be accompanied by two married women. He seemed to still be having a difficult time of seeing her as an adult and not the young maiden she had been when she first left his house. But he was coming around and seemed happy that she was once again with her family where she belonged. She was grateful they had been able to overcome their differences.

Still... being summoned to the Lyon's Den later this evening puzzled her. She had followed all of Mrs. Dove-Lyon's instructions so Patience couldn't think why the Widow of Whitehall needed to see her.

“Rowley,” Lord Saxton said raising his hand to greet his friend. “Good of you to finally show up.”

Patience turned to see Asher walking through the front door and her heart soared seeing him looking resplendent in his evening attire. Not that he was ever dressed inappropriately but there was always just something about the man that caused her head to spin in delight. She was about to step forward when a young lady came up to Asher and took his arm.

“Lord Rowley,” she purred loud enough for everyone nearby to hear, “you look very dapper this evening.”

Asher gave a pained glance toward Patience who waited calmly for the scene to unfold. She wasn’t the jealous type and this young miss wasn’t going to cause her to lose her composure now.

“Lady Maribel... a pleasure to see you this evening,” Asher began looking toward the ballroom as another young woman came forward. “And Lady Juliet... good evening.”

Josephine rolled her eyes as Gyles took her arm and began ushering his wife into the ballroom. Patience leaned over to whisper in Moriah’s ear.

“What am I missing?” Patience asked quietly as she watched Asher conduct himself as a gentleman with polite conversation with the two women, despite the stiff expression on his face that made his lack of enjoyment in the conversation quite clear.

“Last Season, Lady Juliet was attempting to get Lord Wickes to marry her so you can imagine why Josephine wouldn’t want to be around her,” Moriah said looking up to her husband who gave her a strained smile.

“And Lady Maribel?” Patience inquired of the other woman.

“As you can tell from the grip she has on Lord Rowley’s arm, she set her hook in him and had no plans to let go. But watch... he’s already disengaged her hand and obviously has no intention of pursuing a relationship with her,” Moriah finally answered.

“I still worry if his feelings for me are lasting,” Patience said in concern. “We’re still getting to know one another. While I must admit he has been most attentive, I fear what will happen when the early excitement of our romance has worn off.”

Moriah gave a light laugh. “Patience, darling... anyone with eyes in their head can see for themselves how much Lord Rowley adores you. You have nothing to worry about. Trust me.”

Patience continued to watch the scene unfolding in front of her. When Asher stepped aside with Lady Maribel, Patience was certain Asher was making it clear that he wasn’t interested in the lady. She had a moment of sadness fill her heart for the woman when Patience saw her chin quiver and tears fill her eyes before she stormed off with Lady Juliet. Asher immediately came over to Patience and offered her his arm.

He looked down upon her and gave her what appeared an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry you had to witness that but it’s been a long time coming.”

“Being told you don’t hold an affection for her had to be hard for her to hear,” Patience said quietly. “Of course, I’m assuming that’s what was said between you.”

A chuckle rumbled in his chest. “Wickes had been warning me if I didn’t cut the girl off soon, I’d find myself compromised in the garden and have to marry the chit.” He ran a finger through the neckline of his shirt before continuing. “I had no intention of

ever marrying her but she assumed much and attempted to increase our familiarity at every ball we happened to be at.”

Patience squeezed his arm and he put his hands over hers briefly before they continued into the ballroom. “I can understand why she would be upset and hope you said your piece gently.”

“As gently as possible. She was about to cause a scene before her friend Lady Juliet stepped forward and they excused themselves.”

“Are there other women here who will be vying for your attention tonight, Hades?” she teased softly already knowing his answer.

When he turned his hazel eyes to her, there was so much love shining in them Patience began to wonder how she ever doubted his feelings for her. “There is only one woman who holds all my admiration—tonight or any night for the rest of our days together, Persephone. That one pomegranate reaffirmed we shall be as one for more years than I can count.”

“I look forward to the years ahead, my lord.”

“Let’s get through the evening and later our meetings with Mrs. Dove-Lyon,” Asher suggested before he reached for the dance card dangling at her wrist. “I had best claim my dances before I find myself without the opportunity to spend part of my evening skipping with you to a lively tune.”

“We couldn’t let that happen, now could we?” she said as he filled in two places on her card. She would prefer that she spend all her time dancing with Asher alone but she supposed if, or when, they married she could do so. She turned her eyes up to stare into his handsome face and could only think about his kisses. She must have conveyed her longing for him because he quickly switched direction and pulled her

down a hallway.

The first room they came to was a library and he quickly scanned the room to see that it was empty. Once he was assured that they were alone, he pulled her into his arms, then bent forward and kissed her lips. She sighed and wound her arms around his waist.

“Asher...” she whispered softly. “How did you know I needed your kiss?”

“Your look told me more than you might have thought, my dear,” Asher murmured into her ear. He began nibbling his way down her neck and she moaned in pleasure.

“We should return to the ballroom before we’re caught here,” Patience warned him.

“So what if we are? It would allow us to marry sooner. I would not mind as long as you were the lady,” Asher said placing another quick kiss across her lips.

She rubbed her hand down his jacket. “I don’t want our marriage to begin with you being forced to marry me, Asher. I want that to happen because you willingly choose me as your wife.”

“I thought I had already proven that to you over the past several weeks. I must up my game if I have failed to demonstrate my affection,” he teased her while running a finger down her cheek.

She offered him a smile. “You have proven yourself to me, my lord, in so many ways,” Patience replied forgetting all about her earlier words of doubt.

“As long as I have redeemed myself in your eyes,” he said before he kissed her again.

As much as she didn’t want this moment to end, she finally forced herself to pull

away before they could be missed. They left the library and returned to the ballroom. Patience was enjoying herself. Moriah and Josephine had introduced her to many of their friends including Lady Versey who was a delight and accepted Patience as though she was one of the ton her entire life. Overall, most of Society had been welcoming with the help of two future duchesses as friends. She had never been more grateful to Moriah and Josephine for leading the way.

The night progressed and after her second dance with Asher, he excused himself and told her he would look for her on the balcony at the Lyon's Den. Patience had almost forgotten about her meeting with Mrs. Dove-Lyon and Asher's departure was a reminder that she, too, should gather her cloak. The hour was later than she thought and her carriage should be waiting for her outside.

Once she retrieved her cloak, she headed outside to look for her carriage. She finally noticed it was parked several conveyances down from the entrance, almost hidden in the shadows of the night. Not seeing her driver sitting in his seat, she decided to make her way and wait for him inside. Opening the door, she stepped up and immediately regretted not waiting for her driver to bring the horses around to the front door. She was not alone!

"Mrs. Moore," a deep voice hummed from the forward seat before a man leaned toward her. "I hope you don't mind this intrusion."

"I most certainly do," she protested as she attempted to back out of the carriage.

He took hold of her wrist preventing her descent to the ground. "I only wished a private word with you. I thought perhaps we could share a ride to the Lyon's Den," he explained.

Recognition finally dawned on her. "Lord Pitt... this is highly inappropriate and I am certainly not about to share anything with you, let alone allow you to share my

carriage with me.”

“I must insist,” he said giving her arm a yank so she was pulled inside. Luckily, he didn’t force her to sit next to him so she took the opposite seat. Once she was settled, he tapped on the roof of the carriage and the driver began to put her horses into motion.

“What do you want from me, sir?” Patience asked through clenched lips.

He watched her for several minutes before he finally began to speak his mind. “You are a very beautiful woman, Patience,” he began, but she cut him off before he could continue.

“And I have not given you permission to use my first name, my lord. I would prefer to keep this conversation you are forcing me to have... formal.”

“And it is my preference that this conversation be more intimate... Patience ,” he said emphasizing her name.

“What do you want from me?” she repeated firmly.

“I want what you’ve been giving Rowley, of course. I am well aware that you are a member of the Wicked Widow’s Club and I would like to take you under my wing as my mistress. I can provide you a handsome settlement once our association is at an end and in the meantime you will want for nothing. I can guarantee you won’t leave my bed unsatisfied,” he said telling her his terms.

Patience was at a loss for words and she took several gulps of air trying to calm herself.

A chuckle rumbled in Pitt’s chest. “Yes... I know... you are overwhelmed by such an

offer but I promise you I'll be a much better lover than Rowley."

"I am not Asher Tyler's mistress. He has been nothing but a gentleman toward me. What a pity I cannot say the same of you," she shouted and hit her clenched fist on the seat.

Laughter filled the interior of the carriage. "Rowley? A gentleman? Why, he's made his way through most of the prostitutes at the Lyon's Den on top of all the mistresses he's kept over the past several years."

"His past matters little to me. We have come to an understanding, and Lord Rowley has all but offered to marry me," Patience continued to drive her point across to this unsufferable beast of a man.

"You amuse me with your naivete, Patience. Do you really believe he will ever be faithful to one woman?" He took a glance out the window then tapped again on the roof causing the carriage to slow. "I will let you think more about what I can offer you. You won't be disappointed with me as your lover."

"It will be a cold day in hell before I would ever let you in my bed," Patience declared.

As the carriage slowed and came to a halt, Oliver sat forward in his seat, coming so close to her that she could feel his breath on her face. Before she knew what he was about, he took hold of her, pulling her forward, and began his attempt to kiss her. She clenched her lips together thereby denying him what he was attempting to steal from her. When he finally let her go, he stared at her in disappointment.

"Next time, you'll give me everything I desire from you and more, Patience," he warned opening the door and stepping to the ground. "I'll look forward to seeing you tonight on the balcony at the Lyon's Den, my pet."

He shut the door and Patience heard his call to the driver to continue onward to her destination. She swiped her hand across her lips in an attempt to wipe away the memory of Oliver's kiss. She would never give in to his demands but now she worried just how she would protect herself from his advances.

She called up to the driver and an unfamiliar face peeked through the hatch. She gave the stranger Cassandra's address and ordered him to take her there. She would take no further chances by traveling alone. She'd get refreshed at home and ask Cassandra to go with her to the Lyon's Den. It couldn't help to have reinforcements on whatever awaited her for the rest of the evening.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

Asher was in a good mood. His time at the Hampton affair had yielded him an unexpected kiss with his beautiful lady and had allowed him the opportunity to hold her in his arms. Every minute he spent with her had him falling harder for her. He wished to spend all their time together, to delve deeper into all her hidden secrets, but that would come one day. He knew that the wait would be worth it in the long run. He just needed a fair amount of... well... patience.

A small smile swept across his mouth while he continued reminiscing about Patience and holding her close. If someone had told him months ago that his thoughts would be so utterly consumed by a woman, he would have laughed the whole idea off as a joke. He had never been more committed to another lady in his entire life, and he wondered how it was even possible that such a feat was capable. Surely, it was a miracle.

But no other woman had ever affected him like Patience. From the moment he had stumbled down those stairs into her arms, he had been hopelessly lost, even if it had taken him some time to work past his denial. He could only be glad that he'd come to his senses in time. She was a rare treasure just waiting to be taken by the right man and Asher prided himself on the knowledge that he had somehow also earned her heart.

His meeting with Mrs. Dove-Lyon this evening had reassured the woman that Asher had kept his word. He had no plans today or in his future to visit the women available on the third floor nor did he plan to take another mistress. Florinda would be the last woman he would take to his bed outside of wedlock and Patience would be his last woman he would ever know intimately. He shook his head in wonderment knowing he was now dedicated to just one lady. Yes... this was indeed a miracle.

“You’re looking too smug this evening, Rowley,” Oliver Pitt said from across the table. “Think you’ll win this hand over me?”

Asher’s gaze traveled to the man across from him. He picked up his cards, gave them the briefest glance before folding them and tapping the table as he laid them down. Staring at the pile of coins in front of him, he took up a stack and tossed them into the growing pile in the center.

“It seems I’m the one on a lucky streak tonight,” Asher finally replied before he took a sip of his brandy. “You might want to fold, Pitt, before you lose all of your quarterly allowance.”

“I have enough to pay my debts and win a game over you,” Oliver sneered in contempt. He pointed a finger toward Asher. “Besides, I’m after a better catch than a gambling pot tonight. Even better than your ex-mistress.”

Asher narrowed his eyes. “You’re welcome to any of my castoffs, Pitt.”

“I won’t come in second to you again, Rowley,” Oliver taunted with his free hand clenching his glass.

“I wouldn’t waste my money making such a bet. For years I’ve watched your attempts to overcome your shortcomings. Your businesses have failed as have your investments to overcome your losses. Why, I have even heard Florinda tossed you aside. If that is indeed the case, then I have to commend her on her good choice. But your attempts to beat me out in even the simplest of endeavors will only continue to earn you another downfall. I’m not even sure why you refuse to simply admit defeat.”

“Why you worthless piece of sh—”

Quince the dealer finally interjected. “Gentlemen, if we can proceed on with the

game,” he suggested pointing around the table to another man who looked uncomfortable. “I believe it’s your bet, sir.”

The gentleman looked at his cards before he folded, stood up, and left the remaining players to their fate. Two more men folded, while another two added their bets to the pile.

“Reveal your hands, my lords,” Quince finally said as each man began to show his cards.

Asher kept his eyes on Pitt who watched his luck unfold before him. Asher didn’t even look down at his cards but fanned them faceup in front of him with a smile of satisfaction. He knew perfectly well that he had the winning hand.

“Damn you to hell,” Pitt cursed. He abruptly stood with a snarl of outrage. Before anyone could stop him, he flipped the table over sending cards and coins flying into the air. The players all stood to get out of the way as Pitt quickly lunged at Asher. He didn’t get far before Philostrate and Demetrius, two of the gambling floor bouncers, took hold of him.

“You’ll be barred for certain, Pitt, for acting out,” someone called out to the sound of men’s raucous laughter.

“Come along, Lord Pitt,” Philostrate ordered as they began to pull him from the gambling room.

Pitt tried to break free and momentarily was able to grab hold of Asher’s arm. “I’ll see you in hell for this, Rowley. I’m going to take great delight having Patience as my lover.”

Asher sprang for Pitt as soon as his words penetrated Asher’s head. “The hell you

will,” he snarled back. It was Pitt’s turn to laugh even as he was quickly removed from the Lyon’s Den.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon quickly clapped her hands to bring order back to the room. “Nothing more to see here, gentlemen and ladies,” she said pointing to the gallery where the women had gathered to see the cause of the commotion. “A round of drinks on the house and best of luck at my tables.”

Asher shook off the hands of the bouncer that continued to clasp his arm. “No need to continue to hold onto me, Nick. I’m fine,” Asher said before the wolf nodded.

“Just don’t go after him, my lord. He’s a nasty piece of work, and I wouldn’t put anything past him,” Nick warned as several servants rushed into the room to clean up the mess that had been made. Others offered drinks on silver trays to those in need of a refill.

“I wouldn’t waste my time on Pitt,” Asher responded before a glass of brandy was thrust into his hand by Lucius.

“Thought you might need a new drink,” Lucius said scowling. “What the hell did you say to him that sent him off like that?”

“The usual taunts, I suppose,” Asher said with a shrug.

“He’s been trying to best you since our days at Oxford. You’d think he’d have learned by now that he’s never going to one up you.”

“It’s a tiresome game that I’ve grown weary of but when he mentioned having Patience, that’s what made me snap,” Asher confided before raking his hand through his hair.

“He’ll never win her so no need to worry on that account.”

“I’m not worried about him winning her through any honest means, but I wouldn’t put it past him not to do something more devious,” Asher said concerned for his lady’s safety.

“He’s not that stupid.” Lucius downed his drink before setting the empty glass on the tray of a passing servant. “Shall we have a go at another game?”

Asher contemplated the possibilities of keeping his winning streak alive. He stole a glance at the balcony where the ladies would stand to watch the men gamble, but Patience was nowhere in sight.

Asher shook his head. “I think I’ll call it a night and quit while I’m ahead. I’ll see you at White’s tomorrow.”

He called for his carriage to be brought around and went to gather his coat. As he headed toward the street to wait for his driver, he was struck a blow to the back of his head that brought him to his knees. Stunned, he felt himself taken by both arms toward the dark alleyway between two buildings. Fists began to fly, striking Asher repeatedly until he was staggering to remain upright. Dazed and confused and unable to defend himself, it wasn’t until a familiar voice whispered in his ear that Asher knew who was behind the assault.

“Pompous prick,” Pitt sneered before Asher felt a blade being pushed into his flesh. “You’ll never beat me again.”

Pitt pulled the blade out and took off as Asher fell back down to his knees. Blood gushed from his side, and he knew he would need to find help soon or he might bleed to death. The sound of a carriage coming to a halt nearby brought him hope and he forced himself to get to his feet. He barely made it to the sidewalk before he fell to

the ground in agony. A groan left him and he heard a door being flung open.

“Asher?” The sound of Patience’s voice was like that of an angel. “Cassandra, ask someone to send Dr. Thornberry to your residence. Darby, come help me get Lord Rowley into the carriage.”

“Yes, Mrs. Moore,” Cassandra’s driver answered, and he came over to help Patience.

“Asher, can you hear me, darling?” Patience asked as two bouncers came running to help. “Be careful, he’s been injured.”

“Yes, madam,” Theseus and Egeus said in unison.

“Patience... I can’t be taken to your friend’s house. Get me to mine,” Asher managed to whisper through clenched teeth.

“Cassandra’s is closer,” she replied as she got into the carriage after Asher had been settled. She lifted her gown and began tearing one of her petticoats in strips. She then moved his waistcoat aside to hold the linen against the wound.

“Get a move on, Darby, and hurry,” Cassandra called out to the driver.

The sound of the leather reins being slapped sent the horses into motion, the jolt of the carriage causing Asher to groan in despair. He wished he could have said a word of thanks to the ladies who had come to his rescue. He wished he could have protested that Patience’s reputation would be in ruins, but he couldn’t manage to do more than moan with the first rut in the road the carriage hit. He had passed out cold from the pain by the time they rounded the first corner of the street.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

Patience wrung out the cloth in the basin filled with cool water and placed it over Asher's forehead. He had been burning up with a fever for the past several days. In his delirium, he constantly called out her name and she took some comfort knowing he wanted her by his side. Thankfully, his fever had broken, but she would continue to worry over his health until he finally opened her eyes. In the meantime, she constantly sent a prayer to the heavens in between her acts of care for the man she loved.

Dr. Thornberry inspected the wound at Asher's side and replaced the bandage. Wiping his hands on a towel, he took off his spectacles and stood. "You saved this man's life with your quick thinking, Mrs. Moore. Most ladies wouldn't have ruined a petticoat to use as a makeshift bandage."

Patience ran her fingers down Asher's cheek. "I couldn't allow the man I love to bleed to death, Doctor. The clothing can be replaced but Lord Rowley cannot."

"Your compassion toward your patient is to be commended, Mrs. Moore. I was right to hire you for my practice when Mrs. Dove-Lyon made the suggestion. I'd be honored if you'd consider staying on. I could use the extra help," Dr. Thornberry said with a hopeful gaze in his eyes.

"I'll have to discuss the matter with Lord Rowley. Since we have come to an understanding, I'm not certain he would wish me to continue to work," Patience replied, although the thought of continuing to remain helpful to the doctor held some appeal.

"Just so you know the offer stands, Mrs. Moore. You're welcome to work for me at

any time or for however many hours during the week you might be available.”

Patience nodded. “Thank you for the consideration, Dr. Thornberry. I’ll send word as to my decision as soon as I’m able.” She bit her lower lip while her eyes returned to Asher laying pale on the bed. “When will he wake?”

“You know as well as I do that these things happen in their own time, but I have a feeling he’ll be up dancing a lively quadrille with you in no time. Just give him a chance to recuperate,” he said in an encouraging tone. “You know where to find me if you need further assistance. Otherwise, I’ll be back in a week to see how his wound is healing.”

“Thank you for all you’ve done for him, Doctor,” Patience replied as she escorted the man to the door.

Patience returned back to her patient to once again take the cloth from Asher’s forehead and dunk it in the basin of water. Once it was replaced, she leaned forward to kiss his cheek. When she opened her eyes, she was pleasantly surprised to see he was staring at her with a smile.

“I think I must be dreaming,” Asher said before reaching to take her hand.

“You gave us all quite the fright, my love,” Patience replied as she studied his features as though to memorize them. Bending forward, she pressed her lips lightly on his own. “You still have a slight fever, but Dr. Thornberry says you’ll recover in no time. Do you remember what happened to you?”

His brow furrowed before he raised his hand to the back of his head. “I remember leaving the Lyon’s Den and then being hit over the back of my head.”

Patience nodded. “That would explain the wound you have. But what happened next?”

Dr. Thornberry told us you looked like someone had beaten you... prior to stabbing you with a knife, that is.”

“Us? Who else knows of what happened to me?” Asher struggled to sit up, frowning when he was unable to accomplish it. “I feel as weak as a newborn kitten,” Asher complained before he asked for some water. Patience helped him sit up and held the glass to his lips.

“Cassandra, of course. You’re at her house. Your friends the Marquis of Saxon and Wickes have both inquired here as to your health, along with the Earl of Blackthorn, your mother, and your brother,” Patience began but looked at him sheepishly trying to find the words to continue.

“Bloody Hell... what are you not telling me?” Asher asked and Patience knew he wasn’t going to like her answer.

Patience patted her hair into place before she blurted out the news. “The incident was reported in the Teatime Tattler on the front page, I’m afraid. Naturally I was seen helping get you into the carriage outside the Lyon’s Den. They reported you were too drunk to make it home. They didn’t bother to recount that Cassandra was also there, so we were chaperoned the whole time.”

A groan left him. “So basically, all of Society is talking about us over their morning tea,” he proclaimed in frustration.

“Yes, and since you haven’t been seen leaving, they are reporting the worst-case scenario,” Patience answered him softly.

“Let me guess... I’ve been taking advantage of you and your reputation is now in tatters,” Asher said with a worried frown.

“I’ve been through worse,” Patience said trying to reassure the man she loved that everything would be okay. “I don’t care about any of that, Asher. It’s not important.”

“It’s important to me,” Asher proclaimed squeezing her hand.

“We can worry about my reputation another day, darling,” Patience answered before addressing her true concerns. “The constable has been here daily hoping you would wake up so you can give him details of your attacker. Do you remember anything else?”

Asher rubbed his hands over his eyes and then leaned his head back on the pillows. “There were several who grabbed me and took me into the alleyway between the buildings... not the side with the entrance for the ladies,” he began as he appeared to concentrate on the past events.

“It’s very dark on that side of the house, isn’t it?” she asked with worry.

“Yes, but I barely noticed considering the beating they were giving me once they hauled me there.”

“Was one of those assailants the one who stuck you with the knife?”

He placed his hand on his forehead before he swore and then apologized for his outburst. “I’m sorry... I just can’t remember what happened after that or who stabbed me.”

She caressed his cheek. “Don’t fret over the details for now. It will come back to you.”

“You seem so certain,” he replied in a hushed whisper, and she could see that he had just about exhausted whatever energy he had to give.

“I am certain, just as I am certain that I’m not leaving your side,” Patience exclaimed giving him an encouraging smile.

“Considering Society will be saying a simple carriage ride is what made our marriage, I think it’s safe to say you’re now stuck with me, Persephone,” he teased giving her a taste of his old self.

“In this world or the next, I will always be happy to be with you, Hades,” she said placing another kiss on his lips. “Now, rest, my darling, and sleep well knowing I’m watching over you.”

He closed his weary eyes and Patience, true to her word, continued her vigilant care of the man she adored. She could only pray Asher would remember who tried to kill him. Until the assailant was apprehended, no one was safe.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

F lorinda flinched as she watched Oliver take hold of a vase sitting on her fireplace mantle and fling the fragile glass at the wall. It shattered into a million tiny shards and a curse filled the room. Blood ran from his hand, and he turned hostile eyes toward her as though the damage was all her fault.

“Be useful and get me something to stanch the blood, damn it,” he ordered as he shook his hand sending splatters of blood onto the rug beneath his feet.

She turned away trying to catch her breath and looked around for anything that would serve the purpose he demanded. A napkin left on the sideboard would do and she went across the room to retrieve it. She held the cloth before her waiting for him to take it. She dared not get any closer to his frightful man.

He had showed up three nights ago and hadn't left since. No matter how she pleaded with him to leave her residence, she couldn't convince the man to go away. In a drunken stupor, he had confessed what he had done. Stupid, really, on his part for what reason would she keep his secret that he had struck Asher with a knife? None. She held no sense of loyalty to this hotheaded and dangerous man. His need for revenge on Asher was completely out of control and, to her way of thinking, unreasonable. A feud spanning years that would best be forgotten but not in Oliver's case. For everyone's safety, he needed to be sent away where he couldn't harm anyone else. The only reason she hadn't gone to the authorities straight away was because he hadn't permitted her to leave the house.

She had tried pleading with him, even pouring him drink after drink hoping he might get drunk and pass out. But he seemed more interested in breaking everything within hand's reach than consuming any alcohol tonight. She was running out of ideas and

kept praying that he would eventually pass out from sheer exhaustion.

Oliver went to the sideboard and poured a generous shot of brandy into a glass. Finally... there might still be hope!

“I had hoped that bloody bastard was dead in that alleyway,” he muttered in frustration. “I should have stayed to see the job done...but no, it’s better this way. He should be alive to witness me get my revenge by bedding his woman. She’ll be easy enough to get hold of at that Vaughn woman’s townhouse and then I can finish what I started with Rowley.”

Florinda couldn’t fathom who this poor woman might be that Asher had taken a liking to, but she couldn’t spare much worry for a stranger when she was so busy fearing for her own life. She kept her silence, staying in the back of the room hoping Oliver would forget about her.

He downed his drink, picked up his coat and said something about getting his final revenge this very night. Thankfully, he left slamming the front door behind him.

Florinda wasted no time putting the lock into place the moment he left. She quickly ran around the house ensuring any entrance was now barred so Oliver wouldn’t be able to get in so easily if he returned. She then went back to the front parlor and pulled the bell cord. When a servant answered her summons, Florinda asked the girl to have someone fetch a constable. She had information to give him.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

Patience woke with a start. Something had disturbed her sleep, but she wasn't sure what the cause was. Now that she was awake, she took a moment to adjust her awkward position. Sleeping in a chair in Asher's bedroom wasn't exactly conducive to a good night's rest. She rubbed at the back of her neck and then went to check on her patient who was still sound asleep.

Another sound downstairs echoed throughout the house. Patience grew concerned that a burglar was ransacking the downstairs floors when she heard the distinct sound of breaking glass. She looked around trying to find something to protect herself and Asher with in the event the prowler made his way upstairs. The book she had been reading earlier wouldn't be much help but the poker standing next to the hearth might do the trick. She ran toward the object and picked it up, holding it before her like a Viking Shieldmaiden protecting herself and her loved ones.

Footsteps came closer along with the sounds of doors being yanked open and slammed shut as the perpetrator drew near. Whoever it was, they were clearly looking for something—or someone—in particular. With both hands gripping the poker, Patience held her stance at the foot of Asher's bed who continued to slumber on. The door burst open, and Patience took a swing at the unsuspecting foe. But her aim was off, her wild swing failing to connect. And worse, the poker was easily wrenched from her hands. Her arms were taken in a firm grip, and she was brought forward to stare at none other than Oliver Pitt.

“There you are, my pet. I was wondering when I would find you,” Oliver sneered, and Patience turned her head from his offensive breath. He had been drinking and heavily.

“Let me go,” she ordered but Oliver only tightened his hold on her arm.

His eyes traveled down the length of her body. He ignored her struggles, but the slight movement on the bed succeeded in drawing Oliver’s attention away from her. He pushed her away and went to stand at the foot of Asher’s bed.

“Protecting your man like a lioness, I see,” he snarled. “But no matter. I came to finish what I started the other night.”

“You?” Patience said aghast. “You did this to Asher?”

“He’s been a thorn in my side for most of my life. I saw an opportunity to get rid of him and I took it,” he replied with a leering grin. “Too bad he didn’t die in that alleyway but I’ll finish him off for good this time.”

Patience didn’t even think about what she was doing and instead shrieked in outrage. Flinging herself at Oliver, she raked her nails down his face and had a moment of satisfaction when he heard him howl in pain.

“You bitch,” he screamed holding his wounded cheek with his hand before he swung his open palm in her direction. His slap echoed in the room while Patience went flying onto the bed with her cheek burning from the impact of his slap. Asher moaned when she landed upon him.

“Patience?” Asher whispered her name in confusion.

“Not now, dearest. We have company,” she said while sliding over to his uninjured side.

“What are—”

“I’ll kill you both just to shut the two of you up,” Oliver howled before he stepped forward. Patience leaned over Asher to protect him with her body.

But Pitt didn’t get far as a loud clang resounded. A low grunt echoed in the room and then the sound of a body thudding as it fell to the floor. Patience opened her eyes to see Cassandra standing there in her night rail holding a cast iron skillet in both hands. Her chest heaved as she took a couple of deep breaths to calm herself.

“No one breaks into my house and threatens my guest and best friend,” Cassandra said lifting her chin. Her butler poked his head into the room. “We have a burglar in the house, Higgins. Please send word for a constable to come fetch this man.”

“Right away, Mrs. Vaughn,” Higgins replied before he left.

Cassandra went to the drapery and pulled at a curtain cord. Giving it a tug, she held one end out to Patience. “Let’s tie this beast up before he wakes up and tries to cause more havoc.”

Asher took Patience’s wrist before she got up from the bed. “Be careful, my love,” he said quietly.

Patience nodded and went to the man who had been knocked out cold. The two women quickly tied the villain up. Patience went around the room to light the candles so they could see better.

Higgins returned faster than expected with a constable in tow. The man came through the door and took one look at Oliver on the floor who was beginning to awaken.

“Is everyone unharmed here?” the officer asked looking around the room.

Patience helped Asher sit up in the bed and then pulled a chair next to the bed.

Asher now saw who was on the floor. “I remember,” he said turning his gaze to Patience. “Pitt is the one who stabbed me outside of the Lyon’s Den after he had his goons beat me up.”

Patience squeezed Asher’s hand. “Apparently, he was here to finish the job, or so he was boasting. I’m not exactly sure what he had planned for me but I’m glad nothing will now come of it.”

Higgins and the constable took Oliver under his arms and began to drag him to the door. “I’ll send someone over in the morning to get a full statement from everyone.”

Cassandra began ushering everyone out the door, but Patience rushed over to her friend and gave her a hug. “I can’t thank you enough for saving us.”

“You’d do the same for me,” Cassandra said softly before giving Patience a wink. “I think I’ll leave the two of you alone, now.”

The door closed and Patience went to blow out the candles before going back to Asher’s bed. Instead of sitting in the chair, she went to lay down beside him.

“Patience... this is not a good idea,” Asher protested even though his arm still went around her as she laid her head on his chest.

“I’m never leaving you again so you might as well get used to me sleeping beside you,” Patience replied resting her hand over his heart.

“Sleeping isn’t exactly what I have in mind with you this close, my dearest,” Asher murmured before leaning forward and placing a kiss on the top of her head.

She playfully swatted him. “You’re injured and need to mend.”

“I’m not that injured, my love,” he said and when she leaned back to peer into his face, there was a truly wicked grin spread across his mouth. Her heart flipped in her chest at the evidence of his desire for her.

She continued to stare into the face of the man who had won her heart the first time she laid eyes on him. “Then you missed,” she said pointing to her lips and giving him her own knowing grin.

She waited for his lips to press against her own, but he took her chin instead. “We’ll marry as soon as we can make all the arrangements without offending half the ton ,” he said as he ran a finger down her cheek.

“I don’t give a fig about what Society thinks and you know it,” she retorted softly.

“Then we’ll marry as soon as we can without angering my mother and your parents. I would hate to be the cause of another family rift between you and your family,” Asher said bringing her close to his side. “You did reassure your father that you were here nursing a patient and nothing was happening between us, didn’t you? I’d hate for him to dislike your soon-to-be second husband.”

“Yes, I managed to talk him around, though he did not like the idea of me not being under his roof during your recovery. To pacify him, you had better ask my father for permission to marry me, Asher. I don’t think he could stand us running off like I did with my first marriage.”

“I will do so as soon as you allow me out of this bed.”

“Then that might take a while because now that I’m here, I don’t plan on letting you out anytime soon,” she teased causing a chuckle to leave him.

“Then you will marry me, Patience?” he asked.

“Yes, I’ll marry you, Asher. You are the only man that will do to make my life complete, and I love you,” she answered with a confidence she had never felt before.

“As I love you, my dearest lady. I will love you today and for all of eternity,” Asher said as he turned and took possession of her mouth.

Asher was true to his word about showering her with his love. Today was only the beginning of their days together and Patience would be thankful to the Widow of Whitehall who had made this all possible. Patience had found love with a reformed rogue and she couldn’t ask for anything more in life than to have Asher by her side. Her life was complete.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

Six Months Later...

Asher stood in the ballroom of his townhouse with Saxton, Wickes, and Lucius. With the exception of Blackthorn, the men watched their wives talking together across the room. Three wicked widows who were all now happily married with their so-called “tarnished” pasts put behind them.

Now if only Lucius would find a lady of his choosing to also marry, their foursome of friends would all be enjoying marital bliss. But their last friend didn't seem to be in any hurry to marry. In fact, Asher had learned he had a new mistress. Hopefully, Lucius would settle down soon.

As if he read Asher's mind, Lucius spoke up. “I think I will leave you to continue your wedding celebration, Ash,” Lucius drawled. “If I stay here any longer, one of these single ladies might try to sink their claws in me again.”

Saxton chuckled. “Not interested in Lady Maribel or Lady Juliet?”

A groan left Lucius. “Good heavens, no! I'd rather be drunk and left in a gutter than marry either of them. They want a title and care not of the man behind it.”

Wickes placed his hand on Lucius's shoulder. “The right woman will come along one day.”

Lucius shook off his hand. “I'll leave you three to your wives. I'm glad for your happiness, but I have no desire to take part in married life for myself. My mistress will tend to my needs just fine.”

Asher gave his friend a knowing nod. He had felt the same way until he stumbled into Patience at the Lyon's Den. His whole life had changed that night and he was thankful for Mrs. Dove-Lyon's intervention that kept him from throwing away his best chance at happiness. They watched Lucius leave the room and when Patience stepped away from her friends, she made her way toward Asher.

"If you gentlemen would excuse me, I think it's time my wife and I head up to our room," Asher said giving them a bow.

Saxton laughed. "Not sure why you didn't leave hours ago, old man. Your game must be slipping now that you've wed."

Asher's brow rose and he chuckled. "Hardly."

Patience came and placed her arm around his waist. "Shall we go upstairs and continue our wedding celebrations in privacy?" she purred sweetly causing a part of Asher to rise in agreement.

"You read my mind, my dearest," Asher said as they began making their way through the throng of guests, including his mother and Patience's parents, to say goodnight.

He noticed Gideon standing alone with a drink in hand. A patch covered his injured eye, not that he needed it. He ushered his wife toward the younger man and Patience went and placed a kiss upon Gideon's cheek.

Gideon looked at her shyly before he raised his glass to them. "I'm happy for you both and wish you all the best," he said before taking a sip of his drink.

Asher went and clasped his brother's hand knowing how difficult the words were for him to say. Thankfully, Gideon had moved past the feelings he had had for Patience now that she was now his sister-in-law.

“Thank you, Gideon, for your well wishes. It means the word to Patience and me,” Asher said with an honest heart.

“And there’s no reason you need to leave here,” Patience added with a bright smile. “This is your home and you are welcome to stay here for as long as you want.”

Gideon shuffled his feet. “A newly married couple need their space and I would only be in the way,” he said holding up his hand when Asher was about to interject. “I appreciate the offer but I’ve already asked to have my own townhouse aired out and opened. I’m glad Mother convinced you not to sell the place when you thought me dead. I’ll move my things as soon as the place is livable again. I shouldn’t be in the way here for too much longer.”

Patience reached out for his hand. “You are never in the way, Gideon, and are always welcome here.”

“I appreciate your kindness, Patience,” Gideon proclaimed with a smile.

“Family needs to stick together,” Asher said cheerfully.

Patience tilted her head. “As a matter of fact, I have a cousin who—”

“I’m not quite ready for that as yet, Patience,” Gideon said laughing, “but I appreciate you thinking of me for her.”

“I’m certain you’d get along famously,” Patience said in a second attempt.

Asher saw the look Gideon gave him and took the hint. “Maybe another time, my sweet. You’ll excuse us, brother?”

Gideon gave him a knowing nod and they left his side to finish saying goodnight to

their guests. When they finally made it up to their room and he shut the door behind them, he was surprised to see a large bowl filled with pomegranates on a nearby table.

He went over and picked up one of the fruits and saw an opened card sitting next to it. “What’s this?” he asked his wife who went over to her vanity and began removing the pins from her hair.

“I was unpacking a few of my things earlier, and I saw the fruit and note. I couldn’t stop myself from giving it a quick read.” She looked invitingly over her shoulder, flicking her hair free as it cascaded down to her waist. “They’re from Mrs. Dove-Lyon as the card says. Apparently she wished to ensure we have an eternity together, Hades.”

“Ah, my Persephone... I wouldn’t have it any other way, my love,” Asher declared.

He came over to his wife and pulled her to her feet. Turning her, he began unfastening the ribbon at the back of her dress. She leaned into his chest, and he pulled down the fabric at her shoulder before placing a kiss on her smooth skin. Trailing kisses up her neck, he heard her soft moan of pleasure. She turned in his embrace and hands began to fumble at his cravat.

“Have I told you today that I love you?” she asked in a breathy whisper.

“Many times, but I will never tire of hearing such words,” Asher replied as he assisted her with removing her dress and underclothes. He carried her naked body to their bed after the rest of his clothing joined hers on the floor. When he pulled her into his arms, her sigh of contentment filled the room.

“Even after an eternity together?” she teased while brushing back his hair.

“My soul will always find you, Patience... in this life and the next. I will never tire of having you love me, dearest wife,” he said in a husky tone. He felt her shiver.

“Then love me now, Asher, so that we never forget how our lives together began,” she crooned in his ear.

“As my lady wishes. I shall always be your most obedient husband,” he replied before he sealed his words with a kiss.

Asher loved his wife far into the night. Hours later, as she slumbered by his side, he thanked the heavens for blessing him with this incredible woman. His life could have gone in a totally different direction if he hadn’t listened to that small voice telling him to open his heart to the possibility that love could conquer all. Who knew months ago that stumbling down the stairs at the Lyon’s Den could have changed his life so completely?

He looked across the room at the bowl of pomegranates sent by the Widow of Whitehall to ensure their marriage lasted a lifetime. He chuckled, pulling Patience closer into his embrace and closed his eyes. This Lyon had found his mate and no other woman would ever do. Asher would look forward to their eternity together.

The Lyon's Den

Cassandra sat in the private office of Mrs. Dove-Lyon waiting for the widow to join her for the requested meeting. When the lady entered, she stood and waited for the widow to take her place behind the large mahogany desk.

“Mrs. Vaughn... this is a pleasant surprise. I thought you'd be at the wedding celebration of the Earl of Rowley and his countess,” the lady said behind her thick black veil.

Cassandra shook her head sadly. “I sat in the back of the church to witness their vows but thought it unwise to intrude on their wedding reception. My reputation still precedes me, I'm afraid.”

“At least you were able to witness the actual ceremony. Your three lady friends are lucky to have such a devoted friend in their corner. Three matches and all to men with titles and in good standing within the ton.”

“I am most thankful for all you've done on their behalf,” Cassandra said opening her reticule and sliding a bank draft across the table.

The veiled head bent forward before she took the draft, unfolded it, and then placed it in a drawer. “Another friend to match from your Wicked Widow's Club, Mrs. Vaughn?” the Widow of Whitehall inquired softly.

Cassandra shook her head again. “Not this time. This money is for myself.”

“Finally...” the widow purred sweetly. “And are you still of a mind to be matched with the Earl of Blackthorn?”

“If at all possible, yes.”

“He won’t be easily persuaded to marry, Mrs. Vaughn. Are you aware he has taken a new mistress?” she asked.

Cassandra frowned knowing the woman in question lived several doors down from her. “I’m aware.”

“It’s very unfortunate but I’m certain I can change that to our advantage. I have heard you put your current residence up for sale and are looking to purchase another in a better part of town,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon commented.

Cassandra widened her eyes. Nothing slipped past this woman. “You heard correctly, Mrs. Dove-Lyon. Once I move, I had planned to take up your other suggestion of trying to contribute my time to several charities.”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s head bobbed in agreement. “Excellent! Then we are several steps along the path of seeing you accepted back into the fold of Society.”

Cassandra bit her lip thinking of all that was ahead for a possible new life. Her past crept up to the forefront of her mind giving her enough of a scare to remain uncertain if things would work out for her as nicely as they had for her friends.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon leaned forward resting her arms on her desk. She clasped her gloved hands before she pointed a finger toward Cassandra. “Confidence, Mrs. Vaughn, will win you the earl and a new life,” she proclaimed, as if she had read Cassandra’s thoughts. “Leave everything to me. I have the feeling the Earl of Blackthorne is about to have a very bad losing streak at my tables.”

Cassandra thanked the widow and left the Lyon's Den after being told to return in two weeks. She sat back in her carriage thinking of the earl and the long fascination she had had with the man. Perhaps everything would indeed work out for the best. She gave a light laugh wondering what her future life with the earl might just look like. There was only one way to find out...

THE END