



Stealing the Rake's Heart (Willenshires #3)

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Category: Historical

Description: She was the overlooked wallflower longing to break free. He was the irresistible rogue hiding haunted depths behind his charming facade. When fate throws them together one magical summer, will they risk everything for an unexpectedly profound connection?

Shy wallflower Miss Abigail Atwater feels invisible within her own household, overshadowed by her prettier sister. When her eccentric Aunt Francesca invites Abigail to accompany her to a dazzling summer house party hosted by The Duchess of Dunleigh, she hopes to discover freedom beyond societys constricting dictates. But Abigail never imagined crossing paths with the notorious yet irresistible rake, Lord Alex Willenshire.

Behind Lord Alexander Willenshires witty banter and sinfully handsome features, he conceals profound grief over his fathers tragic death. Alex copes by embracing Londons vices and shallow relationships. But at the fateful summer house party, he finds himself unexpectedly spellbound by Abigails natural beauty and intellect. As they are increasingly drawn together despite obstacles conspiring to divide them, both lonely souls will need to surrender their guarded hearts to one another before the magical summer ends.

Will the overlooked wallflower and the irresistible rogue defy expectations, jealous rivals and the spectre of scandal itself to embrace their profoundly unexpected love match?

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The most pressing concern, as far as Alexander could tell, was whether or not he was going to vomit.

He kept his eyes tightly closed, in the hopes that the nausea would recede.

It wouldn't, of course. Even with his eyes closed, he could see the vibrant patterns of the colourful and highly expensive carpet decorating his mother's parlour as it lay partially revealed beyond the edge of the chaise longue. Alexander didn't remember choosing that particular chaise longue to sleep on instead of his own bed, but then, he didn't remember coming home at all.

He couldn't vomit in his mother's parlour. The carpet would be ruined, and she had so few joys left in life. With an effort, Alexander rolled onto his back, head knocking against the hard wooden backing of the seat.

"Ow," he rasped. This way, he would only throw up on himself, and that was a fairly ordinary occurrence.

What day was today? Thursday? Was it Thursday? Or Friday, perhaps?

Either way, today marked the halfway point of their late father's deadline. Six months in, six to go. Two siblings married out of four.

Henry, of all people, Alex thought, cracking a smile. His brother had just returned from his honeymoon, already plunging back into the pottery business which he now ran with his new wife. Henry liked to stay busy. Liked to do things. Admirable, really. Who had the energy?

Alex cracked open his eyes again, swallowing down bile. It burned in his throat, not unlike the whiskey he'd imbibed generously the previous evening. His head pounded, and his tongue felt as though it were made of sandpaper. He'd obviously drank more than usual last night, and now he was paying the price.

I ought to get up. Get up, and make my way to my room before Mother comes down. I don't want her to see me like this.

Even as he formulated the thought, Alex realized that it was pointless. Lady Mary Willenshire, the Dowager Duchess of Dunleigh, was remarkably skilled at not seeing things she did not wish to see.

Seeing her third and favourite son drunk and ridiculous was certainly a sight she would not want to behold. She'd likely find excuses to avoid the parlour until Alex had stumbled away.

As if to contradict his point, footsteps echoed in the hallway outside, determinedly approaching the door. Alex just had time to wonder if he should haul himself into a sitting position, deciding against it just as the door opened.

There was a brief silence.

"Here you are, then," came a familiar voice.

Alex cringed. "You sound more like Father every day, Will."

He couldn't see the expression on his older brother's face, but it was probably a sour one.

"And you're turning into quite a drunkard. You look awful, by the way."

“I’m aware.”

William’s footsteps crossed the room, and his face loomed into Alex’s range of view.

The brothers resembled each other well – the Willenshire siblings were famous for it. Hazel-green eyes, olive skin, chestnut locks, and well-arranged features graced all of their faces. There was hardly any of the wan, colourless Mary to be seen in her children. Alex often wished he resembled his mother more than their wretched father. Nothing could be done about that, though. Recent glances in the mirror informed him that his olive skin was turning yellowish, probably from long nights staying awake and far too much wine. His eyes, more green than brown, were growing bloodshot and puffy.

I can’t stand much more of this.

The thought had occurred to him suddenly and from nowhere, and Alex had done his best to suppress it.

It hadn’t worked, naturally.

He dreaded to think what he looked like, but William was as crisp and well-groomed as always, his hair smoothed back, freshly shaved, his cravat white and fresh as new snow.

Ugh .

“Could you lower your voice, Will, my dear?” Alex managed, smiling faintly.

His brother did not smile back. “You can’t stay here. Mother will be down soon. Have you forgotten about the gathering? You promised Mother you would help.”

A cold feeling of trepidation swept through him. He had forgotten.

“Oh, yes, Mother’s summer gathering, the highlight of the Season,” Alex managed weakly. “That isn’t for a few days, though, is it?”

William’s expression was unreadable. “Yes, and there’s a great deal to be done. Rise and endeavour to rest it off. And should you indulge in drinking at Mother’s soiree, I daresay, she may not easily forgive you.”

That hurt more than Alex cared to admit.

The past six months – the past year, really – had been difficult to say the least. Their father’s death was a relief, and none of the Willenshire siblings pretended otherwise. There was really no point in acting heartbroken over a man who had loathed his children and had been hated in return. But the freedom they’d all looked forward to had never come.

Alex could remember every instant of that dreadful will reading and had done his best to avoid being sober ever since. The will was simple, but shocking: to receive their sizeable inheritances, each Willenshire sibling had to marry before one year had elapsed from the time of the will reading. If not, the money would be lost to them forever.

And that was that. The will was unbreakable – he suspected that William had looked into that – and they were faced with a straightforward dilemma. Marry, or die penniless.

Katherine had been the first to marry, the only girl in the family. She was happy enough, having married Timothy, a family friend who shared the same hunger for novels and writing. Henry, to everybody’s shock, married next, a charming and astute young woman by the name of Eleanor Fairfax.

That left Alex and William.

As the new Duke – the late duke could hardly prevent his son from inheriting the title and whatever money was attached to that – William would be expected to marry anyway, and soon. But since none of them could claim their fortunes without skipping up a wedding aisle, the poor man was left trying to run a vast estate with a mere fraction of the money needed to keep it going.

It's not fair, Alex thought, for the thousandth time since the will had been read.

William would no doubt manage to marry in the next few months. He was handsome, young, rich, and was a duke . Ladies were already throwing themselves at him.

Alex, on the other hand, was a drunken rake of a third son. Who'd want him?

"I would appreciate it if you would refrain from your incessant urging," Alex muttered, hauling himself up into a sitting position. The room spun around him, and he squeezed his eyes closed, waiting for the world to settle down again.

William folded his arms tight across his chest. "This can't go on, Alexander."

"You chiding me? I can hardly disagree."

"Don't be silly. I mean this ," he gestured to Alex in general. "You drink too much, you keep poor company, you stay out late, and you act like a fool. And don't think I don't know about the gambling. I can't afford to keep settling your debts."

"I might as well enjoy myself," Alex snapped. "Our dear Papa has condemned me to a life of obscurity and poverty, getting the last laugh from beyond the grave. Why shouldn't I make merry a little?"

“This is not making merry . This is folly. You’re on a bad course, Alex. We’re worried about you, all of us.”

Alex pressed his lips into a thin line. “You ought to save your worry for yourself. A penniless duke is a poor prospect, especially when he’s as sour as you.”

He immediately regretted the words. William blinked, flinching back, and a feeling of guilt washed over Alex. He swallowed hard, clearing his throat.

“Will, I didn’t mean...”

He was interrupted.

“Get out of Mother’s parlour, and take yourself to your room,” William said tartly. “I have a great deal to do, and I’d rather not have you making things more difficult than they need to be.”

Without waiting for a reply, William turned on his heel and strode away, letting the door slam behind him.

Alex rested his aching head back on the chaise longue and closed his eyes.

Oh, very well done, Alexander. What a fine brother you are. A fine brother, and a fine son. They’re ashamed of you, all of them.

I need to get married.

The thought arrived in Alex’s head with a jolt. It wasn’t a new idea by any stretch of the imagination. He’d dreamed of marriage and wedded bliss even before their father’s death, but now there was a layer of urgency to it all.

A woman who married Lord Alexander Willenshire, to all knowledge, would now marry a rich man. A socialite, and well-known man about town, if a little rakish. A rich man, despite the fact he was only a third son.

If she married the same man in just over six months' time, she'd marry a pauper.

Marriage was the key to independence, then, and possibly to gaining back his family's respect. After all, marrying a rich young woman would be impressive, would it not?

Groaning, Alex rolled himself off the chaise longue, hauled himself into a roughly standing position, and hobbled towards the door.

You're a fool, Alex. A prize fool. That's what Father said, and he was right about most things, curse him.

He wouldn't go to bed, certainly not.

He was going to his club.

It was imperative that a gentleman be clubbable . That is, accepted to at least one of the notable clubs in London. Even grumpy, unfriendly Henry had a club.

Alex had several, but Brooks's was his favourite. It wasn't as genteel and popular as White's, but there was a veneer of respectability to the place that kept William paying the membership fees with only a mild eye-roll.

The moment he stepped inside, Alex heard somebody hailing him. He pasted a grin onto his face just in time to turn around and greet a pudgy, genial-faced young man

with tufty fair hair and a moustache which made him look a bit like a prawn.

“Alex, old man!” Lord Hamish Grey roared, slapping Alex hard on the back. Hamish was a large man in more ways than one. He was well over six feet tall, probably closer to six and a half, and while he gave the appearance of a tubby man, Alex knew there were iron cords of muscle under all that fat. They’d been friends for years.

“Drinking already, Hamish? Tut-tut,” Alex joked, nudging his friend’s elbow so that he spilled some of his brandy down himself.

Hamish spluttered and laughed. “Fine words from you , my good sir! You put on quite the show last night. I half expected to hear that you were dead this morning. I’m surprised Brooks’s has any liquor left at all.”

In the cold light of day, Alex’s half-remembered antics didn’t seem very lordly at all, let alone gentleman-like. He half cringed at himself.

But rolling in one’s shame never did anyone any good, and Alex had no intention of coming here to mope. He draped an arm around Hamish’s shoulder and manoeuvred him towards a table.

“Why is there not a glass of brandy in my hand, my dear friend?”

Hamish chuckled. “Pray tell, what has caused you to wear such a long visage? I was nearly compelled to inquire if there has been some grievous loss in your life, for your countenance seems most suited to a mourning garb.”

Alex sighed. “Oh, it’s nothing, only that my mother’s long-awaited summer gathering is coming up, and I promised to help.”

“Ah, yes, I recall. I have an invite, by the way. But why does her Grace want you to

help? No offence, Alex. What about your sister?"

Alex bit his lip. "Katherine is good at organising things, but not soirees. She has no taste, you see. She'd drop a handful of wildflowers in a glass jar and call it a centrepiece."

"Why you, though? Isn't the Duke managing it?"

Alex said nothing for a moment. How to explain?

Even as a child, he'd known that his family life was not normal. Tyrannical fathers existed in every corner of the globe, some of them taking residence in London for half the year. But the Duke of Dunleigh was something else. There was a streak of something terrible in his cruelty, something edging towards torture in the 'lessons' he taught his children. Alex recalled standing on a stool half of the night, shivering with cold and exhaustion, hunger pains shooting through him, all in punishment for an infraction he could not remember.

His mother was always at the end of it, tearful and remorseful, arms outstretched to hold Alexander close and soothe him.

Not the others, though. Just Alex. He'd never quite understood why, and suspected they didn't, either. Alexander was her favourite, and that had never changed. Even now, her face softened when he approached. She always had a smile for him, a word of praise for whatever cravat or jacket he was wearing.

It was hard to decide whether that made him feel more loving towards his mother or more guilty towards his siblings.

"I have no idea, really," Alex answered, and it was the truth.

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“Emily passed on with faltering steps, and having paused a moment at the door, before she attempted to open it, she then hastily entered the chamber, and went towards the picture, which appeared to be enclosed in a frame of uncommon size, that hung in a dark part of the room. She paused again, and then, with a timid hand, lifted the veil; but instantly let it fall—perceiving that what it had concealed was no picture, and, before she could leave the chamber, she dropped senseless on the floor.”

Abigail’s entire world had narrowed to the words on the page. When had she last breathed? She sucked in a shaky breath, angling herself better so that the gloomy mid-afternoon light of the grey day would shine better through the window onto her book.

Her book was *Mysteries of Udolpho*, the second volume, and quite frankly the best thing she had ever read in her life. Emily St Aubert did swoon a great deal, particularly at moments when the story was at its most tense, but she was also courageous and had such integrity.

She was beautiful, too. Heroines always were, and Abigail did her best not to be jealous.

She turned the page with a shaking hand. Surely it would be revealed. She simply had to know what was behind the black veil. What could be so terrifying that it sent Emily into a dead faint? Perhaps...

Thudding footsteps were her only warning that somebody was coming. They sounded on the part of the hallway right outside the library door, where the carpet gave way to bare floorboards. Not enough warning, really.

Abigail gave a strangled gasp and scrambled to shove her book under the cushion of the window seat.

Not quickly enough.

The door flew open, and there stood Mrs. Harriet Atwood, silhouetted in the door frame in a manner worthy of Mrs. Radcliffe herself.

“Are you reading that trash again, Abigail?” Her mother boomed. She crossed the room in a few long strides, snatching the book out of Abigail’s slack grip.

“I told you she’d be in here, Mama,” came a smug female voice.

Scarlett, of course. She wouldn’t miss an opportunity to see her older sister in trouble.

Harriet squinted at the book, lip curling. “What absurdity. No wonder no gentleman will marry you, if you fill your head with such nonsense. Between this and that awful poetry book I caught you reading last week, I quite regret letting you learn to read at all. I ought to close up this whole library and burn all the books inside – starting with this one.”

Abigail gulped. “Please don’t, Mama. The book isn’t mine. It’s from the circulating library. I shall be fined if I don’t return it.”

Harriet tossed the book onto the window seat with utter disdain.

“Take it back directly, then.”

Abigail nodded, ducking her head. She picked up the book, carefully smoothing out the pages. A couple had been bent back, much to her chagrin.

Scarlett came scuttling into the library, looking ill at ease around the books.

The trouble was, in Abigail's opinion, that the Atwaters were not a family of beauties

Society could overlook any sin, so long as the sinner were good-looking. Harriet Atwater was tall and lanky, plain, but quite without a cheery personality to soften her looks. Her father, Patrick Atwater was good-natured to a fault, prepared to sacrifice everything for a quiet life, and resembled nothing so much as a little mouse with buck teeth.

Abigail had not inherited her father's buck teeth. She had good skin and pretty hair of an indeterminate brown colour, but there her beauty ended. Her eyes were mud brown, her figure unremarkable, her features resolutely ordinary. The heroines in the novels she loved were always strikingly beautiful, and the hero noticed this immediately. No such ripples went around a room when Abigail entered it.

Her older sister Beatrix had similar features, but she was a little less timid than Abigail, and anyway had made an excellent match.

And then there was Scarlett, whom the gods had kissed.

Scarlett resembled a perfectly assembled porcelain doll. Her skin was creamy and fair, her hair a rich, glittering golden. She had a little heart-shaped face, sky-blue eyes, and a dainty pair of pink rosebud lips.

She was, in short, exquisite, and she was extremely well aware of that fact. At nineteen, her come-out had already been delayed by a year because Abigail was not married. Tempers were running short.

Harriet paced up and down in front of the window seat, gathering her thoughts.

Abigail tucked the book out of sight behind a cushion, lest her mother get ideas, and folded her hands on her lap, waiting.

“This will be your third Season,” Harriet said at last. “Beatrix took only one Season to get married. We put off Scarlett’s coming out last year to spare her the embarrassment of going into company beside an unmarried older sister, but she is not getting any younger, and we will not wait any more. We can’t risk it, not on account of your folly.”

Abigail bit her lip. The timeline had been made very clear to her. She was to have her first Season at eighteen, while Scarlett was seventeen, and marry that Season. However, the Season had ended, and their nineteenth and eighteenth birthdays had respectively arrived with no marriage on the horizon. After a few weeks of fury and tantrums, Harriet had decided that Scarlett would not come out that year, and Abigail would take a second Season to secure a match.

But now Abigail was twenty, and her third Season was just beginning, and she was still unmarried.

It would be pointless, naturally, to tell her mother that she did not wish to be married, so Abigail kept silent.

That was something she was good at, at least.

“Will I not take part in this Season, then, Mama?” Abigail asked quietly.

Her mother scowled at her. “Do not be foolish. Of course, you must participate in the Season. If we were to send you away to the countryside at this juncture, you might very well find yourself unwed for all eternity, and I shall not tolerate the burden of having you as a millstone around my neck for the remainder of my days. No, you must indeed attend the Season, and this time you shall secure a suitable match. Take

care not to impede Scarlett in her endeavours, however. And do not anticipate any new gowns.

Abigail ducked her head. “But, Mama, what if... what if I can’t find a match this Season?”

Harriet Atwater was not listening. She had that familiar, glazed look in her eyes, pacing to and fro.

“You must apply yourself, Abigail. If we are to take our rightful place in the nobility, work must be done. Beatrix and her Lord Townsend were a very great start indeed, but if you make a poor marriage – or worse yet, none at all – it will ruin our advantage. Scarlett is the one who will raise us up, aren’t you, love?”

Harriet paused, turning to touch her youngest daughter’s cheek. Scarlett preened, and the distant look in Harriet’s eye grew misty.

Abigail stayed quiet. She had long wondered – blasphemous though it was to think such cruel thoughts about one’s own mother – whether Harriet did not see her child when she looked at Scarlett, but rather what she could have been.

After all, were it not for a few lopsided features – an overlong chin, a mouth too wide, eyes rather grey than blue – could not Harriet have looked like Scarlett, in her youth? If she had been a little shorter, less gangly, more womanly, might she not have attracted scores of admirers, too?

As if she could sense the unfilial thoughts of her middle daughter, Harriet dropped her hand and turned to face Abigail.

“This cannot go on, Abigail,” she said quietly. “Three Seasons is a disgrace. If you embarrass this family any further, then...”

There appeared to Abigail no prospect of reprieve or salvation, as nobody in the household would dare interrupt Harriet when she was in full flow. She hadn't counted on people outside the household.

The familiar crunch of carriage wheels on gravel made Harriet pause and crane her neck to look out of the window.

She sucked in a breath, lifting her hands halfway to her hair as if to adjust it.

“Oh, curses, she's early. It's your Aunt Florence. Come on, girls, hurry!”

Harriet turned and fled out of the room, followed closely by Scarlett. Abigail followed too, her heart a little lighter.

Not, of course, that she was safe, by any stretch of the imagination.

Harriet had married a plain Viscount, but her sister Florence had married a Marquess.

Aunt Florence had grown remarkably wide in middle age and had decorated her bulk with yards and yards of ruched peach silk. The dress took up an entire two-seater sofa, where Aunt Florence sat in state, letting her sister and youngest niece flutter around her. Even Beatrix's husband was only half as wealthy as Aunt Florence's husband had been. He was dead now, of course, and Aunt Florence was easily one of the wealthiest widows in London.

“Seed-cake, sister?” Harriet asked, smiling indulgently. “We have plenty. Scarlett, serve your aunt at once.”

Aunt Florence only smiled to herself, accepting a generous slice of cake. She had a head of vibrant red hair, now gradually fading towards white, and almost translucent eyebrows set high on a freckled face, and the same grey eyes as her sister. She had

never been beautiful, and that had not stopped her catching one of the most handsome men in London.

Abigail liked her aunt a great deal, but Harriet had pulled her aside before they entered the parlour and told her in a sibilant hiss to sit quietly and let Scarlett speak to Aunt Florence.

Aunt Florence, it seemed, was not in on this plan. She glanced over Scarlett's head – the girl had been placed on a footstool beside her aunt's sofa – and met Abigail's eye.

“Read any good novels lately, Abbie?”

Abigail flushed, and Harriet gave a nervous laugh.

“Oh, sister, don't tell me you subscribe to all that nonsense? Abigail spends her days polishing up her accomplishments.”

“Accomplishments? Yes, of course. Banging around on the pianoforte or producing boring old watercolours.”

“I have some watercolours,” Scarlett piped up, clearly struck by inspiration. “I could paint you if you like, Aunt.”

Harriet beamed at her daughter for this brilliant idea. Aunt Florence only lifted one gingery brow.

“In this dress, do you think? Harriet, what do you think of this dress?”

“It's divine,” Harriet gushed. “The most beautiful thing I've ever seen. It must have cost a fortune.”

“It did. And you, Scarlett? Does it suit me?”

Scarlett only hesitated for a heartbeat before plunging into a lie.

“You look beautiful, Aunt. It suits you perfectly. I love it, I quite adore it.”

Aunt Florence hid a smile behind the rim of her teacup and glanced over Abigail.

“And you, Abby? Do you think this dress is the most beautiful one you’ve ever seen? Do you adore it?”

There was a pained silence. Harriet was glaring daggers at her daughter. Abigail bit the tip of her tongue. It would be the easiest thing in the world to lie, and not get scolded afterwards.

Unfortunately, Abigail had never had a great deal to say, and her tongue had never quite fitted in with the words shooting through her head. Lies did not come easily.

“N-No, Aunt,” she quavered. Harriet went purple, and Scarlett pressed a hand over her mouth.

“No?” Aunt Florence echoed, in mock surprise. “And why not?”

Better commit to it now, Abigail thought soberly. She drew in a breath.

“I... I think it looks a bit like a meringue, aunt.”

Harriet opened her mouth, doubtless to shout something at her daughter, but she was interrupted by Aunt Florence’s hoot of laughter.

“That’s my girl!” Aunt Florence chuckled, slapping one meaty knee. “Truthful as

always. I ought to have known you wouldn't fill my head with empty compliments, Abby! Honesty is a rare thing, sure enough. This is very good seed-cake, sister."

Abigail dropped her gaze, but not before seeing the look of consternation and fury on her mother's face. She was forced to swallow her anger back, of course, and the conversation carried on without Abigail.

She supposed that other women – Scarlett, for instance – would feel inclined to join in, rather than just listen, but Abigail had always preferred sitting back and staying quiet. People, as it turned out, were not like book characters. In novels, people said and did exactly the right – or wrong – thing. It was easy enough to work out their intentions, and the story unfolded in a satisfying and easily understandable manner.

Real life was a little more haphazard. In her mind, Abigail was a clever and eloquent person, but somehow that eloquence never quite translated itself to her actual words. If she was a beauty, gentlemen would flock around her regardless, and take her silence as sweetness.

But she was plain, and not particularly rich, and so they never even noticed her. She'd seen their gazes skip over her, again and again. It had hurt at first, but it wasn't as if she had liked any of those gentlemen.

"I take it you intend to put out both girls into the Season this year?" Aunt Florence was saying now, voice jerking Abigail out of her reverie.

Harriet pressed her lips together. "Indeed, yes. I know it isn't common to put out a younger daughter if her older sister isn't married, but really, I am about ready to wash my hands of Abigail. Two full Seasons, and no marriage! I even sent her to a fine party about a month ago, and she entirely wasted the opportunity. She didn't dance a single dance, can you credit it? Now, Scarlett, she would have set the ballroom on fire – wouldn't you, darling?"

“I certainly would, Mama.”

Aunt Florence’s sharp little eyes glanced between them, revealing nothing.

“Well, the Season is starting in earnest, now,” she said neutrally. “We’re in the swing of it. I do hope you girls enjoy yourselves.”

“I shall, Aunt,” Scarlett promised, smiling winningly. Aunt Florence glanced at Abigail, who realized with resignation that she was expected to say something.

“I shall try my best, Aunt.”

“Try your best? What an odd thing to say, silly child,” Harriet said, with a glare and a forced laugh.

Abigail swallowed. “I...you know how I prefer my books, Aunt.”

Aunt Florence smiled, her round face crinkling up. “Indeed I do. There is nothing better than the company of a good book. I myself love Mrs. Radcliffe – her stories quite give me the chills.”

Before she could stop herself, Abigail was speaking again.

“Yes, I am reading the second volume of *Mysteries of Udolpho*, Aunt. Mama commented on it only an hour or so ago.”

Harriet’s gaze was boring into the side of Abigail’s face, but she firmly kept her gaze on her aunt.

Aunt Florence nodded, setting down her empty cup. “Well, I must hear what you think of the ending, when you get there. Where have you got to?”

“The black veil – Emily pulled it back and swooned.”

“Yes, I recall. I daresay you’re mad to discover what’s going on behind it, but I won’t tell you. You’ll have to find out. Now, enough chit-chat, I think.”

“You aren’t going, are you, sister?” Harriet said, managing to look relieved and doleful at the same time. Florence snorted.

“No, I am not going. Not yet. Now, I came here for a reason. Generally, I don’t come to London for the Season, but this year I find myself looking for a little excitement. I plan to stay a month or two. I know we move in different circles, sister, but one can always make time for family.”

A flicker of hope crossed Harriet’s face. “How delightful! If you find yourself in need of company, I’m sure that Scarlett would love to spend some time with you.”

In Abigail’s opinion, Scarlett would love no such thing. She could see her younger sister’s chagrin, imagining accompanying her large, outspoken, and brusque aunt to various gatherings.

However, she would be a fool to ignore the fact that she would be able to attend such soirees, if Aunt Florence escorted her. Balls with earls and viscounts and maybe even a duke or two.

If Aunt Florence chose to extend her patronage to Scarlett, she could do a great deal of good.

“Funny you should mention it,” Aunt Florence said slowly, pouring herself another cup of tea without waiting for the maid. “I did intend to take my niece to an upcoming soiree. It’s a yearly thing, the Dowager Duchess of Dunleigh’s summer ball. Everybody goes, you know.”

Oh, they did not. Abigail held her breath, glancing between the faces of her mother and sister. Their eyes were wide, jaws hanging slack. The Duchess of Dunleigh – or rather, the Dowager Duchess, as the old duke was dead and his son wore his title now – moved in the highest circles in the land, far above what the Atwaters could hope for. Oh, they might get invited to larger gatherings with the richest tradespeople, and Harriet often talked of vouchers for Almack's, but that wasn't the same.

But if Aunt Florence could bring them to a gathering like this, who knew where it might end? What friends might they make?

“Oh?” Harriet managed at last, trying to conceal her excitement. “How thrilling.”

“With your permission, of course, I shall take my niece with me. She can dance a little, if she chooses, and perhaps make some friends. It shall be good for her.”

And then Aunt Florence's gaze flitted over to Abigail, before the others could say a word, and Abigail's heart sank. Aunt Florence smiled.

“Well, Abby? What do you say? Would you like to come with me?”

There was a moment of consternation. Scarlett sagged, disappointed, and Harriet hummed and hawed, trying to find her footing.

“Sister, surely you mean Scarlett? Surely you intend to take Scarlett to the ball?”

Aunt Florence lifted an eyebrow. “Did I say Scarlett? No, I thought Abigail might enjoy it. I'm sure you have plenty of balls and good things lined up for our pretty Scarlett.”

Harriet smiled weakly. “Yes, but consider the advantages...”

“Scarlett has plenty of advantages,” Aunt Florence interrupted. “She’s a beautiful girl, with a decent dowry, sufficient charm, and a great deal of confidence. She will be fine, I promise you. It is Abigail I’d like to bring to that ball, and I believe I can choose my own guests, dear sister.”

Harriet swallowed hard. Abigail could read the thoughts ticking across her mother’s face. Her annoyance and pride would have her storm out and tell her sister that she would take Scarlett or she would take neither of the girls.

But Harriet Atwater was too sensible for that. She likely knew that Aunt Florence would simply shrug and leave, and then none of the Atwater girls would attend the illustrious gathering.

Abigail glanced over at her younger sister, who was glaring at her with loathing. As if Abigail herself had somehow done something to take Scarlett’s rightful place from her.

Don’t be angry at me! Abigail wanted to scream. I don’t want to go!

She did not say such a thing, of course. She stayed quiet, hands folded in her lap, and waited for her mother to speak.

“Well, I suppose,” Harriet managed ungraciously. “Scarlett would make a much better companion, but if you insist upon Abigail...”

“I do,” Aunt Florence said, abruptly rising to her feet. They stood awkwardly too, missing a beat. “Abby and I can talk about Mrs. Radcliffe on the way there.”

“What a treat for you, Abigail,” Harriet said, a threatening undertone in her voice. “You must be very grateful to your aunt.”

Abigail made a quick, lopsided curtsy. “Indeed, I am, Mama. Thank you, Aunt Florence.”

Aunt Florence only gave that mysterious little smile, looking away.

“I shall give you more details soon enough. I think a new dress for the occasion would be in order, don’t you, sister? Can you manage that, or shall I...”

“I will get the girl a new dress,” Harriet interrupted sourly.

Aunt Florence grinned. “What a treasure you are, sister.”

And then she sailed out of the room, never once looking back.

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“Henry and Eleanor aren’t coming,” Katherine announced.

Alex flinched, caught in the act of pouring himself yet another generous brandy. He slopped some of the liquid over his hand and wrist and licked at the sticky droplets guiltily.

Katherine was like William – she could always make him feel guilty, even when all he was doing was having a drink , for heaven’s sake.

He glanced over to where she stood in the doorway, arms folded, eyes narrowed.

“I thought Henry wouldn’t come,” Alex huffed. “He’s so busy with that silly business of his. Do you know, he told me I should have a job there? The cheek of it.”

“I think it was kind,” Katherine shrugged, coming further into the room. “Henry doesn’t like to see you idle. I suppose he thought you might enjoy the work.”

“Then he doesn’t know me at all. I’m not a child, to be kept busy . I’m supposed to be a gentleman.”

Henry would have pounced on that at once, of course. He was the sharpest of them all, and much addicted to travelling. Alex supposed that it was only a matter of time before he and his new wife left the country.

Back when the old duke was alive, Henry had travelled a great deal. Alex knew the truth, they all did – he couldn’t bear to be at home. William was not permitted to leave, being the oldest and the heir. Katherine was not permitted to leave, since she

was a woman. Alex could probably have gone – heaven knew his father didn't care much about him – but how could he leave his mother?

Katherine came all the way into the room and sat down beside him. She could smell the cigar smoke hanging in the library like a pall, and the brandy decanter was almost empty. She didn't say anything, however.

"You miss him, don't you?" she said quietly. "Henry and you were always as intimate as kindred spirits."

Alex sighed. "It's not that I don't love Will and you. It's just that Henry... well, I suppose he was my best friend. Sad, isn't it?"

"Not sad. And don't worry – Will and I love you too, no matter how much we nag you. Henry worries about you, you know."

"He's got a strange way of showing it," Alex remarked bitterly. "Since his marriage, I've only seen him a handful of times."

She sighed. "Be kind, Alex. Henry is in love. He's newly married. I know that when I married Timothy – which was not so very long ago – I could think of nothing else but him. Give Henry time."

"I don't resent his happiness. I just... Oh, I don't know. Pay no attention to me."

"But I am paying attention to you, Alex. You're not happy. You drink too much, you smoke too much, you gamble – and until you come into your money, you can ill afford that, and..."

"Yes, well, I'm not going to come into my money, am I?" Alex pointed out bitterly. "Our darling Papa made sure of that. Who'd marry me?"

“Plenty of people. Don’t be defeatist, Alex. Just attend a few balls this Season - good ones, not your raucous gentlemen’s pursuits – and meet a few ladies. Somebody might catch your eye.”

“And what if nobody does?” he muttered. “What then? Do I just choose one and hope for the best? When Father added that stipulation to his will, it wasn’t to ensure that we’d all enjoy wedded bliss. It was because he wanted to have the final say over what we did with our lives. He wanted us to be miserable, proper, and obliged to obey him even when he was gone. He still holds that money over our heads like a great weight. Some days, I feel like saying dash it all and just staying a penniless bachelor for the rest of my life.”

Katherine didn’t say anything to this, letting the echoes of Alex’s raised voice bounce around the room.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he added, after a moment had passed.

“Do you?”

“Yes. You suppose me to be selfish, foolish and engaging in an act of self-sabotage, as though I were to disfigure myself in a fit of pique, and not thinking about William, who really has to marry, because he is the Duke of Dunleigh and he needs the money. Yes, I know, I won’t starve on the streets, not with the rest of you rich, and yes, I know that Father really is gone at the end of the day, but...” he trailed off, obliged to swallow hard and work some moisture into his mouth before he continued. “I’m not happy, Katherine,” he managed at last, his voice breaking.

Katherine shuffled closer, draping an arm around his shoulder. He leaned into her, and for a few moments, the siblings sat like that, neither one saying a word.

“I know it isn’t fair,” Katherine said quietly. “We all know it. But complaining won’t

change the facts. Whether you marry or not, Alex, you must think about your life and how you'd like to use it. This," she reached out, plucking the sticky brandy glass from his hand and placing it out of reach on the table, "this will not make you happy. It'll make you ill, discontented, and probably ugly."

Alex wilted a little. "I know, I know. I just..." he paused, disentangling himself from her grip, and reached out to snatch up the decanter altogether. He pulled out the glass stopper and took a swig straight from the bottle. Grinning at Katherine's annoyed face, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I can't get through this summer sober, Kat."

She let out a long, slow breath. "I am going to break that decanter over your head."

There was no time to find out whether it was an empty threat or not, because a thin, reedy voice came wafting in from the halls outside.

"Alex? Alex, my darling, where are you?"

"It's Mother," he murmured. "I'd better go find her."

"Yes, do," Katherine rose to her feet, shaking out her skirts. "And then come into dinner, both of you."

They parted ways in the hallway outside. Katherine hurried towards the half-open dining room, light streaming out into the corridor, and Alex plunged into the gloomy part of the house, in search of his mother.

He found Mary in one of the morning rooms. It was seldom used, and bitterly cold, despite the time of year. She was standing at a window, holding up something to the young moonlight.

“Mother, what are you doing?” Alex asked gently. “Didn’t you hear the bell for dinner?”

Mary blinked at him. She had once been a beautiful woman, but time and poor treatment had stripped her beauty from her. Her force of will, never particularly strong, was quickly crushed altogether in the early years of her marriage to the duke. Alex could not remember his mother ever speaking up for her children, not even when the duke was at his most cruel. She’d formed a sort of slavish adoration to the husband who treated her like an inconvenience and was the only one who had truly mourned him.

Alex had secretly hoped that, with his father gone, his mother might grow into her old self, and thrive.

He was destined to be disappointed. Mary said less and less, retreating into herself and looking out at the world in a baffled, terrified way. She was starting to forget things, too.

“Oh, yes, supper,” Mary managed at last. “I don’t much like it in there. It’s far too bright. It hurts my eyes.”

Alex bit his lip. In a fit of frugality, the old duke had cut the candle allowance for the house down to a quarter of what it had been. The hallways were plunged into darkness, the poor servants did their sewing by moonlight, and they were obliged to hunch over their dinners in near darkness, squinting at their food to try and make out what it was.

Now that William was the duke, things were different. The house was actually well lit, the fires banked, even when it wasn’t the depths of winter.

“I don’t take pleasure in watching people squinting in the dark, or shivering by an

empty grate,” he’d said once, when Mary queried it.

The woman came fluttering across the room towards Alex, reaching up to smooth out the shoulders of his jacket.

“So handsome,” she murmured. “The most handsome of them all, my Alex. You must tell William to stop lighting so many candles. The Duke would not like it.”

A lump rose to his throat.

“Mother, William is the duke now. We can’t keep doing things the way Father did, can we?”

Mary pouted. “Well, your Papa was generally right. We saved all that money on tallow and wax, didn’t we? But I have a secret to tell you.”

“What is it, Mother? Why don’t we go out into the hall? It’s freezing cold in here. You’re only wearing a light shawl, and...”

“The Duke insisted that I hand over your brothers and sister to a nursemaid right away,” Mary interrupted. “First William, and then Henry, and then Katherine. He said that children ought not to be coddled. It was dreadfully upsetting, but he was my husband, so of course I obeyed. It was always strange to see them again, to see how much they had grown. They wouldn’t recognise me when they saw me again, and that always stung a little. But you... you, my little Alex, you were different. When you were born, your father was away, so I did not have to give you to a nursemaid. I looked after you all by myself. You were walking by the time your father came home. You were mine. I always felt guilty, though. I suppose the least I can do is to make sure that everything is the way your father wanted it, to make up for keeping you. It was a good bargain, I think.”

The lump was making Alex's eyes water.

"Yes, Mother, but Father isn't here, now. You can do as you like. You can be happy."

Mary pulled back, eyes blank. "I am happy, darling. I'm a good wife."

"I see." Alex drew in a shuddering breath, wiping suddenly clammy hands on his jacket. "Well, you must be hungry, and so..."

"Oh, I almost forgot! Silly me. I have a present for you, darling."

Mary opened her hand, revealing a silver cravat pin, tipped with a round ruby like a drop of blood.

"It was your father's," she confided. "I daresay William should have it, but I'd like it to be yours."

Alex took the cravat pin. It was cool against his fingers.

"Thank you, Mother. Now, we really must go into dinner."

Mary pouted. "I'm never hungry these days."

"But you must eat," he insisted. "Please, Mother. For me. For your little Alex."

She softened a little. "Well, if you say so."

He extended his arm, and Mary took it, her hand white and frail as a bird. They walked through the hallways in silence.

After the gloom of the hallway outside, the well-lit dining room did seem a little

bright, and Alex blinked against the glare.

The others were already there – William at the head of the table, Katherine in her usual spot, and Timothy beside her. They all glanced up when Alex and Mary entered, and for a moment, Alex found himself struck dumb.

He's just like Father.

Sitting in their father's seat, face thrown into sharp relief by the candles, and resolutely not smiling, William resembled the old duke more than anything Alex had ever seen before.

Oh, they all resembled the duke, in that they had his skin, his eyes, his hair, his handsome features, but there was something about William tonight that made the resemblance even more obvious.

Swallowing hard, Alex helped his mother to her seat – at the other end of the table, where she insisted on sitting, as the old duke had insisted on her sitting before, even though her children all sat close together – and took his own seat.

“You're late,” William said crisply, as soon as he was seated.

“I came as soon as I could,” Alex answered in a low voice. “Mother was disoriented again.”

“She is not disoriented.”

“She is . She's not herself.”

“I don't notice a difference,” William gestured for the first footman to start serving up the soup course. “I'm not a tyrant, Alex, but I do like to start meals on time, if

possible. Do you know how irritating it is, to sit here and watch our food going cold, while you waft about the house? You've been at home for hours. There's no excuse for being late."

Alex clenched his jaw. "Mother needed me."

"She is fine ."

"How would you know? You ignore her all day."

"Boys," Katherine interrupted sharply, eyes glinting out a warning. "Let's have a nice family meal together, shall we?"

"Little prospect of that," Alex muttered, taking pleasure in observing William stiffen like an affronted feline.

He said nothing, however, and for a few moments there was only the gentle sounds of soup-slurping, and the low conversation between Timothy and Katherine.

William was paler and grimmer than ever, and picked at his food, for all his talk of being hungry and not wanting to wait. For his part, Alex's stomach was still roiling from his hangover that morning. The pea soup did not look appealing. Instead, he reached for the decanter of wine, and poured himself a generous measure. He could almost feel William's disapproving stare on him, but somehow, that only made the wine taste better.

Go on, have a proper scowl, you simpleton. Ascend upon your high horse as the esteemed Duke of Dunleigh, whilst I remain the drunken prodigal son who cannot even afford the courtesy of departing from home. Take a long, long gaze."

He took a large mouthful of wine, eyes closed, and felt the familiar buzz of the

alcohol warm his blood and ease away his worries.

Oh, yes. I certainly can't make it through this summer sober, no matter what Katherine says , he thought grimly. He drained the glass, ignoring Timothy's horrified expression, and reached to pour himself another.

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Two Days Later

“I just thought it was a one-night thing, Aunt,” Abigail murmured. The roll and lurch of the carriage was making her feel ill, or perhaps that was her tightly laced corset.

Her mother had insisted on that. Scarlett’s corsets were always laced as tight as possible, giving her a fairy-thin waist. Abigail was a little thicker in the trunk than her sister and was decidedly uncomfortable.

Aunt Florence chuckled. “Bless you, child, no. Some people are only invited to the ball, sure enough, but people like you and I attend for several days at a time. Don’t worry, it’ll give you plenty of time to settle in!”

Abigail highly doubted that.

There hadn’t been time to get her new dresses for every day, so she was obliged to wear one of Scarlett’s today – hence the tight-lacing – and the dress was wretchedly uncomfortable. Aside from being too tight, it was rather frillier than Abigail could have liked, and the shade of lilac did not, in her opinion, become her as well as a more muted colour would have done. Besides, Scarlett’s dress was a fraction too long for Abigail, and she had to keep kicking out the hem as she walked.

Too late now. The expensive concoction that had been ordered specially for her was already packed up and waiting, and she would undoubtedly have to wear it tonight.

Aunt Florence’s carriage was large and well-padded, a stark contrast to the Atwater carriage, which was in great need of resprings and reupholstering. Aunt Florence

herself was sprawling out over one side of the carriage, looking very comfortable and rather satisfied with herself, and Abigail hunched over on the opposite side.

She wished, not for the first time, that she could be back in the library, or back in her own room, following the adventures of the unlucky Emily St. Aubert.

“You worry too much, my dear,” Aunt Florence said suddenly. Abigail glanced up, eyes wide.

“I... what, Aunt?”

“You heard me,” Aunt Florence responded, smiling wryly. “It’s just a ball. You’re just my quiet, reserved little niece, here to enjoy herself with everybody else. Nobody will expect anything of you.”

Abigail flushed. “I wish I could believe that. I... I’m afraid of doing something wrong. Embarrassing myself, you know?”

“I shouldn’t worry about that.”

“Won’t the authors of the gossip sheets be here?”

Aunt Florence sighed. “Probably. The wretched creatures keep themselves anonymous – knowing, probably, that Society would shun them if they were ever discovered – and they seem to be everywhere.”

“Well, what if I do something silly, and they write about me?”

Aunt Florence tapped her chin thoughtfully. “Well, it’s a possibility.”

Abigail sucked in a breath. “Aunt!”

“Don’t look at me like that! I’m not your mother. I don’t pretend you don’t exist when it’s inconvenient, but neither will I tell you reassuring little lies. The fact is, dear, very few people are ever mentioned in those scandal sheets. Only the shocking people. And you are not shocking, are you?”

“No,” Abigail muttered. “I’m not much of anything.”

Her aunt narrowed her eyes. “I don’t like defeatist talk, Abby.”

Abigail straightened her spine, steeling herself. “Why did you invite me, Aunt? Why put out my mother in that way? Why not bring Scarlett? She’s much prettier than me.”

“On the outside, perhaps. My dearest niece, you might as well know that I do a great many things just because that is how I act . I like your company, and I thought you deserved a little treat.”

“A treat would be sitting at home with one of Mrs. Radcliffe’s novels,” Abigail countered, before she could think twice about it, “not attending a ball where I don’t know anyone and watching gentlemen pass me over for prettier ladies.”

She immediately clamped her jaw shut, wondering what had come over her. Aunt Florence, however, gave a great gurgle of laughter.

“That’s my Abby! Save some of that razor-sharp wit for the ball, please! Be yourself, my dear, and you’ll do fine.”

Abigail did not bother to point out that being oneself only worked for pretty, charming, interesting women.

And rich men, of course.

The carriage took a slow, ponderous turn into a wide gravel drive, well-raked and trimmed with green hedges and towering oaks on either side. It was the grandest drive Abigail had ever seen, and she began to feel just a little ill.

She bunched her fists in the side of her gown – embroidered with delicate white flowers on the hem, another addition to an already gaudy gown that Abigail did not feel comfortable in.

The carriage turned out of the green driveway and into an open, circular courtyard in front of a terrifyingly grand house. People were milling about in the courtyard – servants, mostly. Gardeners, footmen, the occasional maid scurrying to get out of sight. At the front of the house was a set of wide, well-polished marble steps, leading up to an immense porch and a high door. The carriage slowed to a halt, the driver managing to stop without a lurch. Again, this was something that the Atwater driver could never manage.

“Out we get, then,” Aunt Florence said brightly. “You first, dear. It always takes me an age to haul myself up.”

There was nothing for it. Abigail’s heart pounded and she felt almost dizzy with fear, but her body made her move.

Getting out of a carriage was never particularly dignified, but she was used to it. Being the last one to climb out, the single footman who came out to help was usually already occupied with Scarlett or Harriet, leaving Abigail to hop down herself.

Swinging the door open herself, Abigail noticed with a pang of anxiety that footmen were already hurrying towards her, three of them, all of the same height and dressed in identical, grand-looking livery.

In her hurry to climb down before she had to accept their help, Abigail’s too-long

skirt caught under her foot.

She realised her mistake at once, but it was already too late. Bent over to step through the carriage's narrow entrance, momentum behind her, and nothing to grab onto, Abigail stumbled, overbalanced, passed the point of no return, and toppled forward onto the gravel drive.

Not quite, actually.

She thumped against a broad, firm chest, cheek sliding against what felt like a fine silk brocade waistcoat. A large pair of hands closed around her upper arms, steadying her, and her feet landed squarely on the gravel. She gave an unladylike oof .

"I beg your pardon," Abigail stammered, not daring to look up at the unfortunate footman who'd caught her. "I am rather clumsy."

"Think nothing of it," responded the man, in tones too airy and confident to be a footman.

Swallowing hard, Abigail shuffled back and made herself look up at her saviour. His hands dropped from her arms, but she could still feel where he'd touched her. Perhaps that was a trick of the dress material.

The man smiling down at her was certainly not a footman. He wore an emerald-green suit, shockingly bright and certainly not livery, and there was a gold-coloured brocade waistcoat underneath. His skin was olive, he had thick and glossy chestnut hair, and the most beautiful hazel-green eyes Abigail had ever seen.

In short, he was shockingly handsome, a fact which Abigail was aware of in a way she had not before. She'd met handsome men before, surely? Not all of them made her chest clench. None of them, in fact.

“I am sorry,” she repeated, since he seemed to be waiting for her to say something.
“It was an accident.”

The green-eyed man laughed. “It’s lucky I was here. It would be an inauspicious start to your stay to land face-first on the ground. Ah, this is Lady Caldecott’s carriage! Can I assume you are the infamous niece?”

Abigail opened her mouth, not entirely sure what to say. The wit which her aunt had praised only a few moments ago had deserted her. In fact, all of her words had. The green-eyed man lifted his eyebrows, obviously expecting some response.

A Society Beauty would respond with some witty and ever-so-slightly flirtation sally, something to make him laugh, but not clever enough to make him feel silly.

Unfortunately, Abigail could think of absolutely nothing to say. She could practically see the boredom creeping over the young man’s face. No doubt he thought her dull as well as ugly, and probably wished he’d simply let her fall.

Where was her aunt ?

On cue, the carriage gave a groan of relief, and she heard the thud of her aunt stumbling down onto the gravel.

“Ah, it’s wonderful to be out of that wretched thing,” Aunt Florence sighed. Abigail took the opportunity to turn away from the green-eyed man who made her feel so very inferior, and scurried over to her aunt, taking her arm.

The green-eyed man and Aunt Florence eyed each other warily.

“Lord Alexander,” Aunt Florence said, voice strangely shielded. “I had it in my head you’d be away.”

“You know me, Lady Caldecott. I’d never miss my mother’s summer ball. This is your niece, I assume?”

“Yes, yes,” Aunt Florence said, smiling weakly. “Miss Abigail Atwater. I’m terribly fond of her. I daresay I shan’t let her leave my side for our entire stay.”

Was it Abigail’s imagination, or was there a hint of warning in her aunt’s voice? Aunt Florence cleared her throat, nudging her niece.

“Make your courtesies and say how-do-you-do to Lord Alexander Willenshire, my dear. He’s the youngest of the Willenshire siblings.”

Abigail murmured a greeting, dropping into an ungraceful curtsy. His lordship bowed back.

“Shall I escort you in?” he asked. Aunt Florence’s arm tightened in Abigail’s.

“Oh, that won’t be necessary. I know my way well enough. Oh, and I see the Duchess at the top of the stairs! Don’t let us keep you from your business, my lord. Good day to you.”

And with that decidedly unfriendly greeting, Aunt Florence towed Abigail forward, towards the wide marble steps. Behind them, the footmen were untying their boxes and bags from the carriage, taking them in through a servants’ entrance to the side.

That made a change, too – Abigail was generally the one to bring in their bags at home.

Unable to stop herself, Abigail twisted to look around over her shoulder. The green-eyed man – Lord Alexander Willenshire, she now knew – was standing there, staring after them curiously. He smiled when he caught her looking and lifted a hand in a

half-mocking wave.

Flushing, Abigail turned to face away.

“Steer clear of him, won’t you?” Aunt Florence whispered, once they were mostly out of earshot.

Abigail flinched. “What, Lord Alexander? But he’s a Willenshire, isn’t he? We’re staying with the Willenshires.”

“Indeed we are, but I reckon we won’t see much of him. I don’t object to the boy himself. There’s no real harm in him, but lately he’s taken to bad company and worse decisions. He’s a rake, you know. Ladies steer clear of rakes, if they’re sensible.”

Abigail bit her lip. Was that disappointment she felt? That was silly beyond reason. It wasn’t as if Lord Alexander was going to be hungering for her company anyway.

“Whatever you say, Aunt.”

“Good,” Aunt Florence squeezed her arm. “You’re a good girl, and a clever one. I’m sure I won’t have to keep a close eye on you.”

Abigail smiled tightly and said nothing. It seemed safer.

They reached the top of the marble stairs and were ushered into a cavernous hallway. The floors were highly polished stone, the walls hung with fine old tapestries and portraits of austere men and women, and Abigail’s footsteps seemed to echo louder than they should have done.

A faded woman beyond middle years waited to greet them. A tall, severe-looking man stood behind her, arms tightly tucked behind his back. He had the same olive skin as Lord Alexander, and the same chestnut hair. There was enough family resemblance to mark them out as brothers.

“Florence, my dear!” the faded lady fluted, coming forward, arms outstretched. “It has been too long.”

“Too long indeed,” Aunt Florence agreed, kissing the woman on both cheeks. “This is my niece, the one I mentioned, Abigail. Abby, this is her Grace the Dowager Duchess of Dunleigh.”

“You may call me your Grace,” the dowager said encouragingly.

“And this gentleman is William Willenshire, the Duke of Dunleigh. He’s only recently taken up the post, you see, on account of his father passing away.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” was the only thing Abigail could think of to say. She immediately regretted it. It sounded silly.

The Duke turned his cool gaze on her. He did not smile, or make any response to her condolences, which now that she thought about it, were probably at least months too late.

Before the conversation was allowed to grow cold, Aunt Florence stepped in. They exchanged pleasantries and small talk, and Abigail tried not to shift from leg to aching leg. Her back hurt from the long carriage journey, and she was beginning to feel embarrassingly tired.

Better wake up soon, she warned herself. There’s a ball tonight. Do you want to be sent back to Mama and Scarlett in disgrace? I don’t know what would make them

angrier – me embarrassing myself here, or me being chosen in the first place.

Oh, Aunt Florence, why didn't you just choose Scarlett? I could have had a few days of peace!

She jerked herself back to the present with an effort. Another carriage was rattling down the drive now, bringing more guests.

"You must be exhausted from your journey. I'll have you shown to your rooms right away." the Dowager said, smiling at them both. There was something oddly hollow about her smile, but Abigail didn't want to think about that. These great ladies always had a host of tragedies in their pasts. And that wasn't just a conclusion which she'd drawn from novels.

And then the first conversation was over, and Abigail was able to climb the red-carpeted stairs behind Aunt Florence. A maid led the way, head down, hair covered by an old-fashioned mob-cap. She didn't speak.

"Will I have a trundle bed in your room, Aunt?" Abigail asked.

Aunt Florence laughed. "Heavens, no, girl. You'll have a room of your own. And since you don't seem to have your own maid already, I've brought a girl from my house to wait on you."

Abigail swallowed reflexively. "That's not necessary, Aunt. I can dress myself."

"I'm sure you can, but Lucy will see to you anyway."

The maid silently led them down a long, quiet hallway, carpeted wall to wall. She stopped before a door marked The Orange Room and stood aside for Aunt Florence to step inside.

“Ah, my usual room, I see,” Aunt Florence said, sounding satisfied. “I take it my niece is to be on the same wing?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the maid responded quietly, looking uneasy at being spoken to. “The Blue Room, ma’am.”

“Very nice, very nice. Well, go and get settled in, Abby, and I’ll come along and see you before we go down again. Lucy will come along when it’s time to dress. She knows what’s what.”

Abigail hovered in the doorway, struggling to speak. Aunt Florence paused, lifting an eyebrow.

“Thank you, Aunt,” Abigail burst out at last. “For everything. For bringing me here, mostly. I know I haven’t seemed very grateful. But I am. Thank you.”

Aunt Florence smiled, reaching out to pat her niece’s cheek. “I have great things in mind for you, my darling Abby. Now, off with you and rest.”

Thus dismissed, Abigail followed the maid further along the hallway, to a room marked The Blue Room .

Just like before, the maid stepped aside and let Abigail go in first. The deference made her uncomfortable.

The Blue Room was, as the name indicated, mostly blue. There was flowered blue-and-white paper on the walls, thick carpets of patterned blue, a rich sapphire bedspread, and a powder-blue canopy hanging around the huge bed. It was at least twice as large as Abigail’s bed back home. In fact, her whole room could have fitted into this one twice over.

She stepped inside, turning in a little circle.

“Oh, it’s beautiful! Thank you so much.”

The maid blinked. “Y-You’re welcome, Miss. I did clean it myself.”

“It’s impeccable. You should see the cobwebs in my room back home.”

The maid gave a little laugh, which she hastily turned into a cough. Gaining a little confidence, she spoke again.

“There’s a bell-pull in the corner, Miss. I just thought I’d say, seeing as you haven’t stayed with us before. Ring whenever you want tea or anything, or if you want to see your maid. And there’s a key in the door, in case you want to lock yourself in at night. Some people do, you know.”

Abigail nodded. “Thank you very much. I think I’ll like it here.”

The maid beamed, and retreated, closing the door softly behind herself. Abigail flopped backwards onto the bed, which was just as delightfully soft as it looked.

Maybe it won’t be all bad here, she thought with a smile.

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Alex watched the new guests disappear into the house, unable to shake an unsettling feeling in his gut. He knew Lady Caldecott, of course, although she'd been notably cold with him. Odd.

And then there was her niece, who seemed strangely familiar to Alex. He'd likely passed her by at some gathering or another, although they'd never exchanged words.

It had been pure coincidence that he'd passed when the girl was tumbling out of the carriage. Why she hadn't waited for the footmen to arrive was beyond him, but that wasn't the point.

She had the loveliest eyes he'd ever seen. Brown, proper brown, like the heart of a chestnut, shot with lights of gold. Not a hint of green or blue to be seen, and that was rare, wasn't it? Everybody had blue eyes in this country.

Not that she'd seemed to want to talk much to him. She'd kept her head down and had barely looked at him. Perhaps that was embarrassment, though. A trip like that in the middle of a thriving ball would be noticed, and probably would make its way into a scandal sheet if nothing else exciting happened.

Not your business, Alex reminded himself, turning to face the second carriage coming down the drive. This one was a hackney cab, and he knew exactly who would come tumbling out of it.

"Alex, old friend!" Hamish cheered, flinging open the door when the cab was still moving. "Good of you to come out and meet me."

“I got your note this morning. What do you mean by it? Why are you here?”

Hamish stumbled out onto the gravel, chuckling to himself. He threw a few coins to the cab driver, who snatched them out of the air and moved on without ever having properly stopped the cab. Apparently, Hamish’s entire baggage was contained in one simple box.

“I was invited,” Hamish snorted. “By you, no less. Don’t you remember? The night before last.”

Alex did remember, and his heart plummeted.

Hamish was invited to the main ball itself, like the rest of London, but guests invited to the days before and after were strictly curated by Mary herself. Hamish had not made the list.

That is, until Alex, drunk and in a state of high spirits, told him to come anyway.

“I didn’t think you’d actually come,” Alex muttered. “I’ll have to tell Mother what I’ve done. Oh, what a mess.”

“It is a most regrettable predicament, indeed,” Hamish agreed. “I’ll charm her, don’t worry.”

“Lady Caldecott is already here, with a niece. She was very unfriendly to me. I can’t think of what I’ve done to offend her.”

“A niece? Isn’t that the remarkably pretty one, the one that’s not out yet? Did she come out after all?”

“She was pretty, yes,” Alex acknowledged. “Miss Abigail Atwater, if I recall

correctly.”

Hamish wrinkled his nose. “Oh, that’s the older one. Generally regarded as quite plain.”

“I didn’t think she was plain. And you are in no condition to be casting remarks upon the appearance of others, Hamish.”

“That is true,” Hamish conceded, not offended at all. “I think I know why Lady Caldecott was unfriendly to you.”

“Do enlighten me.”

“She doesn’t want you getting in her niece’s way.”

Alex paused, blinking. “What on earth do you mean?”

Hamish surreptitiously took out a hip flask from his waistcoat pocket and took a swig. He offered it to Alex, who shook his head. Mary would only smell it on his breath. Or worse, William would.

“If she’s brought the niece to this ball, it means she wants the girl to make a good match,” Hamish explained. “She’s acting as a duenna to her niece. And you, my flirtatious rake of a friend, are not at all the sort of suitor she’d like Miss Atwater to have. She’s warning you away, I’m afraid.”

Alex blinked. “Oh. I hadn’t thought of that.”

He wasn’t sure why he hadn’t thought of it. Alex knew he had a certain kind of reputation. He liked people, and he liked making friends, male and female. He was vaguely aware that his friendliness towards women could be misinterpreted, but it

had never quite occurred to him how strong his reputation had become.

It also occurred to him that, if he were a woman, he wouldn't have the luxury of simply being unaware of his reputation.

"Yes, I'm afraid that's the way things are," Hamish agreed, faintly sympathetic. "Still, it hardly matters, does it? Just steer clear of Lady Caldecott and the niece. Easy enough, isn't it?"

"Easy enough," Alex echoed mechanically.

There was an awkward pause after that, broken only by Hamish noisily sipping from his flask again.

And then they heard the rattle of carriage wheels on gravel once more. Alex glanced over his shoulder, and his heart immediately sank.

"Oh, no," he muttered. "Recognise that crest?"

The carriage was well-lacquered, and rather unnecessarily pulled by four horses instead of just two. Boxes and suitcases were piled on top, well lashed down. The carriage lurched to a halt in front of the two men, spilling gravel everywhere, and the door flew open.

Lord Graham Donovan, dandy extraordinaire and well-known artiste, stepped nimbly down from his carriage.

"Lord Alexander," he greeted delicately, lifting a quizzing glass to inspect them both. "And Lord Hamish Grey, I do declare. How kind of you to welcome me to your home. Or rather, your brother's home, in your case, Lord Alexander."

Alex forced a smile. “Lord Donovan. How excellent to see you. I’m surprised you could drag yourself away from your canvases to visit.”

“One must fulfil one’s social obligations. The green suit is a bold choice, Lord Alexander. You are to be commended.”

Am I? Am I really?

Alex swallowed down any sharp comments. “I hope you enjoy the week, Lord Donovan.”

He made to move aside – their house was large, surely he could avoid the man over the next few days – but Lord Donovan stepped in his path again.

Lord Graham Donovan was around thirty. He had aged well, tended to dress well, and had a neat oval face and thick brown hair. Coupled with his modest fortune and excellent breeding, that was enough to win him the love of Society. His paintings were fairly good, and many people commissioned him to do their portraits, more for the novelty of having a lord paint their picture than anything else. He was generally thought to be an amusing and a likeable man, as well as being considered a Catch in the marriage mart. In another world, Alex and Lord Donovan might easily have been friends.

Needless to say, they were not.

“I hear that Miss Havisham married after all,” Lord Donovan said, an edge to his voice. “She picked neither of us, it seemed.”

Alex flushed. “This again, Graham?”

“It’s Lord Donovan to you. Do you really have nothing to say for yourself?”

“I will say the same thing to you as I said to Miss Havisham. My intentions were always platonic, and I truly hate myself for giving an impression otherwise. The mistake was mine. Miss Havisham is a fine woman, and I’m thrilled for her happiness.”

Lord Donovan’s lip curled. “Three years, and that’s all you have to say? I loved her.”

“She would never have married you.”

The words were out before Alex could stop himself. Lord Donovan turned a faint purple colour.

Hamish hastily grabbed Alex’s arm, towing him away. “Let’s go inside. Your mother and brother will be furious if you start a fist-fight on the driveway.”

Alex muttered various curses under his breath, glancing back over his shoulder. Lord Donovan was fighting to compose himself, straightening his waistcoat and shouting at the footmen who came hurrying over to help with his bags.

The tale was a simple one. Lord Donovan had pursued a beautiful young heiress for a Season or two. She was not interested in him. Alex, a youthful fool, made friends with the heiress. He should have known better, should have known how his overtures would have been interpreted. She was a clever, amusing young woman, and pleasant to spend time with, although Alex had never felt drawn to her in that way.

When he told her truthfully how he felt – or rather, how he did not feel – Miss Havisham had retired to the country. Lord Donovan made one last attempt at a proposal – which was refused – and promptly challenged Alex to a duel.

The duel had not happened, of course. William handled things, as he always did, and it had been kept from the ears of their father. Miss Havisham had recovered and

gotten married – quite happily, if gossip was to be believed – and all that was left was a simmering resentment – mostly one sided – between Lord Donovan and Alex.

There was no time to think about that now, as they were climbing the stairs, and Mary was waiting at the top. Her eyebrows rose at the sight of Hamish.

“Lord Grey,” she said, as calm and dignified as always. “What a pleasure.”

“I am intruding, your Grace,” Hamish said, with just the right note of apologetic wryness. He bent over her hand, and Mary graced him with a frosty smile.

“The fault is mine, Mother,” Alex murmured. “I invited Hamish along, and entirely forgot to ask your permission first. I am sorry.”

Mary nodded. “Think nothing of it, my dear. The more the merrier, and we have plenty of rooms to spare.”

She gestured for a footman to come over and instructed him to show Hamish to his room.

The two departed, leaving Alex with his mother. He was keen to get out of the way before Lord Donovan appeared.

“I am sorry, Mother,” Alex repeated, feeling like a naughty schoolboy. “I never thought...”

“Don’t worry about it,” Mary said, reaching up to pat his cheek. “These house gatherings must be so awfully dull for you.”

“They aren’t dull, I promise.”

“I know how close Lord Grey and you are – I ought to have invited him, to be sure.” She stood up on her tiptoes to press a kiss to her son’s cheek. Alex obediently bent down to receive the kiss. “Now, why don’t you run along and dress? Dinner will be served soon enough. We have only a few latecomers to greet now. Oh, and here is Lord Donovan!”

That was Alex’s cue to leave. He mumbled something and darted along the hallway, climbing the stairs two at a time.

It was a relief that Hamish was here, to be sure. At least he would have someone to talk to. And while they couldn’t get in their cups at the gathering – ladies present, and all – it would be good to have a friend to drink with afterwards . In fact...

Rapid footsteps thudded along behind Alex, and he barely had time to turn before somebody grabbed his arm and manhandled him into the nearest bedroom.

It was one of the spare rooms, done up in grey and the palest shades of blue, all ready to greet a guest. Alex spun around and found himself facing his brother.

“What are you doing, Will?” Alex snapped, yanking his arm free. “You really dug in your fingers.”

“I have just heard that Lord Hamish Grey is here,” William hissed. “Your friend. You invited him.”

Alex flushed. “Yes, that’s true. Mother knows.”

“She knows now , because you told her. Why do you think we don’t invite your friends to these balls?”

“Because you hate to see me enjoying myself?”

“Because they are rakes. All of them,” William continued, ignoring his brother altogether. “You’re a rake, but we can’t ignore you because you’re my wretched brother and one of the family. Have you no shred of propriety left, to invite a man like Lord Grey to our family home? You’ve seen the guests staying here. Single ladies, families, respectable people. If you must spend time with Lord Hamish Grey outside of this house, that is fine. He can even come to the occasional ball and dinner, if he behaves himself. But this – inviting him here in this matter – this is too much. Can you really not see that?”

Alex could feel colour rising to his cheeks. He hated flushing like a child, but there really was nothing to do about it.

William clearly was angry. His face was white, his lips pinched together, and he had his arms folded tight across his chest.

At least he doesn’t look like Father, Alex thought, and the idea was strangely reassuring.

The late Duke never gave any outward signs of anger. He was almost smooth-faced and composed, only a cruel glint in his eyes giving a hint of awful things to come.

William, on the other hand, had anger written all over his face, almost like a much younger man on the brink of a tantrum. It was almost comical.

At least, it would have been comical, had he not had a point.

“I’m sorry, Will,” Alex said, as honestly as he could. “I... I hardly remember making the invitation.”

“No, because you were in your cups. It’s clear that Lord Grey remembers.”

Alex hung his head. “Yes, yes, alright, if you must hear it. I was drunk when I invited him to stay. I ought to have spoken to mother about it, but I entirely forgot. I didn’t think he would come. And he’ll be on his best behaviour, I promise. I’ll make sure of it.”

William pursed his lips. “Tell me, how did Mother react when you told her?”

Alex frowned. “What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. Was she angry? Did she roll her eyes? Did she complain, and inform you that there isn’t enough room for any more guests?”

“Well, no, but...”

“What do you think, may I ask, would have happened if Henry did this, or Katherine, or even me?”

“This is your house.”

“Don’t be a fool. Legally, yes, but in our mother’s mind, it will always be hers, and I’m not cruel enough to convince her differently.” William scoffed, shaking his head. “You’re treated entirely different from us, and you truly can’t see it, can you?”

Alex swallowed hard, lifting up his chin. “What is your point, William? I apologised to Mother. She gave her permission for Hamish to stay. I promised that he and I will both behave. What do you want from me?”

William clenched his jaw. A muscle jumped in his cheek.

“Nothing. I want nothing from you, Alex.”

He turned on his heel, reaching for the door. The door flew open just before he could touch it, revealing a footman and Lord Graham Donovan standing in the hall.

“Oh,” the footman stammered, looking confused. “I thought... her Grace said The Grey Room, sir.”

“You are correct,” William said, recovering rapidly. “Do excuse my brother and me. We were having a private conversation.”

“Ah, I see,” Lord Donovan said, an insufferable smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. “I hate to interrupt.”

“Not at all,” William said, with remarkable grace. He stepped out into the hallway and strode away, head down, never once looking back.

Alex was left to edge out of the room after his brother, smiling nervously.

The smile had dropped from Lord Donovan’s face now. The footman looked thoroughly uncomfortable.

“I’m sure we’ll be seeing a great deal of each other over the next few days,” he said smoothly. There was an edge to his voice which Alex did not like.

“I wish we could be friends, Lord Donovan,” he said quietly, so quietly the man almost did not hear him. “I’m tired of this rivalry.”

Lord Donovan took a step towards Alex, coming so close their noses almost touched.

“I’m only just getting started,” he whispered. “You’re going to regret crossing me, Lord Alexander Willenshire. You’re a spoiled, stupid rake of a third son, and it’s no wonder your brother is so disappointed with you.”

Alex swallowed hard. “My brother is not disappointed with me.”

Lord Donovan smiled mirthlessly. “Oh, no? I think we both know that’s not true. Now, if you don’t mind, my dear Lord Alexander, I should like to have my room to myself. We’ll have opportunities to talk at dinner tonight, I’m sure. How does that sound?”

Alex swallowed hard. He was obliged to step aside, as Lord Donovan showed no signs of stepping back. Without risking another comment, he turned on his heel and marched away down the hallway, feeling the other man’s eyes boring into his back all the way.

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The dress was, admittedly, beautiful. Abigail held her breath, turning this way and that to watch it swish around her legs.

It was a mint green colour, a little brighter than she would have chosen for herself, but it did suit her. It was heavily ruched and frilled, according to the latest fashions, but somehow felt less silly than when she'd worn Scarlett's dress.

Lucy, a cheerful, round-faced young woman who'd chattered non-stop since she entered Abigail's room, took a step back, and beamed.

"You look lovely, Miss. Just lovely."

"Thank you," Abigail murmured, pulling at the end of one ringlet. Lucy had insisted on doing Abigail's hair differently – all curled and piled up on her head, with a few ringlets hanging down, rather than the tight knot Abigail generally favoured. It had taken a lot longer to do than usual, but the results were definitely worth it.

"Knock, knock," called a familiar voice at the door, letting herself in without actually knocking. Aunt Florence wore a surprisingly sedate gown in silver-coloured silk, fringed with jet beads. She gave an exclamation when she saw Abigail.

"Well, you are a picture ! You've done well, Lucy. Very well indeed."

Lucy gave a little curtsy, beaming with pride. Aunt Florence circled Abigail, taking in every detail. Abigail held her arms out at her sides for inspection, for once not feeling unbearably self-conscious. It was nice.

“Yes, yes, very nice,” she murmured. “I have to admit, I was worried about the sort of dresses your mother might send along with you, but this is very nice. How do you feel in it?”

“I love it,” Abigail admitted. “I’ve never had such a beautiful dress.”

Aunt Florence lifted her eyebrow. “Not even during your Season?”

Abigail flushed, biting her tongue. “Well, the style of dresses in my first Season were a little different to this, and my second Season... well, they were all annoyed that I wasn’t married, and Mama said she wasn’t going to waste more money on me.”

Aunt Florence pursed her lips. “I see. Hm. Well, enough about that, I suppose. We’re going down in a minute, but first I think you’re missing something.”

“What do you mean?”

With a flourish, Aunt Florence produced a little box, covered in peach-coloured silk. She opened the box, revealing a coral necklace and matching earrings. Abigail muffled a gasp.

“Oh, Aunt, they’re beautiful! Am I to wear them?”

“If you like.”

“But the dress is green.”

Aunt Florence chuckled. She took out the necklace, stringing it around Abigail’s throat. “Sometimes, a contrast is the most beautiful thing one can imagine.”

Sure enough, the beautiful orange-red colour of the coral stood out against the pale

green of the gown, making Abigail's skin seem creamier than before. She lifted a hand gingerly to her throat, tracing the beads.

"It's lovely. It's so kind of you to let me wear this, Aunt."

"Wear it? It's yours. It's a gift. Here, I'll let you put in the earrings yourself."

Abigail bit her lip, eyeing the unfamiliar girl in the mirror. She felt... oh, she wasn't sure how she felt. Different, for sure.

"You're so kind, Aunt," Abigail murmured. "I... I'll do my best not to embarrass you."

Aunt Florence's gaze narrowed. She flicked her hand, wordlessly dismissing Lucy. They stood in silence until the door closed.

"You won't embarrass me," she said firmly. "I invited you because I like you, Abigail. I believe you've been passed over far too much in your life. Such is the fate of a middle child, I'm afraid. I suppose you don't need me to tell you that you need to think about marriage?"

Abigail looked down. "I've been trying, I promise."

"I know you have, dear. But this is a great opportunity for you to make a good match. The sort of match that will give you security, wealth, happiness. The sort of match that will put you in a position to leave your family for good."

She bit her lip. "I love my family."

"Yes, yes, we all love our families, but sometimes we don't like them very much, do we? It's not a sin to want a good future for oneself, my dear."

Abigail's hands clenched at her sides, bunching up the expensive fabric. She tilted her head to one side. Could she find a decent husband, looking like this? Abigail was used to thinking of herself as plain . Her mother said it often enough, and certainly Scarlett. Even her father occasionally tapped her cheek and sighed, saying he wished she was a beauty like her sister.

But without Scarlett beside her, preening and flirting, things felt... they felt different. Abigail felt different.

"Do you think I'm plain, Aunt?" Abigail asked in a rush.

Aunt Florence's eyes flew up to meet herself in the mirror.

"No," she said firmly, without hesitation.

"You can tell me the truth."

"I am. I'm not in the habit of lying to spare the feelings of others, I can assure you."

"I'm not as pretty as Scarlett."

"No, you are not," Aunt Florence conceded, tweaking a curl into place. "Just as I was prettier than your mother when we were young. Society sets the standards as to what beauty means. It changes yearly. One Season fair beauties are all the rage, the next Season it is brunettes. Olive skin goes in and out of fashion, as do curls and blue eyes and shapes. Society dictates what beauty means, just as they choose the fashion for sleeves and necklines and hairstyles. The difference is that people cannot choose their faces, or even their shapes. One cannot slough off olive skin like a dress if next year favours a peach-and-cream complexion. Worrying about whether one is considered fashionably beautiful is a waste of time, I can assure you."

Abigail let out her breath in one long exhale. Had anyone ever said anything like that to her? No, she thought not. It felt as though a heavy yoke had been lifted off her shoulders. When somebody like Aunt Florence said, with all the confidence that seemed to come so easily to her, that being beautiful did not matter, Abigail found herself inclined to believe it.

Their eyes met in the mirror, and Aunt Florence dropped her a slow wink.

“Better?”

“Better,” Abigail confirmed, feeling the mad urge to giggle.

“Excellent. Now, shall we venture downstairs? I can hear a lot of commotion down there, which means that the guests are arriving. Do you have your dance card?”

Abigail lifted her wrist obediently, displaying the card. It was empty, of course, and generally speaking it would stay empty for the rest of the night.

Aunt Florence eyed the card, a grin spreading across her face. “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” Abigail answered, and for once it didn’t feel like an absolute lie.

Downstairs was absolute chaos. From wall to wall, the hallway was crammed with people. Abigail couldn’t see into the ballroom, but she suspected that it was worse. Faint strains of music climbed over the noise of chatter and laughter, almost drowned out.

Aunt Florence made a decent job of manoeuvring them through the crowd. Every few steps an acquaintance hailed her, and then there were generally introductions and

pleasantries to get through. All in all, the walk from the staircase to the ballroom threshold took at least twenty minutes, probably more.

There was a little space surrounding the doorway, and the two women had a chance to stand and catch their breath a little. Abigail was already sweating. She wished she hadn't left her fan upstairs. There would be no going back to get it now.

"Are you alright, my dear?" Aunt Florence asked. "Is it too much for you?"

It was, but Abigail had no intention of saying so.

"I'm fine, thank you. If I can just find somewhere to sit..."

"Sit? Oh, my darling girl. Only matrons and chaperones sit."

"I always sit down at balls."

"Because you are a wallflower. Wallflowers don't get asked to dance, and if I'm not mistaken, you are about to be asked."

Aunt Florence tapped Abigail on the shoulder with her closed fan and nodded in the direction of a gentleman heading their way. He was a rabbity-looking young man, fairly harmless, and smiled hopefully at Abigail as he approached.

Aunt Florence quickly made the introductions – Sir Tobias Hemming – and Sir Tobias immediately asked for a dance. Abigail was so shocked that she nearly dropped her pencil when she filled in his name. He bowed, smiled, and retreated into the crowd.

"For future reference," Aunt Florence remarked, "better let the gentlemen sign their own names. They like that."

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t know. He seemed pleasant.”

“He is, but sadly requires a rich wife. Your dowry wouldn’t be enough.”

Abigail flinched. “Oh. Why did you let me accept a dance with him, then?”

“My dear girl,” Aunt Florence laughed, “A full dance card is the most attractive thing a lady can possess. Sir Tobias probably already knows you are not rich enough for him, but he wants to curry favour with us both. And it worked. He wants to be seen dancing with lots of suitable ladies, and you want to be seen dancing with gentlemen. A symbiotic relationship, you see.”

“I see,” Abigail lied smoothly.

“I should hope so. Ah, I see there’s a refreshment stand over there. I shall get lemonades, you stand here and look pretty.”

Without waiting for a response, Aunt Florence plunged off into the crowd, leaving Abigail standing alone.

Not alone for long.

“You look overwhelmed, Miss Atwater,” came a male voice from just behind her, making Abigail jump.

She already knew whose voice it was, although she’d only heard it once. Best not to think about that too hard.

“My lord,” she managed, her voice little more than a squeak. “You startled me.”

“I beg your pardon,” he responded, moving to stand beside her. He looked very fine

tonight, Abigail thought. It was fine to think such things, so long as she didn't dwell on those thoughts.

He wore a dark blue suit, which might be a little too colourful for a party like this, and a blue and gold waistcoat underneath, which was certainly too colourful.

That odd clenching feeling returned to Abigail's chest. Perhaps the dress was too tight.

"What do you think?" Lord Alexander asked, gesturing to the ball in general with his whiskey glass.

"It's very crowded, but the ballroom looks beautiful."

He nodded, taking a long sip. "I made the centrepieces myself."

Blinking, Abigail glanced over at one of the centrepieces in question. It was an expertly arranged bouquet of flowers, set in an elegant white vase decorated with ribbon. The flowers weren't the usual hothouse variety.

"They're wildflowers," she heard herself say, vaguely surprised.

He winced. "Yes, a lot of people would have preferred roses, I think."

"I prefer wildflowers."

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. "I'm glad. That's a very nice dress, Miss Atwater. You suit the colour."

Abigail hadn't got as far as accepting compliments. Instead of saying something witty – no doubt she'd think of something clever later – she mumbled incoherently and

smoothed down the front of her dress.

“In fact, I was wondering...” Lord Alexander began.

He was not able to finish. Aunt Florence appeared from nowhere, a glass of lemonade in each hand, and directed a strange, flat gaze at the man.

“Lord Alexander, how do you do,” she said, voice oddly disjointed. “Thank you for keeping my Abigail company. I’m sure you know how worrying it is, being a chaperone for a lovely girl like her in a busy ballroom.”

Abigail wasn’t entirely sure what all that meant, but Lord Alexander coloured and looked away.

“Of course,” he said tightly. “Excuse me, ladies. Enjoy the night.”

And with that, he melted away, leaving Abigail with a faint feeling of disappointment that she could not quite interpret.

“Stop it,” Aunt Florence said shortly, pushing a glass of lemonade into her niece’s hand.

Abigail blinked down at the lemonade. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Stop mooning over him. Didn’t I say that his lordship was no good?”

“That’s unkind.”

“It’s realistic. I like him well enough, but not when I have you to worry about.”

Abigail cleared her throat. “Would... would being seen with Lord Alexander damage

my reputation?”

Aunt Florence sighed. “Not exactly. But he’s known to be a bit of a flirt. He’s handsome, charming, and rich, and at his heart, I don’t believe he’s a bad man. That’s a dangerous combination. If I take you out into Society only for you to lose your heart and head to a known rake, I might as well have just left you with your mother and sister.”

Abigail bit her lip. “I’m sorry, Aunt. I should have listened. I didn’t know how to get away from him without being rude.”

“You can’t be rude, of course. His mother is our host, and his brother is the Duke of Dunleigh. Don’t worry, I’ll keep you away from him. Ah, another gentleman is coming over for an introduction, I think. Two, in fact. The older is not looking to marry, as far as I know, but the other is highly eligible. Just to let you know, dearest.”

Abigail began choking on her lemonade just in time for the two men to approach. Their names were Mr. Mutton and Lord Donovan, the former clearly well known to Lady Florence.

Mr. Mutton was a man of middle-years, with a cheerful face and a way of never quite looking Abigail full in the face. He requested a dance, and this time Abigail remembered to let him sign his own name. He did so, then fell into deep conversation with Aunt Florence, leaving Abigail free to speak to the second man.

“You seem a little overwhelmed, Miss Atwater,” Lord Donovan said, smiling wryly. “If you don’t mind me saying so.”

She sighed. “I don’t mind. It is very crowded.”

“Your name seems familiar – is this your first Season?”

She had to laugh at that. “First Season? Heavens, no. This is my third.”

Abigail immediately winced at that. She shouldn’t have been so open about her third Season. The first question gentlemen would wonder – according to her mother, at least – was why on earth she hadn’t gotten married in her first few Seasons.

Lord Donovan, however, did not seem shocked or put off. He only laughed, shaking his head.

“Three Seasons? You’re a braver person than I. Or perhaps you’re the sort of lady who relishes balls and gatherings?”

“I wish I were. I’m not, I’m afraid.”

He nodded. “Neither am I. Some gentlemen – Lord Alexander Willenshire, for example – see balls such as these as their own personal playground. I can’t say that I agree with that sentiment.”

There was a hardness in his voice when he mentioned his lordship. Abigail tried to read his face and failed miserably. She’d never been much good at knowing what people were thinking.

Lord Donovan was a handsome enough man. He was around thirty, by Abigail’s estimation – although she wasn’t much good at guessing ages either – and had good hair and a pleasant face. He dressed in a fairly ordinary evening suit, nothing spectacular. It hung oddly on him, and she found herself comparing it to Lord Alexander’s glittering blue and gold waistcoat.

Stop it! She scolded herself. Here a nice, eligible man is talking to you, and all you can do is think about some charming rogue who spoke to you briefly.

She swallowed hard, forcibly pushing all thoughts of Lord Alexander – who, she was willing to bet, was not thinking of her – from her mind.

Lord Donovan was looking at her strangely, head tilted to one side.

“I haven’t seen that hairstyle tonight, I think.”

Blood rushed to Abigail’s face. She hadn’t considered that a gentleman might know things about hairstyles .

“Oh? Is it unfashionable? I really don’t know about these things.”

He laughed again, a light, airy sort of laugh that immediately put Abigail at ease.

“It wasn’t a judgement; I can assure you. I like to see things that are different. That hairstyle is very becoming, and I often find it suits me better to go against fashion than along with it. One stands out more.”

As if to contradict his point – or perhaps strengthen it – Lord Donovan straightened his plain black suit jacket, identical to most of the other jackets in the room.

Well, it’s probably best to dress conservatively in a place like this, Abigail thought. Out of respect for one’s hosts.

“Are you dancing tonight, Miss Atwater?” Lord Donovan asked suddenly. Out of the corner of her eye, she was aware of Aunt Florence half-turning their way as if to listen. Lord Donovan had not, as yet, asked her to dance.

“I am,” Abigail managed. Butterflies fluttered inside her. Was this really happening? Was a nice, eligible lord about to ask her to dance?

“May I see your dance card?”

She wordlessly held out her wrist. “Only two names on there,” she answered, since it felt like she should say something.

Lord Donovan’s gaze flicked down the list of names, almost as if he were looking for something. He pursed his lips.

“Only two? What a pity. Can I tempt you to stand up with me, Miss Atwater?”

Aunt Florence had ended her conversation altogether and was turning towards them now. She said nothing, but when Abigail glanced questioningly at her aunt, she smiled encouragingly and nodded.

Don’t be too eager, Abigail admonished herself.

“I would like that, thank you.”

Lord Donovan smiled and scribbled his name on the dance card. In the background, the music had paused, and the musicians were getting ready to play in earnest. Couples were gathering on the dance floor, and it struck Abigail that the dancing was about to begin.

It was thrilling to think that at least three gentlemen would come and claim her for dances throughout the night. Before, Abigail could easily go an entire ball without dancing once.

“I noticed that you don’t have a partner for the very first dance,” Lord Donovan said, smiling. “I took the liberty of putting my name down.”

“Oh,” Abigail managed, feeling breathless.

He extended a hand. “Shall we?”

She took it. “It would be my pleasure.”

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:12 am

He shouldn't have brought Hamish.

The guilty knowledge throbbed at the back of Alexander's mind, and he cursed himself and his friend in equal measure.

Why can't he behave, if only for a few hours? Alexander thought unhappily. Beside him, Hamish pressed a hand over his mouth, barely smothering a belch.

"Excellent wine, this," he said, in tones too loud for a genteel party. "Your brother's cellar? Think he'd let us have a wander down there, pick out a few more bottles?"

Alexander imagined asking the butler for the keys to the cellar – or worse, asking William himself – and closed his eyes in mortification.

"No, Hamish, he wouldn't. I think you've drunk too much, anyway."

Hamish blinked, wobbling ever so slightly. He stretched out a hand and clapped it on Alexander's shoulder, more to steady himself than anything else.

"You're a real morose tonight," Hamish commented. "What's the matter?"

Alexander flushed, looking away. "I have a headache."

A flimsy lie, but Hamish seemed to believe it. Across the room, William stood with a group of gentlemen, no doubt ready to time his next dance to the very second. Alexander had been watching him, and he chose his partners carefully. Very carefully. Single ladies, but not too eligible. Not too many dances, but not too few,

either. No waltzes, for sure.

William's eye kept drifting over to where Alexander stood with the increasingly drunk Hamish, and his gaze was hard.

Perhaps Alexander would feel less guilty if his wretched friend wasn't drinking so much. Glancing over at him, he saw Hamish about to pour himself another glass of wine. It was too much.

Alexander reached over, whisking the glass from Hamish's hand.

"Good lord, man, have you not had enough?" he snapped. "Have a little decorum."

Hamish eyed him, hurt. "You invited me here. You stood up to your brother for me. I thought you wanted my company."

Alexander bit his lip. "Yes, but I thought you'd behave. You know how strict these events can be."

His friend narrowed his eyes, gaze slipping over Alexander's shoulder to where William stood across the room. His jaw clenched.

"Do you know, Alexander, it's rather exhausting being your friend. You cannot seem to decide whether you want to shock your brother or live up to his standards. Choose, for heaven's sake, one way or another. I don't particularly enjoy feeling as though I embarrass you one moment, only to be an entertaining diversion the next."

Alexander bit his lip. "Don't be unkind, Hamish."

"Unkind? I'm your guest, and now it's fairly clear you wish you had never invited me."

He flushed. "I didn't mean..."

"I'm stepping out onto the balcony," Hamish said shortly, avoiding Alexander's gaze. "I want a cigar. Are you coming, or would you rather stay here and mope?"

The answer was fairly straightforward. Of course Alexander would rather go out into the cool, fresh night air and get out of this crush, but if his mother looked for him and he wasn't there... or worse, if William found out he'd slipped away.

You aren't here to enjoy yourself, he reminded himself, and bit back a sigh.

"I can't, Hamish. Truly, I would, but my family..."

"Yes, yes," Hamish snapped unhappily. "The family you complain about so frequently requires your presence. No need to say more."

Alexander opened his mouth, maybe to give another apology, but Hamish had already gone, stamping away towards the wide French windows. He watched him go, still unable to shake the feeling of guilt.

I am always doing less than I should and more than I would like, he thought unhappily, echoing a line he'd read in a book somewhere, although he could not recollect the book at all. Stuck between Hell and Heaven.

Perhaps a trifle too dramatic, but never mind.

Alexander abandoned his corner in favour of moving through the sweltering crowd. He was glad when William disappeared in the throng – it was good to be out from under his brother's beady eyes. If Alexander ever made a mistake, it seemed that William was there to see it.

Their mother was holding court at the side of the room, nearest the dancing, surrounded by matrons, widows, and sycophants, grandly receiving greetings and well-wishes from all of her guests. She had not been able to greet the guests at the door, and therefore propriety dictated that all guests should in that case seek her out and make their bows. Mary seemed ecstatic. She caught Alexander's eye across the room and beamed at him.

He beamed back, feeling a little better. He had done his duty, when you got down to it. He'd helped set up the ball, he was attending the ball, he was behaving. Yes, perhaps he ought not have invited Hamish, but it was too late to undo that, and at least Hamish had taken himself off.

I'll apologise to Hamish later, Alexander decided. Once this is over.

He spotted Miss Atwater, standing with her aunt, talking with a group of people he did not recognize.

No, he recognized one.

Graham. Wretched idiot.

There was no doubt in Alexander's mind that Graham had rushed to Miss Atwater's side to put his, Alex's, nose out of joint. Not that Alexander was pursuing Miss Atwater. He wouldn't dare. Her aunt would never allow that.

As he watched, Graham said something to the two ladies, and then departed in the direction of the refreshment stand.

What a gentleman, always anticipating their needs. Fetching lemonade and punch, no doubt, so that they don't have to stir a step.

Hidden in the crowd, Alexander watched Miss Atwater turn eagerly to her aunt, a question on her face. Lady Caldecott smiled benignly down at her niece, saying something that Alex could not hear.

The beginning of a fine romance, I'm sure, Alexander thought, a cold feeling spreading through his chest. Come, now. Are you really going to mope like this in the middle of a ball? You're meant to be happy, meant to be meeting new people, and...

The thought died in his head as a familiar face appeared in the crowd.

It was a woman, a perfect oval face framed by vivid blonde locks, skin pale as bone against black lace and jet beads. A widow, but a beautiful one, the sort of young, tragic figure that melted men's hearts and drew them towards her like iron filings to a magnet.

Panic seized Alexander's chest, catching him by the throat. He turned this way and that wildly, looking for somebody to save him.

Simply walking away through the crowd would never do. Not when he was being pursued by Lady Diana Lockwell, the Merry Widow herself.

Too late. She was on him.

The woman slipped sinuously through the crowd, dark eyes fixed on him. She reached out, placing one elegant white hand on his arm.

"Lord Alexander Willenshire, I do declare," she said. "Fancy seeing you here."

He winced. "Hardly. It's my mother's ball. And how..."

He bit his tongue, cutting off the end of the sentence. He had been about to ask how

did you come to get an invitation? Aside from being horribly rude, the answer was simple. Mary invited everybody, and somebody from the famous Lockwell family – even only by marriage – could not be excluded.

Diana tilted her head like a bird, eyes glittering like she knew what he was going to ask anyway.

“I am glad to see you, Alex. May I still call you that, or is it too much of a liberty?”

Too much of a liberty, of course, Alex wanted to say, but it was rude to contradict a lady, so he only gave a sickly smile.

“I heard you’d retired to the country.”

Her pretty face soured into a pout. “My in-laws thought it best. I believe they disagreed with my grieving process.”

Alexander said nothing. According to the gossip, Lady Diana’s grieving process had involved lots of balls, fun, friends, and of course flirting. Even then, he imagined her cold and disdainful in-laws did not exactly disapprove of this, but only the gossip which followed.

“But I’m coming out of mourning soon,” Diana continued. “Really, I should be in half-mourning, but I find that I do look excellent in black. Don’t you think?”

She glanced coyly up at him, swishing her skirts around. The jet beads glittered. Heavy ropes of silver hung around her neck and wrists, replacing the usual creamy pearls that widows favoured.

She looked, frankly, beautiful. Alexander could admit that, even if he knew the danger that hovered behind that beauty.

“I’m not sure we should be talking, Diana,” he said, immediately cursing himself for his informality. Her eyes lit up, and he knew he’d made a mistake.

“Oh?”

“I... I mean our history?”

“History? My dear Lord Alexander, I do not know what you mean.”

Liar, he thought, with a rush of anger. Lies, lies, lies, that’s all I ever heard from you, do you remember?

He didn’t say that, of course. He also didn’t say that when they first met, Alexander’s mourning for his father was just as false as Diana’s mourning for her husband.

Of course, she hadn’t been married then. Engaged, but not married.

“I understand you’ve been left comfortable,” he said, more for the desire to say anything than from any real interest. It wasn’t a proper conversation to have at a ball like this, but Alexander had all but given up on what was proper or not.

Diana smiled demurely, smoothing her crisp skirts. “Yes, my poor, dear Lord Lockwell left me well provided for. It was his greatest wish that I should live free and happy, God rest his soul.”

Alexander conjured up a memory of Lord Lockwell – a sour-faced, angry little man, somewhere in his fifties, with a nasty streak of spite running through him. He didn’t seem like the self-sacrificing type, to be sure.

“Ahem. Well, I’m glad for it. If you’ll excuse me, Lady Lockwell, I see my mother...”

She surged forward again, hand tightening on his forearm. Alexander clenched his teeth.

At one time, the touch of those long, cool fingers would have sent shivery heat rushing along his skin. It would electrify his spine, forcing the breath from his lungs. He'd be hers, body and soul. He'd believe whatever lies she would choose to feed him.

A fine example of said lies was the promise that she would break off her engagement to the titled, wealthy, and influential Lord Lockwell, and marry an unimportant third son.

Alexander reminded himself firmly of those facts and disengaged his arm.

"Diana, stop this. You shouldn't have come. You shouldn't have accepted the invitation."

Twin spots of colour burned in her cheeks. "The dear Dowager Duchess has no idea of our history, Alex. I should never dream of telling her. If she were to find out, of course, it would be a different matter."

Was that a threat? It might have been. Alexander didn't dare probe too deeply. It was all games with Diana, and she always liked to win.

"If I was the scheming woman you think I am," Diana continued, shuffling closer still, "I should introduce myself to the Duke of Dunleigh himself."

Alexander clenched his jaw. "I do not think you're scheming, and I'd thank you not to use words like that at my mother's ball. As to William, you are entirely welcome to try with him, although I would not recommend it."

Diana's expression soured, angry that her bluff had been called. The music dropped, as did her hand. There was a general shuffling on the dance floor behind them, as exhausted couples left the floor only to be replaced by new ones. The next set was beginning.

A mulish set came over Diana's face. "We should dance, my lord. Come, it's just beginning."

No, Alexander thought, panicking. No, no, no.

The lie rose easily to his lips. "I already have a partner for this dance."

She didn't believe him, that much was plain to see. He had never been able to lie to Diana – she was too experienced at falsehoods herself to be easily taken in. She opened her mouth to speak, but Alexander saw with chagrin that if he didn't make his escape quickly, Diana would have him on the dance floor and huddled away in the corner by the end of the night, enough gossip rising up around them to attract even his mother's notice.

"Good evening, Lady Lockwell," he gabbled, making a lopsided bow. "I really must go and fetch my partner."

He turned on his heel, frantically scanning the crowd. Diana did not, of course, move to leave.

"Well, who is she, then?" she demanded, voice thin. "Do point her out to me, darling Alex."

He swallowed hard. The dance was about to start, and that meant that the ladies standing in the crowd and sitting around the wall were all unengaged. But if Diana made it known that he'd lied about a partner to avoid dancing with her, he would find

himself the subject of a great deal of censure. The gossip columns would pick up on it, people would talk about it, and his mother would be shamed.

Ungentlemanly behaviour , they would call it, heads shaking. And the brother of the Duke of Dunleigh, too! Shameful.

Alexander would not allow that to happen, so he had better choose a woman who would agree to dance with him at the last moment.

And then a miracle happened.

A familiar figure moved forward out of the crowd, just a step, half turned away from him to look at the dance floor.

“Miss Atwater,” he heard himself say.

Diana flinched. “What? Who? I haven’t heard of her.”

As if hearing her own name called – which she hadn’t, of course, Alexander knew that she could likely hear nothing above the din of the ballroom – Miss Atwater turned to face him. Their eyes met.

Now or never, he thought, and lifted a hand to greet her. She lifted her own, hesitantly, half glancing over her shoulder as if unsure whether he was waving to someone behind her. Alexander strode forward.

Graham was still ensnared in the crowd around the refreshment table.

Better move quick.

“Miss Atwater, are you not dancing?” Alexander managed, breathless. Diana had not,

to his relief, followed him. She wasn't quite foolish enough to shoulder her way into a conversation where she hadn't been introduced to everybody.

"I... not this time," the girl stammered, eyes large. "I do have a number of engagements to dance, though. Look."

She lifted her wrist, dangling her dance card in front of his face.

"Abigail, what are you doing?"

At the sound of her aunt's voice, Abigail snatched down her arm, red-faced.

Lady Caldecott materialized from the crowd behind her niece, fixing Alexander with a steely glare.

I thought we had an understanding, that look said. Why are you back here?

He glanced over his own shoulder, hoping that Lady Caldecott would see Diana and understand. The wretched woman had gone, though. There was no Diana to be seen.

It changed nothing, though. Alexander had told Diana that he was going to dance, and so he had to dance. Abigail was eyeing him curiously, standing entirely too close. No doubt it was just the crush of the crowd, but it did make him feel uncomfortable.

Not a bad sort of uncomfortable, to his horror, but a prickling sort of attraction, something that made him want to reach out and put his hand on the smooth, pale green satin of Abigail's evening gloves.

Stop it!

Ignoring Lady Caldecott's glare boring into his head, Alexander addressed himself to

Abigail.

“Care to dance, Miss Atwater?”

Something crossed her face. Surprise, perhaps? Excitement? It wasn't as if she could refuse him, not without giving up the opportunity to dance for the rest of the evening.

“Of course,” Abigail managed, a bit too late. She didn't, he noticed, look at her aunt at all. “Here is my dance card, and...”

Alexander waved the thing away. “I thought we dance right now. For the set which is just starting.”

She blinked. “Right. Well, if you'll just write your name...”

“No time,” he said abruptly, well aware that he was not acting like a proper gentleman but not able to summon up the energy to care. With poor Lady Caldecott's eyes almost popping out of her head, Alexander snatched Miss Atwater's silken glove and towed her away towards the dance floor.

Just in time. They'd only just taken up their places when the music began in earnest, and the dance began.

A waltz, Alexander realized with a sinking heart. He cleared his throat, glancing down at his partner.

Abigail was looking up at him with that curious, intent look on her face again.

“It's a waltz,” he said.

“Yes, I know.”

“Do... do you have permission to dance the waltz?”

She narrowed her eyes. “I always thought it rather shocking that ladies couldn’t decide for themselves whether or not they wanted to dance a particular dance.”

“Does that refer to the waltz, or the fact I all but dragged you onto the floor?”

Her face relaxed into a smile. “I suppose you’ll have to guess. But to answer your question, yes, I do have permission to dance the waltz.”

“Good, good,” he mumbled, scanning the surrounding faces for Diana. He didn’t see her.

She was there, though. She was always there, and she missed nothing .

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:12 am

The waltz was not Abigail's best dance.

She didn't consider herself particularly graceful, having never had the opportunity to practice very often. An expensive dance tutor had been engaged when they were younger, but mainly for Scarlett's benefit. The tutor had adored Scarlett at once, and spent hours with the girl, ignoring Abigail almost entirely. She'd learnt the dances, naturally, but once the steps had more or less lodged herself into her mind, Abigail had avoided both dancing and her tutor as best as she could.

The waltz was fairly new to Society, and still considered shocking by some. Perhaps it was the proximity, the forced intimacy of the dance, or perhaps it was simply amusing to compel the ladies and gentlemen of the ton to adhere to frivolous conventions.

Could have been any one of those reasons. Or all, perhaps.

Either way, the point was that Abigail had not danced the waltz before in company. Never, in fact, outside their own drawing room, which had been repurposed as the dancing room when the tutor was in residence.

For the time being, then, she ignored any opportunity to talk, and instead focused on putting her feet where they were meant to be.

"I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable, Miss Atwater."

Her head snapped up. Lord Alexander was not looking at her. He was addressing her, of course, but his eyes were fixed over her head, mouth drawn in tightly at the edges.

“It’s alright,” she heard herself say. “I’m not uncomfortable.”

“I asked a Miss White to dance about two years ago. There was such a flutter, and I had no idea what I’d done wrong. They ushered her out and went home, I think. I learned later that the dance was to be a waltz, and Miss White was only permitted to waltz with a man she was engaged to. It was a rather unfashionable viewpoint, even then, but I never intended to make her feel so uncomfortable. Certainly not to force her to leave. My father was furious. I thought he’d beat me, I really did.”

Abigail’s eyes widened. She opened her mouth, perhaps to ask a question, but closed it again. Alexander had gone quiet, too.

“Well, I am not uncomfortable,” she managed at last.

Was this what it was going to be like? Awkward conversation, exchanging the same old points of views and opinions – the fashionable, boring ones – until the dance ended and they went their separate ways?

For some reason, that idea was not a pleasant one. A disappointing one. His fingers, wrapped around her gloved ones, flexed almost subconsciously. It was odd, having a man’s hand at her waist like that.

Perhaps this is why Scarlett enjoys the waltz so much, she thought wryly. She loves attention, after all.

The dance demanded that they circle around, until Abigail was facing the section of the crowd Alexander had been facing before.

Out of all the people standing there, she knew exactly who he had been staring at.

A woman stood there, not anyone Abigail knew, and she was achingly beautiful. Tall, slim, blonde-haired and creamy-skinned, the woman was resplendent in black satin. A widow, then, but young and beautiful, and likely to marry again before the Season was out, if she wanted to.

A peacock, besides which Abigail would look like a drab old peahen.

I'm used to that, of course, she thought bleakly. The woman's eyes were fixed on Alexander, a veiled look in her eyes. Then she looked at Abigail, and cold water ran down her spine.

It was not a pleasant look. It was the sort of look that implied the woman would like to come storming across the ballroom floor, wrench Abigail out of the arms of her partner, and perhaps bang her head on the floor a little.

The dance spun them away and moved them away entirely. Abigail cleared her throat.

"So, did you ask me to dance in order to avoid that woman, then?"

He flinched, meeting her gaze squarely for the first time since the dance had begun.

"What? I... no, no, of course not, I wouldn't..." he trailed off, looking guilty. "Would you be horribly offended if I said yes?"

"Not at all," Abigail answered, and realized at once that it was a lie.

You fool, muttered a warning voice in the back of her head that sounded remarkably like Aunt Florence. Weren't you warned to leave that man alone? He's dangerous,

and you know it.

Dangerous did not seem to fit Lord Alexander Willenshire. He was so sweet, so handsome, so kind ...

You don't know he's kind.

"Are you going to tell me the story, then?" she asked, spinning deftly under his arm as the dance required. So far, she hadn't trod on anyone's feet, or tripped on her own hem. So far, so good.

Alexander cleared his throat awkwardly. "Well, I mean..."

"Come on, my lord. You owe me, don't you? I'm interested to know how such a beautiful young woman could inspire such fear."

He let out a low chuckle. "Fear is the right word, actually. Well, you know how Society is set up as a sort of hunting game? Ladies do the hunting, without seeming to hunt, naturally, and gentlemen try to escape or let themselves be caught as their fancy goes."

"What a lovely way of describing it."

He lifted one eyebrow. "Sarcasm, Miss Atwater? In a young lady? Shocking."

She tilted her chin. "I prefer to believe that my sense of humour is simply very delicate."

"Mm-hm. Well, Lady Diana Lockwell is chasing me . To marry, or to murder, I'm not entirely sure. She wanted to dance, I think, and I would rather not have danced with her, so I fled. Cowardly, yes, but I'm nothing if not honest about my own

flaws.”

He fell silent after that, and Abigail waited in vain for more. She knew there had to be more, and looked out for the woman – Lady Diana Lockwell – when the dance brought them round again.

This time, though, she was gone, and Abigail felt oddly deflated. Alexander’s face was pale and tight, and she felt as though she’d said the wrong thing.

Aunt Florence was there, though, hands folded in front of herself, expression pinched. There’d be trouble there, later.

“Ladies aren’t allowed to refuse anyone,” she said flatly. “I always thought it unfair.”

“Of course it’s unfair. If ladies could pick and choose which gentlemen they wanted to dance with, or speak to, or even marry, the face of Society would change rapidly. It wouldn’t be allowed.”

The dance picked up speed, and Abigail spun rapidly under Alexander’s arm. She felt herself getting dizzy – she’d never learned the art of spinning in place without losing one’s balance, not like Scarlett.

“Do you intend to marry this Season?” Abigail said, and nearly bit off her tongue.

There were, of course, certain subjects that were frowned upon at balls and gatherings. And then there were other subjects that were banned entirely. Talk about money – vulgar – as well as status, shocking subjects, and so on were all forbidden.

Bluntly asking a man if he intended to marry was certainly beyond vulgar. Beyond shocking. Lord Alexander would be well within his rights to drop her hand and stalk off the ballroom floor.

He did not, however. He eyed her thoughtfully, eyes glinting green beneath smudgy brows.

“I am sorry,” Abigail gasped, wishing with all her heart that she could go back in time and undo what she’d said. “I never meant... I didn’t think...”

“Yes,” he answered bluntly. There was a heartbeat of silence before Abigail managed to speak again.

“Y-Yes?”

He shrugged. “Yes, I do mean to marry. I’m a third son with no prospects, no occupation, and not much to recommend me but my charm, my face – which had been called handsome, I must modestly say – and whatever money my older brothers sees fit to settle upon me. A dowry, I suppose.”

“At least you have that,” Abigail retorted. “All of my parents’ money will probably go to my sister. They expect her to make the finer match out of the two of us. I doubt there’ll be anything left for me.”

It was a half-joke, but Alexander didn’t smile.

“Be careful who you tell that to,” he said quietly. “Lots of people here are penniless, but it’s all about maintaining the faade. You have to pretend. If you plan to get married this Season, Miss Atwater, I’d suggest you keep your lack of dowry to yourself. People can be unforgiving.”

She bit her lip, colour rushing to her cheeks. “At least you have your charm. My sister is charming, when she wants to be.”

“You are charming too.”

“I wasn’t fishing for compliments, my lord. I was merely stating a fact. It seems that both of us have serious things to overcome this Season. I intend to marry, too. This will be my last chance. My third Season.”

The reality trickled down her spine like cold water.

If this doesn’t work, if I don’t marry this Season, there’ll be no more chances.

It wasn’t fair. Wasn’t fair that ladies got a handful of chances to make a life for themselves, and more unfair still that their ‘chance’ involved catching a decent man who could build a life for them.

Fit in, but stand out, otherwise no man will want you. Follow the rules, or you’ll receive censure, but the gentlemen are all bored of the same old Society misses. Excel at the traditional feminine accomplishments, ready to cast them all aside the instant you marry. You must be noticed for your beauty. If you have no beauty, then your wealth.

If you have neither... well. Be thankful for whoever you get, and even one or two measly proposals may not be guaranteed.

She shivered. The dance was winding down. Another couple of minutes. She was too hot, sweat pricking at her temples and at her hairline, the lace of her neckline and sleeves itching against her skin. Her heart thudded under her tightly-laced bodice, and she made a mental note to ask Lucy not to tie it so tightly next time. How was a girl meant to eat? Or breathe ? Just because short stays and narrow waists were the fashion did not mean that Abigail needed to follow it.

“We’re meant to speak of ordinary things,” he said, the ghost of a smile dancing around his lips. “Your hobbies, for instance. Let me guess – watercolours? Embroidery? Then, I could tell you about my hobbies. Hunting, mostly, for a

gentleman.”

“My painting is abysmal,” Abigail admitted, “and my embroidery worse. I love to read, though. Novels, if that shocks you?”

“Not at all. And hopefully it won’t shock you to know that I abhor hunting.”

She smiled. “It certainly does not. I thought all rakes hunted, in one way or another?”

He smiled grimly.

“I have something of a reputation, which I believe you’ve already guessed,” Alexander said suddenly. “A well-earned reputation, but...” he trailed off, shaking his head. “I see how happy my brother and sister are, now that they have married their respective partners. I would like some of that happiness. William, now, he is in love with a phantom.”

“A what ?”

Alexander shook his head. “It’s no matter. Not really my secret to tell, you know.”

Abigail itched to ask more, but resolutely pressed her lips together. Alexander did not seem to be hearing or seeing her, his gaze drifting over the top of her head.

“She’s there again, isn’t she?” Abigail said aloud. “Lady Diana Lockwell.”

“She’ll try and collar me as soon as the dance ends. Don’t be offended if I go haring off.”

“I won’t. Although,” Abigail added, catching a glimpse of her stone-faced aunt in the crowd, “Aunt Florence might well chase you off.”

“Now, that is a horrifying prospect. I know Lady Caldecott well enough to be thoroughly frightened of her. And... and Miss Atwater, I’d be obliged if you didn’t mention to anyone – even your aunt – about what we have discussed tonight. I’m not sure what came over me. I ought not to have burdened you with all of that.”

Abigail bit her lip, nodding slowly. There wasn’t much else to do, really.

“I’m not a gossip, my Lord.”

“I didn’t mean to imply...” he trailed off, shaking his head. “I’m sorry. I told you how charming I thought I was, and all I’ve done is act the fool. It’s rather funny, isn’t it?” He gave a short, low, mirthless laugh. “That’s the story of my life, in fact. I act the fool, and I act the rake, and now I find myself cut off from most decent Society. If you have sons, Miss Atwater, don’t let them grow up like me.”

Before she had the opportunity to say anything – although what could be said in response to such a speech, Abigail did not know – the music ended with a flourish. The dancers stepped apart, bowing and curtsying to their partners, and Abigail and Alexander were obliged to do the same.

“If you’ll excuse me,” Alexander said, face a blank, polite mask, “I think I had better go and find my friend. Let me escort you back to your aunt.”

In fact, it wasn’t necessary for him to escort her anywhere. Abigail turned and found Aunt Florence striding towards them, expression set.

“Don’t worry, Lady Caldecott,” he said, voice forced and light. “I relinquish your niece back into your care.”

“Thank you, my lord,” Aunt Florence responded crisply. “We shall trespass on no more of your time.”

A dismissal if ever there was one. Alexander bowed again, and melted back into the crowd.

Abigail, on the other hand, was in trouble. Aunt Florence gripped her arm tightly, almost frogmarching her over to the refreshment table.

“Lord Donovan came back with our lemonades, and I had to tell him that you had gone whisking off to waltz with his lordship, Alexander Willenshire,” she said crisply. “He was most put out.”

Abigail pressed her lips together. “What should I have said to Lord Alexander, Aunt? I could not be rude to him. This ball is held in his ancestral home, with his own brother as the Duke and his mother as the hostess. Should I have refused him?”

Aunt Florence passed a hand over her face. “No, no, of course not. Forgive me, my dear, I don’t mean to snap. I’m only annoyed that Lord Alexander is looking your way. It will have been noticed, mark my words, that you waltzed with a rake like him.”

“I... he is not looking my way . It’s nothing like that.”

“You can never tell with a rake,” Aunt Florence retorted tartly. “I have known him for a long time, and while he is a good boy, I want him nowhere near my niece. If it means I have a falling-out with the Willenshires, so be it.”

Abigail said nothing. She remembered uncertainly how Alexander had confided that he planned to marry that Season. But then, she’d told him that she had no money.

“Is is lordship poor?”

“Hm? What? No, I think not. He inherited a great deal of money from his father, if I

recall. But men do look to marriage when they get bored, even rakes.”

“But he said...” Abigail trailed off, remembering Alexander’s talk of dowries and having no money. Odd.

“No, we’ll avoid him as best we can. You aren’t feeling a draw towards him, are you, my dear?” Aunt Florence added, peering anxiously at her.

“No, no, of course not.”

“Good. Now, let’s seek out Lord Donovan, and perhaps...” she trailed off as a willowy woman with blonde hair and a black satin dress glided towards them. Abigail’s heart sank.

“I hope you’ll forgive me speaking to you without a formal introduction,” the woman fluted, in a genteel, delightful sort of voice. “My name is Lady Diana Lockwell. I believe you and I, Lady Caldecott, had a passing acquaintance sometime before my marriage.”

Aunt Florence blinked, brow scrunching as she called up an old memory.

“Oh, yes , of course, I recall! You were Miss Rubeshall then, of course! This is my niece, Miss Abigail Atwater.”

Feeling frozen from the neck down, Abigail managed a lopsided curtsy. Lady Lockwell sank down gracefully, watching her closely out of large, dark-coloured eyes.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Atwater. I find myself newly in town, soon to come out of mourning. I hope we might be friends.”

“Yes, quite,” Abigail managed. She found herself glancing around, looking for Alexander. Surely he was nearby? What was the woman playing at?

Lady Lockwell rose from her curtsy, face a beautiful mask.

“I hope to see you again, Miss Atwater. Good luck in your endeavours this Season. We ladies need a generous helping of luck, do we not? I hope you get all that you deserve.”

Well, that was a threat if ever she had heard one. Abigail managed a watery smile, and that seemed to satisfy the woman. She nodded at Aunt Florence and glided away into the crowd.

Abigail let out a long, slow breath.

“Well,” Aunt Florence said, after a pause. “I wouldn’t trust that one as far as I could say.”

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The party was going well. No thanks to Alexander, of course, and his drunken fool of a friend.

William breathed in deeply, forcing himself to stay calm. He'd snatched a few minutes to himself in a quiet corner by the mantelpiece, but it wouldn't be long before somebody or other came over to talk to him, and then his peace would be over.

He breathed deeply, steadying himself. Balls like this weren't meant to be peaceful . He was here to do his duty, both to himself and to his mother. Mary, for her part, was having an excellent time, and William was glad. The poor woman had few enough pleasures in life as it was. She deserved a little joy.

And so do you, whispered a small voice in the back of William's head, but he ignored it.

Almost before he knew it, his hand had slipped into his jacket pocket, where the locket lay wrapped in a strip of linen.

Folly. Absolute folly.

He knew he was being a fool. Why should he care so much about returning a piece of jewelery to a woman he did not know? He fancied he could almost trace the engraved initials in the back of silver locket, initials which, according to the man he'd hired to investigate, did not belong to anyone among the Ton .

L.B. Those were the initials. William couldn't think of anyone with those initials.

In fact, the letter from Mr. Seeker sat in his pocket beside the linen-wrapped locket. It was frank and simple, getting straight to the point.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:12 am

Alexander entered the library just in time to see Hamish vomit into a large antique urn. A pair of them had stood by the fireplace for years, although he suspected that from now on, there would only be one.

The urn was being held by a panicked-looking footman, a man that Alexander vaguely recognized as Eric.

Relief swept through the young man's face when he saw Alexander.

"Oh, your lordship, there you are! The butler and James went off to fetch his Grace. The gentleman is ill, I think. We should call a doctor, shouldn't we?"

Alexander put his hands on his hips, glaring down at his friend.

"He doesn't need a doctor. He needs a bucket of cold water over his head and a good slapping, I think."

Groaning, Hamish rolled onto a sofa, dropping his forearm over his eyes.

"It's so devilishly bright in here, isn't it?"

"Not particularly," Alexander muttered, eyeing the feeble candles. "There isn't even a fire. How did you get into this state?"

By way of answer, Hamish held up a bottle of whiskey.

At least, it had been a bottle of whiskey. There was less than a third left, and

Alexander had the feeling it had been full before Hamish got his hands on it. Not to mention whatever the wretched man had drunk before he started on the whiskey. Wine, punch, and champagne, no doubt.

“You can leave us, Eric,” Alexander addressed the footman. “I shall take care of this. Don’t let any guests come in here, of course.”

The man bowed. “As you say, your lordship.”

“Leave the urn,” Hamish spoke up, face still hidden under his arm. “My stomach feels a little strange still. Probably that cream-cheese pudding thing I ate.”

Alexander gave a bark of laughter. “The pudding? Oh, you fool, it’s nothing of the sort. You’ve drunk entirely too much. You’re no longer in your cups, you’re steeped in your flagons.”

“Nicely put. I do feel ill, though. Don’t be unkind to me.”

“You deserve for me to be unkind to you.”

Alexander sat down at the foot of the sofa with a sigh. His head was pounding, he felt sick himself, and his ears were ringing with the noise and laughter in the other rooms. The noise was muffled here, but he could still hear it. And if he went back into the ballroom, Diana would be there. Waiting for him.

“Do you remember Diana?” Alexander asked at last, after the silence had trailed on for too long. “From before she was married, that is?”

It was relative silence, of course. There was chatter, laughter, and music from the distant ballroom, of course, as well as Hamish’s self-indulgent groans and mutterings, and even the loud, genteel ticking of a grandfather clock in the corner.

“Of course I do,” Hamish answered. “She chased you with a great determination, I recall. I was quite sure she’d catch you. But then she caught a gentleman of greater wealth. You can’t possibly be thinking of her.”

“I’m not, I just...”

Hamish removed his arm, fixing his friend with a bleary but unblinking stare.

“She jilted you carelessly,” he said firmly. “You had an understanding. She knew how you loved her. She made you believe she loved you, too. And then she threw you over for a greater prize. I remember the pain you went through, Alexander. Don’t treat me like a fool. If you believe I’ll sit here and watch you endure that again, you’re mad. I’m your friend. I cannot allow it.”

Alexander bit his lower lip hard, staring down at his hands, entwined in his lap.

“But I want to be wed.”

“Then marry,” Hamish responded. “You’re handsome, charming, and rich. You have a reputation as a bit of a rake, but not a desperate flirt. Ladies like a reformed rake, after all. You don’t need to marry this Season, though, do you?”

“I... I don’t have any money, Hamish.”

The words were out before Alexander could stop them. Hamish paused, propping himself up slowly on his elbows, eyebrows knitted.

“You’ve run through it all already? That’s not possible. I don’t know the details of your finances, naturally, but the old Duke...”

“There’s a clause in his will,” Alexander began, gabbling his way through the words

in case he lost his nerve towards the end. “I can’t get my money until I’m wed. If I don’t marry by the end of the year, I lose it forever.”

There. It was said. Alexander let out a long, slow breath of relief. Sometimes, it felt as if the secret was bottled up inside him, stuck in a corked glass bottle, the pressure building up and up with nowhere to go.

His siblings never wanted to talk about it. Now that Katherine and Henry were married, they had nothing to worry about. They were happy. They were safe.

Alexander, though, might find himself the greatest disappointment among the Willenshire siblings.

Again.

He drew in a long, shaky breath, closing his eyes.

“Nobody can know,” he said, since Hamish had not spoken. “It’s a great secret. If it gets out that we’re... that I’m penniless, I’ll never marry. Or I’ll be stuck with a woman who only wants my money.”

He heard rustling, and then Hamish slung an awkward arm around Alexander’s shoulder.

“Oh, Alex. I knew something was wrong. I... I could tell something was off, but I thought you were just miserable with William stretching his muscles as the new Duke. I never thought... I can’t say I’m surprised. Your father was a vile man.”

“I hated him,” Alexander burst out. “I hated the way he treated Mother. He didn’t much care about me or Henry – we were the spares, you see – but Katherine, as the only girl, and William, as the eldest... I think he felt that he had to mould them.

Shape them into what he wanted. Katherine always defied him, but Will... I sometimes worry he succeeded with William. And now we have this hanging over our heads.”

“The clause applies to you all, then?” Hamish said, sounding shocked this time. “I’m surprised he was willing to risk losing the entire fortune.”

Alexander gave a harsh laugh. “That’s our father for you. He’d rather set fire to his entire fortune than see us escape his control. I suppose he thought forcing us into matrimony would be a way to exercise control from beyond the grave.”

There was a longer pause. In the distance, Alexander heard the music end with a flourish, followed by cheers and applause. There was a minute or two of silence, then the music began again. Another dance was beginning. They would dance until dawn, probably. It was barely one in the morning.

“He hasn’t succeeded, though, has he?” Hamish said at last. “Katherine married a man she loves, and Henry is so happy. They’ve found happiness, and freedom. Do you think... I know this is an awful thing to suggest – but do you think your father was trying to make amends? Trying to make sure you were all happy and safe once he was gone?”

There was another pause, then Alexander shifted to face his friend.

“No,” he said quietly. “I don’t think that. And if you knew my father better, you wouldn’t think it, either.”

Hamish dropped his gaze. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you, I just...”

His voice trailed off, and his skin took on a greenish hue again. Alexander leaned back.

“Oh. Oh, dear. Are you going to...”

By way of answer, Hamish threw himself forward over the side of the couch, leaning over the urn, and threw up violently.

At that inauspicious moment, the door flew open, and William stalked in, followed by the first footman and the butler.

There was a taut moment of silence, during which Hamish spat into the urn, and sheepishly wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

“So,” William said, voice clipped and angry, “this is how you are passing your time at our mother’s party, Alexander. Vomiting into an expensive urn.”

Hamish spat again. “Your Grace, Alexander wasn’t vomiting. It was only I.”

William ignored him, turning to the butler.

“You can leave us. Make sure this gentleman’s room is prepared and be ready to take him quickly up there before any of the guests can notice him. Leave somebody on guard, I don’t want anybody walking in.”

The butler bowed, murmured something in the affirmative, and hurried out, flanked by the footman.

William made sure the door was securely closed, then turned to face the other two. He folded his arms tightly across his chest, gaze travelling over the room. He missed nothing, focusing on the mostly-empty bottle of whiskey.

“Did you take that from the cabinet, Lord Grey?” he asked, slowly and pointedly.

Hamish gulped. “I... I did. I do apologise, your Grace. I only meant to sample it, but... but things got out of hand. It’s a delicious whiskey.”

“It was our father’s,” William snarled. “He kept it for close two decades, and then you come along and drink it.”

The blood drained from Hamish’s face. “Oh, oh. I am so truly sorry. I cannot apologise enough...”

“No, you can’t.”

“I’ll pay twice the value of the whiskey,” Hamish began, but Alexander interrupted him.

“Why do you say that as if it has any significance, William?” he demanded, getting to his feet. “I am not excusing Hamish’s behaviour, but I have made a fool of myself more than once with drink. So has Henry, in fact, and Katherine.”

“Don’t be stupid.”

“You miss my point. Why should we care if Hamish drinks Father’s whiskey? We hated the man, or have you forgotten?”

William flinched. “Don’t speak so thoughtlessly. He was still our father. Where are your filial feelings?”

Alexander gave a bark of laughter. “Filial feelings ? Oh, what a laugh. Don’t you remember the time Katherine and I took a sip of brandy from a leftover glass at the table? It was silly childishness, no more than a single sip each. And father was so angry he poured us both a large cup of whiskey each, and forced us to drink until we were sick?”

Hamish sucked in a breath. William's expression tightened.

"That's irrelevant."

"I was ill for days," Alexander snapped. "I was a child. Barely ten years old, if I recall. Father said it would teach us a lesson, and I suppose it did. He was a cruel man, and if Hamish wants to drink his whiskey, why should we care?"

There was a tap on the door before William could respond.

"Your Grace? My lord?" came a footman's quavering voice. "Lord Grey's room is ready. Should we help him to his bed?"

"Yes, yes, for heaven's sake, get the man out of here," William snarled, glowering at Hamish.

Hamish hung his head.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, and it wasn't clear whether he was talking to Alexander or William.

The door creaked open, and the two footmen scurried in. Taking an arm each, they helped Hamish to his feet, and walked him to the door.

"I'll mix you up a special drink in the morning," Eric whispered. "Cook swears by it. You'll feel like death, and the drink will taste vile, but it'll work."

"Thank you," Hamish mumbled, and then the door closed behind them and the two brothers were alone.

Silence grew heavy between them.

“I don’t have many friends,” Alexander said at last. “But I have Hamish. He’s been with me through thick and thin. I trust him. I care for him. He’s not perfect, and I intend to have strong words with him about his behaviour tonight, but really, what damage has been done?”

William pressed his lips together in a thin line. He moved over to the fireplace, staring into the empty grate.

“I think it’s best that you go to bed, too,” he said, after a full minute of silence.

Alexander flinched. “But the ball’s not over.”

“Are you telling me that you are enjoying yourself?”

He flushed. “Not particularly, but Mother will be hurt if I leave now. I know she will.”

“It’s for the best.”

“The best for who, William? You or me?”

Alexander stamped over to the fireplace, trying to get his brother to look him in the eye. William half turned so that he could avoid Alexander’s face.

“I am the Duke of Dunleigh,” William whispered. “I am an important man. You have no idea of the responsibilities weighing down on me.”

Alexander couldn’t help it. He rolled his eyes.

“You remind us often enough.”

William rounded on him. “How dare you. I am heartily sick of you, Alexander. You’re like a weight around my neck, Mother and you both. I spend all my time making sure you don’t embarrass the family and me. I am running as fast as I can, using all my strength, and I never even get any further forward. I’m tired of it, do you hear? It’s high time for you to grow up, Alexander Willenshire.”

Alexander flinched backwards at the venom in his brother’s voice. Silence landed between them again. In the distance, he heard cheers and clapping as another dance ended.

William blinked, as if taken aback by his own anger. He stepped backwards a full pace, putting more distance between them, and folded his arms behind his back.

Just like Father used to, Alexander thought, before he could end the thought. It had always been the most cruel insult any of them could fathom – you’re just like Father .

Sometimes they wouldn’t even use his name, as if he might be conjured through his name.

You’re just like him .

As if he could read Alexander’s thoughts, William swallowed hard, eyes fluttering shut.

“That was... that was uncalled for,” he said at last. “I’m sorry, Alex, truly I am. I’m... I’m tired, and my head hurts, and your friend...” he trailed off, gesturing at the rumpled couch and the accusing urn standing before it, which would have to be dealt with before somebody knocked it over. “It was just a lot, you know? I’m sorry. Please, forgive me.”

Alexander shook his head. “Nothing to forgive. One can’t resent honesty.”

William started to look panicky. “It wasn’t honesty , I didn’t mean...”

“Yes, you did,” Alexander interrupted. He turned abruptly, moving towards the door.

“Wait! Where are you going?”

He paused, fingers curled over the brass doorknob. It was cool to the touch, and Alexander had a wild vision of himself kneeling in front of the door, resting his forehead against the smooth brass. He cleared his throat, and the vision was gone.

“I’m going to bed, William. That was what you wanted, wasn’t it? Things will be easier with me out of the way. Tidier. You like things tidy.”

He heard William swallow hard. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Yes, it was,” Alexander responded, opening the door and stepping out into the cool hallway.

William did not see Miss Bainbridge when he returned to the ball. That was probably for the best. Perhaps she had chosen to disappear, or perhaps she had simply gotten lost in the crowd. It was hard to tell.

He was wondering whether it would be too rude to return to his quiet spot at the mantelpiece when Mary appeared from the crowd. Her cheeks were flushed with laughter and probably too much wine, and she laid a cold hand on his forearm.

“There you are, dearest! Where is Alex, do you know? I have a young lady I want him to meet.”

William cleared his throat. "I believe Alexander had gone up to bed, Mother."

Mar' blinked. "What, already? He can't have."

"I believe he has."

"But I want him here. It won't be the same without my little Alex."

Anger coiled in William's chest.

I am here, he wanted to shout. Your oldest child. Your firstborn son. Katherine and Henry are here. Aren't we enough?

He didn't dare ask, mostly because he knew what the answer would be.

No.

"He's tired, Mother."

"No, no," Mary shook her head a little too energetically. "That can't be the case. Go and fetch him, quickly, before he starts to get ready for bed."

William drew in a breath. "No, Mother."

"Then I shall fetch him. I want my Alex here."

"He's drunk, Mother."

That came out much harder and more cruel than William had intended, and it was of course too late to take the words back.

And they weren't even true.

Mary recoiled, eyes huge. "Drunk?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so." There was really nothing for it but to double down. "I'm sorry, Mother. Best to let him alone for tonight."

Mary cleared her throat, turning away. "Oh. Right. I see. Well, thank you for telling me. I should have preferred it if you had stopped him drinking quite so much, then we could have enjoyed his company all night, but I suppose it's too late now."

"Mother..." William began, but she did not hear. Already, Mary was shuffling back into the crowd. The smile had gone from her face.

William was left alone, feeling like the worst son – and brother – in the whole wide world.

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It was an embarrassing thing to admit, but Abigail had spent most of the previous night's ball looking for Lord Alexander Willenshire.

She hadn't meant to do it, only that whenever she looked around, she found herself searching for a particular face. She kept hearing voices that sounded like his, kept thinking that a gentleman with his back to her was Lord Alexander, only for the man to turn and for her to realize that he looked nothing like him.

Ugh. It was impossible.

Aunt Florence knocked on her door at around ten o' clock the next morning.

"Are you awake?" she asked, peeping around the door. "Ah, yes, I see you're up. Why haven't you rung for Lucy?"

"Lucy was up just as late as me last night," Abigail answered, eyes fixed on her reflection as she pushed the last pins into her hair. She'd chosen a plain, dark green muslin dress that she could put on herself and had done up her hair in a simple knot. "I didn't get to bed until close to four in the morning. I can dress myself, thankfully."

Aunt Florence pursed her lips disapprovingly. "Hm. Well. Never mind. Come on, let's go to breakfast."

"Yes, Aunt," Abigail answered meekly, getting to her feet.

Downstairs, the ballroom and dining room were still in a state of disarray. Servants bustled to and fro tidying up the seemingly endless mess. A footman went past with a

wheelbarrow full of dying flowers, the remnants of last night's centrepieces, already wilted with the heat. Housemaids swept up broken glass amongst piles of dirt and dust and fallen leaves and petals, while a scullery maid knelt on the rug before the mantelpiece, scrubbing what appeared to be a red wine stain out of the material.

"It'll be a quiet day today, I think," Aunt Florence confirmed. "Lord Henry and his wife are not here, and neither is Katherine. There's talk of a walk after breakfast, but I shall have to stay with Mary. She's always dreadfully low after her yearly party. She looks forward to it for weeks, months even, and then, poof! It's over."

Abigail bit her lip. She'd seen the Dowager last night, beaming with joy. She'd talked to everyone, and even danced once or twice. Only with her youngest son, Alexander. The two seemed to have a special bond.

The Duke himself had even asked Abigail to dance, although Aunt Florence had warned her it was a courtesy thing and did not indicate any real interest. Abigail had been relieved more than anything. The Duke was remarkably handsome, in the same way that Alexander was handsome, but he was cold and serious and almost unfriendly, seeming to be occupied by something heavy. She'd been glad when the dance ended.

With the dining room still in a state of disarray, Aunt Florence led the way to a morning room, where tables had been set out for breakfast.

The first person Abigail saw when she entered the room was none other than Lady Diana Lockwell.

Her heart sank into her boots.

Lady Diana smiled, just a little, and nodded graciously.

“Good morning, Lady Caldecott, good morning, Miss Atwater. I trust you slept well?”

“I didn’t know you were staying here,” Abigail said, before she could stop herself.

Immediately, she wished she could have bitten off her a tongue. It was a hopelessly rude thing to say – before she had even greeted the woman, too – and made her look ill-bred and frankly, impolite.

It was too late to take it back, of course. Abigail’s face burned, and Lady Diana allowed herself a small, satisfied smile.

“There was a problem with my carriage last night,” Lady Diana explained, delicately buttering a scone, “and the dear Dowager kindly invited me to stay overnight. She is so like her youngest son in that respect – kind to a fault.”

The last part seemed rather barbed. Flushing, Abigail leaned over her plate, and concentrated on breakfast.

Gradually, over the next half hour, more people joined the breakfast table, stifling yawns and exchanging stories and gossip. The Dowager Duchess herself arrived, white-faced and looking thoroughly miserable, and Aunt Florence devoted herself to cheering up her friend.

The Duke appeared, but only for a few minutes, with the air of a man performing his duty. He briefly explained that he could not join them for breakfast due to his responsibilities and withdrew as soon as possible.

Abigail steadily ate her way through a much larger breakfast than she would have liked, mostly in hopes of Lady Diana leaving the breakfast room before her. The woman kept glancing at Abigail, her gaze veiled and distinctly unfriendly.

However, it seemed that Lady Diana had the same idea, nursing a cup of tea long after it had gone cold, and showing no signs of leaving the table and retiring to her room.

In the end, it was Aunt Florence who broke the unspoken stalemate.

“What do you plan to do with yourself today, Abigail?” she asked, turning away from the Dowager Duchess. “Mary and I are going to reminisce in the drawing room, so you’ll have to entertain yourself.”

“I...”

“It’s a fine day for a walk,” Lady Diana interrupted smoothly, smiling unblinkingly at Abigail. “Why don’t you take in the air with me, Miss Atwater? There are fine blackberry patches on top of the hill yonder. You may bring your maid with a basket.”

“I... I was going to sit in the library today,” Abigail managed lamely. “I wanted to read a bit.”

“Oh, don’t waste your day with your nose in a book,” Aunt Florence said blithely, unaware of the tension in the room. “Take a walk with Lady Lockwell. That’ll be nice, won’t it?”

Abigail swallowed. There was really nothing for her to say.

“Very well,” she managed, aware that she was being ungracious. “I could do with stretching my legs, I suppose.”

Lady Diana smiled widely. “Oh, I am so glad. I think we have a lot to talk about, you and I.”

Abigail shivered. Now that did not sound good.

Abigail had hoped for a last-minute shower of rain to put off their walk, but her prayers were not answered. In fact, the sun came out.

Lady Diana met her at the door, looking breezy, cool, and beautiful in an elegant walking gown and neat kid gloves. Abigail immediately felt blowsy and untidy in her coat and rough straw bonnet. Lady Diana's gaze flicked up and down her frame, so quickly Abigail thought she might have imagined it. Then the other woman smiled widely, and she knew it wasn't imagined.

"Shall we go?" Lady Diana said, still smiling. "I shall warn you, I walk quickly. You seem rather shorter than I, and therefore will have shorter legs. I'm sure you'll be fine, though."

There was an insult in there somewhere. Abigail chose to ignore it.

"Is it just you and I, then?"

"Just us," Lady Diana responded. She glanced briefly over at Lucy, who hovered behind them, looking deeply uncomfortable. Lady Diana hooked her arm through Abigail's, tugging her out of the door without any further ado.

Abigail was fairly sure that Lady Diana was walking deliberately fast. Already, Abigail was out of breath, puffing and panting in a most undignified manner. She clenched her teeth, refusing to let herself give up, or ask to slow down. They had crossed the wide gravel courtyard, delving into the maze opposite, full of waist-high, square green hedges. Lady Diana seemed to know exactly where she was going, leading them up and up towards the cusp of a hill, where Abigail could see rose

gardens.

“I see you danced with Lord Alexander last night,” Lady Diana said, after about fifteen minutes of aggressive, silent walking. “I could not find him. He seemed to disappear, did you not find? Or perhaps you knew exactly where he was.”

It sounded almost accusatory.

Abigail swallowed. “I also danced with the Duke. It was just courtesy, I think. Because they are all such good friends with my Aunt Florence, you know.”

She wasn’t sure why she was trying to be conciliatory. It seemed silly. Weak, almost. Clenching her jaw, Abigail forced herself to keep looking ahead, and concentrated on not getting too out of breath, and not tripping.

“He is very kind,” Lady Diana said tartly, and Abigail had a feeling she was not referring to the Duke of Dunleigh. “To a fault.”

“Do... do you know him well?” Abigail ventured.

“Oh, very well. We were inseparable at one time. But life takes strange turns, does it not? I married, and I think that poor, dear Alex took it hard. He missed me dreadfully, by all accounts.”

Lady Diana shook back her curls, allowing herself a small smile.

“I’m sure you can be friends again now,” Abigail said, and earned herself a glare.

“I don’t need your permission to spend time with my friend.”

“I... I didn’t mean...”

“Oh, do be quiet.”

They had nearly reached the end of the maze, and the steep slope was levelling out. Poor Lucy had fallen behind, puffing and panting up the steep hill, red-faced. Lady Diana dropped Abigail’s arm like a stone, whirling around to face her.

For an instant, the woman’s beautiful face was twisted with anger, but then the moment passed and she was all smoothness and smiles.

“I invited you here, my dear Miss Atwater, to discuss something rather serious,” Lady Diana said, voice low and confiding. “You seem like a sweet girl. A wallflower, perhaps. The sort of innocent girl that a man such as Alexander Willenshire would like to practise his skills upon.”

Abigail resisted the urge to take a step backwards. “Practise... practise his skills?”

She smiled thinly. “Yes, rather like a cat sharpening its claws on a pretty little quilted footstool.”

“What a vivid image,” she managed.

“Indeed. He’s a rake, you know. I’m sure you know the type.” Lady Diana sighed expressively, rolling her eyes up to heaven. “I can manage him, of course – I always could – but you, my darling girl, would be entirely out of your depth. Has Lady Caldecott not warned you away?”

Abigail said nothing. Of course Aunt Florence had warned her away, but really, it was unnecessary. Why on earth would Alexander Willenshire be interested in her ? He was such a handsome man. So confident, so charming.

And Abigail was... well, she was Abigail.

If Scarlett was here, it would be another story entirely. She would have charmed Alexander immediately and sent Lady Diana packing into the bargain.

Lady Diana was still talking, tossing back her hair and talking about how wallflowers and rakes were a terrible combination. Abigail had stopped listening. Instead, she found herself reeling at a shocking fact.

I wish my sister were here. Scarlett wouldn't let anybody speak to her like this.

She imagined Scarlett shoving Lady Diana backwards, and watching her topple head over heels down the slope. It was such a funny image she had to bite back a smile.

Lady Diana paused, mid-flow. "What are you smiling at? What is so funny? Answer me, you wretched thing."

The smile dropped off Abigail's face like a stone. "That's not kind."

"Kind? I don't care about kind. I want you to stay in your place, you nasty, grubby little thing."

Narrowing her eyes, Lady Diana lurched forward, gripping Abigail's upper arms with long fingers, nails digging in. Abigail gave a squeak of alarm and tried unsuccessfully to pull away. Lucy was still further down the maze – she'd taken a wrong turn, it seemed, and did not want to vault over the waist-high hedges – and the woman's grip was stronger than one might have thought.

"You're hurting me," Abigail managed, forcing herself to meet Lady Diana's eyes.

The woman sneered. "Don't think I don't know about your penniless little family. You're nothing but a dull little Miss, quite past your best. I shouldn't even have to have this conversation with you. You should know that Lord Alexander Willenshire

is not for the likes of you. Not that I truly believe you could steal his attention from me, but...”

“If I’m not a threat,” Abigail interrupted, before she could stop herself, “why on earth have you gone to all this trouble to warn me off?”

Anger flared in Lady Diana’s eyes. “Why, you little...”

“Now, now, Lady Lockwell, I hope you aren’t about to treat us to some unladylike language.”

Both women froze at a familiar masculine voice. Glancing over Lady Diana’s shoulder, Abigail saw none other than Lord Graham Donovan step out from behind a clump of trees, hands shoved in his pockets. He smiled thinly at her and glanced at Lady Diana.

“I believe Miss Atwater said you were hurting her, Lady Lockwell,” he remarked. “Better let go of her, eh?”

There was a heartbeat of silence, then Lady Diana abruptly released Abigail’s arms. Staggering backward, Abigail resisted the urge to rub the sore spots. The woman still glared down at her, and Abigail lifted her chin and glared right back.

“I didn’t see you at breakfast,” Lady Diana spat.

“No,” he agreed, “I don’t suppose you would.”

Abigail cleared her throat. “It’s been a charming walk,” she heard herself say, “but I think I’d rather go on by myself.”

“Alone?” Lady Diana spat out.

“I shan’t be alone. Lucy is here.”

Lady Diana hesitated, glancing over her shoulder at Lord Donovan, who was now lounging against a tree and looking bored.

“You’re a boring walking companion anyway,” she ground out, turning on her heel and storming off, pushing past Lucy as she went.

“What’s going on, Miss Atwater?” Lucy asked, bewildered.

“I might ask the same,” Lord Donovan remarked, stepping forward with a smile. “You looked terrified.”

“I felt terrified,” Abigail confessed, finally letting herself rub her arms with a wince. There’d be bruises there, she wagered. “The woman is mad.”

“Not mad, exactly,” Lord Donovan shrugged, glancing down at Lady Diana’s retreating figure. “Just determined. And clever enough to get what she wants. You’ve gotten in her way, I fear.”

Abigail froze. “How... how much of what she said did you hear?”

His gaze bored into her face. “Enough.”

“Well, she’s... she’s mad, like I said,” Abigail managed lamely. “I should pay her no mind.”

“I won’t,” he said, voice quiet. “Now, will you continue with your walk, or will you return to the house.”

Abigail glanced at Lady Diana once more. She was almost certainly retreating to the

house, so perhaps it would be wise for Abigail to steer clear.

“I’ll walk on, I think. I’ve already climbed this hill, so I might as well see what’s at the top of it.”

Lord Donovan nodded slowly. “Can I offer myself as a walking partner? It would not be inappropriate, not with your maid here.”

Abigail looked away. “I... I’m grateful for your intervention, Lord Donovan, but I really think I’d rather walk alone.”

Disappointment crossed his face, just for a moment, but he nodded, stepping back.

“I see. Well, I’m sure I’ll see you again.”

He turned to go, but Abigail found herself speaking again.

“Wait.”

He glanced back, an expression of hope flitting across his face. Abigail drew in a breath.

“Do you think I’m a dull wallflower, Lord Donovan?”

His eyebrows raised. “What a question. Do you consider yourself dull?”

“I do not, but then, I’m used to feeling inferior around my sister. She’s very pretty, you know. Pretty and interesting.”

“I see. Well, for what it is worth, Miss Atwater, I do not think you’re dull. Reserved, perhaps, and for some people that means you are a wallflower, but never dull.”

She smiled weakly at that. “Thank you, Lord Donovan.”

He nodded wordlessly, and then carried on down the hill. Abigail watched him go. Lady Diana’s figure had already disappeared. No doubt the awful woman would try something else to get back at Abigail.

“It’s a compliment, really,” she said aloud. “A woman like that thinking that I am a rival.”

Lucy eyed her. “You don’t do yourself credit, Miss Atwater.”

Abigail shrugged, and turned to follow her path.

There was a little winding paved road which led out of the maze. Abruptly, Abigail found herself in a very different sort of garden.

The roses were almost wild, higher than her head, a tangle of stems and leaves and long, brown thorns. And blooms of course, blooms of all colours and sizes. The air was full of the scent of them, thick and sweet. Abigail paused at the entrance to the rose garden, breathing in deeply. It was like another maze, but notably wilder and more complex than the manicured hedges behind them.

“Careful we don’t get lost in here, Miss Atwater,” Lucy remarked, eyeing the roses with dislike. “I don’t fancy pushing my way through rosebushes to get out again.”

“We’ll be fine, I’m sure,” Abigail said, and walked forward.

The path twisted and turned, forking and diverging and circling back on itself, and frankly she found it far more interesting than the so-called maze behind them. In places, the bushes towered a foot or so higher than she was, or more. The bushes seemed to be arranged more or less by colour – yellow roses along one stretch, then

red, then pink, then white, and back again.

“I love wild flowers but those roses seem wild and I adore them, don’t you?”

“I prefer a nice bunch of wildflowers myself, Miss,” Lucy remarked heavily. “Although these are a nicer lot than the usual hothouse flowers ladies often get.”

Abigail stopped by a particularly perfect-looking bush. The roses growing from it were red. Although a red rose may be clichéd, there is certainly something to be appreciated about these particular blooms.

Perfect, velvety petals curled out from a tight bud at the centre, impossibly soft and smelling so sweet that Abigail simply had to stop and smell it. It bowed forward at eye height, the red so vivid it made a person look twice.

Abigail reached out tentatively, drawing a fingertip across the petals. Leaning forward, she breathed in the perfume.

So soft.

“Flowers like this make me wish I could paint,” she remarked idly. “But I never capture the colour, or even the...”

Before she could finish the sentence, Lord Alexander Willenshire came hurrying around the corner at a half-run, knocking into Abigail with his full momentum and sending her tumbling backwards with a strangled, undignified squawk of alarm, arms wind-milling in a most unladylike manner.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:12 am

Alexander was not expecting anybody in the rose gardens. People tended to find them a little too wild, not as manicured and perfect as a proper estate should keep its flowers. Besides, there was the hill to tackle, anyway.

He carried the flowers he'd selected for his apology bouquet to his mother in a basket on his arm. She loved roses. When he was younger, Alexander had always believed that their father had planted the huge, half-wild, Willenshire roses up on the hill for his wife.

He was wrong about that, of course. The roses had been there for generations, and had they not been "traditional", it was likely that the old Duke would have had them uprooted altogether and replaced by a folly on top of the hill.

I slept in, Alexander chastised himself. He'd planned to have the bouquet ready before breakfast, but now he'd have to settle for getting it ready before luncheon.

She'll forgive me, he thought with a pang. Far more easily than I should be forgiven, though.

He picked up the pace, breaking into a light jog. He rounded the corner, and lo and behold, a woman stood there, bending over to smell a rose.

He knew it was Abigail Atwater a splintered second before he crashed into her.

She gave a shriek, toppling backwards.

Managing to juggle the basket, Alexander grabbed her arm to steady her, hauling her

forward out of the way of the murderous, thorny roses.

She regained her balance, lurching forward and grabbing at his forearm to steady herself.

“Watch where you’re going, sir!” the maid yelped, before reddening and recollecting herself. “Sorry, your lordship,” she muttered, dropping her gaze.

“No, no, you’re quite right, I was clumsy,” Alexander admitted, glancing briefly at Abigail. She was not looking at him. Her gaze was pinned to her feet, and she shook out her skirts with a little more care than they really needed.

Memories of their dance together came flooding back, making Alexander shiver. He cleared his throat.

“Are you alright, Miss Atwater? Did I hurt you?”

“N-No, no, I’m fine. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to get in your way.”

He gave a short laugh. “What are you apologising for? I am the one who wasn’t looking where he was going. You’re lucky I was here, though – I’m rather good at saving you, aren’t I?”

That worked. Her head shot up, eyes narrowed.

“Saving me? Let me remind you, Lord Alexander, that without you racing around like that, I wouldn’t have needed saving.”

He chuckled. “Fair enough, fair enough.”

And then there was a silence. Alexander was aware that really, he ought to just make

his goodbyes and leave her in peace. He hadn't attended breakfast, but had it on good authority from the butler that there had been an atmosphere over the breakfast table between Lady Diana Lockwell and... well, just about everyone else. Miss Atwater, mostly. The butler had been surprised to relate that the two ladies had gone out walking afterwards.

"They did not seem to enjoy each other's company, your lordship," the man admitted, shaking his head. "But then, I do not know much of young ladies, after all."

Neither do I, Alexander thought grimly, but I know enough to guess that Lady Diana Lockwell means trouble.

He felt like a fool for having ever considered Lady Diana as a marriage partner. He'd regret such a decision for the rest of his life. Would it be worth getting his part of the fortune, and finally being seen as an adult by his siblings?

Probably not.

As if she'd known what he was thinking, Abigail spoke up.

"Lady Diana Lockwell was looking for you last night, I think. She seemed angry that I was able to dance with you and she didn't."

He bit his lip. "Lady Diana has... expectations of me. Unfortunately, I cannot fulfil them. I think she resents me."

Abigail eyed him for a long moment. Alexander held her gaze, not allowing himself to drop his eyes like he secretly wished to do. The warm feeling spread through his chest again, and he found himself holding his breath.

She's so beautiful.

Abigail was the one who dropped her eyes first.

“I thought there was something between you,” she said at last, steadfastly eyeing the rose. “I didn’t dare ask what, but she... she seems resentful, as I say. Of you, and of me.”

He nodded. “That seems fair.”

“She’s jealous of me, and I don’t know why.” She raised her eyes to look at him again, as if asking him to explain where Lady Diana Lockwell’s jealousy might have come from.

His tongue had turned to lead. When Alexander finally opened his mouth and began to speak, it wasn’t Lady Diana’s jealousy he was speaking of.

“I was in love with her, once.”

Abigail flinched backwards. She glanced briefly at her maid, and some sort of look passed between the women. The maid sighed, just heavily enough to be heard, and wandered about ten or fifteen paces away, pretending to inspect some roses.

It was hardly privacy , but it was better than nothing. Abigail turned to face him, folding her hands in front of her waist.

“Go on,” she said quietly.

He drew in a breath. “I loved her, or at least I thought I did. I thought we would get married. I made no proposal, you understand, as I had no money and had to secure my father’s permission. I suppose it’ll be William’s permission I need to marry now. His blessing, at least. What an odd thought. anyway, I digress. I was sure that I would secure my father’s permission, since she was a suitable enough girl, and Father never

had high hopes for me. We'd talked about it, but nothing official was decided. And then..." he breathed out slowly, steeling himself. "And then she went to Bath for a month, with an aunt. I read about her engagement in the Gazette less than two weeks after she'd gone."

Abigail looked down. "Oh, Alexander, I'm sorry."

Alexander. She called me by my Christian name.

A frisson of excitement rolled down his spine, and he swallowed hard, trying to force moisture into his dry mouth. She didn't seem to notice her slip of the tongue, and he was determined not to draw it to her attention.

"She got married," he continued, shrugging. "I speak about it easily now, but at the time, I truly thought I would die. I think my older brother – William, that is – thought I was being silly. He's always been more practical than me. Katherine and I are the dreamers of our family. As I said, she married, and years passed. She's a widow now, and it seems she plans to secure my hand after all."

"She doesn't deserve you," Abigail said suddenly, looking just as surprised as Alexander to hear the words coming out of her mouth. "Lady Diana is... well, I find her cruel. Beautiful, and clever, but cruel. She'll hurt you, if you let her."

He raked a hand through his hair. "I know that. Do you think I don't know that? I just... I don't know. It's odd, seeing her again."

There was more silence after that. Alexander wondered whether he'd shocked Abigail, speaking so openly. She seemed to be working up to say something – perhaps to make an excuse and then hurry away.

To forestall the inevitable, Alexander spoke up himself, as quickly as he dared.

“I’m bringing back some flowers for my mother,” he said, holding up the basket. “I see you were admiring that bloom in particular. I can cut it for you, if you like? Help yourself to as many flowers as you like.”

She blinked, glancing at the basket. “You’re such a good son, Lord Alexander.”

He winced. “Not as good as I should be.”

Reaching out, she trailed a fingertip over the rose’s petals. “It’s a beautiful flower, and it would look lovely in my room. But I never like to cut flowers for myself. They die so quickly, and I think I can admire their beauty out here, when they are alive, instead of keeping them in vases.” She paused, glancing up at him anxiously. “Not that I mean anything against people who do keep flowers, I just...”

“No, no, I understand. You’re a sensitive young lady, Miss Atwater.”

She smiled wryly. “Hardly. My mother believes it’s a fault.”

“Really? I’m sorry to hear that.”

“She would much rather my sister were here, instead of me,” Abigail admitted, shrugging. “And sometimes I think she was right. Scarlett would have secured a match very quickly, but me... well. I suppose I’m just a wallflower.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being a wallflower. All flowers are beautiful, after all.”

Had those words really just exited his mouth? Alexander felt colour rising to his cheeks. But Abigail was smiling, gaze pointed downwards.

“Thank you. That... that means a lot,” she admitted, at last. “You’re a kind man.”

“No, I’m not. I’m a rake. A fool.”

She shrugged. “Those things are not incompatible with kindness.”

Glancing up, her eyes met his. This time, Alexander found that he could not look away. The breath stopped in his throat. The perfume of the roses, always heady, became intoxicating. Choking, almost, but pleasant.

Abigail was close to him, so close that he could almost imagine that he felt the heat from her skin. His hand inched out of its own accord, wanting to touch the smooth skin at her collarbone, to feel the silky strands of hair, escaped from the knot she’d pinned it into, brush across his knuckles. Her lips were parted, eyes fixed on his, and she was holding her breath too, and surely...

Somebody cleared their throat, loudly.

The spell was broken. Alexander blinked, hand dropping back to his side. In an instant, Abigail moved backwards.

It was the maid, of course, who had coughed so pointedly. She was currently aiming a flat glare at him.

“What is it, Lucy?” Abigail said, her voice trembling ever so slightly.

“We should get back, Miss Atwater,” the maid replied coolly. “It looks like rain.”

Alexander glanced up at the idyllic blue skies above them and said nothing. There were a few clouds, certainly, but... he cleared his throat.

“Your maid is right, Miss Atwater. May I escort you back to the house?”

She opened her mouth to reply, but before she could, a tremendous crash echoed up from somewhere below.

Biting back a curse, Alexander hurried forward out of the rose gardens, and peered down the hill.

Hamish. Of course it was Hamish. He was staggering through the maze and had knocked over a stone statue. The thing had probably stood for generations, and now its head was broken off.

“My friend,” Alexander said, apologetically. “I had better see to him.”

Abigail nodded. The three of them descended the same way anyway, and soon they reached the centre of the maze, where Hamish was ineffectually trying to slot the statue’s head back into place.

“Are you well, Lord Grey?” Abigail asked, looking anxious. “Lord Alexander, I think he’s ill.”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine,” Alexander responded, levelling a steely glare at his friend.

The wretch is still drunk from last night, he thought, annoyed. Hamish had the grace to look ashamed, hanging his head like a drunken puppet.

“I’m so sorry, Alex,” he mumbled. “I didn’t mean to interrupt. Miss Atwater is such a nice lady, and I know you must marry, since...”

Fear spiked through Alexander’s chest.

“Yes, yes, well. I’ll take care of this, Miss Atwater, not to worry. You go on back to the house, won’t you?”

Abigail showed no signs of having heard or understood what Hamish was saying, much to Alexander's relief. She gestured to her maid, and the two set off down the hill without another word. Alexander watched them go, hands on his hips, and breathed a sigh of relief once they were out of earshot.

Then he rounded on Hamish.

"What are you thinking of?" he hissed. "You were about to spill... to tell what I told you last night! It's a secret, you fool!"

Hamish's eyes widened. "What, that you won't receive your money until you marry?"

"Hush! Don't say it again! Oh, heavens. Who else have you told, Hamish?"

"Nobody. Nobody, I swear."

"For your sake, I hope that's true."

Hamish slumped to the ground, leaning heavily back onto one of the hedges. He eyed the broken statue miserably.

"I just tripped," he mumbled, pointing at the statue.

Alexander sank down onto a stone bench, elbows on his knees.

"Am I like this, do you think?" he wondered aloud, gesturing vaguely at Hamish and the statue. "When I'm... when I'm in my cups?"

Hamish stared at him. "You're worse, Alex."

He groaned. “My wretched siblings were right, then. I need to stop, don’t I?”

“I think we both do. I had an uncle who drunk himself to death. It wasn’t a pretty way to go.”

The two men sat there in silence for a few moments, staring at the statue to avoid staring at each other.

“We can do it together,” Alexander said at last. “What do you think?”

Hamish considered. “Well, we’ve done plenty of other things together, as old friends. I don’t see why not.”

“I’ll show my brother I’m not a useless fool.”

“Alex, you are too hard on yourself. You always have been.”

He shook his head, gaze aiming into the distance. “I’m the third son and the youngest child. Nobody was ever interested in me beyond my mother, and even she...” he bit his lip. “Even she is being let down by me these days. I have to do better.”

Hamish leaned forward, eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep and too much drink.

“We will do it together. We will, I promise.”

“Agreed. Thank you, Hamish.”

“Oh, and for what it’s worth? I like her.”

The hairs on the back of Alexander’s neck prickled. He wasn’t drunk enough for this conversation. Of course, that could be helped. “You... you mean...”

Hamish grinned tiredly. “Miss Atwater, that is. There’s a lot of talk about how she doesn’t have a fortune, and isn’t charming enough, but it’s nonsense. I like her a great deal. And, more to the point, I think you like her a great deal, Alexander.”

He bit his lip. “Lady Caldecott warned me away. She’s too sensible to... to care for someone like me.”

But the scene in the rose garden replayed itself before Alexander’s eyes, the way Abigail’s eyes had widened at him, the way her breath had stuttered in her throat when he leaned near her.

Perhaps...

But hope could kill just as surely as a knife.

“You’ll never know if you don’t try and find out,” Hamish said, grinning wryly. “Come on, the Alexander I know always loved to wager. Take a gamble now and try and win Miss Atwater’s heart.”

Alexander tapped on the door to the drawing room, waiting for a response before he entered.

“Who is it?”

“It’s me, Mother.”

“Oh, Alex, darling! Come in.”

Alexander pushed open the door. The drawing room was quiet, with none of the

guests around. As far as he could tell, they were all in their rooms, or in the libraries. Outside, rain was starting to patter on the windows, forcing anyone who'd gone out for a walk to hurry back inside.

Mary was not alone, though. Lady Caldecott was sitting on the sofa, reading quietly. She shot him a look over the top of her book, though, which he tried his best to ignore.

Mary got up, pattering happily over to her son.

"There you are, darling! Sit down, let me ring for fresh tea. Are you feeling better? You must have been ill last night, to have retired so early from my ball."

There was a tinge of hopefulness in her voice. Alexander smiled weakly, trying not to remember the anger in William's voice as he told him to go to bed.

I hope they did something about the urn in the library, he thought suddenly. The one Hamish threw up into.

"Yes, I felt awful, Mother," Alexander said. It was not entirely a lie. "But I brought you these to make up for it."

He produced the bouquet of roses, and Mary gave an exclamation of delight.

Her favourites were the pink roses, so Alexander had gotten only pink ones. There were a variety of shades in the bouquet, adding depth, and he'd picked a good amount of greenery to fill out the bouquet, tying the stems with a smooth satin ribbon.

"Oh, it's beautiful, Alex! Florence, take a look at this!"

"He has a remarkable eye," Lady Caldecott admitted begrudgingly. "It's very pretty."

Mary stood up on her tiptoes to kiss Alexander on the cheek.

“What a darling boy you are. Oh, I have an idea! Why don’t you make up a little bouquet to give to Florence’s niece? She’s such a shy little thing, and only danced half the dances last night.”

Lady Caldecott’s glare burned into the side of Alexander’s face. He forced a smile.

“I would, but I happen to know that Miss Atwater doesn’t like to pick flowers. She likes to admire them alive, in their habitats.”

Mary blinked, surprised, and glanced over at Lady Caldecott. “Oh. Is that true, Florence?”

Lady Caldecott looked as though she’d swallowed an insect, or perhaps taking a long sip of lemon juice.

Behind the sourness, however, he could have sworn there was a hint of admiration and surprise.

“He’s right,” she admitted begrudgingly.

Mary shrugged, taking a long sniff of her roses.

“Oh, well. You’ll have to get her another present then, Alex.”

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:12 am

Abigail chose a pastel-pink gown, heavy with lace. It wasn't a gown she would have chosen for herself, but it was pretty, and it did suit her. Perhaps it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world to wear pink a little more often. The dress was a present from Aunt Florence, and she'd found it waiting for her in her room when she went up to dress for dinner.

There was a tap on her bedroom door, and Aunt Florence poked her head through. Her face creased into a smile when she saw Abigail in the gown.

"Ah, you're wearing it!"

"Of course," Abigail laughed, spinning around in a little circle to show off the dress. "It's beautiful, Aunt, thank you. You're too kind to me, really. I'm going to wear the coral necklace you gave me with it. It'll go perfectly."

"You're developing a taste of your own," Aunt Florence said approvingly, coming into the room properly. "I'm glad to see that. A woman ought to dress for herself and nobody else, and certainly not for her mother and sister."

Abigail bit back a smile. When she'd had her Season, she had dutifully worn whatever her mother had chosen out. Their clothes were generally picked to suit Scarlett, and Abigail was not really considered at all.

Lately, her only clothes had been simple, plain ones, easy to mend and maintain, and chosen for their cheapness, not meant to overshadow Scarlett.

I could overshadow Scarlett in this gown, Abigail thought, with a frisson of spiteful

glee.

Aunt Florence helped her fasten the coral necklace around her neck, nodding approvingly.

“Yes, yes, very pretty. Do you know, I had second thoughts about this colour? Pale, sugary colours are all very nice, but not everybody can suit them. You do, though, my dear. I’m glad I chose this shade. You’ll turn some heads with this gown, that’s for sure,” she met Abigail’s eye in the mirror, and smiled conspiratorially. “One head in particular, I think.”

Abigail’s throat tightened. “Aunt Florence, I don’t know what you mean.”

Even as she said it, images of Lord Alexander’s handsome, grinning face flashed up behind her eyes, making her heart flutter and her cheeks flush. She saw him extending his hand to her, beckoning her onto the dance floor, and her heart pounded faster than ever. She imagined him seeing her in her new beautiful dress, his eyes widening with admiration.

“Of course you do,” Aunt Florence said briskly, adjusting the lace at Abigail’s neck. “Lord Donovan won’t be able to take his eyes off you tonight.”

Abigail’s heart plummeted. Of course.

“He’s very taken with you, you know,” Aunt Florence continued, oblivious. “I’ve never agreed with all that nonsense about women employing arts to attract men, but I do think a little more encouragement wouldn’t go amiss. Just to reassure him, you know?”

I don’t want to reassure him.

“I... I think Lord Donovan is a fine man, but...”

“Oh, my dear,” Aunt Florence shot Abigail a stern look. “Don’t take that flirtatious rake’s flattery as anything serious. I mean it. He’s a fool, and I wish he would leave you alone.”

“I didn’t mean...”

“The trouble with gentlemen like Lord Alexander,” Aunt Florence continued, as if Abigail hadn’t spoken, “is that they confuse innocent young ladies like yourself. You start to think that perhaps that is what courtship is like. You crave the excitement and are disappointed that more serious suitors are not as exciting as the rakes. Believe me, my dear, the saying that reformed rakes make the best husbands is the exception rather than the rule.”

Abigail bit her lip and stayed quiet.

Aunt Florence’s eyes bore into her, and she avoided the older woman’s gaze.

“There,” Aunt Florence said at last, hands dropping away from Abigail’s shoulders. “You’re ready. You look beautiful, my dear.”

Abigail glanced back at her reflection, but all pride in her appearance had mostly filtered away.

Dinner was an ordeal.

Abigail’s fragile mood had been half-crushed already, before she stepped into the dining room. The meal did nothing to lift her spirits. She was seated by Lord

Donovan, of course, who spent the whole time complacently chattering about some political development which Abigail did not care about and could not understand. She smiled politely and nodded in the right places.

She could feel her aunt's watchful eyes on her across the table.

Alexander was sitting opposite. Diana was not beside him – clearly, she hadn't been able to wangle herself a chair next to him today – and she looked as black as thunder.

Lord Donovan told a story to the table, something dull and not funny or entertaining at all, but he received a polite chuckle at the end of it. Enthused, he embarked on a second anecdote. At this point, he'd monopolized the conversation for close to ten full minutes. Not even realizing what she was doing, Abigail's gaze flitted across the table to Alexander.

He met her eye, swilling his half-drunk glass of wine, and raised his eyebrows meaningfully.

Something like laughter bubbled up inside her, and Abigail was obliged to press her napkin to her face to smother the laughter.

The amusement passed almost immediately. Sensing eyes on her, Abigail glanced across the table, and found Aunt Florence staring at her, expression hard. Any impulse to laugh faded away immediately. Aunt Florence leaned over to William and began to whisper urgently.

On cue, the Dowager rose to her feet.

“Ladies,” she said smoothly. “Shall we retire?”

Abigail found herself walking alone at the back of the little procession of ladies,

making their way to the drawing room.

No, not quite alone.

A tall, svelte figure materialized at her side, making Abigail flinch.

“Goodness, that gown of yours looks good enough to eat,” Diana remarked, smiling coyly. In the flickering candlelight of the dark hallway, it was hard to read her expression. “I’m not sure I would like to look like a piece of sugar candy, though.”

Abigail bit the inside of her cheek. The gown that had seemed so beautiful in her room suddenly seemed a little... well, a little gaudy.

What had she been thinking? Aunt Florence could wear all kinds of wild and strange clothing, because she had the confidence to wear it well, but Abigail did not.

“It was a present from my aunt,” Abigail heard herself say.

Diana smiled pityingly. “Oh, I thought as much. I’m afraid it makes you look rather sallow. I don’t say it out of unkindness, of course, only a word to the wise. You understand. People were looking , you know. I think a person with your complexion ought to stick to quiet colours and simple styles. Perhaps a nice grey, or a pale brown, or a dark blue would suit you better? Something less frothy .”

Abigail swallowed hard, resisting the urge to smooth out her bodice and pick at the frilly, lacy sleeves. “I rather liked this dress. Aunt Florence said...”

“Oh, one can never listen to the opinions of those who love us! They’ll always say we look pretty regardless. We women must be cannier than that, don’t we, Miss Atwater?” she leaned forward conspiratorially. “Between us, Lord Alexander simply couldn’t take his eyes off that monstrosity of a dress. He was hard-pressed not to

laugh. That's when I decided to speak to you about it, you poor thing."

Abigail swallowed reflexively. "Oh."

Diana straightened up, smiling demurely. "Just a little word in your ear, my dear. We'd better go in, then."

Not waiting to see if Abigail followed, Diana glided off into the drawing room.

Abigail stood there for a moment or two, her beautiful dress hanging heavy from her shoulders, until a figure appeared in the open doorway.

"Abbie?" Aunt Florence whispered. "What's the matter, dear? Aren't you coming in? Mary suggested we could play a game or two of chess, and I mentioned that you were particularly good at..."

"I don't feel well," Abigail interrupted. She hated to interrupt anyone, least of all her aunt, but the words were out before she could stop them.

Aunt Florence frowned, stepping out into the hallway. "What's the matter? Do we need to send for a doctor?"

"No, no, nothing like that," Abigail said hastily. She felt small and stupid, tears pricking at her eyes. In a few minutes, she would have to begin tearing the wretched dress off herself. "I... I just think I'm getting a megrim. I might go to bed early."

Aunt Florence nodded slowly. "If that's what you want. Are you sure everything is alright?"

"Oh, yes," Abigail lied. "Quite alright."

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Alexander took a deep swig of his wine, emptying the glass. He set it down, glancing over at the footman to indicate that he wanted it refilled.

He was playing billiards with a handful of other gentlemen, and so far, the game was not going his way. Perhaps the shake in his hands was because of that, not because of... of anything else.

He didn't want to think that his tightening chest and pounding heart had anything to do with the wine.

Or worse, Abigail.

He hadn't been able to take his eyes off her. Her new dress was beautiful, giving her an ethereal look. She'd looked so bored next to Graham, and he'd longed to rush over and rescue her, somehow or other. He'd been the first gentleman back in the drawing room, and his heart had plummeted when he saw she wasn't there. Lady Caldecott was staring daggers at him, so he didn't dare ask her where her niece was, but somebody else said something about a megrim and an early night.

There didn't seem much point staying after that, and now here he was in the billiards room.

Losing.

He drew in a deep breath, trying to dispel the image of Abigail Atwater glancing at him across the table, eyes creased with amusement, and took his shot.

Crack . Billiard balls bounced ungracefully across the table.

“You missed, old boy,” one of the men commented. “Bad luck.”

Alexander smiled tightly, straightening up.

One of the men was Graham Donovan, of course. He was playing well, and had joined at the last minute, doubtless so that Alexander couldn't cry off. Every time Alexander looked around, he found the man's eyes on him, seething with dislike.

He shrugged, as if it didn't matter to him if he lost the money wagered on this wretched game and picked up his refilled wine glass. Had he really intended to stop? What nonsense. There was nothing wrong with a little wine now and then. Or a whisper of whiskey. Brandy was practically a dessert.

He took a few large mouthfuls, gulping it down like water, and stepped back to let the next gentleman take his turn.

And then William appeared in the doorway, face set in a thin line, expression grim.

“Gentlemen,” he announced, “would you give my brother and me a moment alone?”

Anywhere else, there would have been murmurs of complaint at having to abandon the game, or even outright refusals.

Not in the Duke of Dunleigh's house. Nobody was quite ready to challenge William's authority yet. There were a few bitten-off sighs, a few meaningful looks exchanged, but that was all. They all filed out, leaving Alexander alone with his brother.

William shut the door with his heel.

“What have I done now, then?” Alexander sighed, snatching up his wine and perching on the edge of the billiards table.

“Besides drinking too much?” William snapped. “That’s your third glass.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“I’m not here to argue. Lady Caldecott is extremely concerned about something and confided in me today. She’s an honoured guest of our mother’s, and a personal friend of mine. And of yours , too.”

Alexander clenched his jaw. He had a feeling he knew what this was about, and it was not going to be a pleasant conversation.

William looked ready for battle. He had a way of drawing himself up when he was ready to have a serious conversation with somebody. His mouth was tight the way it did when he disapproved of something, and tension rolled off his shoulders like steam. Alexander braced himself.

“Do tell me, then,” he said at last. “Get it over with.”

William let out a long sigh. “You’ve been flirting with Miss Atwater.”

“I have not. Believe me, William, I have not tried to flirt with the girl. It would be disrespectful and unkind. I’ve just... just treated her in a friendly manner.”

William crossed the room in a flash, standing almost nose to nose with his brother.

“Don’t be such an abysmal fool. You know fine well what the rules are between unmarried ladies and gentlemen. You cannot simply be friendly with a young woman like Miss Atwater.”

“She is hardly a pale and insipid miss, nor a frivolous debutante eager to succumb to the affections of the first gentleman who casts his gaze upon her,” Alexander snapped back, getting angry despite himself.

“No, but she is here to look for a husband. Lady Caldecott made that clear. She also told me a few things about Miss Atwater’s background. Did you know that she’s a middle child, the second daughter of three, with no fortune and not much breeding to speak of? She’s neglected by her mother, bullied by her younger sister, and entirely kept away from Society and any opportunity she might have. Her aunt’s intervention might be the only opportunity she will have to make a good marriage and get herself a family and an establishment. I will not have you and your rakish ways getting in the way of Miss Atwater’s prospects, and neither will Lady Caldecott.”

Alexander bit hard on his lower lip, tasting copper. “Not every young woman wants a family and an establishment. Not everybody is as fixated on marriage as our family has had to be, William.”

“No, that is true, but I have it on good authority that Miss Atwater does wish to marry. Lady Caldecott has made it clear that she does not approve of you as a suitor, and I reassured her that you would not be serious. However, you must see how cruel it is to make Miss Atwater believe you are serious when you are not. It would distract her from other prospects.”

Before Alexander could say something to defend himself – he wasn’t sure what he would say, only that he had to say something – William reached out, laying his hands awkwardly on his shoulders. It was odd to receive a touch like that from his older brother, and Alexander flinched, momentarily distracted.

“You’re not unkind, Alex,” William said, more gently. “I know that, and Lady Caldecott knows it. But you must leave Miss Atwater alone. I saw how you kept looking at her across the table at dinner tonight.”

“I haven’t flirted with her, Will. Truly.”

William sighed. “I’m sure you mean that. I’m sure you didn’t consider it flirting. But as I said before, young ladies looking for husbands must be treated differently. I must insist on you keeping your distance from Miss Atwater from now on. It’s for the best, and everybody wants it.”

Alexander swallowed hard. “I’m not the man you think I am, William. You think I’m a fool, a stupid, flirtatious, cruel rake, somebody who enjoys making others squirm.”

“I think you are careless,” William said firmly. “You are not cruel, and although you make stupid choices more often than I can recall, you are not stupid . I assured Lady Caldecott that I would talk to you about this, and I have. I can’t control you, Alex, but I do expect you to try.”

Alexander nodded tightly, not trusting himself to speak. When William removed his hands from his shoulders, he picked up his wine glass again and drained it. The footman had gone, wretched fellow, and taken the decanter of wine with him. He glanced at the door, noticing that it was ajar. Odd, considering that William had slammed it shut with his heel when he came in.

“Think on what I’ve said,” William said firmly, and left without another word.

For a few moments, Alexander stood alone in the billiards room, the forgotten billiard balls casting shadows over the green baize, the ghosts of a game.

Then the door creaked open.

“I couldn’t help overhearing,” Graham commented languidly, still twirling his billiard cue in his fingers. “Got your knuckles rapped, didn’t you? I can’t say I’m sympathetic. That’s what happens when you bother defending sensible, genteel

ladies.”

The hairs on the back of Alexander’s neck rose. “Do you mean to tell me you were eavesdropping on our private conversation? A private conversation between myself and my brother, the Duke of Dunleigh and your host?”

Graham sighed. “ Eavesdropping . Such a dramatic word. I just happened to be standing in the hallway outside. You were both rather loud, and the door was open.”

“No, it was not. It was closed.”

“Well, you’ve already imbibed a good deal of wine tonight, so perhaps your perception is not what it should be.”

Alexander tightened his jaw. “What do you want, Graham?”

The man took a moment before replying, pursing his lips. Abruptly, he leveled his cue at the billiards table, and made a neat shot. The echoing clack-clack-clack of the balls bouncing against each other filled the room. He potted several.

“Flirting is not an enjoyable amusement for me,” he said at last. “My intentions towards Miss Atwater are sincere.”

Something like dread coiled in the pit of Alexander’s stomach. He felt sick, and his chest seemed to be tightening with every breath. He began to worry that he might actually be sick, and plotted several contingency plans in case the nausea came unexpectedly.

The best option, he surmised, would be to throw open the window behind him and vomit out of it.

Undignified, but better than ruining the billiards table.

“Why are you telling me this?” he demanded frostily.

Graham grinned, and Alexander realized that his reaction was exactly what was expected.

“Lady Caldecott likes me,” Graham said, ducking his head modestly. “She approves of me as a suitor for her niece. Without Lady Caldecott’s blessing, I doubt any suitor would get far with Miss Atwater. She does so adore her aunt. And, as I heard his Grace mention, once this little trip is over, Miss Atwater is going home. Her opportunity will be over. No doubt Lady Caldecott asked the esteemed Dowager – such a friend of hers, of course – to invite a few eligible gentlemen, to give her niece a chance, but if she lets this opportunity slip away...” Graham trailed off meaningfully, giving a delicate sigh. “I’m afraid it’ll be ignominy, spinsterhood, and obscurity for our poor Miss Atwater. She deserves better, don’t you think?”

He shuffled closer, eyeing the billiards table as if planning another shot.

“We’ve had our differences, you and me, Alexander,” Graham continued, voice changing. “But if you care for Miss Atwater at all, my advice would be to back away. Perhaps you are truly fond of her. I’m sure you’re capable of it, deep down. But you’re a rake, and a drunk, the sort of man no woman wants to marry. Leave her be, can’t you?”

Alexander found his voice. “A rake and a drunk, am I?” he managed at last. “Some men would demand satisfaction for such an insult.”

Graham sighed, rolling his eyes. “First of all, I doubt your brothers and your esteemed sister would let you fight a duel. Secondly, I am fairly sure I could beat you in a duel, if it came to it. Thirdly – and I think that perhaps this is the most important

point – nothing I have said is a lie. It is not slander. It’s just the truth.”

“I am not a drunkard,” Alexander insisted. As he spoke, however, he felt his grip on reality weaken, just a little. Wine had a way of blurring the world at its edges, in a light, pleasant way, nothing like the hard-hitting effects of whiskey or brandy. Even so, he was aware that his voice was not as crisp as it should be, and his hands shook just a little too much.

Graham eyed him for a long moment, and Alexander saw disgust written clear in his eyes.

For the first time, he felt as though he deserved it.

“Just leave her alone, won’t you?” Graham said, after a pause. “Leave her alone, and I won’t tell the world that you and your siblings are penniless until you marry.”

Alexander couldn’t help it. He sucked in a deep, shocked breath, and Graham smiled mirthlessly.

“I did eavesdrop just now, by the way, but when I heard your dear friend Lord Grey talk about your father’s will, it was loud enough that anyone could have overheard. You should talk to him about keeping his mouth shut. Good day to you.”

Dropping the billiard cue on the table, Graham walked out without another word, leaving Alexander reeling and breathless.

What have I done?

Oh, Hamish, what have you done?

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In the morning, Abigail found herself with a slight headache. Perhaps it was her punishment for claiming a megrim the night before.

Daylight brought a newfound sense of confidence, if it could be called confidence. The sugar-pink gown hung up in her cupboard, looking as pretty as ever.

Perhaps the problem isn't the dress, Abigail thought wearily. Perhaps it's just that I am wearing the dress.

A tap on the door made her jump. As always, Aunt Florence came in without waiting for a reply. She glanced down at Abigail's nightdress and frowned.

"Goodness, girl, you aren't dressed! We're going out strawberry picking this morning."

"I don't feel like eating strawberries very much, Aunt."

Aunt Florence sighed. "It's not about the berries, you silly girl, it's about the social element. Lord Donovan will be there," she added, as if that might tempt her.

It did not. Abigail pressed her lips together and avoided her aunt's stare.

"Why don't you go ahead, and I'll find you all out there?"

Aunt Florence's eyes narrowed, as if she knew fine well that Abigail did not intend to come out to the strawberry fields.

“Humph. Well, do as you like, I suppose. I shall save you some strawberries. The nice ones, at least.”

Abigail smiled weakly. “Thank you, Aunt Florence.”

The older woman withdrew, and Abigail listened to her footsteps retreat down the hallway.

Only five or ten minutes later, she heard voices outside. Peering out of the window, being careful to stay tucked away behind the curtain, Abigail looked out.

A stream of guests was making their way across the lawn towards the distant fields, most of them with baskets hanging from their arms. She saw Aunt Florence and the Dowager leading the way, deep in conversation. Graham was there too, looking bored, and Diana walked by his side, turned away. She didn’t see Lord Alexander. Perhaps that was for the best. He didn’t seem like the type of man who’d enjoy strawberry-picking very much.

She dressed quickly after that, throwing on an old check dress that generally wasn’t suited for such finely dressed company, but was comfortable and entirely suitable for rambling around the garden.

Snatching up a book, Abigail ventured out of her room.

It was already hot outside. The sun burned right through her straw bonnet, making her skin prickle and itch under her gown.

Thank heaven I’m not picking strawberries.

Abigail imagined that the heat and unrelenting sunshine would drive the strawberry-pickers home soon enough, at least to sit on the shaded part of the terrace and eat

their strawberries. And then Aunt Florence would come looking for her.

Still, she would get an hour or two, at the very least, to herself.

At home, time by herself was a given. Abigail was used to being alone. Generally, her company was neither wanted nor needed, and she could spend as long as she liked in reading, taking walks, and resting in her room.

It got rather too much after a while. Time by oneself was pleasant, but loneliness was another thing altogether. At the moment, it was almost a novelty to be tired of company and having to seek out time to be alone.

Abigail walked quickly, keen to get out of the sun. Head back, shoulders squared, she breathed deeply, enjoying the clean air and the warm breeze. A few gardeners moved around the grounds, some nodding and smiling as she passed by. Nobody demanded to know where she was going, and why she didn't have a maid with her.

She walked in the opposite direction of the strawberry fields, not entirely sure what it was she was looking for.

And then, abruptly, she found it.

An area of woodland flanked a particularly nicely manicured lawn, bursting with wildlife and undergrowth in a stark contrast to the smooth grass. Abigail had intended to walk along the tree line, not wanting to risk getting lost in an unfamiliar forest, but soon saw something that made her pause.

A little clearing sat only twenty or thirty feet beyond the line of trees. She could just glimpse it between the trunks. It was mostly overgrown but had clearly once been well-maintained. The remnants of a little rabbit path wound through the trees towards it, and inside the clearing, Abigail could see a swing.

Intrigued, she pushed through the trees.

The swing was a simple one – just two rough, well-knotted ropes wound around a tree branch high above her head, and a plank hung below for a seat, smoothed with age. There was a patch of bare earth beneath the swing, no doubt a testament to many years of children's swinging feet. It was obvious the swing had been well used, although not perhaps in recent years. Moss was beginning to grow on the wood, and the swing itself was gradually beginning to list to one side.

Taking a risk, Abigail took a seat. The swing creaked but did not give at all under her weight. Encouraged, she swung back and forth, just a little. More creaking, but the swing was clearly sturdy and well built. There was enough room in the clearing to make a good swinging arc, although Abigail did wonder whether her legs were long enough to skim the trees on the opposite side of the clearing.

She wasn't in the mood for a swing, but it was a delightfully idyllic spot. And private.

Sighing in contentment, she took out her book. The words wouldn't focus in front of her eyes, however, and Abigail found herself looking at the little border of flowers around the base of the trees. Before she knew what she was doing, she'd taken a stub of pencil out of her pocket and began to trace the outline of the soft petals in the blank flyleaf of the book.

It was her book, so it didn't matter if...

A twig cracked behind her, and Abigail froze. Swallowing hard, she twisted around slowly.

When she saw who was standing behind her, she didn't know whether to be relieved or horrified.

“My lord,” Abigail said neutrally. “I... I didn’t know you were here.”

“I could say the same,” he responded, gaze flickering around uneasily. “I came from a different direction. Forgive me, I thought no one was here.”

He made no move to leave, though. Abigail did not ask him to leave. His eyes dropped to her book.

“Would it be terribly rude of me if I asked to see your drawing?”

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She'd drawn one of the purple crocuses. They sprang up thickly in the forest at this time of year, and Alex remembered making clumsy sketches himself. His own attempts had been terrible, of course – he was never much of an artist – but Abigail's sketch was something else.

In just a few lines, she'd captured the softness of the petals, the graceful curve of the stem, contrasting with the abrupt straightness of the thick grass beside it. The sketch was in black and white, naturally, but he could imagine the delicate purple colour inching along the flower itself.

“You have a talent,” he remarked.

She shrugged, flushing. “I can't do watercolours very well, and Mama said that only watercolours are worth displaying. We had a tutor, but it was extra to tutor both of us, so we could only afford to have him teach my sister.”

As soon as she'd finished, she flushed and looked away, as if she wished she hadn't said it.

“That's unfortunate,” Alexander responded.

He knew, of course, that he should take his leave right away, since Abigail wasn't chaperoned, and they were alone in the woods, for heaven's sake.

He didn't leave. He found himself lingering, searching for something to say.

In the end, she spoke first.

“Was this your swing? When you were a child, I mean?”

Alexander swallowed, nodding. “I always wanted a swing. Kat and me kept trying to make ourselves one, but we were too small, and the things kept collapsing.” He bit back a smile. “I remember once, Kat was the first one to sit on a swing we’d made ourselves, and the branch came tumbling down on her head. I suppose she could have been hurt, but at the time, we just thought it was hilarious.”

“And how did this one happen?”

He drew in a breath. “I begged my father to build us a swing. I thought that if I just asked him often enough, and behaved as well as I could, he’d listen.”

A look of trepidation eased over Abigail’s face. She gently closed her book, setting it aside.

“And... and what happened?”

Alexander shrugged. “At last, he agreed. I was thrilled. I remember that my two older brothers were wary, but Kat and I thought they were just sour. Father got a good, smooth plank of wood, big enough for two, and a few lengths of rope. He put up the swing with his own hands, and when it was done, he made all of us come out and watch. Mother too.”

He breathed deeply, steeling himself. “I was thrilled. It was the happiest day of my life. Father stood me in front of everybody and said that even though he’d said no to a swing, I had kept asking and asking, and now here was a swing, and wasn’t I persistent? He told me to hop on and try it out. I did. It was perfect. I went higher and higher, laughing and kicking up my legs...” he swallowed hard. “And then, quite out of the blue, my father took out a very sharp hunting knife and cut through one of the ropes. Snick . I’ll never forget the sound it made. Or the feeling of euphoria turning to

terror as I started to fall.”

Abigail’s face was white and set. Her fingers curled around the rope of the swing, knuckles standing out.

“Did you hurt yourself?” she asked, voice quiet.

He nodded. “Nothing broken, but I badly sprained one wrist. I cut myself in half a dozen places. I have some scars left, and I remember that there seemed to be a tremendous amount of blood. I lay there for a moment, and then started wailing. You know, the way children do when they’re hurt. I remember that nobody came to help me, and at the time it hurt so much, but now I know why they held back. It would have been worse for me, otherwise. Father yanked me to my feet, slapped me across the face, and told me to stop crying. ‘When I say no, I mean it,’ he said. ‘Never ask twice for anything again.’ Then he walked off, leaving us all there to pick up the pieces.”

There was a brief silence.

“What a monster,” Abigail breathed, voice shaking. “I know he was your father, but...”

“We hated him,” Alexander murmured. “All of us. It taught me a valuable lesson, though.”

“Don’t ask twice for something?”

He gave a lopsided grin. “No, don’t ask at all. Better to ask for forgiveness than to ask for permission, after all.”

She gave a small smile back. “What about this swing, then?”

“Ah, that’s the good part of the story. A day or two later, Henry and William told me to come out to the woods. They took me here, to this clearing – Father never ventured into the woodlands – and here it was. The swing my brothers and Kat had built for me. Kat was sitting on it when I first came here, grinning like mad.” He allowed himself a small smile. “This was our secret place, for years and years. It’s peaceful. I’m glad you found it, truly.”

He glanced down at Abigail, trying to gauge whether he’d gone too far. Perhaps she didn’t want to hear about his suffering. People generally didn’t.

“You had the last laugh, though,” she said at last. “You’re here, and so is your swing, and he’s gone.”

Alexander managed a weak smile.

“Yes. I suppose so.”

Their eyes met and held. He felt the familiar warmth prickling over his skin, and Abigail did not look away. He opened his mouth to speak – heaven only knew what he was going to say – but was interrupted by the sound of distant footsteps.

Abigail flinched, eyes widening, and she clutched her book to her chest.

“We can’t be here together,” she hissed, glancing up at him.

“I’ll go,” Alexander said at once. “You stay here until the coast is clear.”

Without waiting for a response, he hurried out of the clearing.

William was outside, striding purposefully along the tree line.

He looked angry. But then, he generally did.

“There you are!” William hissed, hurrying towards him. “Your cursed friend is making a show of himself again. Thankfully, most of the guests are out in the strawberry fields. Get him under control now , before they come home!”

Alexander swallowed hard, a sensation of dread trickling through him.

“What... what is he doing?”

“Oh, just come and see. Quickly!”

Alexander and William stood side by side, hands on hips, staring down at the crumpled heap that was Lord Hamish Grey.

“I am sorry, Will,” Alexander muttered. “I... I didn’t know he’d be like this.”

According to the footman, Hamish had gone racing through the halls, singing at the top of his voice, and stopped to vomit inside a very expensive vase. The footmen had attempted to stop him, and he had shoved one of them over, and then run into the library, proceeding to pull a small pile of books off the shelves, and then vomited repeatedly over them .

Also on the rug, which was very expensive and likely would not be saved.

Alexander had guilty memories of himself staring down at the fine rug in his mother’s morning room, wondering if he would vomit on it.

Now, Hamish was lying on the floor, face down. It looked as though he’d tried to get

to the couch but hadn't quite made it.

"Can the books be saved?" Alexander whispered.

"No," William replied, voice clipped.

"Oh."

"Do something about him, won't you? I've summoned a few trustworthy footmen."

Alexander swallowed hard, nodding. "I... I'll have him stay in his room for the rest of tonight and have him conveyed home in the morning."

"I think that's for the best, don't you?"

Not waiting for a reply, William turned on his heel and strode away, leaving Alexander to manage his drunken friend alone.

He moved over to Hamish's side, propping him up into a sitting position.

"I was looking for a book of poetry, I think," Hamish mumbled, only half conscious. "For your Miss Atwater. For you to give to her, that is."

Alexander's chest tightened. "You're ill, Hamish. You've drunk too much."

Hamish groaned, passing a hand over his face. "Don't I always."

"Here, let's get you up onto the sofa."

"No, no, better not. It's a lovely velvet affair, I'd only ruin it. I ruin everything, you know."

He bit his lip. “You know that’s not true, Hamish.”

Hamish opened bleary eyes, smiling weakly. “I think you know that it is. Just give a moment to sit quietly.”

He leaned back, resting his head against the seat of the sofa, and Alexander crouched down in front of him.

For a moment, they sat there in silence.

“You’ve never been as bad as me, have you?” Hamish remarked at last. “I’ve been a rake since I was seventeen or eighteen, and drinking too much long before that. You only started on this business when your father died.”

The lump returned to Alexander’s throat. He swallowed hard a couple of times, trying to force it down, but it wouldn’t go.

“What does that have to do with anything, Hamish? You’re ill.”

“Yes, I am ill. More ill than I might have thought. Do you know, I kept telling myself that it didn’t matter how much wine and whiskey I drank, because I could stop drinking it whenever I chose, I just didn’t want to. Seems ridiculous, but I truly did believe that I was controlling it, not that it was controlling me.”

“Hamish...”

“No, no, I see the look on people’s faces. It’s like reading something in one of those Radcliffe novels, when the hero or heroine sees something terrible happening, but they haven’t strength to stop it, so they just have to watch. I disgust people, Alexander. I disgust myself.”

Alexander gripped Hamish's shoulders firmly. "You're my friend. You don't disgust me. You never will. I won't lie, I wish you'd behaved a little better over the past few days. You embarrassed me a little, but I also embarrassed myself a fair bit, too."

"Your brother looks at me like he wants to kill me," Hamish remarked, trying for a wobbly smile.

Alexander winced. "Yes, but he looks at me like that, too. Sometimes I think it's just the way William looks at everyone, frankly."

"I... I think I might have let your secret slip to someone, too. I was drunk, and I was talking to myself, and I think... I think someone was nearby."

Yes, you fool. Graham Donovan.

But what good would come from telling him that? Hamish was looking up at Alexander with wide, pleading eyes, guilt written clearly on his face.

On impulse, Alexander settled down next to his friend, shoulder to shoulder.

"You have to go home tomorrow, Hamish. William insisted. Neither of us have behaved well, but he can't exactly send me away. I'm going to arrange it all. And when all this is over, you and I will try and mend our rakish ways, eh?"

Hamish gave that small smile again. "Me because I don't want to end up like my father, and you to impress your Miss Atwater?"

"You really need to stop talking about Miss Atwater like that. I've been warned off her."

"What?"

“Don’t ask,” Alexander muttered, waving a hand. “But the point is, we’re friends. Playing the rake, drinking, and enjoying a hand of cards isn’t a crime, as far as I know, but perhaps as we get older, a little more moderation is the key?”

“Neither of us are good at moderation.”

Perhaps, Alexander thought, with a sudden spurt of fear, but if we don’t control our habits, they’ll control us. Vomiting on the library floor will be the least of our worries.

I don’t want to die a drunkard.

There were soft footsteps, and the footmen appeared, faces smooth and impassive.

“Take him to his room, please,” Alexander instructed. “He’ll have his meals there, if he’s hungry. He’s leaving in the morning, first thing.”

The footmen nodded obediently.

“How about a nip of whiskey for the road?” Hamish asked hopefully. Alexander sighed.

“No. And you’ve got a long way to go, my friend.”

He stood where he was, watching the two footmen gently walk Hamish away down the hallway. When they were gone, Alexander was left alone with his buzzing thoughts.

And the pile of books and vomit, too. He glanced at the mess and wrinkled his nose.

Better clean that up before Mother sees it.

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Abigail didn't see Alexander for the rest of the day. The peace of her quiet little clearing – well, their quiet little clearing, really – seemed to have been ruined.

The story he had told her about the previous Duke of Dunleigh shook Abigail. How could a man be so cruel to his own children? Mrs. Atwater was hardly a model parent, but she had never been physically cruel, at least. Her only crime was neglect, and allowing Abigail to do whatever she wanted without caring what might happen to her, but it seemed like the old Duke took great pleasure in torturing his children.

Dinner passed without incident. Abigail was seated across the table from Alexander, as usual, with her aunt on one side and Lord Donovan on the other. When she had the chance, she leaned over to her aunt and whispered quietly.

“What do you know about the previous Duke of Dunleigh?”

It was the right question to ask. Or rather, the wrong one, because Aunt Florence stiffened, a spoon of soup halfway to her lips, and glanced rapidly around the table as if afraid somebody was watching them.

“Ask me again after the ladies withdraw,” she murmured, and continued eating.

Perhaps Aunt Florence had hoped that Abigail would forget. She didn't, of course. When the Dowager rose, indicating that the ladies would retire to the drawing room, Abigail cornered her aunt, looping her arm through hers.

“Well?” she prompted.

Aunt Florence sighed. “Why are you asking, Abigail?”

“Well, I heard from Al... – that is, I heard that the Duke was remarkably unkind to his children. I heard a story about cutting a swing while one of his children were on it.”

Aunt Florence threw her niece a sharp look, and Abigail suspected that her aunt knew exactly who had told her that story.

The ladies began to file out of the dining room into the dark hallway, and the gentlemen settled down comfortably to enjoy their after-dinner port. Abigail felt an itch between her shoulder blades, as if she were under scrutiny, and glanced around to see who was watching.

Alexander hastily averted his gaze, and she felt her cheeks begin to burn.

“The old Duke was a difficult sort of man,” Aunt Florence continued, once they were safely out into the hallway, the door closed behind them. Ahead, the flickering yellow rectangle of the drawing room’s open door beckoned. It was a cool night, and a fire would have been lit inside, along with plenty of candles.

“By difficult, do you mean cruel?”

“Yes,” Aunt Florence said at once, which rather took Abigail by surprise. “He... he seemed to love no one, beyond himself and his reputation. His title, I should say. He became preoccupied with his legacy, and despite having four fine children, he found something to dislike in each of them. William, I believe, came under the brunt of his persecution. William and poor Katherine, being the only girl.”

They had fallen behind, the last in the line of women, and Abigail spotted the Dowager up ahead, craning her neck to see where they were. Their conversation would soon end.

“My friend, Mary, endured much,” Aunt Florence continued. “She loved him, and I believe that was her downfall, in the end. She is... weak and diminished now, but she was not always like that. I remember the way she was and hope that she’ll find her way back to her own self one day.”

“Oh. Oh, that is terrible.”

“Indeed. Let it be a lesson to you, Abigail. Women must marry, in this world, but for heaven’s sake, choose wisely.”

Then they had reached the drawing room, the Dowager smiling at them all, and the conversation had to stop. Aunt Florence stopped to talk with her friends, and Abigail smiled weakly and went on inside.

Her aunt’s last sentence had shaken her. What if she found herself in a marriage like the poor Dowager Duchess? There’d be no getting out of it, no escape. She shuddered, lowering herself into a chair by the fire.

She needed time to think. Unfortunately, she was not going to get it.

It felt as though she had only been sitting for a few minutes before the door opened and the menfolk came pouring in, chatting and laughing, some still clutching brandy glasses.

“You’re finished quickly!” the Dowager exclaimed, hurrying over to Alexander, who came in last. She beamed up at him, hands dancing out to touch his face, almost adoringly. Alexander smiled down at his mother, eyes crinkling.

From her vantage point, Abigail could see the faces of the others. More specifically, she could see the Duke of Dunleigh, who the Dowager had pushed past without a second look to get to her youngest son. His expression tightened, but he said nothing.

“We thought we’d join you early,” Alexander explained, looping an arm through his mother’s and escorting her to a seat. “What would you all say to a game of charades?”

The idea was well received by young and old. Abigail, who’d hoped to sit quietly and read her book, was not thrilled at the idea, but nodded and smiled when he glanced questioning at her. It would look rude to refuse.

I’ll have plenty of time to be a wallflower when I go home.

That thought sent a jolt through her. This was the first time Abigail had properly thought about going home, but of course this visit could not last forever, and Aunt Florence was not going to keep her for weeks and months on end.

And then Abigail’s moment in the sun would be finished. It would be back to spinsterhood and invisibility, back to sitting on the sidelines at local balls while others danced. Scarlett would marry, most likely. She would probably not have the chance to secure a really good match, on account of their finances and the expense of a London Season, and Abigail would be blamed for that, for charming their aunt in giving her this opportunity, rather than her younger sister.

Abigail’s throat tightened. She gave her head a little shake, bringing herself back to the present. Just in time, she saw Lord Donovan approaching her, smiling complacently.

“They are talking about forming into partners for charades. May the best pair win, eh?”

Abigail’s heart sank. Of course, she might have known. She would be stuck with Lord Donovan all night. She could see Diana approaching Alexander, a sultry smile on her face, and knew exactly how things would be.

And then the Dowager spoke up.

“To make things more interesting,” she said, beaming around at the company. “we shall pick names out of hats for our partners! The gentlemen will write their names down, and the ladies shall pick. How does that sound?”

Lord Donovan and Diana’s faces both fell comically, but Abigail bit back a sigh of relief.

They decided to go by age, starting with the youngest, which meant that Abigail was presented with the hat much more quickly than she’d anticipated.

Smiling nervously at the company, she reached in and picked up the first piece of paper her fingers touched.

It would be just her luck if she picked Lord Donovan anyway.

She unfolded the paper, and blinked at it for a moment, waiting for the words to rearrange themselves into a different name.

“Lord Alexander Willenshire,” she read out.

Diana flinched as if slapped. Aunt Florence made a little moue of disapproval, and Lord Donovan’s lips tightened. The Dowager, who was holding the hat, saw none of these changing expressions, and only beamed at Abigail.

“Oh, you are lucky! Alex is excellent at charades.”

She moved on before Abigail could respond, and Alexander came shuffling forward.

“It’s you and I, then,” he said, smiling wryly. “May I sit?”

“Of course.”

Abigail’s heart was hammering. Alexander settled himself onto a stool beside her armchair, sitting so close she could almost feel the heat coming off him. No doubt feeling her eyes on him, he glanced over, and she felt herself blushing.

Alexander smiled; a languid, lopsided grin that made her chest tighten again.

“I intend for us to win this, Miss Atwater.”

She smiled back. “So do I.”

It was Alexander and Abigail’s turn again. Each pair was obliged to pick out a prompt from the hat – the same one which had held the names was now holding dozens of charades prompts to act out – and then act the prompt to their partner. If they guessed correctly before the minute-glass ran out, they would earn one point. If they were quick enough, they were permitted to choose another prompt, and earn the chance of another point.

So far, to her amazement, Abigail and Alexander were ahead.

It was Alexander’s turn to act, and he bounced up from his seat, snatching up a prompt. He read it quickly, eyes narrowing.

Abigail waited, the anticipation building inside her.

The Dowager had not been exaggerating when she said that Alexander was good at this game. He was happy to clown around and make the others laugh, but somehow, it was also easy to guess at what he was acting out. He was also good at guessing when

it was his turn.

She could see Diana, paired with a man who had a bristling moustache and appeared to be half-asleep, sitting sourly beside Lord Donovan and his giggling debutante partner, a rather sweet young lady who thought everything an absolute joke, but could not guess or act to save her life.

Drawing in a breath, Alexander slipped the piece of paper into his pocket, nodding at Aunt Florence to start the minute-glass timer.

He placed his hands together, palm to palm, and opened them slowly.

“It is a book, then,” Abigail said.

There was a vigorous nod. Then Alexander threw out his arms in a circle around his hips, making a move as if splashing.

“Water? Water? No, no, but I’m close? River? Stream? Pond? No – Lake!”

There was another vigorous nod. The others were all watching in varying shades of amusement. The Dowager was beaming adoringly at her son.

The Duke, who was not playing, as there was an odd number, was sitting off to one side, on the armchair Abigail had vacated.

Next, Alexander pointed directly at Abigail. She frowned, a little confused.

“Me? No, no. Woman? Lake... Woman...”

He was still pointing urgently, then gestured to the rest of the gathering, specifically the...

“Ladies!” she gasped. “Lady... The Lady of the Lake, by Sir Walter Scott!”

“Correct!” Alexander laughed, whipping out the now-crumpled piece of paper to show them all.

There was applause, and Abigail allowed herself a wide grin. This victory would put them a full five points above the next highest scoring pair.

“Although, The Lady of the Lake is a poem, you wretch,” she said, laughing. Perhaps it was a little too familiar, but Alexander only bowed and grinned.

“And yet you guessed it anyway,” he said, glancing up at her with strangely glittering eyes. “We make quite the team, don’t we?”

“Enough chit-chat,” Aunt Florence interrupted. “Look, you have twenty or thirty seconds left on the timer! Get yourselves another prompt, and try and win another prompt.”

“Goodness, Lady Caldecott,” Diana remarked sourly. “Anyone would think you wanted them to win, instead of your partner and yourself.”

“It is charades, Lady Lockwell,” Aunt Florence shot back, without missing a beat, “hardly a game upon which anyone’s life depends.”

Diana flushed at her sharp tone, throwing herself back against the sofa and folding her arms tight across her chest, disapproval evident.

Aunt Florence, of course, did not seem to care.

Snatching up another prompt, Alexander read it quickly, and glanced up at Abigail. There was a small smile on his face, something soft and fond, and she almost felt as

though she ought not to be seeing it at all. Something tugged inside her, something that made her want to get up and go to Alexander and put her arms around him.

A shocking notion, of course. Lord Alexander Willenshire might be a rake, but he would never conduct himself poorly in public. No gentleman would, even a...

A crash echoed from outside, making the inhabitants flinch and turn around.

The Duke rose to his feet, a wary look on his face.

“What on earth is going on out there?” Alexander said, even though he was not meant to speak a single word once he had read the prompt.

By way of answer, the drawing room door barreled open and a man collapsed inside, making the ladies nearest to the door leap to their feet and shriek.

The minute-glass ran out, and Alexander dropped the prompt.

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The awful sinking feeling made Alexander feel as if he'd swallowed his heart.

The piece of paper he'd picked out of the hat – he was sure Abigail would guess it, as it was the title of her favourite play, *Much Ado About Nothing*. He'd already planned how he would act it out, clowning around and making her laugh.

And then there was that horrible noise, the door banged open, and who should stumble inside but Hamish.

Poor, wretched Hamish, who'd obviously convinced one of the more impressionable servants to get him some alcohol one way or another.

Stupid Hamish, who was quite clearly drunk again.

He came stumbling into the room, grubby and unshaven and stinking of alcohol, his shirt untucked and undone at the neck, a large, unpleasant-looking stain of something on the thigh of one of his trouser legs. He was wearing dancing slippers, for some reason, and they were too loose on him, slapping against his feet with every step. His hair stuck straight up, and one glance at his slack face and reddened, bleary eyes told them all that he was – to put it politely – not himself.

“So this is where the party's at,” Hamish slurred, grinning absently at the young debutante, Lord Donovan's partner. The girl shrank back, glancing about her for her mother.

“Lord Grey,” William said sharply, stepping in front of Hamish. “You are not yourself. You are quite clearly in your cups, which is entirely inappropriate for a

gathering like this, and certainly not proper in the presence of ladies. You'll be so good as to remove yourself at once."

Hamish blinked lazily at him, and Alexander's heart sank further.

He recognized that look. He'd seen it on Hamish and other friends before, and he'd experienced it himself. It was the level of drunkenness where a person could no longer function properly. It was beyond dizziness and vomiting. Hamish would not – could not – listen to reason. He likely could not hear anything, and was only clutching to some odd, preconceived idea of what was going on, fueled by whiskey-addled senses. It could be a dangerous thing, too. Even the mildest men could lash out at a time like this. Alexander swallowed hard, pushing in between William and Hamish.

If Hamish was going to strike anyone – he'd never hit anyone before, but there was a first occasion for anything – he was jolly well going to hit Alexander instead of William.

"Hamish, old boy, I thought you were in bed," Alexander said, with forced joviality. "You said you were tired, and not feeling well. Do you think you have a fever?"

He moved as if to lay a hand on Hamish's forehead. It was a mistake. Hamish knocked his hand away with an audible slap, and a shocked gasp ran around the room.

Hamish rounded on the other guests, glaring balefully.

"Oh, and what are you all looking at, with your stupid, blank faces? Like you've never had one tippie too many."

"No, I have not," Lord Donovan remarked acidly. Alexander glared at him.

Now is not the time to be snide, you fool!

Hamish made a few tottering steps towards Lord Donovan, who paled and shrank back into his seat. However, Hamish's balance was not faring well, and he wobbled sideways, arms flailing to catch himself. He knocked against one of the sideboards, making the most horrible clatter, and a tall vase set on one of the shelves began to rock.

Alexander knew what was happening before it did. The vase had gone past the point of no return, and rocked slowly to and fro before giving up altogether. Toppling down from the high shelf, Alexander watched it fall, noting miserably that it had been a present from his grandmother to his mother.

Crash . The vase shattered into a hundred pieces, small bits of porcelain showering the skirts of a nearby woman. She darted away with a gasp, shaking her dress to dislodge any remaining pieces.

"Oops," Hamish mumbled, smiling blearily around. "That was an accident. Alex, tell them it was an accident? Alex and me, we're friends. Good friends. We know all each other's secrets, just as friends should."

Alexander stiffened. He glanced briefly over at William, whose face was white. He did not look at his younger brother.

"Hamish, why don't you let me walk you out?" Alexander tried again. He generally had no trouble marshalling a drunk Hamish in their various pubs and clubs, but here, in the quiet gentility of his mother's drawing room, things felt very different.

Hamish glowered at him. "Am I embarrassing you, Alexander?"

"You are embarrassing yourself, sir," William rapped out. Hamish turned his vague

glare onto him.

Alexander bit the inside of his cheek. You aren't helping, Will.

"Oh, an embarrassment, am I? Perhaps I should act in a more gentlemanly manner," he tottered forward, wobbling for no apparent reason, and let out a loud belch.

Then Lady Caldecott rose to her feet, clapping her hands. It broke the spell of horrified silence that lay over the rest of the guests.

"We shall go into one of the morning-rooms," she announced firmly. "With your permission of course, Mary. It is not kind to watch Lord Grey when he is unwell. Lord Alexander, your Grace, can you manage him?"

William gave a short nod. "Yes. Thank you, Lady Caldecott."

The spell was broken, and suddenly the guests could not get out quickly enough. Lord Donovan edged warily past Hamish and hurried out into the hallway, not bothering to wait for the pale debutante.

Hamish's head wobbled to and fro as the guests filed out.

"Where are you all going? No need to rush off. Fine, then. Be like that. Alex and I don't care, do we?"

Alexander bit his lip hard. When he wouldn't meet Hamish's gaze, he saw his friend jerk back a little, as if hurt.

"You want me to make a scene?" Hamish snarled, whipping towards the sideboard again. "Very well."

He picked up another ornament, a china figurine of a shepherdess, and held it out pointedly. He dropped it.

Crash .

Alexander squeezed his eyes shut.

The last of the guests hurried out, whispering eagerly between themselves. Lady Caldecott went last, holding tight to her niece's hand and almost herding a pale-faced Mary ahead of her.

Abigail didn't look at anyone as she left, keeping her eyes fixed on her own feet. Alexander watched her go, willing her to look at him so he could shrug or roll his eyes, or do anything to let her know that he did not approve of Hamish's behaviour and that he would never do such a thing.

Well, not anymore.

"The footmen are coming to assist," Lady Caldecott added in an undertone as she passed through the doorway. "I suspect you'll need help to get him to his room."

"Thank you," William repeated, raking a hand through his hair. "I know you won't repeat this shameful story, but I can't expect as much from others."

Lady Caldecott gave a sharp nod. "I'll do my best to suppress gossip, but as you say, the story will get out regardless."

Alexander's heart sank. This occasion would reflect poorly on them all. As Hamish's friend and the one who had invited him there, blame would fall heavily on him. Hamish's reputation was likely not able to be saved at this point, but men could generally claw back some respectability after a while.

Unfairly enough, it was William who would come out the worst of this. It was his house. He was the duke. The behaviour of his guests was his responsibility, and any shocking events that took place in his home would reflect directly upon him.

Alexander glanced anxiously at his brother.

“Will, I...”

“I am not sure I can ever forgive you for this,” William stated, before Alexander could finish. “I told you not to bring him here, and you ignored me. And now look at what has happened.”

Alexander opened his mouth, not entirely sure what he was going to say. Apologies, perhaps, some silly excuses. There was no time for any of it, of course.

The footmen arrived, four of them, grim-faced and serious. The butler trotted behind, looking tired.

“Forgive me, your Grace,” he murmured to William, as the footmen began to wrestle a struggling Hamish out of the room. “It seems that he bribed one of the under-gardeners to bring up a decanter of whiskey. I believe he called to him from the window. The boy came into the house to bring it, and left the door unlocked. The fault is mine.”

“No, actually,” William responded tightly. “The fault is my brother’s.”

There was no more talking after that.

Hamish was escorted upstairs, probably more roughly than was necessary. He was placed back in his room, and this time a footman was left on duty outside his door, and another outside the window. William did not say a word to Alexander, only

turned on his heel and strode away into the depths of the house once it was all over, carrying a candle to light his way into the darkness.

Alexander stood there for a moment, in the hallway outside of Hamish's room. He'd heard from talk between the servants that the party downstairs was broken up, unsurprisingly. After the Incident, as people were calling it, they had all been keen to get themselves to bed as soon as possible.

Alexander did not go to bed. He went downstairs to the drawing room, where maids were still clearing up the mess of broken china in front of the sideboard. Ignoring their curious stares, Alexander took out a decanter of brandy, and began to drink.

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“Thank you for coming on such short notice, Mr. Seeker. And so early.”

“It’s no trouble, your Grace,” Mr. Seeker answered, lowering himself into the seat opposite William’s desk. “It is very early. And here I was thinking that the members of the ton all slept till noon.”

William gave a tight smile and said nothing.

As if my father would have ever allowed me to sleep a minute past sunrise. My days of longing to sleep in are long gone. I doubt I could sleep till noon even if I wanted to.

Especially not after the debacle of last night. William knew he would have to attend breakfast in a few hours, to smooth over ruffled feelings and calm shocked guests. It was his mother’s duty, but Mary was not the hostess she had once been. Lady Caldecott would do her best, but it was not her responsibility, really.

I wish Kat were here. Or Henry. Alex is no good at all. In fact, I fancy he makes things worse.

Of course, Lord Hamish Grey was gone. He had gone to sleep shortly after being returned to his room, apparently, and was woken in the grey hour before dawn with a carriage waiting for him at the servants’ entrance, his things packed already.

He had gone quietly, as grey as his name, looking sick and miserable. William himself had gotten up to see him off, more to make sure that he really did leave rather than anything else. He wasn’t sure whether Lord Grey remembered the events of last

night, but apparently, he remembered enough to cringe in shame.

“I am sorry, your Grace,” he kept saying, hanging his head.

“Least said, soonest mended,” William had responded, voice tight and clipped. “There’ll be repercussions for you, no doubt. Richly deserved, I might add. I don’t wish to resume our acquaintance anytime soon or see you again in the foreseeable future. I cannot stop Alexander spending time with you, but it’s fair to assume that you won’t be invited here again.”

Lord Grey only hung his head again. “I know. And I’m sorry, truly I am.”

William had pointedly said nothing else. Apologies were all very well, and no doubt they were sincere, but apologies were not going to keep the incident out of the scandal sheets.

“Your Grace?” Mr. Seeker prompted, bringing William back to the present.

“I beg your pardon,” he said. “Last night was... eventful. I did not sleep well. In your last letter, you said you had exciting developments?”

“Indeed I did. Now, I intended to make absolutely sure of this before telling you in person, but no matter. I believe I have discovered your L.B.”

William sucked in a breath. “Oh?”

“Yes. Now, I have spent a great deal of time researching the particular ball at which you met this lady and accidentally acquired her locket, but there was nobody answering your description with those initials.”

“But...?”

“But with a little further digging, I learned that there were several ladies and gentlemen in attendance who had not received formal invitations. Visiting relatives and friends, wards, and so on. For example, a lady might receive a formal invitation, which names only herself, and writes back to the hostess to request that she bring a friend, or companion, or ward. Permission is granted, the invitation therefore extended to the newcomer, but there is no formal record of their invitation.”

William bit back a sigh. It was clear that Mr. Seeker was pleased with his cleverness, and it wouldn't do to rush him to the point and offend him. He was getting further than William himself had managed, at least.

“And?”

“And I found one Lavinia Brookford,” Mr. Seeker finished. “Does the name sound familiar?”

“It does not. I certainly haven't been introduced to her, and I've never heard her name mentioned. Is she a lady?”

“Of that, I'm not sure. I only heard the name from a lady's maid. She might be Miss, a married woman, or even a governess or companion. I simply do not know, but rest assured, I will find out. Her description seems to answer yours, so I am confident this is the woman, but please, let me confirm my facts.”

William nodded slowly, nibbling his lower lip. “Some good news at last.”

Mr. Seeker nodded, leaning back in his seat. “I fancy that the lady will be impressed and pleased to hear of the lengths you have gone to in order to return her locket.”

William glanced sharply at the man, not sure whether that was a compliment or a subtle insult.

He was well aware that he'd gone too far. Anybody else would have shrugged and tossed the locket in a drawer, ready to be forgotten about. A particularly kind person might have sought out one of the Society Matrons, perhaps an Almack's patron, and given her the responsibility of seeking out the lady.

Instead, William had gone on a quest to discover the lady's identity, with a fervour that bordered on obsession. There was really no way to explain to the lady what he'd done to find her without coming across as unhinged. It was increasingly likely that to return the locket, he would have to simply put it in an envelope and have it sent to her with a brief, disinterested note of explanation.

That idea did not sit well with William, and he had no idea why. He had replayed his meeting with the lady – with Lavinia Brookford, who William hoped was a miss – over and over in his head.

Why had she fascinated him so?

"I hope the locket means something to her," William found himself saying. "I'll be disappointed if I've gone to all this trouble for a necklace she didn't even realise was missing."

Mr. Seeker pursed his lips. "I doubt that very much, your Grace. Was that all you wished to discuss? I assume you wish me to continue my efforts?"

"Yes, yes, of course. Thank you for your hard work."

Mr. Seeker rose gracefully to his feet, bowed, and showed himself out, leaving William sitting by himself in his study.

He wasn't sure how long he sat there. It could have been a few minutes, or much longer – time seemed to slip away from William rapidly these days. He jolted at the

sound of footsteps, glancing sharply up.

Mary stood there. She'd chosen to let her hair hang loose around her shoulders, giving her a blowsy, untidy look, and the old-fashioned, ugly white gown she wore seemed almost like a nightgown, and wouldn't have been out of place on an asylum patient.

William gave himself a shake at the thought of his mother in an asylum.

"Mother," he said briskly, shuffling some papers to keep his hands busy. "You're up early. I am rather busy, you know."

"Don't you dare be angry with him," Mary said, gaze fixed on her eldest son.

William's shuffling hands stilled. "What do you mean?" he asked, voice tight.

"You know what I mean. I am talking about Alex."

"You mean, the same Alex who brought a drunkard into our home, who smashed a few valuable heirlooms and made your gathering a disaster?" William rapped out, voice tight. "The same Alex who drank half a bottle of brandy last night and collapsed in bed in the early hours? That Alex?"

Mary pressed her thin lips together. "You have always resented him. The others didn't, but you dislike him."

"I don't dislike my brother," William responded, ignoring the accusation of resentment. "I dislike his lifestyle and his habits, that is all."

"No, there's more to it than that," Mary said, voice absent, almost as if she were talking to herself. "You should not be so cruel."

William was on his feet before he knew what he was doing.

“I am not cruel, Mother, and I resent that accusation. Do you think I am jealous of Alexander? Is that it? Only you would see anything to envy in him .”

Mary rocked back on her feet. William felt a pang of guilt.

“Alexander is spoiled,” he continued, voice softer. “I am not here to scold you for that, but...”

“I would see you looking at him and me,” Mary interrupted, gaze distant. “When Alex and I would go for walks, or arrange flowers together, or read together. Katherine and Henry didn’t mind, but you were always looking angry. I’d see that tight look on your face and know that you were jealous. I suppose I ought to have done something, but you were always your father’s son. That was the deal we made; I think. I had the youngest, the one that we could afford to spoil, and your father had the eldest. You. He would have been dreadfully angry if I gave you too much attention. Besides, you were never soft and sweet like Alex. You’re hard, William. Hard and serious. There’s a great deal of your father in you – he had a core of steel, too.”

William felt breathless, as if somebody had punched him in the gut.

“How dare you,” he gasped. “How dare you compare me to that man!”

Mary was unmoved. She tilted her head to one side, pale gaze raking her eldest son up and down. She sighed, shaking her head just a little.

“Out of us all, he was most pleased with you, I think. You are his creature, after all. Take care about that, William. And don’t abandon Alexander. If he is to improve his life and leave his harmful habits behind, he will need his family. You have all found

your own ways to leave your father behind. You have chosen to imitate him, it seems, but Alexander's way of coping is far more explosive and dangerous."

Mary did not wait for a response. She turned on her heel and left the room, slippers slapping on the floor.

William stayed where he was for a moment or two, still feeling winded. His hands were planted flat on his desk, supporting his weight, and he stayed in that position until his shoulders began to ache. Abruptly, his strength deserted him, and he collapsed backwards into his seat. Mary had left the door open, and for a moment, William could do nothing but stare out of the doorway, at the stone wall directly opposite.

From here, he swore he could see faint, smooth curves in the wall, worn away from years of children standing there. That was where they had stood, when they were summoned to their father's study, generally for punishment. He always kept them waiting for a while, generally an hour or two, and woe betide the child who was found sitting on the floor when the door finally flew open without warning.

So, they would lean against the wall for support, shifting and fidgeting, afraid of what awaited them behind the door.

I am not like him. I'm not. I'm not his creature .

Abruptly, William flew out from behind his desk, diving over to the velvet bell-pull in the corner. He hauled on it and paced up and down in front of the fireplace while he waited impatiently for a response.

When a footman finally answered the summons, William snapped at him immediately.

“I don’t like this room.”

The poor man blinked, bewildered. “I... what do you mean, your Grace? Does it require airing? Dusting, perhaps? The maids were in here only yesterday, but not...”

“No, no,” William interrupted, shaking his head. “I want a different room as my study.”

The man recoiled, as if William had suggested that instead of wearing livery, all the footmen would simply walk around naked.

“But, your Grace, this room has always been the Duke of Dunleigh’s study. For generation. Even your late father had...”

“Yes, yes, I know that! I know that, and I’m telling you I want a different room as my study. Today. Fetch the butler, and some of the other footmen. You’ll need help.”

Looking confused and a little afraid, the footman scurried off to find help. William let out a long breath. He dug into his pocket, feeling the familiar curve of the locket there. He imagined the initials engraved on the pendant. Lavinia Brookford.

I am not like him. I will never be like him. I won’t let it happen. I won’t, I won’t!

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“There is nothing better to distract people from an upsetting like a picnic, I think,” Lord Donovan remarked, drawing Abigail’s arm through his with a grin. “I imagine that is why the Dowager suggested it.”

Abigail smiled weakly. She didn’t bother to point out that the picnic had been Aunt Florence’s idea.

The events of last night had shook everybody. For a few awful moments, Abigail had been sure that Lord Grey was going to punch somebody in the face, and there was a good chance the somebody might have been Alexander.

Everybody was talking about it this morning, of course. Lord Hamish Grey was nowhere to be seen, and the Duke had tightly confirmed that Lord Grey had left early that morning. He didn’t say that he’d been forced to leave, but everybody knew that was the case.

They also knew that Alexander had invited Lord Grey, as his personal guest and long-time friend, and people had plenty to say about that, too.

And so, Aunt Florence had suggested to the Dowager that they go on a picnic by the lake, since it was a fine day, to distract everybody.

In the light of day, Lord Grey’s behaviour was less frightening than it had been. People loved scandal, after all, and Abigail imagined that it would blow over fairly quickly. It would not be forgotten, naturally, that was a different thing, but still.

They were all walking up from the house to the valley beyond, with footmen and

maids carrying picnic baskets and blankets ahead. It was a fine view, Abigail was told, and if it hadn't been so clear to her that Lord Donovan was going to spend every minute of the afternoon with her, she might have enjoyed it a lot more.

"I was surprised that his lordship joined us this morning," Lord Donovan commented under his breath. "I should be ashamed to show my face."

And I should be ashamed to have run away from a drunk man without even waiting to see that the ladies and older gentlemen were safe first, Abigail thought, but did not say it. A few minutes passed, and she started to wish that she had said it.

Abruptly, the path they were following opened up onto a sloping, grassy bank, which provided a view of a wide, still lake, purplish mountains beyond, and a neat little wooden pier, to which various small boats were moored. People spread out to take in the view, exclaiming and smiling to each other.

The footmen got to work, spreading out the blankets and setting out the food. A good amount of fine wine had been brought out, and generous glasses were poured.

She spotted Alexander at the edge of the picnic spot, with Diana's arm hooked firmly through his, weighing him down like an anchor. He looked tired, she thought. Diana met Abigail's eye and pursed her lips. Abruptly, she had turned Alexander around, pointedly pulling him down on the blanket furthest away from the one Abigail and Lord Donovan were standing beside.

She was obliged to sit down but found herself staring at Alexander still. He was pale, and there were dark circles around his eyes. He seemed distracted, not his usual, bubbly self. She found herself remembering how he'd smiled and laughed during the game of charades, playing the fool to make the others laugh.

To make her laugh.

A lump rose in Abigail's throat.

"Now," Aunt Florence boomed out, voice echoing easily across the party, "Our dear Mary has suggested boat rides on the lake."

This idea was met with excited gasps.

"I thought you might all like that. Now, shall we enjoy boat rides before the picnic, or after? We don't need to decide now, by the way. Feel free to enjoy a little wine or lemonade and some refreshments while we all get settled in."

Aunt Florence glanced down at Abigail and Lord Donovan as she spoke, giving them a pleased smile.

"I believe I've quite charmed your aunt," Lord Donovan murmured, flashing a secret grin.

"Oh, my aunt likes most people," Abigail replied, somewhat ungraciously. "She's very kind."

"Yes, very kind. Just the other day, I remarked to Lady Caldecott that the quality of young women was so very dire these days, and she said that..."

Abigail stopped listening. She found her gaze, as usual, drawn across to where Alexander sat.

Was that normal? Was it usual to find oneself always looking for one particular person in the crowd, heart pounding as you searched? Was it normal to feel one's stomach drop when they weren't there, or one's heart to leap when you saw them? Frankly, Abigail wasn't sure at all what had come over her.

If it was love, it wasn't at all like what the books described. There'd been no swooning, no yearning, intense gazes. She hadn't fainted once when he came into the room. She'd laughed until her sides ached and she truly thought she might be sick at Alexander's charades, her face hurting from so much laughter. Was that normal? It didn't feel very romantic, but it had certainly been easy.

Abigail knew that she was not considered fascinating . More than once, gentlemen had made jokes around her, and she had not laughed. Simply put, they were not funny, but apparently nobody had considered that. She'd given offence, according to her mother later. Ladies were meant to laugh whenever gentlemen said things that they intended to be funny, but it had to be a polite laugh – sweet and tinkling and attractive. Scarlett was good at it.

Abigail could not remember the last time a gentleman had made her laugh. And it wasn't a pretty laugh. She was fairly sure she'd roared, snorting occasionally in a most unladylike way, face creasing up. Had Alexander been disgusted? He hadn't seemed disgusted.

She glanced his way again, and this time she paused, frowning.

The footman was pouring out wine. Diana held two glasses and attempted to pass one to Alexander. He said something she could not hear, smiling nervously, and gestured towards the jug of lemonade.

Diana gave a tittering laugh that did drift across to where Abigail sat and offered the wine glass again.

Alexander shifted away, just a little, hand outstretched. She could read his lips enough to know that he was saying no, no thank you.

The conversation around them dipped, and Abigail could clearly hear Diana say:

“Oh, come, Willenshire! Men don’t drink lemonade . This is a fine, full-bodied red. It’ll cheer you up. Come, you must drink a glass. I insist. You wouldn’t contradict a lady, would you?”

The others on the picnic blanket were all sipping wine, watching Alexander out of the corners of their eyes. They all tittered when she said that men did not drink lemonade.

And the next thing Abigail knew, she was on her feet.

Everybody else was sitting down by now, Aunt Florence just about to lower herself down.

All eyes turned her way, and the conversation dwindled away. They all waited, expectantly, and colour rushed to Abigail’s cheeks.

She felt a tug on the hem of her skirt, and she glanced down to see Lord Donovan staring up at her.

“What are you doing?” he hissed. “Sit down!”

She ignored him, addressing herself to the Dowager instead.

“Your Grace, I think we should go on the lake now.”

“Oh?” the Dowager answered. “You aren’t hungry?”

“Not particularly. You see,” she continued, warming to her theme, “we ate a late breakfast. If it rains later – I’m sure it won’t, but if it does – we can go home and have our picnic indoors, which will be just as fun, but we won’t be able to go on the lake at all. So, I think we should do that first.”

Aunt Florence was staring at Abigail, clearly trying to work out what she was doing.

“Well, that makes sense,” the Dowager said at last. “We’ll need to go out in pairs, as the boats are quite small. What does everybody else think?”

Abigail was not listening. Already, she was aware of Lord Donovan tugging harder on her hem, this time trying to get her attention so he could invite her to go on the lake with him. That was not part of Abigail’s plan.

She turned, already seeing Diana lean close to Alexander, on the cusp of asking the same question Lord Donovan had for her.

“Lord Alexander,” Abigail said, hating that she had to ask in front of everyone, but seeing no other option, “Would you mind taking me out on the lake?”

There was silence.

Abigail had never considered herself an expert on social graces, but she knew the basics.

One fundamental rule was that ladies did not ask for anything. They waited to be asked. Whether it was a cup of tea or a dance, they had to wait to be asked or offered.

Another rule was that ladies did not press themselves on the notice of gentlemen, not in public. If a particular man did not choose to speak to a lady or offer to escort her anywhere, she did not ask. Diana was speaking in a whisper, no doubt dropping hints, but Abigail had asked loudly and in public.

Abigail had neatly broken both rules at once, and the shock had rippled around the gathered picnickers. Diana looked as though she wanted to tear Abigail’s eyes out of her head.

Alexander cleared his throat, getting to his feet. Diana was left alone on their corner of the blanket, with two untouched glasses of wine in her hands.

“I should love to, Miss Atwater,” he said firmly. “I was about to ask you myself.”

Under the eyes of the shocked company, he offered her his arm, and they headed towards the edge of the lake.

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“I’m sorry about that,” Abigail said, once they were clear of the other picnickers. “I just saw Lady Lockwell trying to make you drink that wine when you clearly didn’t want to, and it annoyed me.”

Alexander glanced sharply at her. It had seemed like a miracle, Miss Atwater asking him to take her onto the lake just when his resolve was weakening, but now he saw that it wasn’t a miracle at all. Abigail had been watching, alert to the discomfort that nobody else seemed to see.

“Please, don’t apologise,” he said at last. “I’m unspeakably glad you did. That woman... ahem. She can be rather forward. And since this is my mother’s party, I’m obliged to be on my best behaviour, and can’t exactly scuttle away like a coward.”

They reached the pier, and Alex chose a small, green-painted boat at the end of the queue. Behind them, it seemed that the guests had shaken off their horror at Abigail’s forwardness, and were pairing up into twos, following them to the lake. Abigail glanced over her shoulder, and hastily looked away. Alexander saw that Lady Caldecott was staring at them, and it was fairly clear she was not pleased. She was trying to get ungracefully to her feet, and there was a good chance she would come stamping down to the lakeside to drag Abigail away on some trumped-up excuse.

He suspected that he would get a talking-to sooner or later, and probably Abigail would, too.

He helped Abigail into the boat then climbed in himself, hastily pushing off the side before Lady Caldecott could start off towards them.

The lake was smooth and clear, with hardly a ripple on its surface. That would change once the others joined, so he made a point of enjoying the view now.

For a few long moments, he and Abigail sat in silence. He rowed, of course, propelling them strongly away from the shoreline, out to where the water was deep.

“It’s so peaceful on the water,” Abigail said at last. “I’ve never been on a boat in a lake before.”

Alexander blinked. “Really? Not ever?”

She shrugged lightly. “I’ve been to a few outings where people paired off into boats like this and rowed around, but I was generally the odd one out. I would have rowed myself, but Mama always said no.”

“Oh. I see. Well, I hope I can make this first experience a good one. I’ll do my best not to capsize us.”

She laughed at that. “Don’t worry. I can swim.”

“Yes, but can you swim in all those layers of petticoats? I’m fairly sure my boots would fill with water and drag me down. These ones are famously heavy.”

They filled the next few minutes with idle chat, and the conversation flowed much more easily than Alexander had hoped. He couldn’t help but notice the change in Abigail Atwater since he had first met her. She was still reserved, of course, although he’d seen a different side of her last night during charades. She seemed... stronger now, somehow. More confident. She spoke more easily and seemed to be worrying less about the people around her.

“Is Lord Grey still ill?” she asked, after a pause. “People seem to be talking about

him without mentioning him, if you know what I mean. He did seem ill last night.”

Alexander bit his lip. “He was deep in his cups. Too deep. He’ll recover, but if he continues drinking so much, I dread to think of how he’ll end up.”

Or me, he added mentally.

Abigail nodded. “Well, he was always kind to me whenever our paths crossed. I liked him. I do hope he recovers soon.”

Alexander thought about Hamish’s encouragement regarding Abigail, how he’d tried to get books of poetry for Alexander to woo her with. A lump formed in his throat.

“Thank you,” he managed. “I’ll be sure to pass it on to him. He’ll be pleased to know that not everybody thinks of him as a repulsive degenerate.”

“People are too judgemental, I think. They’re too keen to drag down others. I suppose they think it will make them look better, but it never does.”

Alexander thought immediately of Lady Diana Lockwell, who had spent the walk here whispering in his ear about Abigail, how plain she was, how poorly she dressed, and a variety of silly and downright unkind things Abigail was reported to have said and done to others.

He didn’t believe a word of it, but he did believe the malicious glee that spread across Diana’s face.

Some days, he could hardly believe that he’d once been madly in love with her.

“You’re right,” he said at last. “Cruelty never looks good on anyone.”

He rowed a little further and then rested on the oars, enjoying the bob and swell of the water beneath them. It was deep here, deep and opaque. Strands of river-weed dangled just below the surface, and he wondered how deep it would go. A family of ducks came swimming grandly by, a flock of ducklings paddling furiously in the wake of their parents.

“You know,” Abigail said, after the pause had dragged on comfortably, “Some siblings remind me of ducklings.”

He couldn’t help but laugh at that. “Oh? Explain.”

“I mean, they’re comfortable with each other, friendly, seldom seem apart. It’s natural that they’re so close. You and your siblings are like that.”

“Not always,” he said, thinking of William. “We aren’t perfect.”

She conceded the point with a nod of her head. There was a wistful expression on her face now. Perhaps Alexander should have waited, to see if she was going to speak, and let her decide whether to further the conversation, but of course Alexander had never been good at making sensible choices.

“What are you thinking of, Abigail?”

Too informal. Far too personal a question, and the use of her first name...

He bit his tongue. It was too late to take anything back, of course. Abigail glanced sharply at him, but she didn’t recoil in horror and demand he take her back to the shore.

“I’m thinking of my sisters,” she said eventually. “I have two, you know. Some girls would love even one sister. I’m lucky, and yet not at all, because my sisters hate me.”

He sucked in a breath. “Oh. Oh, dear.”

She shrugged. “Perhaps hate is a strong word, at least when it comes to Beatrix. My older sister, you know. Beatrix is the oldest, the one who made a fine match, and Scarlett is the baby, the beauty of the family, quite spoiled. Mama was sure I was going to be a boy. Instead, she had another girl, a middle child in a gaggle of females. Quite a disappointment. I’m not mercenary like Beatrix, or pretty and fascinating like Scarlett. I’m not really anything. I’m just... just a wallflower.”

She bit her lip, glancing away. Alexander felt a pang of sympathy.

“You and your siblings, though, you’re all so different,” she continued, gaze fixed on the water shimmering past them. “So comfortable with each other. You love each other, it’s true. I know that my sisters don’t love me. Sometimes I think even my mother...” she trailed off, giving an awkward cough. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have told you all that. It’s too much. It’s that after what you said about the swing and your father...” she trailed off, looking embarrassed.

Alexander hurried to reassure her.

“No, no, I’m glad. Not... not glad that all that happened to you, of course, but... glad you decided to confide in me. It can be hard, carrying that sort of thing around. It’s like a great heavy backpack that you can’t unload, because Society doesn’t allow us to speak freely to each other. It can be a relief to finally find someone to speak openly to.”

She gave a small, relieved smile. “Yes, I agree.”

“And... for what it’s worth, my relationship with my siblings is not as perfect as you might think. I was closest to my brother, Henry, but now he’s married, I see less of him. My sister, Kat, is the same. It feels like it’s just Will and me these days, and we

get on poorly.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. Can I ask why?”

He hesitated, toying with the idea of making some vague comment, or changing the subject. It was too shameful to admit. Wasn’t it?

“He’s afraid I’ll end up like Hamish,” Alexander said at last, voice quiet. “A drunken fool who is ruining his reputation and his health day by day. And perhaps William’s fears aren’t entirely unfounded.”

“Oh,” Abigail said, in a small voice. “I see. And... what do you plan to do about it?”

He thought for a moment. Abigail waited patiently for his response. They floated along peacefully, letting the current take them where it chose.

The conversation, of course, had veered pointedly into the realms of improper. They should not be discussing anything like this, not even hinting at it.

And yet, Alexander did not feel a single qualm of conscience. It just felt so right to be talking with Abigail about the most serious matters in his life, and he never had a moment’s worry that she might betray him.

What would I do without her?

The thought arrived suddenly in his mind, making him flinch, but it made so much sense he wanted to laugh aloud.

Then he remembered what they were talking about, and swallowed back the giddy feeling coiling inside him.

“I... I think I must abstain,” he admitted. “From alcohol, I mean. I don’t know how long for, but I believe that moderation doesn’t suit me. I will have to be more drastic. It’s not made easier by people like Lady Lockwell pressing wine on me after I’ve said no. If you hadn’t intervened when you did, I’d likely be on my second glass.”

She bit her lip. “You’re brave to take such a drastic step. Men seem to do little else but drink alcohol in our Society – wine with dinner, port and brandy with dessert, whiskey for afters. Will your family support you?”

“Yes, they will,” he said, without a moment’s thought. “But they can’t always be here.”

“You should talk to them,” Abigail advised. “Tell them everything you told me. Even William. His Grace, I mean.” She gave a nervous laugh. “I think you would feel better if you were honest with them.”

He nodded. “I think perhaps you’re right. Tell me, Miss Atwater, do you always give such fine advice?”

She blushed, hiding a smile. “Not generally, no.”

She seemed about to say something else, but then the splash of oars caught their attention. Somebody was rowing towards them, and fairly fast, by the sounds of it. Alexander had his back to the oncoming boat, but he guessed who was in it by the way Abigail’s face fell.

Heart sinking, he twisted around to look.

Lord Graham Donovan was rowing towards them, red with effort and panting hard. None other than the Merry Widow herself – Diana, of course – sat in the boat with him, idly twirling her parasol over her shoulder.

“Goodness,” Alexander remarked, lifting his eyebrows. “You look exhausted, Graham. Rowing on the lake is meant to be relaxing.”

Graham scowled at him, too out of breath to make a sharp retort. Diana spoke up instead, her voice cool and placid.

“We hurried over here to bring you a message. Miss Atwater, I believe your aunt wants you.”

Abigail and Alexander both glanced over to the shore. Lady Caldecott was standing there, arms folded, glaring out towards them. Alexander bit back a sigh.

“What does she want?” Abigail ventured, looking just as miserable as she felt. It hardly mattered, of course. Alexander already knew that obedience would compel her to go straight back to shore, now that the message had been sent, and no doubt Lady Caldecott would not allow them into a boat together again.

“I have no idea,” Diana responded coolly. “Only that she wanted you immediately. You had better go back, I think.”

Abigail’s mouth set into a thin line, and she glanced at Alexander.

“I’ll take you back,” he assured, gripping the oars, and she gave him a tiny smile.

“Perhaps you can take me out afterwards,” Diana said at once.

“No, I don’t think so,” Alexander responded, more snappishly than was polite. “I’ll be far too tired to row again after this.”

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“I intended for you to spend time with Lord Donovan, Abigail!” Aunt Florence hissed.

Once Abigail and Alexander had reached the shore, closely pursued by their respective would-be suitors, Aunt Florence had quickly ascertained that Abigail was not going to row out again on the lake with Lord Donovan. She then claimed that she had a headache and wanted to return to the house, and Abigail found that everybody expected her to go with her aunt.

The unfairness simmered in her veins.

“I’ve spent more than enough time with Lord Donovan,” Abigail shot back. “I don’t like him, Aunt Florence!”

“Nonsense. You haven’t given him a fair try. If you weren’t dazzled with that silly little Willenshire rake, you’d think differently.”

They were stamping along the grassy path which led back to the house, alone. Lord Donovan had immediately offered to escort them back, but to Abigail’s surprise, her aunt had said no, she wanted to speak to her niece in private.

“I know I shouldn’t have said what I did at the picnic...” Abigail began, and was immediately interrupted.

“No, you shouldn’t have! Asking the man to take you out in the boat, in front of everybody! I was mortified, Abigail, and I don’t mind saying so! I would expect such behaviour of your sister, but not from you.”

That stung. Abigail rounded on her aunt. “That isn’t fair.”

“It is fair, and you know it. Your behaviour is bad, Abigail.”

“What have I done wrong? I’m sorry if I can’t fall in love with the man, you picked out for me, but I...”

“But what?” Aunt Florence interrupted, quick as a flash. “You’re in love with Alexander Willenshire, is that it?”

Abigail felt her cheeks stain red, a sure admission of guilt. No amount of holding up her head could make the tell-tale blush go away.

“Of course not,” she said, unconvincingly.

Some of Aunt Florence’s anger drained out of her face. “Oh, my poor sweet girl.”

“There is nothing poor about me, aunt! Except, of course, for the fact I am poor, but that’s not the point.”

“I wish you would listen to me, you stubborn, silly thing. Lord Alexander Willenshire is not the marrying kind of man. You’re breaking your heart for nothing.”

To her horror, a lump rose to Abigail’s throat. She kept remembering the way Alexander had looked at her, those strange, intent glances, the little smiles that made her heart beat. He was so much fun to be with, and they’d spoken about such deep subjects. She was sure he cared for her.

But then, how many silly girls had thought exactly the same? How many women found themselves heartbroken and alone because the man they swore loved them turned out to feel nothing of the sort?

She squeezed her eyes closed. "I'm not in love with him."

It was clear that her aunt didn't believe her. After a moment, Aunt Florence gave a long, heavy sigh, and continued tramping on towards the house. Abigail was obliged to follow.

"You're more stubborn than I expected, Abbie," she said, after a pause. "Perhaps the family blood runs deeper in you than I thought."

That felt like an insult, or at least a criticism. Abigail held her tongue and said nothing.

"But all is not lost," Aunt Florence continued. "I've spent a great deal of thought on this ball, you know. I had you in mind when I asked Mary to invite gentlemen like Lord Donovan. He is a fine man. He is wealthy, intelligent, well-bred, and looking for a wife. He's of equal rank to Beatrix's husband, so you'll be on equal footing with her. That will oblige your mother and Scarlett to show you a little respect, which I believe you deserve. You'll be settled and happy if you marry Lord Donovan."

"It's irrelevant, though. Lord Donovan does not want to marry me."

Aunt Florence gave an indulgent chuckle. "You are a sweet, naive girl. He's been announcing his intentions since he first met you. He and Lord Alexander are well-known enemies, and I think that is the one good thing Alex did for you – his flirting made Lord Donovan act more seriously."

Abigail flinched. "Are you saying that Lord Donovan only pursued me to put Lord Alexander's nose out of joint?"

"No, I am not saying that. Well, there is an element of truth in it, but he does like you. Lord Donovan, I mean. And you say he doesn't want to marry you, but nothing could

be further from the truth. Only this morning, Lord Donovan approached me and asked for my permission to marry you. There! What do you think of that?"

Aunt Florence gave a triumphant nod, glancing over at Abigail to see how she took it.

Abigail stopped dead in the middle of the path. "What? I... I don't understand. Why would he ask you?"

"Well, he's doing things properly, of course. You don't need my permission to marry, since you are of age, but I am your guardian in this setting, and your aunt. There's no point him writing to your mother, since she doesn't know him, and would say yes regardless of who he was. I told him he would need to ask you, naturally, but I did hint to him that he should expect a favourable reply."

Aunt Florence paused, the smile dying off her face. "You don't seem pleased. This is a fabulous offer, Abigail. Your sister Beatrix and your mother worked very hard to secure her proposal from a man like Lord Donovan, and you've gotten it effortlessly. You've done well. Why aren't you pleased?"

She drew in a deep breath. "If he proposes to me, I'll say no."

Aunt Florence jerked back. "Why on earth would you do that, you little fool?"

"I don't love him! I can't!"

In two strides, her aunt was in front of her, grabbing her shoulders.

"Look, you silly girl, if you don't marry Lord Donovan, you'll regret it."

"I'll regret it if I do marry him!"

“Can’t you just think for a moment? What will your life be like if you go home, hm? I took a risk in inviting you here, and you took a risk in accepting. I thought you would act more sensibly than this, Abigail. Be honest with me, what objections do you have against Lord Donovan, beyond the fact he isn’t Alexander?”

Abigail found herself taken aback by the question. “I…”

The truth was, she couldn’t think of any. She wasn’t attracted to Lord Donovan, and didn’t find him particularly interesting, but that wasn’t considered anything to consider in the Marriage Mart.

But when one came down to it, Aunt Florence was right.

Lord Graham Donovan was not Alexander, and that made all the difference.

She waited too long to reply, and Aunt Florence gave a growl of frustration and roughly released her.

“You are more stupid than I expected, Abigail. If I believed Alexander was serious, things would be different, but I know him. He is never serious. Why would he consider marriage now? If you must know, Lady Diana Lockwell broke his heart years ago, and it’s clear she’s set her cap at him this time around. If he’s going to marry anyone, he’ll marry her. You’re just a wallflower, my poor girl.”

That hurt. Abigail flinched, swallowing hard. She wrenched away, turning her back.

“That was unkind,” Aunt Florence said, after a pause. “I am sorry, Abigail.”

She shook her head, saying nothing. “I can’t marry him, Aunt Florence. I won’t.”

There was a long, pregnant silence. Aunt Florence let out a long, tired sigh.

“You’re of age, and I have no real authority over you. I can’t oblige you to do anything. Just know that Lord Donovan has my blessing as a suitor. If he makes a proposal and you refuse, that will end our trip.”

Abigail flinched again, turning to stare at her aunt. Part of her believed that Aunt Florence must be joking.

She wasn’t.

“I mean it, Abigail,” Aunt Florence said, her expression impassive. “I vouched for you. Please don’t be hurt when I say this, but somebody like you turning down a man like Lord Donovan will cause a stir when it gets out. I can assure you that it will get out. It will do no good for your reputation, and will make no sense to many people, least of all your family. I will be obliged to return you home as soon as possible.”

Abigail found her voice. “That isn’t fair.”

Aunt Florence shrugged. “That is Society, Abigail. The rules are strict and unforgiving. You are not a dazzling personality, or a beauty, or remarkably rich, and as such you will not be given any mercy if you break the rules. Believe me, I have been where you are. I was not rich or remarkably beautiful, and my character, although strong, was not what people considered ladylike. I married well, and it saved me in more ways than one. If I had let that opportunity slip away, I dread to imagine what my life would have been like. Now, I cannot and I will not insist on you doing anything, but those are the plain facts. I don’t want to bring you home unmarried – it feels like burying you alive.”

On that upsetting metaphor, Aunt Florence swept past her niece, head held high, and strode towards the house.

She did not look back.

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Alex looked for Abigail Atwater, but there was no sign of her. Not in the library, or in the drawing room, or even wandering in the morning room. He even collared a passing servant and asked if Miss Atwater was in her room, and he was informed that she was not.

He wasn't about to embarrass himself by asking just anyone where she was, but there was somebody who was likely to know.

"Mama?" Alexander asked, tapping on the door and poking his head into the morning-room.

"Ah, Alex," Mary said, smiling and rising to her feet. "See how the rain comes down! I'm glad we had our picnic and our boat-rides first. It was a shame that poor Florence and Miss Atwater had to go home early."

Alexander glanced at the rain drizzling down outside, as if seeing it for the first time.

"Yes, quite. Mother, do you know where Abigail is? Eh, Miss Atwater, I mean?"

Mary tilted her head to one side. "Why?"

He flushed. "I... I wanted to talk to her."

"Are you going to tell her how you feel?"

There was a brief silence.

“What?” Alexander managed at last, his voice a little scratchy. “What did you say, Mama?”

Mary gave a tinkling laugh. “Oh, bless you, Alexander. I may not be the finest mother in the world, but I know my children a little , at least. It’s clear as day that you’re in love with Abigail Atwater.”

Alexander felt as though the breath was knocked out of his body. He sank down onto a sofa, and Mary sat down beside him.

“I... I don’t know how I feel about her,” he admitted. “I never expected to feel... that is, with Diana, everything was different. It was fast and intense, and I thought that all love must be like that.”

“Some forms of love are,” his mother agreed. “But what you felt for Lady Lockwell wore off quickly, did it not? A slower-growing, more natural kind of love can be more enduring, I think. Like a plant that grows under any circumstances, which isn’t put off by any hardships. Even a loss of reciprocal love.”

There was a sort of wistfulness in that last sentence, and Alexander glanced sharply at his mother. She didn’t meet his eye.

They knew, of course, that the late Duke hadn’t loved his wife. Although perhaps he did love her, in a way, but not in the way a man should love his wife and the mother of his children.

The old Duke hadn’t loved anyone in the right way, it seemed. Perhaps Mary was more aware of it than they had realised.

There was a silence after that.

“If you want to find Miss Atwater,” his mother said, after a pause, “I believe she went out in the garden.”

“In the rain ?”

Mary gave a small smile. “In the rain, yes.”

Unless the woman was standing on the lawn in the pouring rain, Alexander guessed that she was in the shrubbery.

The thick trees overhead would block out the worst of the rain, and one could walk there quite comfortably, if one didn’t object to the soggy pathways. He chose the nearest path through the shrubbery, mostly because it ended in a small stone folly at the end, which would provide proper shelter from the rain.

He walked quickly, head down, and concentrated on thinking of what he would say to Abigail when he found her.

Abigail, I love you. Will you marry me? Just so you know, I’m technically penniless now, but once I get married, I’ll be very wealthy. It’s all to do with my father’s will. Long story.

Perhaps that was a little too blunt.

He reached the end of the shrubbery. The path carried on, winding across a small field to the folly, which was designed to look like a rustic cottage, with stone benches and such inside to allow for a comfortable reading location. He couldn’t glimpse any movement inside, but that didn’t mean that Abigail wasn’t there. He took a moment, steeling himself for the long, wet dash across the field.

“Alexander?”

For one mad moment, he imagined that it was Abigail's voice he heard, muffled by the rush of rain and the non-stop patter of water on leaves. Then he swung around and it wasn't Abigail at all, but Diana, dressed in a long, glittering black cloak and boots entirely unsuited to the wet weather.

She smiled coyly. "I followed you, I'm afraid. What are you doing out in this weather?"

"I... Diana, what are you doing here?"

"I believe I just asked that question."

Eyes fixed on his face, she slid a little closer. Alexander moved to back away but found himself with a thick old oak at his back.

"Diana... I mean, Lady Lockwell, I don't believe we should be out here together. Don't you have a maid?"

"I am entirely alone, but I know that I am safe with you, Alexander. I have always known that. It's one of the things I loved most about you."

In a flash, she was standing close to him, far too close, hand fluttering out to rest on his chest.

Up until the last minute, Alexander didn't really believe that she would touch him. Perhaps she took his stillness and shock as encouragement.

"Diana, really..."

He had no time to say more, because she threw herself at him, would have knocked him over altogether if he hadn't been leaning against the tree. Her arms wound tightly

around his neck, threatening to pull them both over, and Alexander's arms shot out at his sides, automatically trying to steady them both. Her face was very near to his, and all he could think of was that her breath smelled of coffee.

"Kiss me, Alex," she breathed, eyelashes fluttering madly.

An instant before Alexander yanked her arms away and fled, she turned, eyes widening theatrically.

"Oh, oh dear! We are not alone, Alex!"

She disentangled herself immediately, smoothing out her cloak. He turned to see what – who – she was looking at, and his blood went cold.

Abigail Atwater was standing at the entrance to the folly, a book in her hand.

The silence seemed to drag on. Then Abigail visibly steeled herself and began to walk the distance between the folly to the shrubbery.

After all, that was the only way back to the house, unless one wanted to circle around for miles.

She didn't run or even hurry, regardless of the mud squelching around her shoes and the rain wetting her hair and dampening her clothes. She tucked her book close to herself, trying to shelter it. As she got closer, he saw it was the same book she'd used to sketch the crocus.

Before he could say a word, to apologise or explain, Diana spoke up.

"We did not know anyone was here," she said breathily, eyes fluttering. "Please, don't say a word, will you?"

Alexander rounded on her, at a loss for words. In just two sentences, she'd implied that this was a clandestine meeting, that it had happened before, that it was planned , and that he was part of it. What was worse, she'd said it with such confidence.

Abigail ducked her head. "I won't," she said quietly, and dashed past them.

"Wait! Abigail, no! It isn't what you think!" Alexander shouted desperately, but she picked up her skirts and put her head down, and ran.

Diana made a clucking sound with her tongue. "Well, well, it was to be expected, I think. She's not for you, dear."

He rounded on her. "How dare you? How dare you? What's wrong with you, Diana?"

Diana frowned, pouting a little. "I only wanted to make you see, Alexander. It's you and me. It's always been you and me."

"No! No, it hasn't! I don't love you like before, and I'm fairly sure you never loved me."

She seemed genuinely taken aback at this. "Alexander, don't you understand? I want to marry you. That's what you've always wanted."

"You have no idea what I want, Diana. What I want right now is for you to leave. Today."

This seemed to baffle her even more. She shook her head.

"This is not how it's meant to be. Besides, I'm invited."

"Do you think your invitation will still stand when I tell my brother, the duke , what

you've done?"

At the mention of William, she paled a little. "Alex, please..."

He turned his back on her. "Leave me alone, Diana. I don't want to see you again. Ever."

He hurried off down the path, and she didn't follow him.

Abigail nudged open the door to her aunt's room without knocking.

Aunt Florence sat her writing desk, pen poised. She lifted an eyebrow. "Oh, you're speaking to me now, are you?"

She drew in a deep breath. Her insides felt as though they were twisted into knots. She kept seeing the image of Alexander and Diana together, her arms around his neck, his hands poised to go around her waist, their faces tilted together.

It made her feel ill.

"I've changed my mind," Abigail said, and her voice sounded raspy and scratchy. Unsurprising, as she'd spent a good deal of time crying in her room before coming here. Lucy had tried to ask her what was wrong, but Abigail had told her that it was nothing, and not to ask again. It was clear her maid didn't believe her, but she said nothing and only quietly withdrew, leaving Abigail alone.

All she'd wanted was to be alone, but the instant Lucy left, Abigail realised that she did not want to be by herself, not one bit.

“You’ve changed your mind?” Aunt Florence repeated, setting down her pen. “About what?”

Another deep breath. “About Lord Donovan. I’ll marry him, if he makes me an offer. Could you let him know that, please?”

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Alexander practically pounced on the maid – her name was Lucy, he'd learnt – when she appeared at the entrance of the hallway.

“Well?” he asked eagerly.

The maid frowned, and wordlessly handed over the same envelope he'd given her earlier, with the name scrawled on the front. Abigail Atwater. He turned it over, inspecting the seal. Unbroken.

“She didn't read it?” he said, despairingly. “Did you tell her that it explained everything?”

Lucy shook her head. “No, your lordship. I told her what you said, but she still wouldn't open it. She said I'm not to carry any more messages from you, too. I'm sorry. I... I don't think she wants to see you. She said if I carried more messages, she'd tell Lady Caldecott, and I can't risk that.”

He deflated. “No, no, of course not. She... she's angry with me, but it's not what she thinks. I don't know how to convince her otherwise.”

Lucy shifted from foot to foot, looking uncomfortable.

“Can I go, your lordship? I said you were waiting here for her reply, and she said to give you back the letter and come straight back. I'd better go.”

“Of course, of course. Thank you for your help.”

The maid trotted off, shooting curious backward glances at him as she went.

Alexander felt as though all the energy had been drained out of him. He crumpled the letter in his hand. He was tempted to let it fall, but then somebody might find it and read it, and that would be too humiliating. He dragged his feet all the way to his room, kicked open the door, and threw himself, fully clothed, onto his bed.

It had been two full days since the picnic at the lake, during which the rain had fell pretty steadily. The party was coming to a close.

Diana had made an excuse and left, much to his relief. Lord Donovan, however, was still here. Abigail had claimed a headache the day after the picnic and stayed in her room. She had been out today but seemed to be avoiding him. She was always with her aunt.

She doesn't want to see you.

You've ruined everything.

He lay on his bed, staring up at the canopy above his head until it blurred. When the door creaked open, he assumed it was a servant coming in to tidy up.

"You look like a mess."

Definitely not a servant. Alexander flinched, hauling himself upright.

William stood there, lips pursed, looking around the room.

"This is a mess," he added, gesturing at the room. "Do you ever tidy up in here?"

"Sometimes," Alexander lied defensively. "What are you doing in here, Will?"

He shrugged, leaning against the door. "I thought we could talk. Mother seemed to think you were down about something but wouldn't say what. And then Miss Atwater's maid told my valet that you kept sending letters to Miss Atwater, that she returned unopened. Care to tell me what's going on? And does it have anything to do with why Lady Lockwell left in such a hurry?"

A lump rose to Alexander's throat. He swallowed hard, closing his eyes.

"Diana cornered me in the gardens, the day of the picnic. She... she tried to kiss me. Miss Atwater saw us. I think I'm love with Miss Atwater, and I was on my way to tell her so. Well, she saw Diana and me, and drew the wrong conclusion. She won't speak to me. The letters were to try and explain, but she won't read them."

William stood there for a moment, then moved over to sit beside him on the bed.

"That's unfortunate," he said at last. "I think Lord Donovan intends to propose to Miss Atwater. Did you know that?"

"I guessed. And... and perhaps it's for the best."

Clearly, William had not been expecting that. His eyebrows flew up into his hairline.

"Well, I didn't think I'd ever hear you say that."

"Oh, it makes perfect sense. Graham will make a better husband than me, I suppose. He'd never have been caught in a compromising position."

He sniffled miserably and waited for William to respond.

It took a worryingly long time.

At long last, William spoke.

“I... I think I might be able to fill in some of the pieces here.”

“Pieces? What do you mean?”

He drew in a breath. “Don’t you think it odd that Lady Lockwell cornered you in that manner just in time for Miss Atwater to see?”

Alexander blinked. “I assumed I was just lucky.”

William let out a deep breath. “That day you and I spoke in the billiard room, I spotted Lord Donovan lingering outside. I suspected him of eavesdropping.”

“Hmph. He was.”

“Well, I’ve kept an eye on him. It’s ungentlemanly behaviour, after all. The morning of the picnic, he snuck into one of the closed-up sitting rooms with Lady Lockwell.”

Alexander stiffened. “The two of them aren’t...”

“No, it’s not what you think. I overheard bits of the conversation. I remember a few specific words: ‘you follow him’, directed to Lady Lockwell, ‘she’ll see you both’, and ‘it’ll work out nicely for us both’. Now, perhaps I’m making a leap here, but I think Lady Lockwell and Lord Donovan have been working together. He wants to marry Miss Atwater, mostly to spite you, and she wants to marry you, because she’s bored of being a widow and is not nearly as rich as she lets on. To get what they wanted, they both needed to drive Miss Atwater and you apart. I think your meeting with Lady Lockwell on that day was planned, and she intended for you to be seen.”

Alexander blinked, trying to make sense of it all.

“But that’s vile. It’s wicked.”

“It’s Society,” William corrected, shrugging. “Lady Lockwell left, I assume, because she knew she had no hope of you.”

“I told her to leave, or else I’d tell you about what she’d done.”

“That makes sense. However, I must mention that Lord Donovan is still here. Miss Atwater left her room only a few minutes ago and has accompanied him into the garden.”

A cold sensation like fear went crawling down Alex’s spine. He swallowed hard.

“He’s going to propose to her,” he said flatly.

“Yes,” William agreed. “It’s considered likely. Lady Caldecott is expecting it. She mentioned having to convince Miss Atwater that you were not the marrying sort .”

Alexander was on his feet before he knew what was going on.

“I can’t let it happen,” he said, swallowing hard.

William crossed one leg over the other, smiling wryly up at him.

“Then you had better hurry.”

The ground was still soft and wet from the rain. Alexander ran, boots slipping on the mud.

It was too wet for many people to be out walking, and the gardeners weren’t out for the same reason, so he spotted Graham and Abigail at a distance.

They had stumbled upon a little paved clearing with a stone bench and stone parapet above it to keep off the rain. Abigail was sitting on the bench, back very straight, hands folded in front of her. She did not smile.

Graham was standing in front of her, smiling complacently down. Alexander was still a little way away when the man went smoothly down to one knee.

Abandoning pride, Alexander shouted.

“Wait! Wait ! Don’t marry him, Abigail!”

In a second, both Abigail and Graham were on their feet, one looking almost hopeful, the other enraged.

“What is the meaning of this?” Graham snarled. “How dare you say such a thing?”

“Alexander?” Abigail ventured, eyes fixed on him. “What’s going on?”

Unfortunately, Alexander was out of breath, and was obliged to take a moment to regain it.

“It was all a plot,” he gasped, which in hindsight did not make much sense, but it was better than nothing.

“He’s drunk,” Graham stated, face reddening.

“I am not,” Alexander insisted, regaining his breath at long last. “Abigail, Diana embraced me , I swear it. It was a plan hatched between Lord Donovan and her, for her to embrace me and for you to see it. That way, you’d be driven into Lord Donovan’s arms and I’d be free for Diana to take.”

“That is a vile lie, and I will have satisfaction for it,” Graham spat. “Let’s see how smug you are with a bullet in your brain.”

“Lord Donovan!” Abigail snapped. “That’s a terrible thing to say! Alexander, what proof do you have?”

“My brother overheard them. I imagine that Diana might be willing to say a word or two about Lord Donovan’s part in this, seeing as she ended leaving in a bit of a hurry, while he stayed.”

“I only did it for Miss Atwater’s good,” Graham said, taking her arm. “We won’t hear another word of this.”

She yanked her arm away. “So it’s true, then?”

He bit his lip. “He’s a rake. And, what is more, he doesn’t have any money!”

Alexander sucked in a breath. He noticed that Graham deliberately left off the part about the money he would inherit if he married.

Abigail lifted her chin. “So what? Neither do I.”

Graham gaped for a moment, glancing between Alexander and her. When he was met only by stony expressions, he bit off a curse, turned on his heel, and stormed away.

Silence fell, and Abigail and Alexander were left alone.

“I’m sorry about all that,” he said in a rush. “I… I panicked. You wouldn’t read my letters, I didn’t know what to do. Truly, there’s nothing between Lady Lockwell and me. If anything, I’ve only realised that I haven’t loved her for a long, long time.”

She cleared her throat. “Well, you don’t owe me anything. You can marry her if you want.”

He blinked, finding himself, for once, at a loss for words. Where were all those clever speeches he planned?

“Graham was telling the truth,” he said at last. “I am penniless. My father’s will is a strange one, and I have no money. Would you marry me with no money?”

She glanced sharply up at him. “You... you’re asking me to marry you?”

He smiled faintly. “Of course I am. I love you, Abigail Atwater.”

There was a pause, the two of them staring at each other, broken only by the gentle pat of falling rain on the roof of the little clearing. Alexander wondered when it had started raining again.

“My aunt said that you weren’t the marrying type,” she said at last. “That you were a rake, and that she liked you, but you weren’t for me.”

“I... I still have nightmares about my father,” Alexander said in a rush. “I drink too much because it makes me feel free, makes me stop worrying. I flirt because I enjoy the attention. I feel as though I’m in control. I loved Diana once. I would have married her, and the hurt of being betrayed stayed with me for quite a while. Perhaps I chose to wrap my heart up in wool to keep it safe, but a person can’t live like that. I do love you, Abigail. I’m not a perfect man, but I am improving every day. Well, most days, at least. I love you. I want to marry you, and if you agree, I swear I will spend every striving to be a man worthy of you.”

“Then my answer is yes,” she said, voice trembling. “I love you too, Alex.”

He barely had time to grin before she'd thrown her arms around his neck and was kissing him. They overbalanced, nearly toppling over, and exploded into hysterical giggles.

"Now that you've said yes to marrying me without money," Alexander said, forehead pressed against hers, "I think I should tell you something else about the terms of my father's will."

"What is going on here?"

They both flinched at a familiar, sharp voice, and turned to see Lady Caldecott striding towards them, black as thunder, oblivious to the rain.

"Oh dear," Alexander muttered. "Do you think I should run, or would she shoot me down like a stag?"

Abigail gave a splutter of laughter. "If you wish to marry me, you can start by asking my aunt for her blessing. She might actually believe you then."

He grinned down at Abigail, wrapping an arm tight around her shoulders and pulling her close.

"Lady Caldecott," he called, beckoning her forward into the shelter of the little clearing. "I have something I want to ask you."

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One Month Later

“We all got one,” Katherine said, sighing.

Henry nodded. “It was... it was a strange thing to read.”

Alexander glanced at William, who raised his eyebrows.

“Don’t look at me. I’m nowhere near getting married, so I wouldn’t know.

Alexander looked back down at the crisp white envelope the family solicitor had delivered only half an hour ago.

It was his wedding day, and apparently their father had arranged for all of his children to receive a letter on their wedding day.

“What happens if we don’t marry within the deadline?” he asked.

Katherine shrugged. “I imagine they’re destroyed. Does it matter?”

“Not really, I suppose. How long until I have to be at the church?”

“You have an hour,” Henry advised. “Your friend Hamish is there already, doing some last-minute decorations. Or so he said, I thought there were enough flowers on the aisle, but then my wedding was a little more sober.”

Alexander bit back a smile.

Mary, of course, had wanted the wedding to be a fantastic affair, and was disappointed that she would only have a month to plan it. Half of London was invited, as far as Alexander could tell, and there was to be a tremendous wedding breakfast back at the house afterwards. Abigail was nervous about the crowds, and he often wished that he'd bargained his mother down to a smaller guest list.

It was too late now, of course.

Hamish had not touched a drop of alcohol since the disastrous party. Neither, for that matter, had Alexander.

He felt... better. Fresher and clearer, to be sure. No more headaches and nausea in the morning, no more blurry evenings that he could never quite remember.

He watched his siblings drink alcohol and suffer no ill effects, and had wondered more than once why he was the one who could not get the hang of moderation.

The longer he went without a drink, the less it seemed to matter.

"Should I read it?" he asked, after a pause.

Henry and Katherine exchanged glances.

"We did," Henry admitted. "I wanted to know what he had to say. I have no idea what you'll find in that letter, though. Be warned."

Alexander nodded. "Thank you."

His three siblings filed out of the room, closing the door behind them.

Alexander was left alone in his bedroom, staring down at the envelope.

In about an hour, he would be married, and his inheritance would come through. He had no idea what to do with it, beyond buying a neat townhouse for him and Abigail to live in.

The business of his mother worried him. She had the dower house and her own allowance, of course, but William lacked patience with her. Katherine resented her mother for never supporting her during those hellish years when their father lived, and Henry did not seem to think much about his mother at all.

Alexander already knew, deep down, what would need to be done. He had said as much to Abigail.

“I think that my mother may need to live with us,” he had said, slowly and hesitantly one evening, not so long ago. “I... I don’t think she can live alone. She is so fragile.”

Abigail had put down her book and considered, nodding slowly.

“Then she’ll live with us.”

That was all. Alexander blinked, frowning. “Just like that? Most women would rather die than have their mother-in-law live with them.”

Abigail smiled, reaching out to take his hand. “I can see how vulnerable she is, too. Your father, her husband, treated her poorly and took her for granted. She suffered. We won’t let her suffer more.”

Alexander had broken into a wide, relieved smile, very nearly bursting into tears.

“Thank you, Abbie. Thank you.”

Back in the present, he picked up the envelope and gingerly slipped it open. He'd half-expected something terrible inside, like a dead spider or poison powder.

It was just a letter, of course, written in his father's familiar handwriting. Holding his breath, he unfolded the paper and began to read.

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“You are mistaken, Mr. Darcy, if you suppose that the mode of your declaration affected me in any other way, than as it spared me the concern which I might have felt in refusing you, had you behaved in a more gentleman-like manner...You could not have made me the offer of your hand in any possible way that would have tempted me to accept it.”

Isolde let out a long, slow breath, cheeks puffing out. She hastily read to the end of the chapter, sparing a few moments to reread a passage or two to ascertain that what she'd read was correct, then closed the book.

Well. Well.

There was a reason that this newest novel, intriguingly entitled *First Impressions*, or as some were now calling it, *Pride and Prejudice*, was causing such a stir. No wonder the esteemed author kept her identity a careful secret.

Isolde, for her part, was thrilled. Why should the brilliant, charming, and fascinating Elizabeth Bennet accept the – admittedly wealthy – hand of Mr. Darcy, who said that she wasn't beautiful enough to tempt him? Isolde had chafed more over that insult than the fictional Miss Bennet had herself, she thought.

The book was only halfway through, too! Isolde knew already, though, that it would end with Elizabeth Bennet marrying someone. Mr. Darcy intrigued her more than the rest, despite his boorishness. Stories always ended with the heroine either happily married or tragically dead. At least Mr. Darcy was simply an awkward man, instead of a rake all ripe for reforming. She hated those books. Isolde had torn *Pamela* in two towards the end, full of rage for the awful man the poor titular Pamela had married.

What a silly girl.

She leaned back with a sigh, tucking her feet up under her. The afternoon was wearing on, and still there was no sign of the guest they had hoped for. Isolde's spot in the window seat afforded a decent view down the drive. The Belford townhouse was in the centre of London, although one would never have thought it to look at the lush gardens and long, winding drive, well-raked by diligent gardeners every day. They were working now, picking their way through the undergrowth, inspecting the waxy, perfect blooms coming up through the earth.

I hate gardening, Isolde thought miserably.

The Season was just starting, and until it got into full swing, there wouldn't be much to do in town. For her part, Isolde preferred to stay at home and read. There were so many books to read, and more novels being produced every day. *Pride and Prejudice* was one of her favourites so far, and Elizabeth Bennet easily a favourite heroine. Isolde's book club were all going to love her. She would certainly suggest that the circulating library stock more of that author's books.

The rumble of carriage wheels on gravel jerked her out of her reverie, and Isolde blinked, leaning forward. A hired hackney cab, its dull black sides splattered with mud, was making its way up the drive. A familiar face peered out through the window, and Isolde gave a strangled shriek.

Leaping to her feet – *Pride and Prejudice* slid off her knee and landed with a thump on the carpet, but she hardly noticed – Isolde went racing out of the library, skidding along the carpeted hallway outside.

"He's home! He's home!" she shouted to no one in particular, then leapt down the stairs, fully intending to rush out and greet her brother.

Not your brother, needed a voice at the back of her mind, making her smile falter.

But then she was outside, and James was right there, handing up a handful of coins to the cab driver, flashing that white-toothed grin that was even more remarkable now that his skin was so well-tanned.

He turned to smile at her, and Isolde threw herself at him.

“Steady on, steady on, little sister!” James laughed, catching his balance. He wrapped his arms around Isolde, lifting her full off the ground and swinging her around. “It’s good to see you again, I can tell you that.”

He put her down, and Isolde wiped the back of her hand across her eyes.

“We were starting to think you weren’t coming. You were meant to be home three days ago.”

He winced. “Indeed, I encountered a series of misfortunes during my travels – carriages with splintered wheels, inclement weather, and the like. Yet, I have arrived at last, and I eagerly anticipate being warmly attended to. I bear gifts, of course – a gentleman cannot embark on a Grand Tour without returning with tokens of appreciation, can he?”

“I place no importance on gifts, especially now that you have returned. Do come in, do come in. Mama and Papa are out, so I shall have you to myself for a few hours.”

Towing him by the hand, Isolde gestured for the footmen to collect James’ things, and pulled him into the cool darkness of the hallway.

James, never one for measured silences, chatted incessantly as he stripped out of his heavy travelling coat, hat, and gloves. The butler smiled benevolently as he waited to

receive the items.

“If I may say so,” old Sinclair intoned when a pause came, “we below stairs are all very glad to see you returned safely, Lord James.”

James beamed. “And I am most pleased to return, Sinclair. Please convey my fondest regards to all.”

The butler bowed and melted away. He barely spared a glance for Isolde. The older servants, the butler and housekeeper, both seemed to treat her a little strangely. Distantly, perhaps, compared to the way they treated James.

It made sense now, of course, and the knowledge burned in Isolde’s chest like a trapped fire. The family portrait loomed large in the Great Hall, above the spot where James stood, fixing his thick mouse-brown hair in the mirror.

In the portrait, the resemblances were clear. James had his mother’s eyes – flinty grey, large and clear and fringed by black eyelashes, with firm brows set over them. He had his father’s mousy hair – which was likely to thin in later years, but for now was thick and strong – and his father’s sharp jaw and aquiline nose.

And then there was Isolde.

The painting had been done six years ago, when Isolde had just turned seventeen. She had a round face, a roses-and-cream complexion which, while fashionable, did not match the olive skin of her father and brother. Her hair was blonde, refused to curl, and she had blue eyes, downturned at the corners.

Pretty, yes, but the family resemblance was never marked.

“I found a painting of her, you know,” Isolde said, gaze drifting past her brother. “In

the attic. I didn't take it down, but I know it's there."

James followed her gaze and frowned. "You mean, a painting of Dorothy?"

"Hush! Somebody might hear."

He sighed. "People know that Mama had a sister, Izzy."

"Yes, but they don't know..." she swallowed the words. "They don't know the rest of it."

"And they never will," he said, reassuringly. She wished she could believe him.

"Come, let's go to the library. I want to talk to you about something."

"This place hasn't changed a bit," James remarked, running his finger along the spines of a row of books. "You have, though. You're prettier than ever."

Isolde snorted. "Oh, please. I'm three and twenty. This will be my fourth Season, and people are only ever interested in the young debutantes. Believe me, that suits me fine."

James narrowed his eyes. "You're a Belford, remember. You're Lady Isolde Belford, daughter of the Duke and Duchess of Belbrooke. Remember that."

"I can hardly forget it," she muttered, picking at her dress.

"I think you are forgetting it, though." Crossing the room, James sank down beside her, reaching out to take her hand. "Now, what did you want to tell me?"

Isolde bit her lip hard. She felt silly baby tears pricking at her eyes and blinked

furiously. Elizabeth Bennet would never cry. Pamela would, though, and look at what happened to her.

“I had an argument with Mama, about a month ago,” she admitted at last. “A bad one. It’s about the Season. She says that she and Papa have had quite enough of my dilly-dallying, and it’s high time I was settled. She said that this will be my last Season, and if I know what’s good for me, I’ll choose a nice man to marry. There will be consequences if not.”

“Consequences? What does that mean?”

“I don’t know. She may be harbouring any number of thoughts, I expect.”

“You read entirely too many novels. They shall merely send you to the countryside, where you may dwell in tranquil repose among your books.”

“I like London. I like my friends, and my books, and my circulating library – which is a revolutionary idea, by the way – and I don’t want to go. All the men in town are purely awful.”

“They can’t all be awful,” James pointed out. “I’m here now.”

“Yes, but that’s different. They’re all rakes or dead bores. There’s nothing in between.” She paused, tilting her head. “Except for the old men who want a third or fourth wife, and don’t realise how ridiculous they look pursuing the young women. Ugh, that’s who I’m going to marry, isn’t it? Some lecherous old man with about ten children who will all hate me on sight. Oh, James, what am I going to do?”

She dropped her head into her hands, and James slung an arm around her shoulder, pulling her close.

“There, there, you poor dear. I shall speak with Mama and Papa and ascertain what course of action may be taken.” In the meantime, why not take their advice seriously? We both know Mama can be brusque, but she has your best interests at heart. Ladies do get married, you know. Why not do this Season properly? You always seem a little... well, a little distracted. Not really looking for somebody to marry. What about if we change that? I’ll be there, and we can choose someone together.”

Isolde shook her head drearily. “I don’t want to get married.”

A flash of annoyance clouded James’ handsome face. “Don’t be silly. Of course you do. I’m ready to get married. Perhaps we can look for spouses together.”

She sighed. “It’s different for you. You’ll be the Duke of Belbrooke one day. You just finished the most marvellous tour. Do you have any idea how envious I was, perusing the accounts of your adventures in the letters you dispatched home? It felt like a form of torment. I have no desire to be wed, and at the conclusion of it all, I find myself... I am...” she trailed off, face colouring.

James didn’t understand. With the best will in the world, he never quite seemed to understand the way Isolde felt. It didn’t seem to matter how much she explained it.

“At the conclusion of it, what?” he pressed, tilting his head. “What are you so afraid of?”

“I’m afraid they’ll find out,” she hissed, low and quick, glancing furtively at the library door as she did so. It remained modestly closed. Of course, the servants could all be gathered around the keyhole, listening in.

James flinched. “Oh. Well, they won’t. How could they?”

Isolde didn’t answer. For a moment, she was no longer three and twenty years old, in

the library with her older brother. She was eighteen, on the cusp of her first Season, frisking downstairs to the parlour with the intention of showing her parents just how well a particular dress looked on her.

The mint-coloured silk had been the perfect choice, of course. Isolde hummed to herself, admiring the way her skirts swished around her legs. It was a grown-up dress for a proper adult. Perfect.

It was late, and the lights were mostly out downstairs, aside from a few strategically placed candles. The parlour door was cracked out, warm firelight streaming out into the hallway. She could hear her parents' voices in there, talking to each other. They usually spent a few hours together each evening before retiring. Isolde was comfortably aware that her parents loved each other, which was rare enough in Society.

Pausing in front of a long mirror in the hall, Isolde inspected herself one last time. The shadows made her look older, her figure a little fuller than her spindly eighteen-year-old frame. She had no gloves on, but one could imagine. Isolde smiled coyly at her reflection.

"Hello, my Lord," she whispered. "Why yes, I would love to dance."

And then her father's voice raised a little higher, making her jump.

"You must be mad, Beatrice. You cannot be suggesting what I think you are suggesting."

Isolde crept closer to the door, holding her breath. She could hear the sound of pacing, and imagined it was her father, walking up and down, up and down in front of

the dying fireplace.

“I’m not saying we tell him right away,” Beatrice’s voice replied. “But Isolde is a pretty girl, and I imagine she will want to marry for love. And why should she not? The gentleman of her choice, whoever he may be, has a right to know the truth.”

“And so we must risk everything? No man would take her once he knew the truth.”

Isolde clapped a hand over her mouth. What secret was this? What was happening?

“Don’t speak of Isolde that way, Richard. It’s unbecoming, and untrue.”

“I am not being cruel,” Richard said, voice lowered. “I care for Isolde, of course I do. But Society simply does not tolerate these things. Secrecy is her only chance at an ordinary life.”

“But a man who truly loves her...”

“That love will wither away as soon as he knows the truth. No gentleman would wed himself to a bastard, no matter how pretty she is, or how wealthy her uncle and aunt might be. Certainly not a bastard who’s spent her life living as the trueborn daughter of a Duke and Duchess.”

This time, Isolde exclaimed aloud, a strangled gasp that was loud in the following silence. There were hurried footsteps, and the door whisked open.

Lord Richard Belford and his wife, Beatrice, stood there. The Duke and Duchess of Belbrooke respectively. They looked guilty, horrified, and angry. For a few moments, nobody spoke.

Isolde felt sure it had to be a joke. At any point, they would break into smiles and

laughter, shaking their heads at the look on her face.

They didn't.

Beatrice spoke first, in the end.

"Oh, my darling girl," she whispered. "You were never meant to know."

The secret which Isolde was never meant to know was nothing new. In fact, it had probably played out over the country countless times over the centuries.

Beatrice had married well, while her younger sister had eloped with some man or another. He had not married her. Only a year after Beatrice gave birth to their son, James, the disgraced Dorothy Fairwood had arrived on their doorway. Sick, thin, alone, unwed, and pregnant.

She hadn't lived through the pregnancy. Isolde had wondered, more than once, whether her life would have been different if Dorothy had lived. But she hadn't, and the duke and duchess had made the decision to take Isolde in as their own.

It was easily done – a few months away, a hint of a pregnancy, then a return with one's new baby.

But the fact remained that Isolde was not a Belford, and she was not legitimate. No respectable gentleman would marry such a woman.

"I can't get married, James," she repeated quietly. "It would be wrong."

The rumble of carriage wheels sounded outside. The Duke and Duchess must be

back. James was glancing over his shoulder, already distracted.

“You must, Isolde. It’s the only way, I’m afraid. You must.”

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:12 am

A tray slipped from a footman's gloved hands. It was empty, thankfully, just a silver platter designed for carrying drinks, but it made an awful clatter, nonetheless.

Everybody at the table jumped, with one exception.

Lord Auric Camden, Earl of Wrenwood, turned cold eyes on the footman in question. The footman – a young man, probably a new hire – visibly trembled.

“Careful, lad,” the earl grated.

The footman gulped, nodding rapidly. He snatched up the tray and made a speedy exit.

Clayton let himself breathe again.

It had been many years since his father had tried to hit him, but that wouldn't prevent him from turning his rage onto others.

Eliza spoke up, as she often did. “It was an accident, Auric.”

Her marriage to Auric had never made sense to Clayton. Eliza was a woman of middle years, staid and sensible, and seemed to get as close to managing Auric as anyone ever would. They weren't in love, naturally. They weren't happy but they managed well enough. She was no thin, delicate damsel like Clayton's mother had been.

Best not to think on that.

Clayton snatched up his wine glass, taking a long pull. It was weak stuff, nothing like the good port he would get at his club. White's was the best, and Clayton had long since convinced himself of the simple fact that he deserved the best.

"Can I have some wine, Clay?" whispered a small voice at Clayton's elbow.

The children were sitting at the table with them tonight, a rare treat that seemed to have them both in fits of terror at doing something wrong.

Amelia sat opposite, looking as panicky as an almost-thirteen-year-old girl might in the presence of overbearing adults. Little Edward, however, was only nine, and was generally well shielded enough from his father's temper to only have a moderate terror of the man.

It was Edward who requested wine. Clayton lifted a sandy eyebrow, looking down at his little half-brother. The wine swirled around the glass.

"You won't like it."

"I might," Edward insisted. "I can't know unless I try, can I?"

Clayton inclined his head, acknowledging this impeccable logic.

"Your Mamma might not like it."

"She might not notice. You're in the way, you see. You are so large."

"Perhaps I am not large, but you are merely small."

Edward reflected on this new information. "Perhaps," he conceded. "Will you let me have some wine, now?"

Clayton considered. “Perhaps a small sip, then.”

Edward’s face brightened. Before anything could be done, however, Eliza slowly and leisurely dug her elbow into Clayton’s ribs.

“I think not,” she said sweetly, never once glancing his way.

Clayton grimaced. “I beg your pardon, Edward. It seems not.”

The boy looked crestfallen. “I see. Well, thank you anyway, Clay.”

“You aren’t old enough for wine,” Amelia piped up. Edward angrily asserted that this was not so, and the children began a spirited exchange across the table. Until Auric spoke again, of course.

“That’s enough,” he grated.

There was silence immediately. Eliza stiffened, almost imperceptibly. Clayton set down the wine with a clack.

“It’s rare enough that our gracious Viscount Henley – my own son, mind you – honours us with his presence. You rarely come home, boy. What have you to say for yourself?”

Clayton held his father’s eye steadily. “My estate requires work, Father.”

Auric gave a snort. “Don’t try and fool me. I know what you’re doing. Flirting with ladies – some respectable, most not – and drinking yourself into a stupor. If your mother’s fool brother saw fit to leave you his estate and his title, that’s his concern. Run it into the ground if you want, I care not.”

Clayton had inherited the title of Viscount Henley, along with his uncle's large estate, on the event of the man's death. Uncle Henley, as Clayton had known him, had stopped visiting once his sister died. There had apparently been some letters sent, from the uncle to the nephew, but Clayton had never received them. They'd almost certainly been reduced to ashes in the grate of Auric's study. Best not to think of that.

The gist of it was that Clayton was a rich man. He had been since he was nineteen and had spent the past seven or eight years enjoying himself and avoiding his father.

Unfortunately, if he wanted to see Amelia and Edward, he couldn't avoid the man forever. Annoyingly, Clayton found that he did want to see his wretched little half-brother and half-sister, and so here he was. Enjoying a delightful family meal.

"Thank you, Father," Clayton answered evenly. "Tonight has been wonderful, but I fear I must take my leave."

"Do as you will," Auric snapped. "The children are going to bed anyway."

Edward, who had only just started on his dessert, opened his mouth to argue, but a frantic glare from his sister made him close his mouth again. The children obediently hopped down from the table, with Eliza rising to see them to bed. Tossing his napkin on the table, Clayton rose too.

"Don't forget my birthday, Clay," Amelia whispered, as they shuffled towards the dining room door together. "You promised me a present."

"I shall not forget."

In the cool hallway outside, Clayton turned towards the door, but a hand on his arm stopped him.

“Auric is right,” Eliza said quietly. “You live a reckless life, Clayton.”

“You sound jealous, my dear step-mamma.”

“I am not. You ought to be married. You ought to settle down.”

“My uncle never did.”

“And see what a mess was made of his estates when he passed.”

Clayton grinned, an expression he knew would make him look wicked in the dim hallway light.

“Forgive me, but I don’t much care what happens when I die. It’s not as if I’ll be around to witness it. Can ghosts feel shame, do you think?”

“Stop it. Your father intends to talk to you about this sooner or later. He wants to see you married.”

“My father holds no sway over me.”

Eliza tightened her jaw. “Don’t be too sure about that. Think on what I’ve said, Clayton. Please?”

“Of course I’ll think about it,” Clayton lied. “Do excuse me, step-mamma. My club is calling.”

Eliza sighed heavily. “Are you ever going to grow up?”

He grinned, dancing towards the door. “Not if I can help it.”

White's was abuzz with energy. The night was well along, and with the Season just starting, so everybody was coming to town. Clayton shouldered his way in and stood on tiptoes, trying to peer over the heads of other gentlemen to spot his friends. He caught sight of his own reflection and paused to adjust his hair.

It was important not to delve too deeply into dandyism, but Clayton was entirely too handsome not to know about it. Ladies fluttered at him, and gentlemen either wanted badly to be his friend or hated him on sight. Both made for interesting evenings.

Clayton knew from portraits and his own hazy memory that he resembled his mother, and probably Uncle Henley, too. He had thick dark hair, so brown as to almost be black, and a pair of shockingly bright jade-green eyes, set in a square, handsome face. His collection of features was the sort of thing one might see in a Romantic painting, or perhaps engraved in marble.

Either way, Clayton knew he was handsome, and was rather proud of it. His father might have kept his mother from him for all those years, but he couldn't change the fact that her face lived on in her son.

Smiling grimly, Clayton turned away from the mirror, and ploughed on through the crowd.

A grating, high-pitched voice caught his attention.

"Now, here it is – fifty pounds to anybody who can melt the heart of the infamous Ice Queen! You cannot do it, I wager."

Clayton paused at that, peering at the knot of men to his left.

They were the usual crowd – rakes, gamblers, second and third sons who longed to be noticed by their fathers, even for the wrong reasons. The men were all deep in their cups and were listening and laughing with the man that Clayton disliked most in all the world.

Excepting, of course, his father.

Mr. Simon Dudley came from trade and hated the fact. Clayton had once joked that the chip on his shoulder was so deep that it was a wonder his arm did not fall clean off, and perhaps that was where their animosity had started.

Simon was thirty years old, taller than Clayton but not as handsome, with pale skin and a petulant mouth with a desperate love of gossip and scandal. He was rumoured to have killed a man in a duel and had never forgiven Clayton for revealing that rumour to have been started by none other than Simon himself.

He'd lingered too long. Simon glanced his way, and his eyes narrowed.

"Ah, Lord Henley. What a pleasure. Will you drink with us?"

"I'd love to, but no, I have other engagements."

Simon snorted. "What engagements?"

Clayton smiled winningly. "I am engaged to drink elsewhere. Anywhere else, really."

That won him a few titters. Simon scowled.

"Well, well, you heard my wager. What do you say? Could you melt the Ice Queen's heart? You must know her. A pretty enough girl. Rich, with excellent family. Three Seasons have come and gone and she's turned down every single suitor who came her

way. And there were plenty, might I add, most of them entirely eligible. Turned them down firmly, may I add. It's odd, is it not?"

"I'm not sure how it concerns me," Clayton drawled, affecting boredom. "The lady's business is her own."

"What about the fifty pounds, though?"

"I don't know about you, Simon, but I do not require fifty pounds to make my fortune."

Simon pursed his lips, tilting his head. "You don't accept my wager, then?"

"I certainly do not." Clayton craned his neck, trying to spot an acquaintance – any acquaintance, really. He couldn't exactly cut Simon in the middle of White's. There were rules, after all. It was a gentleman's club.

Simon drew in a breath. "Oh. Oh. I see what it is."

"Do you really?"

"Ye-es, I do. You're afraid that the great Lord Henley, with his great charm, would be refused by a chit of a girl."

Clayton scowled. "There are dozens of women who would marry me at a word. I don't mean to brag, Simon, but I have conquests aplenty. Why on earth should I bother with a woman who doesn't want me?"

Simon leaned forward, grinning, elbows resting on the wooden counter in front of him. There was a puddle of spilled brandy there, and it soaked into the elbow of his jacket. He didn't seem to notice.

“Why? Well, because I say you cannot do it, of course. I say you are all talk and no action.”

The chatter had died down in the club, to Clayton’s chagrin. More people were listening, mostly because it was Simon and Clayton – famous enemies – who was going head-to-head.

“This may shock you, my dear sir, but I don’t care for your opinion any more than I do the Ice Queen’s. I imagine that if I applied myself, I should be able to attract her attention, but why would I want to do that?”

Undeterred, Simon chuckled.

“I put it to you, Lord Clayton Henley, that you prey on silly, feeble-minded debutantes and jolly widows, and a conquest of any difficulty at all is entirely beyond you. You cannot melt the Ice Queen’s heart any more than we can, but if you do not try, you can keep up this faade of pretending you could, if you wanted to.”

Clayton’s fingers curled tight around a brandy glass. He wasn’t entirely sure who had pressed it into his hand. He drained it anyway, tipping back his head, the liquid burning down his throat. It shivered through his veins, making him feel warm. He could see Lucas now, pushing through the crowd.

A little too late, he thought sourly. If I’d seen you earlier, wretch, I might have excused myself and gotten away from Simon’s nonsense.

It was too late, of course. Simon was waiting, grinning, for Clayton’s response. His cronies were too, and a good number of interested gentlemen.

Wagers like this, which hinged on attracting the attention of a lady, were generally frowned upon and considered ungentlemanly, especially by the older generation. That

didn't stop them from being made.

“Very well, then,” Clayton answered brightly, setting down the glass and pushing it away. “I accept your wager, Simon. The terms?”

Simon's face lit up. “You have until the end of the Season to win the Ice Queen's heart. It must be obvious – no getting her to smile at you and calling it a success. If you succeed, fifty pounds for you. If you lose, well, you have plenty of money to lose, do you not?”

“More than enough,” Clayton snapped. “Done.”

“I look forward to the beginning of our wager,” Simon said, grinning delightedly.

Clayton sneered, turning on his heel and marching away.

What on earth have I gotten myself into?

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:12 am

The first ball of the Season was held by one Lady Juliana Lafayette, an aloof young bride who had never been much of a friend to Isolde, even though they'd come out together. It didn't matter, though, because Isolde had received an invitation anyway, and it wasn't as if she'd actually have to talk to Lady Juliana in the tremendous crush.

It was unavoidable that they had to greet each other, though.

Beatrice and Richard passed through the door ahead of Isolde, murmuring greetings and shaking hands. Isolde came next with James on her arm.

Lady Juliana beamed at James.

"Why, Lord James! What a pleasure! I'd heard you were back in the country. You are most welcome to my humble abode, of course."

Isolde barely muffled a snort at the idea of Lady Juliana's sprawling, ornate home ever being described as humble.

The snort earned her a glare.

"Ah, Lady Isolde!" Lady Juliana fluted sweetly. "I am surprised to see you here. I am quite honoured, having the Ice Queen herself attend my intimate little party."

The words stung, as they were intended to. Isolde had tried her best to convince herself that Ice Queen was a fine nickname to have but hadn't quite managed it yet.

"It's the first ball of the Season," Isolde managed. "Of course I would come."

It wasn't exactly the sort of witty rejoinder that, say, Elizabeth Bennet would have come up with, but it was all Isolde could manage at short notice.

Lady Juliana smiled smugly, tossing rich chestnut curls over her shoulder.

"This will be your... your fourth Season, will it not, Isolde? Goodness. Pray, do proceed. Enter and partake in the festivities," she added, and it didn't much sound like she meant it.

Clenching her teeth, Isolde allowed James to steer her past the entrance and into the vast ballroom beyond.

"Ignore her," he murmured. "She's jealous, always was."

"She might have been jealous when we first came out," Isolde acknowledged. "I did have a lot of suitors."

I didn't accept any of them, though. How could I, when I was lying to them the whole time about who I was?

"And now you're free, and she's married to that drunken fool of a man." James insisted.

"She's married and settled, and I'm a spinster," Isolde responded tautly. "That stupid nickname has followed me through three Seasons now, and I'm fairly sick of it."

"Oh, Izzy, I'm sorry. But look, this is a new Season, and I'm sure it'll be entirely different."

Isolde bit her lip to avoid arguing. It was too loud to talk much, anyway. Lady Juliana's intimate little gathering seemed to include the whole of Society, all jammed into her cavernous ballroom.

Since it was the first ball of the Season – and hosting that was a mark of high honour – everybody who was anybody coveted an invitation. Nobody would turn down such an invitation. The ballroom was packed with ladies and gentlemen of all ages and varying ranks. There were dukes and duchesses in one corner, and the plain Misses and Misters mingling among them. The place was a whirlwind of beautiful dresses in every size and colour, frilled as per the year's fashions, produced in a flurry by fashionable modistes all over the town. Most of them had probably been designed for this very ball.

Isolde's dress was a rare exception. It was a muted canary-coloured silk, plain in comparison to the other frothy confections swirling around, and she'd worn it last Season. It still fitted, it was comfortable, pretty enough, and not so out of fashion as to be shocking.

Isolde hadn't seen the point in commissioning a horde of new gowns. She had plenty of dresses already.

She was beginning to regret that decision. A few curious glances were thrown her way. The gentlemen, of course, would neither notice nor care that her dress was last Season's. They glanced her over, and she saw a flicker of recognition on their face.

The Ice Queen. There she is, here for another Season. What for, I wonder?

She even spotted a few men who'd made her proposals in previous Seasons or been determined suitors. They all averted their gazes immediately.

The ladies, on the other hand, mostly recognized her out-of-fashion dress, and tittered behind their hands. She saw mammas firmly steering their debutante daughters away from her – a friendship with such a determined spinster might ruin a young lady's chances in the marriage mart.

Isolde's cheeks stung, and she tried to keep her head up and pretend as though she

didn't care.

"Izzy, I behold a few acquaintances of mine yonder," James murmured softly in her ear. "Would it be too much trouble for you if I were to procure a chair for you and take my leave to converse with them?"

Isolde did mind, dreadfully so. James, at least, was earning smiles and nods and congratulations from passers-by. Without him, she'd just be another sad old spinster.

"Certainly not. And pray do not trouble yourself to procure a chair for me; I shall find one for myself."

"Thank you, dear," James said with a smile, gaze already distant. He patted her on the hand and went ploughing into the crowd.

Isolde was left unmoored for a few minutes, until a waving hand caught her attention. Relief swept over her, and she began to push her way across the room towards a bespectacled young lady with a wild head of brown hair.

Lady Viola Appleton was a year younger than Isolde. This was her third Season, and she looked set to be a spinster, too. They'd been firm friends for years.

"There you are," Viola exclaimed. "I have been searching high and low for you."

"I'm glad to find you, let me assure you," Isolde muttered, slipping her arm through her friend's. "The Ice Queen comments are persisting for another year."

Viola tutted sympathetically. "Oh, that's horrid. Still, at least they're talking about you. Nobody ever seems to notice me. I sat right next to a great crowd of gentlemen, and not one of them glanced my way. I'm fairly sure I heard one of them call me plain."

“How awful. Point the gentlemen out to me, and I’ll try and spill wine down their expensive silk waistcoats.”

Viola blinked. “How do you know they were wearing silk waistcoats?”

“Just a notion. Come, let us procure some lemonade and secure ourselves a few seats. The dancing will start up soon, although I doubt I’ll be asked.”

Viola sighed. “You could be asked, if you were a little more encouraging. You’re ever so pretty, Isolde.”

“Beauty fades,” Isolde said firmly. “And the gentlemen will always consider the eighteen-year-old debutantes to be prettier than a woman of my age, regardless of their actual looks.”

“Well, you don’t want to be associated with those gentlemen, do you? There might be somebody worth meeting in the crowd this year. Always expect the unexpected, Izzy. I read that in a book.”

“Forgive me if I don’t believe it,” Isolde responded, smiling wryly. “People are disappointing, and nothing ever is as it seems to be. Now, speaking of books, I simply must tell you about the most thrilling book I’ve begun reading. I’m only halfway through, but already...”

The ladies disappeared into the crowd, talking eagerly of books, and the musicians played harder than ever, delicate stringed music sweeping over the crowd and echoing throughout the heated air.

Clayton felt the urge to put his hands over his ears.

“I wish they’d stop with that wretched screeching,” he complained. “All I can hear is endless chatter and those cursed violins.”

Lucas took a sip of his wine, and eyed Clayton unsympathetically. “What did you expect? It’s a ball, after all.”

“Humph.”

“Pray, allow me a moment to express my thoughts to you. You really must reconsider this wager.”

Clayton’s jaw tightened. “Do give over, Lucas.”

“No, I’m serious. That fool Simon should be ignored at the best of times, and a wager like this – well, I shall appeal to your vanity. What are you going to do if this young lady falls madly in love with you?”

He sniffed. “The Ice Queen? She will not.”

“She may well do. Your success depends on her treating you favourably. You could destroy your own reputation, to say nothing of hers. This is not a gentleman’s wager, Clayton. You know, I know it, and...”

“Indeed, most agreeable, most agreeable, but I have acquiesced now, have I not?” Clayton drained his glass of champagne. It was, he had to admit, exceedingly fine vintage.

Lucas gave an exasperated sigh. “Do you think of no one but yourself, Clayton?”

He grinned. “Certainly not. Who, pray tell, could hold greater significance to me than my own self?”

“You’re a fool.”

“At least I like myself.”

Lucas flushed and opened his mouth to argue. Before he could speak, however, a familiar figure, skeleton-like in black satin, materialized at Clayton’s side.

“I thought you weren’t going to come,” Simon said breezily. “I thought you’d taken to the countryside or something.”

Clayton wished he hadn’t drunk all of his champagne. That way, he might have had something to dash in the man’s face.

“Go away, Simon.”

“I do hope you aren’t reconsidering our wager,” Simon remarked, yawning. “I’d hate to have to pass the word around that the famous Lord Henley is nothing more than a craven fool.”

Clayton grinned at him, displaying an array of white teeth in a way he knew to be unsettling. He knew it was unsettling because he’d practised it in the mirror.

“Fear not, Simon. I haven’t forgotten, and nor am I reconsidering.”

Lucas bit back a curse. Clayton ignored him.

Simon narrowed his eyes. “Then why aren’t you talking to her? Our delightful Ice Queen is here tonight.”

“The difference between me and you, despite the obvious,” Clayton remarked, setting down his glass and straightening his cravat, “is that I don’t allow others to hurry me along. I do things in my own time. If you’ll excuse me, both of you, I need some air.”

Leaving a dissatisfied Simon and a stony-faced Lucas behind, Clayton slipped off into the crowd. Lucas' comments had twinged his conscience a little, a state of being which Clayton tried to avoid as best he could. Still, there was nothing for it. A wager was a wager. Perhaps he ought not have agreed to it, but the fact was that he had.

Lady Isolde Belford, the infamous Ice Queen, had better look out.

Viola's mother, a middle-aged widow with a haggard face and dwindling funds – which probably explained her eagerness to marry off her daughter – had descended upon them, whisking Viola away to dance with somebody. Isolde had taken a few turns about the room, trying to look cool and collected as Elizabeth Bennet might have done, but really it wasn't working.

Eventually, she gave in and sought out her parents.

Not your parents.

Oh, do be quiet.

Beatrice was chatting to a selection of friends, and Isolde stood by her side and tried not to look bored. The dancing had started, and her dance card was empty so far. Plenty of ladies and gentlemen eyed her as they went by, but nobody made a move to speak to her.

Infamy was not enjoyable, so far.

Isolde was stifling a yawn when somebody tapped her elbow, making her jump.

"I do apologise for the informality, Lady Isolde, but I simply had to speak to you," drawled an unfamiliar male voice.

Isolde blinked up at the man who'd spoken. "Oh. I... I'm not sure that's proper."

The man grinned. "Come now, Lady Isolde. We know each other well enough to have moved past proper and improper, have we not?"

She clenched her jaw. "Lord Raisin, I really must..."

"Oh, George!" trilled Beatrice, having disentangled herself from her conversation and leaping headfirst into the situation. "How lovely to see you here. I heard that you were in Spain?"

"Indeed I was, but it's fine to be home."

Lord George Raisin was about forty, and the years had not been particularly kind to him. His hair was not grey, but it was resolutely thinning, and his jowls seemed to hang lower each year. He had been married twice and subsequently left a widower both times and had a collection of children up at some country estate. He was wealthy, he was titled, and he was respectable.

He was also looking for a third bride.

Despite not being the most handsome man in town by any stretch of the imagination, there were plenty of ladies present that would be happy to catch a man such as Lord George Raisin as a husband.

Unfortunately, he had his mind set on Isolde. He had petitioned Richard and Beatrice several times for their permission. They'd reluctantly given it but pointed out that he had to secure Isolde's agreement too.

She was not going to give it. He'd proposed twice, not taking no for an answer, and she had been obliged to spend most of her previous Season determinedly cutting him, which caused quite the scandal.

It did not help the Ice Queen comments.

And here the man was again, beaming, freshly tanned from the Spanish sun, with a look of determination in his eyes. Isolde's heart sank.

"I have come to inquire if you would care to engage in a dance," Lord Raisin said, with the placid confidence of a man not accustomed to hearing the word no.

And, of course, Isolde couldn't say no. To refuse a gentleman's offer to dance for any reason would mean that she wouldn't be permitted to dance at all that evening. It was also rather frowned upon.

Besides, Beatrice was watching closely.

Biting the inside of her cheek, Isolde made herself smile. "Well, if you insist, Lord Raisin."

He beamed, her sharp tone entirely lost of him. "Excellent! Shall we?"

I'm going to have to try extra hard to lose him this Season, she thought unhappily, reluctantly allowing the man to lead her onto the dance floor.

The current dance was a brisk cotillion, to Isolde's relief. The waltz would be danced here – and no doubt in all but the strictest households this Season – but she did not want to spend the next set in Lord Raisin's arms. Dancing was dancing, in Isolde's opinion, and people were gradually coming round to the idea that the waltz wasn't really that shocking. Still, Isolde felt that there was something intimate about the dance. So far, she'd avoided waltzing altogether. Gentlemen saved the waltz dances for ladies they were extremely fond of, or ones they had hope of marrying. Needless to say, nobody had asked her.

But Lord Raisin might, she thought, with a frisson of worry. I really shall have to say

no, then. I'll say I've twisted my ankle. I'll have to sit down for the rest of the ball, which will be disappointing, but better than the alternative. There will be other dances.

And Lord Raisin will be at those dances, too.

Her heart sank into her dancing slippers.

The dance slowed enough for the two of them to speak, and Lord Raisin seized his opportunity.

"I am surprised to find a lady as beautiful and well-bred as you still single, Lady Isolde," he commented, with what he doubtless thought was a rakish smile. "What luck for me."

Isolde coloured. He'd never have dared speak so openly to her if Beatrice was around, but the middle of a dance gave people the opportunity to speak freely. One could always claim to have been misheard, what with all the noise and chaos of the dance floor.

"I don't intend to marry, Lord Raisin," Isolde said, as firmly as she could.

If he can speak freely, so can I.

Lord Raisin frowned ever so slightly.

"Well, some ladies do say that, I suppose. But you really must settle down eventually, Lady Isolde. Do you want to be a spinster, ridiculous and alone all your life?"

She bit her lip. "That's a rather hurtful thing to say, Lord Raisin."

"But it's the truth, isn't it? I wager your dear parents don't know about your idea.

Shall I tell them?"

Isolde's eyes flew up to Lord Raisin's face. His expression was placid, but there was a hint of malice in his eyes that hadn't been there before.

"Is that a threat?"

He gave a throaty chuckle. "Goodness, you ladies and your dramatics! A threat, indeed! No, I only think that one's family ought to be privy to such an important decision. I daresay they'd have something to say about it."

"Gentlemen choose to remain bachelors all the time."

"That's an entirely different thing, though, is it not?"

Isolde did not think so. She bit her tongue, though – the dance was nearly over. When the musicians played their last strain, she was relieved to step away. Applause broke out around them, and Isolde made a wobbly curtsy, intending to hurry away before he could say anything else.

Naturally, things did not work out that way.

"Pray, allow me a moment, Lady Isolde, whilst I procure for you some refreshing lemonade," he said briskly, taking her arm. She was obliged to let him tow her along, back to a smiling Beatrice.

"It's good to see you dancing, dearest," she whispered under her breath, when Lord Raisin hurried away towards the refreshment table.

"I don't like him," Isolde hissed back. "He's going to keep me cornered until he can safely ask for a second dance, just like he did last year. I'm going, Mama."

“Don’t be silly. Look, he’s on his way back already. You’ll stay, Isolde.”

Isolde shook her head, pulling her arm away from her mother. A drift of cool air raked through the room, and she automatically turned her head towards it. A set of wide French doors stood open, letting in the breeze.

If she could get out, she could hide in the shadows somewhere. Yes, it was humiliating, having to cower out on the balcony of the first ball of the Season, but she’d been cornered by the shockingly dull Lord Raisin before, and did not care to repeat the incident.

“Isolde! Listen to me!” Beatrice cried, already losing her daughter in the crowd.

She glanced over her shoulder. Lord Raisin was making his way towards her, with a glass of lemonade in each hand and a determined expression on his face.

It was now or never, then.

Isolde plunged into the crowd, desperate to get away.

A little too desperate, perhaps.

Her dress, which was really designed to be worn with a pair of dainty ankle boots, was a fraction too long for her when paired with flat dancing slippers. In fact, Isolde had been kicking away her skirts all night.

She remembered this, belatedly, the instant she stood on her own hem and went lurching forward.

Isolde’s own momentum worked against her. Her arms flailed, but there was nothing within arm’s reach to grab onto, except for other people, and they all moved hastily aside. So she was going down, about to smack face-first into Lady Juliana’s waxed

and polished floor, in front of all of Society during the first ball of the Season.

Just perfect.

And then Isolde slammed face-first into a firm, masculine chest, no doubt belonging to some poor fool who hadn't moved away quickly enough.

Her cheek slid against a silk waistcoat which felt remarkably expensive, and she heard a pained grunt from somewhere above her.

He staggered backward, a pair of arms coming up to grab her reflexively, and for one awful second she thought they were both going down.

The only thing more humiliating than falling over at the first ball of the Season, Isolde decided, was dragging somebody else with her.

But he steadied himself, and therefore steadied her. There was a faint slop as champagne began to run down the aforementioned fine silk waistcoat.

The whole interaction could only have lasted a second, perhaps at the most, but it felt more like an entire lifetime.

Staggering backwards, Isolde blinked up at her unwitting saviour.

None other than the infamous Viscount Henley looked down.

"Oh," he said. "Hello, my Lady. Are you quite well?"

"I'm fine," Isolde said, more snappishly than she should have. She took in the growing dark stain on the man's waistcoat. "Oh lord, I made you spill your drink on yourself. I am so sorry."

The viscount blinked down at his sodden waistcoat. “I shouldn’t worry about that. My valet has gotten worse things than champagne out of my clothes.”

Isolde opened her mouth to ask what those worse things were, but decided against it, closing her mouth with a snap.

She glanced around, wishing people would stop staring. A little circle of gawkers had formed around them, whispering loudly to each other. In the background, Lord Raisin stood beside Beatrice, both of them staring in stony disapproval.

Naturally, Beatrice did not approve of Viscount Henley. No sensible mamma would.

She’s not my mamma, though.

“Since my champagne is now gone,” Viscount Henley drawled, setting aside the empty glass, “perhaps you’d favour me with a dance instead?”

She blinked up at him. “I beg your pardon?”

“Oh, I think you heard me clearly. Why, is this dance already taken?”

Isolde thought of Lord Raisin, waiting for her. “No.”

“Well, then.”

The viscount abruptly leaned forward, coming far too close, and Isolde got a good whiff of his cologne. It was sharp and sweet, coming off him in gusts like breaths. She tried not to breathe in.

“People will stare less if we go and dance,” he murmured. “Best take their minds off it.”

Isolde swallowed hard. She could hear the strains of music starting up already for the next set. It was, to her horror, a waltz.

What choice do I have?

“Very well,” she said stiffly, taking his outstretched hand. “Very well, let us take to the dance floor.”