



The Baron's Forbidden Bride (Lords of Convenience #4)

Author: *Amanda Stones*

Category: Historical

Description: A forbidden love reignites as childhood friends brave a perilous Season filled with secrets, schemes, and the perils of following their hearts.

Lady Chloe Swift has never forgotten her childhood best friend, Lord Anthony James, or the ache of his sudden departure years ago. When Anthony unexpectedly returns just as Chloe faces the daunting prospect of her third Season, her heart is thrown into turmoil. As a powerful duke sets his sights on making Chloe his bride, she proposes a daring scheme: a fake courtship with Anthony to ward off the dukes advances and buy herself time.

Lord Anthony James has spent years abroad trying to forget the beautiful girl he left behind. Bound by familial obligations and societal expectations, he buried his feelings for Chloe deep within his heart. But when presented with the chance to be by her side once more, even if only in pretense, he cannot resist. As they embark on a perilous journey through the Season, the line between act and reality blurs, rekindling a love they can no longer deny.

With the weight of family expectations and the threat of a loveless marriage looming over them, Chloe and Anthony must decide if their love is worth risking everything. Can they overcome the obstacles of rank and duty to claim a future together, or will they be forced to sacrifice their hearts for the sake of propriety?

Total Pages (Source): 28

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:14 am

“Can you believe it has been three years since our debut, Chloe? Time flies by so quickly.”

Lady Chloe Swift stared at her best friend, Lady Seraphina Fairfax, across the table in the cozy, bustling atmosphere of Gunter’s tea shop. One of their favorite spots to gossip and escape the eyes of the expectations of their parents. Even if it was just for a while.

“Indeed, it does.” Chloe smiled wistfully, her fingers tracing the edge of her teacup as she thought about the last three Seasons. “And yet, it feels like an eternity when I think of the endless parade of balls and suitors that the Season entails. It is such hard work.”

Seraphina raised an eyebrow, setting her cup down. “You sound more weary than usual. What is troubling you?”

Chloe sighed, glancing around to ensure no one was within ear shot. “It is Father. The pressure he is placing on me to find a husband this Season is suffocating. He has such high hopes for me to marry someone of high rank and wealth. I feel like a prize he is trying to auction off to the highest bidder. I do not know what this Season will hold for me.”

Seraphina’s expression softened with empathy. “Your father does seem quite determined. But surely, he wants what is best for you?”

Chloe shook her head, her voice dropping to a whisper. “He wants what is best for the family, for our social standing. My happiness is secondary to his ambitions.”

“And by happiness, you mean...”

Seraphina did not need to finish that sentence. They both knew exactly what she was talking about. Lord Anthony James. The love of Chloe’s life. Her childhood best friend, who now seemed like a distant dream. His sudden departure years ago had left a void in her heart that no number of suitors could fill. No one compared, and there was nothing that Chloe could do to change that. Every single man that approached her, even for a dance, was instantly compared to him, whether that was what Chloe intended to do or not. And the worst thing was, no one ever even slightly came close.

“Do you ever think about him?” Seraphina’s voice was gentle, as if sensing the direction of Chloe’s thoughts.

Chloe nodded slowly. “Every day. His absence left me feeling abandoned and heart broken. I have never understood why he left so abruptly to go on a Grand Tour that he never talked about before. It is just so confusing.”

She never got closure, which might have been the hardest thing of all, especially since she had spent most of her youth dreaming about marrying him. Seraphina reached across the table and squeezed Chloe’s hand, offering silent support. Chloe’s thoughts began to drift, the gentle hum of the tea shop fading as her mind wandered to the wedding she had once imagined. She could see it clearly: a sun lit afternoon in late spring, the gardens of her family estate bursting with color and fragrance, delicate blooms of lavender and roses formed arches and garlands, filling the air with their sweet perfume.

Chloe imagined herself standing at the entrance of the estate chapel, the place where her parents and grandparents had wed, wearing a gown of ivory silk and lace that shimmered like the surface of a tranquil pond. Lord Anthony James, her Anthony, stood at the altar, his eyes alight with the same mischievous sparkle she had adored since they were children. His dark hair was neatly styled, and he wore a suit that

accentuated his tall, lean frame. He smiled at her, that smile that always made her heart flutter, as she walked slowly down the aisle on her father's arm.

The guests, a blend of their families and closest friends, turned to watch her, their faces reflecting the joy and admiration they felt for the couple. They would be the sort of couple so in love that it made everyone in their lives jealous. They would be the couple that everyone else wanted to be.

As Chloe imagined Anthony taking her hand at the altar, she could almost hear the vicar's voice echoing through the chapel: "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to join this man and this woman in holy matrimony..."

Her heart ached with the bitter sweet beauty of the memory that never was. She envisioned the way Anthony's hand would feel, warm and reassuring, as he slipped the ring on to her finger. The vows they would exchange, words filled with promises and dreams for their future together. She had dreamed about it far too much, and losing that dream had killed her. It was still a feeling that she had very much not recovered from.

"Do you think he will ever return?" Seraphina asked, shaking her from her thoughts.

Chloe sighed heavily. "I do not know. Sometimes, I imagine that he will simply stroll back into my life and it will be as if he never left, and other times..." Now this part was much harder for her to say, but she truly did need her friend's advice. "Sometimes I think he will marry a beautiful woman that he meets on his travels, and I will never see those sparkling blue eyes of his again."

It crushed her, the idea made her heart physically hurt, but it was also a possibility that she absolutely had to accept, if she ever wanted to move on with her life.

Seraphina reached across the table and placed a comforting hand over Chloe's. "Oh

Chloe, I wish I could say something to ease your mind, but I understand how you feel. The heart wants what it wants, regardless of reason or practicality.”

Chloe looked at her friend, appreciating the understanding in her eyes. “I know. And it is not just the memories that haunt me. It is the uncertainty of the future. I can not help but wonder if I am holding on to a ghost.”

Their conversation was interrupted by the chime of the tea shop’s doorbell. Both women glanced over to see who had entered, but it was just another group of ladies from their social circle, nothing out of the ordinary.

Chloe returned her gaze to Seraphina. “Sometimes, I wish I could just run away from it all. Escape the expectations and the relentless search for a husband that fits Father’s criteria.”

Seraphina gave her a sympathetic smile. “I know. It is not easy. I struggle, and I am not under the same pressure as you at all. I do not have a man from my past that I am clinging on to.”

Chloe slid her eyes closed for just a second, allowing herself to travel back in time for a second. This time to a cherished childhood memory that she had shared with Anthony. She could almost feel the grass underneath her and the sun beaming down on her shoulders as she watched Anthony, glistening in the sun light as he skipped pebbles along the water of his family’s pond.

“You are very good at that,” Chloe giggled.

She had always been impressed by him, she liked everything that he did. Just being in his presence always made her feel warm and excitable.

“Have a try.” Anthony picked up a smooth, flat stone and handed it to Chloe, his

fingers brushing against hers and sending a small shiver down her spine. That shiver was a sensation that she would remember for the rest of her life.

“I do not know what to do,” she told him.

“Not to worry,,” Anthony chuckled. “I will show you.”

He patiently showed her how to hold the pebble and flick her wrist to make it skip. “Like this, Chloe,” Anthony said, demonstrating the technique with a smooth, practiced motion.

The stone leaped across the water, creating a series of ripples that expanded outward. Chloe’s eyes sparkled with determination as she mimicked his movements. Her first attempt sent the stone plopping unceremoniously into the water. Anthony laughed. The sound was infectious, and Chloe could not help but join in.

“You will get the hang of it,” he assured her, picking up another pebble. “Try again.”

Anthony’s warm smile and gentle words filled her with determination, encouraging her to try again. And again, and again.

“Oh my,” she gasped. “I do not know if I will ever be able to do this!”

Anthony laughed, shaking his head. “Nonsense, Chloe. Just keep trying. You have always been the most persistent person I know.”

Chloe smiled, her heart swelling at his words. “Well, I am lucky to have you as a teacher.”

She picked up another pebble, determined to get it right. With a flick of her wrist, the stone skipped once, twice, and then sank. But it was progress, and Anthony’s

approving nod made it all the more rewarding. As the sun began to set, casting a golden glow over the estate, they made a pact to always be there for each other, sealing their promise with a pinky swear.

“No matter what happens, we will always have each other,” Anthony said, his eyes shining with sincerity.

Chloe nodded, her heart swelling with the depth of their connection. “Always.”

Seraphina gently squeezed Chloe’s hand, bringing her back to the present moment. “The right gentleman will come along, Chloe. One who will appreciate your wit, beauty, and kind heart.”

Chloe smiled, grateful for her friend’s support, but a part of her could not help but wonder if that gentleman might be Anthony.

And it might already be too late...

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:14 am

Lord Anthony James finally stepped back through the grand front door of his family's London town house, a strange sensation settling over him as he inhaled deeply. The familiar scent of polished wood and lavender greeted him like an old friend. He might have been away on his Grand Tour for many years now, but the moment he stepped inside the house, it was as if he had never left.

"Anthony!" It did not take long for his mother to realize that he was home at long last.

"Mother," he chuckled. "I have returned."

Lady Leonora James hurried towards him, excitement flooding her face as she raced to greet him. His younger twin sisters, Hannah and Caroline, followed close behind, their faces lighting up at the sight of him. In that moment, he realized that he had been gone for far too long. He might have been many exciting places in the world, but there was nowhere quite like home.

"I have missed you," Anthony declared, his voice thick with emotion as he enveloped his mother in a warm embrace. "I am so grateful to finally be home."

She held him tightly, as if afraid he might vanish again.

"Oh, how we have missed you," Leonora murmured, stepping back to look at him, her eyes shining with tears. "It has been far too long since you have been home."

Before Anthony could respond, Hannah and Caroline flung themselves at him, their arms wrapping around him in a flurry of laughter and tears.

“Anthony, you are finally back!” Caroline exclaimed, her voice muffled against his shoulder. “It is so good to see you.”

“We have so much to tell you,” Hannah added, her eyes wide with happiness. “Do you have any gifts for us?”

“Of course! As if I would return without gifts. Come on, let us sit down and I will show you what I have.”

In the drawing room, Anthony presented his mother and sisters with delicate lace shawls from his travels, each one carefully chosen to suit their individual tastes. For his mother, he had chosen subdued colors, sweet like her. One that would keep her warm even on the coldest of days. For Hannah, he had gone much brighter, to suit her bold spirit. The lace patterns were more intricate, more complicated. More exciting, because she had an adventurous spirit, one that reminded him of himself. And for Caroline, he had chosen pastel shades because of the way that she always had her head in the clouds, day dreaming. It was one that she could wrap herself up in while reading yet another romance novel.

Leonora took her shawl with a gasp of delight, before she immediately wrapped it around her shoulders. “Oh, Anthony, it is beautiful. Thank you.”

Hannah and Caroline eagerly took theirs, their eyes wide with wonder and admiration.

“Where did you get these?” Hannah demanded. “I would love to hear all about your travels.”

“Me too,” Caroline agreed. “This is utterly beautiful.”

Anthony settled into the comfortable chair that he had missed so much, his heart

warming at the sight of his family's joy. In this moment, he never wanted to leave London again.

"I found them in a bustling market in Venice," he began, a smile spreading across his face. "The colors and craftsmanship were exquisite, and I knew they would be perfect for each of you. I, of course, was thinking about you the whole time that I was away."

"You must tell us more about Venice," Caroline said, her voice filled with awe. "It sounds so magical."

"It truly is," Anthony replied, his eyes twinkling with fond memories. "The canals, the architecture, the art... it is like stepping in to another world. I really did enjoy exploring Italy. It is nothing like England. Nothing at all."

Lady Leonora smiled, her eyes twinkling with curiosity. "It sounds enchanting. Did you visit any other places in Italy?"

"Indeed, I did," Anthony replied. "I visited Florence, where I was mesmerized by the art in the Uffizi Gallery. The paintings and sculptures there are masterpieces beyond anything I had ever seen. I also ventured to Rome, where the ruins of the Colosseum and the grandeur of the Vatican left me in awe. Each city had its own unique charm and history."

There was a little twang in his chest. He had enjoyed his travels and had most certainly learned a lot about himself along the way. But he was still very grateful to be home.

"Where else?" Hannah demanded. "It must not have been just Italy. What other souvenirs did you bring back?"

Anthony chuckled. "I actually have a small collection of trinkets and mementos from

each place I visited. From Paris, I brought back a set of delicate porcelain figurines. From Vienna, a music box that plays the most beautiful waltz. And from Greece, a set of hand painted pottery.”

Caroline’s eyes widened. “A music box? Can we see it?”

“Of course,” Anthony said, retrieving the ornate box from his travel bag.

He opened it, and a soft, melodious tune filled the room. Anthony could see the girls losing themselves in the music, just as he had done when he first heard it.

“One of the most thrilling parts of my journey was sailing along the Mediterranean coast,” he continued as the music played. “The crystal-clear waters and the vibrant marine life were breathtaking. I even had the chance to dive and explore some underwater ruins near the coast of Crete. It was like being in a whole different world.”

“Did you see any mermaids?” Caroline gasped.

Anthony shot her a playful wink. “I can not be sure. Mermaids are not easy to spot, but I did see a flickering purple tail as I swam.”

Caroline’s eyes glazed over, probably already imagining what it was like for Anthony to see such magic around the world. And it did feel like magic. At the time, he had been thrilled to see a world outside of London society and the ton, but now it was time to get back to reality. Whatever that was going to look like. Anthony’s stories captivated his family, each tale bringing a spark of wonder to their eyes.

“Did you make any new friends on your travels?” Hannah asked, her curiosity insatiable.

Anthony nodded, a thoughtful expression crossing his face. “Yes, indeed. I met many fascinating people, each with their own stories and perspectives. There was Pierre, a French artist with a passion for capturing the essence of everyday life in his paintings. And then there was Elena, a Greek historian who could recount the myths and legends of her homeland with such vivid detail that you felt as if you were living them.”

Caroline leaned in, her eyes wide. “Did you meet anyone special?”

A flicker of a smile played at Anthony’s lips as he thought of the people he had encountered. “Special in their own ways, yes. But no one quite like those I left behind.”

Leonora, watching her son with a mix of pride and curiosity, gently touched his arm. “And what about your heart, Anthony? Have your travels helped you find clarity?”

Anthony looked into his mother’s eyes, feeling the weight of her question. “I believe they have, Mother. I have seen so much and learned even more. But in all my travels, there was always a part of me that longed for the familiarity and love of home.”

Hannah and Caroline exchanged knowing glances, their excitement barely contained.

“Does that mean you will stay for good?” Caroline asked, hope lacing her words.

Anthony smiled, his heart full. “For now, I am home. I have missed you all more than words can say. And there is much to catch up on.”

The conversation drifted to the upcoming social Season, the balls, and the gatherings that were sure to follow Anthony’s return. Leonora spoke of the many invitations that had already started to pour in, eagerly anticipating his presence. Anthony was not entirely sure how to feel about the Season. He had not returned to London, eager to

throw himself back in to society. But it was springtime, there was nothing that he could do about it.

“We will have to find you a suitable match, Anthony,” Leonora said with a twinkle in her eye. “There are many young ladies who would be delighted to meet you.”

Anthony chuckled, though his thoughts wandered to Chloe Swift. He wondered how she had fared during his absence. Had she found someone who cherished her as much as he always had? The thought stirred something deep within him, a longing that had never truly faded...

As the evening wore on and the James family basked in their reunion, Anthony’s heart remained divided. The adventures of his Grand Tour had given him many things: knowledge, experience, and a broader perspective. But there was a part of him that still yearned for the simplicity and joy of his past with Chloe. He had never given up those memories, and it left him curious...

Would she remember their promise to always be there for each other? And if she did, could they rekindle what they once had, or had too much time passed? Did it even matter? Anthony had left for a reason, and that was not something that would ever change. These questions lingered in Anthony’s mind as he tried to mentally prepare for the inevitable return to society that came with his return to London. The Season promised excitement, challenges, and perhaps, the answers he sought.

As the night deepened, the girls eventually went off to bed, their chatter and excitement still lingering in the air. Anthony and his mother remained in the drawing room, the fire casting a warm glow around them.

Leonora looked at her son, her expression softening. “Anthony, I am so glad you are home. But I know it is not just for the social Season that you have returned.”

Anthony nodded, his demeanor growing somber. “Yes, Mother. I came back because I know it is time for me to take on the responsibilities of the estate. With Father gone, it is my duty to ensure everything runs smoothly.”

Leonora’s eyes filled with sorrow at the mention of her late husband. “Your father was so proud of you, Anthony. He always spoke of how he knew you would be a wonderful steward of our family’s legacy.”

“I hope to make him proud,” Anthony said quietly, feeling the weight of his father’s expectations settling on his shoulders. “I regret not being here for his final days. It was a difficult time for you and the girls, and I should have been here.”

“You were following your path,” Leonora replied gently, placing a hand on his. “Your father understood that, and he wanted you to see the world. He believed it would make you a better man and a better leader. Do not forget, your father used to sit here, just like this, sharing stories of his own travels. He was not surprised that you wanted to follow in his path.

Anthony smiled, the warmth of his mother’s words enveloping him. “He did have a talent for storytelling. I remember sitting by his side, completely enraptured by his tales of far-off lands and daring adventures.”

Leonora’s eyes sparkled with fond memories. “Do you recall the story he used to tell about the time he climbed the Matterhorn? He would describe the sheer cliffs and the treacherous paths as if they were just outside our door.”

Anthony chuckled. “Yes, and how he almost lost his hat to a sudden gust of wind at the summit. He always made it sound so dramatic, as if the hat was the most valuable thing in the world.”

“It is so hard without him here,” Lenora sighed. “Sometimes I do not know how we

are going to survive.”

Anthony sighed, his heart heavy. “It has been a lot to process, Mother. But I am here now, and I am ready to do whatever it takes to honor Father’s memory and take care of our family. We will be just fine, I will make you proud.”

Leonora smiled, her eyes shining with pride and love. “I know you will, Anthony. And remember, you are not alone. We are all here to support you.”

“Thank you, Mother,” Anthony said, squeezing her hand. “That means everything to me.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:14 am

The grand ballroom of Almack's Assembly Rooms shimmered with opulence as the Season finally came to life in front of Chloe's eyes. Chloe had to admit that it was absolutely beautiful. Crystal chandeliers hung from the high ceilings, their myriad prisms casting a warm, golden light that danced across the room, over the sea of excitable aristocratic faces. The walls were adorned with elaborate gilded moldings and intricate plaster work, the delicate patterns winding gracefully around the room like the threads of a golden tapestry. Rich, velvet draperies in deep shades of burgundy and royal blue framed the tall windows, their heavy folds adding to the sense of luxury that flooded the room. The scent of fresh flowers filled the air, their vibrant arrangements adorning every corner and table, their blooms carefully chosen to reflect the Season's finest. At one end of the ballroom, a raised dais held the musicians, a small orchestra whose melodies filled the room with a harmonious blend of strings, woodwinds, and the occasional soft flourish of a harp. The music was both lively and refined, perfectly suited to the sophisticated atmosphere of Almack's. It was perfect, and yet...

Chloe was thoroughly not enjoying herself.

She moved gracefully through the crowd, her pale blue silk gown swishing softly around her feet. The delicate embroidery of the gown accentuated her petite figure, and her golden curls framed her face like a halo, drawing admiring glances from many in attendance. Despite the external admiration, her heart was heavy with the pressure to secure a suitable match, an unyielding expectation from her father. He had been very firm with her that morning, that she was to make a good impression, and now she could feel his eyes on her the whole time, a silent reminder of her duty. A duty that she could not shake off, however hard she tried.

She sighed softly, wishing for the freedom to follow her own heart rather than the rigid path laid out for her. She even wished that she did not have to be here tonight, at this ball. She would have much rather been at home, daydreaming about the ghost from her past...

“Lady Swift, might I have the honor of this dance?” A smooth voice interrupted her thoughts. Chloe turned to find Lord Daniel Thompson, bowing elegantly before her. Now this was a man that her father would like for her. So of course she could not refuse.

“Of course, Lord Thompson,” Chloe replied with a practiced smile, extending her hand to him.

Daniel took her hand and led her to the center of the ballroom, where the other couples were already gliding gracefully across the polished floor. His touch was light, but firm, and he exuded an air of confidence that commanded attention. Tall and impeccably dressed in a black tail coat, Daniel moved with an elegance and precision that spoke of years of refinement and practice.

As they began to dance, Chloe could not help but notice how perfectly he fit the image of the ideal suitor. His dark hair was neatly styled, and his chiseled features were softened by the warmth in his deep blue eyes. There was a charm about him that was hard to ignore, a charm that made him a favorite among the ladies of the ton. And yet...

He was simply not the man for her. She did not even need this dance to know that he would never be the man for her.

As the music began, Chloe moved with grace, her steps light and fluid. Just as she was taught to do when she was forced to take endless dance lessons as a child. Lord Thompson’s grip was firm, his movements precise, yet she felt no warmth in his

touch. Her mind wandered to Anthony, as it often did during moments like these. How different it had been to dance with him, to feel the genuine affection and unspoken connection that had always existed between them.

Now those were dances that she would always remember...

But of course, Anthony was not here to dance with her tonight. She could not forget that he had cruelly abandoned her.

“You look ravishing tonight, Lady Chloe,” Lord Thompson remarked, his gaze lingering on her. “It is no wonder you are the toast of the Season.”

Toast of the Season?

Chloe was sure that was not a title that had been bestowed upon her, but of course, she did not wish to be rude either.

“Thank you, Lord Thompson,” Chloe replied, her smile tight. “That is very kind of you to say.”

She felt an involuntary shiver run down her spine, and not from the cold. She simply did not have any connection with this man, and never would, and there was no way that she could force it. As the dance ended and Lord Thompson led her back to the edge of the ballroom, Chloe excused herself, claiming a need for refreshment.

She moved swiftly to the refreshment table, seeking a moment of respite from the suffocating atmosphere. She took a glass of lemonade, its coolness a welcome relief against the heat of the crowded room. But she was not to be left alone for long. It was mere moments before Mr. Gregory Havisham was beside her.

“Lady Swift, may I have the honor of this next dance?”

His voice was more kind, and his smile more genuine, but Chloe knew that his charm was not sincere. He did not intend to settle down, and even if he did, it was unlikely that her father would approve, for he carried a reputation that was far from spotless. Known for his gambling habits and a string of fleeting romantic entanglements, he was not considered a stable or serious match by the standards of the ton. But still, she agreed to dance with him.

As they took to the floor, Chloe found herself comparing him to Anthony again, as she had with so many others. As she could not stop herself from doing. Gregory was amiable, his conversation light and entertaining, but he lacked the depth and sincerity she admired in Anthony. Without that, what would they share? She would never be able to have a true bond with him.

“Lady Swift, you seem rather pensive this evening,” Gregory observed as they twirled gracefully.

“Do I?” Chloe forced a smile. “Perhaps it is just the weight of the Season’s expectations.”

“Ah, the infamous pressures of Almack’s,” Gregory said with a wry grin. “Do not let them trouble you too much. You are a jewel among us, Lady Swift.”

Chloe’s smile faltered as she thought of the real jewel in her heart.

The evening wore on, and Chloe dutifully danced with several more gentlemen, each one blending in to the next in a blur of polite conversation and measured steps. Her father’s approving nods from across the room did little to lift her spirits. The weight of her duty pressed heavily upon her, the prospect of a loveless marriage looming ever larger.

What would she do if she did not find a husband this Season? What would her father

do? It did not bear thinking about.

Once she was given a moment alone, Chloe quickly scanned the room and spotted Sera standing near the edge of the dance floor, engaged in conversation with a group of young ladies. She made her way towards her friend, weaving through the throngs of elegantly dressed guests, needing to talk to the one person in the room who she was sure really understood her. As she approached, she caught Sera's eye and gave a small, urgent nod. Sera excused herself from the group and met Chloe near the refreshment table.

"Oh my," Seraphina gasped. "Tonight is quite the start to the Season, is it not?"

Chloe did not even have an answer to that. It might have only just begun, but she was already thoroughly exhausted.

"I do not think that I can dance another step," she confessed. "How much longer must we tolerate this?"

Seraphina grimaced. "Unfortunately, this is only the beginning."

Chloe groaned, before they both laughed. If they did not laugh about it, then Chloe might cry. She most certainly did not think that her father would approve if she burst in to tears, and unfortunately, she knew that his eyes were on her the whole time. No matter where he was in the room, or what he was doing, his eyes were on her.

Seraphina gave her a sympathetic smile. "I know it feels unbearable, Chloe. But remember, we are not alone in this. Almost every girl here feels the same pressure."

Chloe sighed, glancing around at the other young ladies, each seemingly lost in their own world of expectation and duty.

“I wish there were another way,” she murmured. “Something more than this endless parade of forced smiles and shallow conversations.”

Any other way would be better than this.

Anything at all.

Julian was bored.

He always found these kinds of events thoroughly boring. As he stood at the edge of the opulent ballroom, his gaze sweeping over the crowd with a cold, calculating intensity, he realized that there was no one here that he wanted to talk to. Unfortunately, everyone always wanted to talk to him.

The chandelier’s light glittered off his perfectly tailored coat and the medals that adorned his chest, which he knew would add to his imposing presence. He observed the fluttering gowns, the sparkling jewels, and the forced laughter that echoed through the room. Each face, each conversation, was analyzed and categorized within seconds. Much as he was bored, he could not deny to himself that he thrived in this environment, a battle field of social maneuvers where he always emerged victorious.

As Julian took a sip from his crystal glass, his gaze lingered on the couples twirling on the dance floor. The sight of their carefree expressions only deepened his sense of ennui. He could easily predict the motivations behind each smile, the hidden agendas behind every polite exchange. It was a game he had mastered long ago, one that no longer offered any real challenge. His eyes narrowed as he spotted a cluster of young ladies, their laughter like the tinkling of delicate glass. Among them stood Lady Chloe Swift, daughter of the Earl of Hadleigh.

A slow, predatory smile spread across Lord Frampton's face as he observed her. Chloe was the epitome of grace and beauty, her golden hair cascading in soft curls around a porcelain face. She was petite, with an elegance that seemed to come naturally, her expressive green eyes drawing him in even from a distance. The fact that she remained unmarried after two Seasons intrigued him. There must be more to her than the pretty face and charming demeanor. His mind raced with the possibilities as he watched her from across the room. Chloe represented more than just an alliance with the influential Swift family; she was a prize, a symbol of his power and control.

Julian adjusted his cuff links, his movements deliberate and measured as an idea popped in to his mind. Perhaps there was a way that he could make this night so much more interesting for himself. He moved towards Chloe with the precision of a predator closing in on its prey, his smile widening as he approached her. The crowd seemed to part before him, the other guests instinctively stepping aside as he made his way across the ballroom. He was about to claim her as his own, and he could not wait.

The boredom that was over coming him before dissolved. In its place, a desire to claim. A desire to remind everyone in the room that he was always a force to be reckoned with. Of course, she would be thrilled as well. Any lady he turned his attention to was always happy, as were their parents, that was one of the great things about being a duke.

He approached Chloe with calculated charm, his movements smooth and unhurried. He was a master of these encounters, and he knew exactly how to make an impression that would linger long after the night was over.

"Lady Chloe Swift," Lord Frampton's voice was smooth, his eyes locking on to hers with an intensity that left little room for doubt about his intentions as soon as he was in ear shot. "I must say, you are even more enchanting in person than the rumors suggest."

Chloe turned towards him, her smile polite but guarded. She did not look as pleased to see him as he thought she might be. But that was alright, there was still time. If anything, that made her even more fascinating to him. Julian could not help but notice the envious and admiring gazes surrounding them, surrounding him. The other ladies in the room watched him with longing, their smiles brightening whenever he glanced their way.

Yet, he remained focused on Chloe, sensing the complexity beneath her composed exterior.

“Your Grace,” she replied, curtsying gracefully. “You flatter me.”

“I merely speak the truth,” he said, taking her hand and brushing his lips against her gloved fingers. “I have been most eager to make your acquaintance.”

As he straightened, he saw a flicker of something in her eyes... nervousness perhaps, or a hint of defiance. Julian liked that. It would make the game all the more interesting. Anything to make the game interesting inspired him.

The orchestra began to play, but Julian paused for a moment, heightening the tension. He enjoyed these small moments of control, the way anticipation hung in the air. The other guests watched with bated breath, waiting to see what he would do next. He smirked, still not quite ready to ask. But it was inevitable, he would ask when the moment was right. But only he would be able to decide when the moment was right.

Julian could feel the collective gaze of the ballroom fixed on him and Chloe. He reveled in the power he held over them, knowing that every subtle move, every hesitation, only increased their fascination.

"Tell me, Lady Chloe," he said, his voice barely above a whisper, yet carrying the weight of command. "Do you enjoy these gatherings, or do you, too, find them

lacking?"

Chloe's eyes narrowed slightly, as if trying to discern the meaning behind his words. "I find them... necessary," she replied carefully. "But often quite monotonous, I suppose."

"Ah, monotony," Julian echoed, his gaze intense. "A plague upon the privileged, would you not agree?"

She smiled, but it was clear that she was not entirely sure how to react. It was up to him to carry this on. He allowed his lips to curl up into a smirk before he allowed those words to fall out of his mouth. The words that they all knew were coming.

"Please, accompany me for a dance. I would be most honored, Lady Swift."

"Please, accompany me for a dance. I would be most honored, Lady Swift."

Had he really just asked that?

In shock, Chloe hesitated, her eyes darting to Seraphina beside her, who offered an encouraging nod. Although the encouragement might have simply been because Chloe could not refuse. Not when a duke asked her to dance. She could feel Lord Frampton's confidence radiating off him, his certainty that she would comply, just as so many others had before her. Reluctantly, she placed her hand in his.

"Of course, Your Grace," she replied, her smile polite but strained.

As they moved to the center of the dance floor, Chloe's mind raced. The Duke was not a man to be trifled with. His reputation was as imposing as his presence. Tall and

broad shouldered, he carried himself with an air of authority that made lesser men quail. His dark eyes seemed to pierce through anyone he looked at. His jaw, set in a permanent expression of sternness, added to his intimidating aura. Rumors about him circulated through the ton like wildfire. They whispered of his fierce temper, his ruthless business acumen, and the mysterious circumstances surrounding his family's fortune.

Some even said he had single handedly negotiated trade deals that saved the crown from financial ruin. Others spoke of duels fought and won, his skill with a pistol unmatched. It was likely all untrue, but Chloe did not know how to feel as she stood opposite this man.

As they stepped onto the dance floor, Chloe could feel the weight of his gaze. It was as if he were assessing her, measuring her worthiness. She struggled to maintain her composure, aware of the eyes of the other guests upon them. They were all going to be gossiping, and that terrified Chloe more than anything else. Chloe caught sight of her father standing at the edge of the room. His expression was one of approval, his eyes fixed on her with a look that spoke volumes. This was what he wanted for her. A match that would elevate their family's status, a connection that would solidify their place in society. The weight of his expectations pressed down on her, making it hard to breathe.

Lord Frampton led her into the dance with a practiced grace, his movements precise and controlled.

"You look exquisite tonight, Lady Swift," he said, his voice low and intimate.

"Thank you, Your Grace," she replied, her body stiff and her smiles forced.

She tried to focus on the steps, the rhythm of the music, anything to distract her from the unsettling feeling of being in Lord Frampton's arms. Why did he make her feel

this way? What was it about him that terrified her so much? As they glided across the dance floor, Frampton began speaking, his tone dripping with confidence and self assuredness. This seemed to be a speech that he had practiced often. He said it as if it was a script which only made this feel a million times worse.

“You know, Lady Swift, I have recently acquired a new estate in the Lake District. It is quite the property. Several thousand acres, with a manor house that rivals any in the country. The views are simply breath taking.”

Oh no.

Now she was going to have to suffer him bragging. She had been through this with lords before, and it was always hard to smile through.

“That sounds lovely, Your Grace,” Chloe replied, keeping her tone polite.

She could not help but notice the way his eyes gleamed with pride as he spoke about his latest acquisition, as if it were a trophy to be displayed rather than a home to be cherished.

“And, of course, my investments have been flourishing,” Lord Frampton continued, undeterred by her lack of enthusiasm. “The venture in India has been particularly successful. The returns have been more than satisfactory. My business acumen has always been a point of pride.”

“Indeed, Your Grace,” Chloe murmured, her mind wandering as he bragged about his wealth and successes.

She caught sight of her father again, his approving gaze never wavering. The pressure to secure a suitable match weighed heavily on her, making each of Lord Frampton’s boasts feel like a chain tightening around her heart. His grip on her waist tightened

slightly as he guided her through a particularly intricate turn.

“It is essential to maintain a certain level of prestige and influence in our circles, would you not agree? Connections and wealth are what keep us at the top, after all.”

Chloe forced another smile, her thoughts drifting to the days spent with Anthony. His laughter, his kindness, the genuine connection they shared... it all seemed so far away now, replaced by the cold reality of societal expectations.

“Yes, Your Grace, they are important.”

His gaze bore into her, as if searching for a sign of agreement, or perhaps admiration. Chloe's mind raced, struggling to keep up with the conversation while battling the rising tide of discontent within her. She felt like a marionette, her strings pulled taut by the expectations of those around her. She had absolutely no control over her own movements at all.

Finally, the music swelled to its final crescendo, signaling the end of the dance. Chloe felt an overwhelming sense of relief wash over her.

Lord Frampton escorted her back to her mother, his hand lingering on hers for a moment longer than necessary. “Thank you for the dance, Lady Swift. I look forward to our next.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” she replied, her voice steady despite the turmoil within. She curtsied politely as he bowed and took his leave.

Thank goodness that was over. That was a nightmare. Although she knew that was unlikely to be the end of the nightmare. Her father was most certainly going to want to talk about it, whether she wanted to or not. Chloe's heart sank. The Season had not gotten off to the greatest start for her, and there was still so much to come.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:14 am

“There is nothing quite like a meal at home,” Anthony chuckled as he finished his last bite. “I have very much missed the delicious food here. I know I said that yesterday, and the day before, but truly the food here is wonderful.”

Hannah and Caroline laughed, but Anthony could not help but notice that there was something akin to concern on his mother’s face.

“Are you alright?” he asked her cautiously. “You look... perturbed.”

She reached for her glass of wine, her eyes settling on Anthony with a look of tender concern. “Yes, I am quite fine, but there is something I would like to discuss with you.”

Anthony narrowed his eyes curiously. “Of course. We can discuss anything.”

“Anthony, my dear,” she began, her voice wavering with what appeared to be nerves, “have you given any thought to your future?”

“Oh.” Anthony frowned. “Well, I have to admit, Mother, that you have caught me off guard. I have only just returned. I have not been thinking about much past this moment.”

Leonora’s smile was gentle but persistent. “It is only natural for a mother to be concerned about her son’s happiness, Anthony. You always take on your responsibilities with such dedication and honor, but I can not help but wonder if you have considered settling down.”

“Well, I am back in London now...”

“You know what I mean.” Lenora cocked a knowing eyebrow. “I am wondering if the time has come for you to think about finding a wife.” She paused and caught her breath for a moment. “Because it is the Season, you know. It is hard to think of anything else when everyone else is talking about love and marriage.”

Anthony took a deep breath, setting his fork down and leaning back in his chair. He felt the weight of her question pressing on him. This was not what he expected to face in his first few days of being at home.

“I have only just returned from my Grand Tour, Mother,” he reminded her. “And I have returned to the pressure of managing the estate and our business interests. These duties of the title leave little time for matters of the heart.”

Leonora’s expression softened, her eyes filled with understanding. “I know, my dear. But there is more to life than duty. Marriage is not just an obligation; it can be a source of great joy and comfort. I want you to find someone who makes you happy.”

Anthony looked in to his mother’s concerned eyes and felt a pang of guilt. She deserved to see him happy, settled, and with a family of his own. Yet, every time he considered the possibility of marriage, his thoughts inevitably turned back to Chloe. He had been thinking of her a lot since he had been home. He could hardly shake her off his mind. Her laughter, her kindness, the way she could understand him without words... all of it haunted him. But what could he do?

There was no way that she would ever want to speak with him now. Not after the way that he had left her behind forgoing all their promises to one another. She likely did not know why, and would not understand it. Plus, he had to recall the reasons why he abandoned her in the first place... but being back in London meant that he needed to confront the past, whether he was ready for it or not.

Leonora reached across the table and patted Anthony's hand reassuringly, her eyes filled with understanding and wisdom.

"Anthony, I know your duties are important, but please, keep an open mind and heart during this Season. There are many opportunities to meet eligible young ladies who could make a wonderful wife and partner."

Anthony nodded, trying to smile as he squeezed his mother's hand gently. "I promise I will consider it, Mother."

Leonora's smile broadened, the worry lines around her eyes softening. "That is all I ask, my dear. Just promise me you will give yourself the chance to find happiness."

As Hannah and Caroline monopolized the conversation for a little while, Anthony's thoughts drifted unbidden to Chloe. Of course, because she was always there. Her face, as clear as day in his memory, brought with it a flood of unresolved feelings. He could see her laughing beside him during their childhood games, feel the warmth of her hand in his as they ran through the fields, and hear the softness of her voice during their long talks under the stars. It did not matter how far he had traveled or where he had gone, no one had ever compared to Chloe. No one even came close.

He had fallen in love with her when they were young and assumed that would take them into adulthood. He did not think that he would need to worry about the Seasons as he aged, because he had already found the love of his life. But then he had ruined it, and he was not sure if he would ever be able to come back from that.

"There is so much to look forward to," his mother finally continued, drawing Anthony back into the conversation, as if she did not sense his inner turmoil at all. "I am sure you will enjoy the events that are to come. It has been a long time since you have attended a ball in London. They are quite fabulous. As people compete to throw the best ball, they are getting grander by the minute. I am sure that you will be

surprised.”

Anthony gritted his teeth together, trying not to show his concerns about the upcoming events. That was not what he had been looking forward to when he returned home. The idea of mingling with society, pretending to be interested in courtship while his heart ached for Chloe felt like a daunting task.

“Of course, Mother,” he said, forcing a smile. “I will do my best to enjoy the Season and see where it leads.”

Leonora beamed, her excitement infectious. “That is the spirit, Anthony! Who knows, perhaps you will meet someone who captures your heart. Someone who will make your return home not just out of duty.”

There was only one woman who could do that for him, but Anthony knew that Chloe would not want to see him. She may have even moved on, and married another... that idea made his blood run ice cold. It unnerved him so much that he did not even want to ask his mother about this. He was not sure that he wanted to know. Although there was no way he could avoid this forever. He was going to have to confront his past in one way or another, whether he liked it or not.

After dinner, Anthony retreated to the solitude of his study, his mind heavy with the day’s events and the conversation with his mother. He reached into his pocket and retrieved a small, smooth pebble, a cherished memento of his bond with Chloe. The initials “C” and “A” were etched on to its surface, a tangible reminder of their childhood connection. Of the bond that they shared. Of the wonderful times that they’d had together. Sitting at his desk, Anthony ran his thumb over the familiar grooves of the initials, lost in thought. The study was filled with the soft glow of the fire, casting long shadows on the walls lined with books. The room had always been a place of comfort and reflection for him, and tonight was no different.

The memories of his youth with Chloe washed over him like a tide. He could almost hear her laughter, feel the warmth of her presence beside him. The pebble was a simple thing, but it held the weight of all the promises they had made to each other. Promises he had broken when he left for the Grand Tour without so much as an explanation.

As Anthony gazed at the pebble, he was transported back to those idyllic days spent with Chloe, skipping stones and sharing their hopes and dreams by the tranquil river near their homes. He recalled the sparkle in her eyes whenever she talked about the future, her infectious laughter that could brighten the darkest of days. They had shared everything, from childhood secrets to their deepest aspirations.

One memory, however, stood out starkly against the backdrop of their otherwise happy times together. He remembered the day Chloe's father, Lord Swift, had pulled him aside. It was a sunny afternoon, and Anthony had just finished helping Chloe gather wildflowers. It had been such a wonderful day, leaving him feeling warmer than he ever felt possible... until he had been pulled to one side.

That was when Lord Swift told him that he had to stay away from Chloe, for her own good. It was more of a threat than anything, and Anthony had always been a little nervous around Chloe's father. He was not sure what the man was capable of, especially when he was trying to make him leave. That was when he decided to go on his Grand Tour. He had hoped that distancing himself from the heartache would give Chloe the chance to find a more suitable match. With a heavy sigh, Anthony placed the pebble on his desk, his fingers lingering on its smooth surface as he grappled his conflicting emotions. He had to find a way to move forward, but how could he when his heart was still tethered to the past?

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:14 am

Chloe was lost in her thoughts, daydreaming as she often did over the breakfast table, especially when her father was droning on about other members of the ton. People she did not know or particularly care about. She could barely even hear her parents talk as she absently stirred her tea. At least not until her father coughed loudly, demanding her attention, that she finally snapped out of her drifting thoughts.

“Chloe, I must say, I was very impressed with your performance at the ball last night,” he snapped, in a strangely out of character manner.

Chloe was stunned. “Oh... thank you, Father.”

“Attracting the attention of the Duke of Fladbury was a significant achievement. Making the acquaintance of such a high ranking nobleman could lead to a most advantageous match for our family. Dancing with him... well, that was wonderful. Very clever of you.”

Chloe felt a twinge of discomfort at her father’s words. She knew that his primary concern was not her happiness but rather the family’s social standing. He always made that very obvious, but this ... this was a connection that she already knew would make her future awful. She did not like dancing with the duke at all. But of course, she had to keep that to herself. Forcing a smile, she nodded politely.

“Yes, Father, I understand.”

She could not express her true desires... to search for a love match. Not three Seasons in. At this rate, she was going to end up a lonely spinster, a burden on her family for the rest of her life. It was obvious that her father was growing impatient with her. She

also knew that it would be hard to compete with the increasing number of debutantes that came out each year, but if no man made her feel like Anthony did, then what was the point? Why marry a man who she did not enjoy? It seemed like her father was about to give her a list of reasons.

“The Duke is wealthy, influential, and well respected,” her father continued, clearly oblivious to her inner turmoil. “A match with him would secure our family’s position in society for generations to come. When I saw you on the dance floor with him, I was very happy for you.”

Chloe glanced desperately at her mother, who smiled brightly, not sensing her worries at all.

“You did dance beautifully, dear. The Duke seemed quite taken with you.”

Chloe’s smile tightened. “Thank you, Mother.”

Suddenly sensing the tension, Lady Swift gently continued, “But of course we will consider your happiness as well, Chloe. A genuine connection with a potential suitor is just as important as their social status.”

Lord Swift waved his hand dismissively. “A match with the Duke of Fladbury would bring immense benefits to our family, Lady Swift. Chloe should consider herself fortunate to have caught his eye.”

“I know, but...”

“But of course,” Lord Swift jumped in once more, stopping his wife from sticking up for Chloe’s desires. “I expect you to continue fostering this connection. The Season is not over yet, and there is still much to be done.”

Chloe's heart sank as she forced another smile. Her cheeks were starting to ache with all the falseness.

"Yes, Father," she replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

Her father gave a satisfied nod and resumed his breakfast, but Chloe's appetite had vanished. She stared at her plate, the weight of his expectations pressing down on her like a heavy cloak. The Duke of Fladbury might have impressed her parents with his charming smile and polished manners, but she could not shake the feeling of unease that settled in her heart whenever she was near him. Lord Frampton was a man who radiated power and control. He was accustomed to getting what he wanted and had a cold reputation because of that. Unfortunately, because of his title and estate, he was the sort of man that her father would prefer for her, even if Chloe was sure that she could not be happy with him. She did not even have anything in common with him, how could she live a life with a man like that? Even if it would help for generations to come.

Did she have to be miserable for that to happen? There was a coldness in his eyes that sent shivers down her spine. Dancing with Lord Frampton had been the worst part of her whole night. How could she make her father understand that?

Sensing the heavy atmosphere, Lady Swift attempted to lift Chloe's spirits. "Chloe, should we go shopping today? There are some lovely new fabrics and accessories at Madame Francine's. A new dress or two for the up coming balls might be just the thing to keep us excited for the events that are to come."

Chloe looked up at her mother, grateful for the distraction. "That sounds wonderful, Mother. I would love that."

"Agreed," her father said. "You shall want to look your best. Especially now that you have caught the attention of a duke. You shall want to stand out at any event to ensure

his eyes are not turned in another direction.”

Chloe forced another smile, her heart sinking further. “Of course, Father.”

She was not going to be able to escape this, was she? Her father was not going to let this go. The idea of having to spend more time with the duke, and even being forced into marrying him, was utterly heart breaking. She could not even begin to compare Lord Frampton to Anthony because they could not have been more different if they tried. And in the worst way possible.

But she kept all of her feelings inside as they finished up their breakfast. She hoped that she would be able to talk to her mother about this when they were alone because she really did need to get this out of her system and to have someone on her side. She was not sure how much power her mother would have over her father, but without her, she was very much on her own and trapped. About to be trapped in a marriage that she could not stand the idea of. That was not the way that she wanted this Season to end.

Later that morning, Chloe and her mother made their way through the fashionable shops of Bond Street. The vibrant atmosphere of the shopping district provided a temporary distraction from Chloe’s preoccupied mind, still dwelling on her father’s expectations and the pressure to secure a suitable match, preferably with the duke who she had disliked the most. The bustling street was lined with elegant store fronts, their windows displaying the latest fashions and accessories. Chloe tried to lose herself in the beautiful silks and satins, the intricate lace and delicate embroidery, but her thoughts kept drifting back to the unwanted attention of the Duke of Fladbury.

What on earth had she done to garner that?

Chloe was not exactly a wallflower, but she did not consider herself someone who a duke would notice either. Certainly not on her third season. She sighed inwardly, her mind flashing back to the ball. She had tried so hard to stay on the periphery, to avoid drawing attention to herself, but Lord Frampton had singled her out almost immediately. Why? What had she done to attract his interest? Whatever it was, she hoped not to do it again...

“Lady Leonora?” Chloe’s eyes snapped up as she heard her mother talking. “How wonderful it is to see you.”

Chloe’s heart began to race. Lady Leonora James along with her daughters, Hannah and Caroline, stood in front of them. Anthony’s family. Her heart ached as she tried to smile at them.

“And Hannah, Caroline, you both look lovely,” her mother continued.

Leonora returned the smile warmly. “Lady Swift, Chloe, what a pleasant surprise. We were just admiring the new collection here. It seems we all had the same idea today.”

Chloe curtsied politely. “Lady Leonora, it’s a pleasure to see you. And you too, Hannah and Caroline.”

Hannah grinned. “Chloe! It has been ages. How have you been?”

“Busy with the Season, as I am sure you have been,” Chloe replied, forcing a lightness into her voice. “There are so many events to attend.”

Caroline nodded enthusiastically. “Is it not thrilling? The balls, the soirées, the endless dance cards. It is all so exciting.”

“Hmm.” Chloe could hardly even bother to respond.

“Well, we have some news,” Lenora declared, her eyes sparkling with excitement, capturing everyone’s attention once more. “Anthony is home.”

Chloe’s heart stopped beating.

Anthony was here ?

Home?

Back in London?

Her breath caught in her throat.

“Anthony is home?” she repeated, trying to keep her voice steady.

Leonora nodded, her smile broadening. “Yes, he returned just a few days ago. We are so delighted to have him back.”

Chloe forced a smile, her mind whirling with a mix of emotions. He had been back for a few days. How did she not know that he had already been back in the country for a few days? What on earth did that mean?

“That is wonderful news, Lady Leonora. It must be so nice to have him home.”

Hannah and Caroline exchanged knowing glances, seemingly sensing the under current of emotion in Chloe’s voice.

“Indeed, it is,” Lady Leonora continued, clearly pleased. “He has been busy with his duties for now. But he is looking forward to partaking in the Season.”

Chloe’s heart fluttered with a mixture of hope and anxiety. She desperately wanted to

see Anthony, but the thought of facing him now, amidst her father's relentless pressure to secure a match with the Duke of Fladbury, filled her with dread. She forced herself to maintain her composure.

As the conversation continued, Chloe's mind drifted back to her childhood with Anthony, the carefree days they had spent together. She had so many questions, but she did not dare voice them now in the middle of Bond Street. Perhaps it was best not to voice them at all...

Just then, as if the universe had heard her thoughts, Anthony appeared around the corner, carrying a small package. He looked every bit the distinguished gentleman, his presence commanding and his eyes searching the crowd. When his gaze locked on to Chloe, he froze for a moment, surprise and a flicker of something deeper crossing his face. Handsome as ever. Painfully so. It seemed like her heart was never going to be able to let this man go...

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:14 am

Bond Street, with its flurry of activity and cacophony of fashionable chatter, was always a trial for Anthony. His mother and sisters delighted in its splendor, stopping at every glittering window display and exclaiming over the latest in Parisian fashions. Anthony, however, found the entire endeavor quite tedious. It was only the prospect of a good meal afterward that had convinced him to accompany them today.

“Anthony, do keep up,” his mother called, her tone brooking no argument as she motioned him closer. “We still have a lot of places that we need to visit.”

He quickened his pace, slipping through the crowd with ease. The streets of London were always busy, but he had gotten used to crowds in the European cities he had been to.

His reverie was abruptly interrupted when a voice called out from behind him. “Anthony? Is that you?”

He turned to see an old school friend, Edward Hawthorne, approaching with a broad smile.

“Edward! It has been ages,” Anthony replied, shaking his hand warmly.

“Yes, it has,” Edward agreed, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “What brings you back to London? I thought you were off conquering the Continent.”

Anthony chuckled. “I am back for good now. Family obligations and all that. How have you been?”

“Oh wonderful. I do not know if you are aware, but I got married last year.”

Anthony raised an eyebrow, genuinely pleased for his friend. “Congratulations, Edward! That is wonderful news. Who is the lucky lady?”

Edward beamed with pride. “Lady Margaret Thompson. You remember her, right? We met at one of those interminable garden parties a few years back.”

Anthony nodded, recalling the lively young woman with a keen wit and infectious laugh. “I do remember. She is a fine match. You must be very happy together.”

“We are,” Edward confirmed, his smile broadening. “And what about you, Anthony? Any prospects on the horizon?”

Anthony’s thoughts immediately drifted to Chloe, but he quickly masked his feelings with a casual shrug. “Nothing concrete. I have only just returned, after all.”

Edward gave him a knowing look but did not press further. “Well, there is plenty of time. The Season is still young. Perhaps we’ll see you at some of the up coming events. I do not know if you have heard, but this is supposed to be one of the most exciting Seasons thus far.”

“Yes, I have heard as much, and I am sure we will cross paths since my mother is determined to have me at every dance,” Anthony replied, grateful for the distraction. “It is good to see you again, Edward, but I must catch up with my mother. I am supposed to be carrying all of her parcels.”

Edward laughed. “It is good to run in to you, Anthony. I look forward to seeing you again.”

Anthony took off, worried that he had lost his family through the crowd. Just as he

reached his mother's side, he saw her engaged in animated conversation with a young lady. Her profile was strikingly familiar. The soft cascade of her hair, the graceful tilt of her head...

It could not be...

But who else could it be?

It had to be.

It was.

Chloe .

Anthony felt his breath catch in his throat. She looked more beautiful than he remembered, her eyes bright and her smile radiant. It was as though the years apart had refined her beauty, making her more captivating than ever. His heart nearly leapt out of his throat with excitement, but the nerves got the better of him as well. He did not know how to react.

"Anthony!" his mother exclaimed, noticing his approach. "Look who we have run in to! Lady Swift and Chloe."

Chloe turned to face him fully, her expression composed yet surprisingly cool. Anthony could not help but marvel at her poise, though it stung to see a hint of reserve in her eyes. Where was the young girl whose eyes had always lit up at the mere sight of him?

"Chloe," he greeted, taking her hand and bowing slightly. "What a pleasant surprise."

Chloe inclined her head, her smile polite. "Anthony, it is... good to see you again."

The formality in her tone was unmistakable. Anthony's heart sank slightly, but he pushed the feeling aside, determined to make the most of this unexpected encounter. He had been trying to mentally prepare himself for seeing Chloe again, so perhaps she had been doing the same thing. Maybe the more that they talked, the more her walls would come down and their bond would return.

"How have you been?" he asked, searching her eyes for any sign of the warmth they once shared.

"I have been well, thank you," Chloe replied, her voice even. "And yourself?"

"Quite well, thank you," Anthony said, though his mind was far from calm.

He sensed an invisible barrier between them, a distance that had not been there before. It made him regret ever setting foot out of London, even for a moment.

"It has been too long."

"Yes, it has," Chloe agreed, her smile not quite reaching her eyes. "Far too long."

Anthony felt a pang of regret. He had hoped that seeing Chloe again would rekindle their old camaraderie, but instead, it felt as though they were strangers.

"I see you have been keeping busy," he remarked, gesturing to the parcels at her feet.

Chloe nodded. "Indeed. One must stay occupied. Especially during the Season."

Her words were light, but Anthony detected an under current of reproach. He longed to explain himself, to tell her that his silence had not been born of neglect but necessity. Yet, in the bustling street, with his mother and sisters watching, it was impossible. Had she moved on? Did she no longer see him in the same light? That

saddened Anthony. He swallowed hard, struggling to keep a smile on his face.

“Your mother tells me you have been abroad for quite some time,” Chloe said, her voice carefully neutral. “On a Grand Tour.”

She was hurt. He could see that. Because he never said a thing before he left.

“Yes,” Anthony replied, feeling the weight of his mother’s curious gaze upon him. “Several years, actually. It has been... enlightening.”

Chloe nodded, her eyes searching his face for a moment before she looked away. “I imagine you have seen many interesting places.”

“I have,” he said, trying to sound enthusiastic. “But it seems London has changed as well. I almost did not recognize Bond Street with all its new shops.”

“Yes, it has grown quite lively,” Chloe agreed. “And the fashions have certainly become more elaborate. I am sure you will see during the Season.”

Their parents involved themselves in their own conversation, but Anthony could still sense his mother listening in with half an ear.

“What about you, Chloe?” Anthony asked, desperate to keep the conversation going. He ached for their connection, he needed it back somehow. “How have you been keeping yourself occupied?”

“Much the same as always,” Chloe replied, her voice tinged with a hint of wistfulness. “Attending social events, fulfilling my duties as expected. It has been the same way for all the years you have been gone.”

Anthony could sense the under lying frustration in her words once more. Life seemed

to be a struggle for her, but he could not yet find out why. He longed to ask more, to understand what she truly felt, but the setting was far from ideal.

“And your music?” he asked, remembering her love for the piano. “Do you still play the pianoforte?”

“Yes, I have been continuing to play.” As she bit down on her bottom lip, Anthony felt his heart flutter.

“I have missed your playing,” he confessed.

“Oh, I am sure you have heard a lot of wonderful music while you have been away. Europe is famed to have some of the most beautiful music in the world.”

“But nothing is quite the same,” Anthony half whispered. “There is nowhere quite like home.”

Could she read between the lines? Did she know what he was trying to tell her? She always used to, but that was before. Now... he was not sure. But as their eyes met a flicker of the old familiarity seemed to pass between them, like a whisper from the past. Chloe quickly looked away, her cheeks tinged with a faint blush.

“Yes, home has a way of making everything else seem... distant.”

Now the only thing that did not feel distant to Anthony was Chloe. Of course, she was not her typical warm self, but she was still the closest person to him. Just as she always had been. It seemed that time and distance could do nothing to change that.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:15 am

I can not do this.

Chloe's thoughts were a whirl wind as she stared at Anthony, his presence so familiar yet so foreign after all these years. She had not been given any warning that he was home, back in London, until his mother had mentioned it mere seconds before he was standing right in front of her. It was too much. She was utterly overwhelmed. Chloe knew that she needed to be calm, and to not allow any of her emotions to shine free, but it was getting increasingly difficult. Trying to have a calm and collected conversation with Anthony was just too much.

Her heart pounded in her chest, a physical ache that matched the turmoil in her mind. Her hands trembled slightly, and she felt a flush rising to her cheeks. She could barely breathe. She ran her eyes over him, taking in the changes time had wrought. He was more handsome than ever, his features sharpened by maturity. His eyes, still the same deep shade of blue, now held a depth and intensity that made her heart skip a beat. His strong jaw line, the slight stubble that only added to his rugged appeal, and the way he carried himself with a confidence born from experience... all of it was too much.

Feeling the weight of expectation pressing down on her, Chloe forced a polite smile, but her heart raced with a tumult of emotions she could barely contain. Every word exchanged felt like a carefully measured step on a precarious tight rope, and the more they spoke, the more difficult it became to maintain her composure. Her head was absolutely throbbing with anxiety. It was a relief when Hannah eventually tugged their mother away, excited about another store that she had seen. It was time to say their goodbyes, for now. With Anthony back in the country, she was not going to be able to avoid him as much as she liked.

“Well, I am sure that we shall see you soon, Lenora.”

“Oh yes, Lady Swift, we must catch up properly...”

As the group began to part ways, Anthony caught Chloe’s eye one last time. His blue gaze held a mixture of hope and uncertainty that tugged at her heart strings.

“It was good to see you again, Chloe,” he said, his voice carrying a softness that made her ache.

“Yes, it was,” she replied, barely managing to keep her voice steady.

Perhaps it was, maybe it was not. Truth be told, she could not be sure. Chloe needed some time to get her head in order after this unexpected meet up in the middle of her shopping trip. Not that she wanted to shop any longer...

She curtsied politely, turning away before he could see the tears welling up in her eyes. What was she going to do now? This Season, which was already challenging enough, had just gotten a whole lot harder. She could not shake the fear of seeing him court other women through out the Season, the dread of watching him smile and laugh with someone else. The mere thought made her stomach twist in knots. She truly felt sick to her stomach. The Duke of Fladbury was nothing to worry about compared to this . Losing Anthony and not knowing what had happened to him was one thing... having to see it with her own eyes was going to truly be something else entirely.

“Oh, I have been looking forward to visiting this perfume shop,” her mother declared as she tugged on Chloe’s arm, completely unaware of her inner turmoil. “Come on, Chloe. Let us step inside.”

Chloe used this as an opportunity to get a moment alone.

“I shall just stay outside for a moment, Mother. I need some fresh air,” she said, her voice strained but controlled. “I will not be far.”

Her mother paused, scrutinizing Chloe’s face with a concerned frown. “Are you sure, dear? You look a bit pale.”

“I am quite alright,” Chloe insisted, offering a reassuring smile. “I just need a moment.”

Her mother hesitated before nodding. “Very well, but do not wander off too far.”

Chloe watched her mother disappear into the shop, her smile fading as soon as she was out of sight. She took a deep breath, trying to calm the storm inside her. She needed a walk, to burn off some of this nervous energy, before it swallowed her up whole. Rose followed her, giving her some distance to catch her breath. Chloe was not sure if her ladies maid understood her upset, but she was grateful for a moment to think. Not that she could control her thoughts at all. Anthony... the duke... the Season... she truly did not know how she was supposed to navigate any of it.

As she and Rose stepped out onto the bustling street, Chloe’s thoughts continued to race, a cacophony of confusion and heart ache. Her mind was so preoccupied that she failed to notice the rising commotion around her... the frantic shouts, the terrified gasps of pedestrians scattering in all directions. It was not until a piercing scream cut through her reverie that Chloe looked up, her heart jolting as she saw the massive horse barreling towards her, its eyes wild with fear, hooves striking the cobble stones like thunderclaps.

Time seemed to decelerate, each second stretching into an eternity. The street around her blurred into a haze of movement and noise. Chloe’s body locked up, her muscles rigid with terror. She could not move, could not think. She could only watch in helpless horror as the enormous animal bore down on her with unstoppable force.

Everything narrowed to the pounding of her heart and the approaching doom. She could see the whites of the horse's eyes, hear the desperate cries of those trying to get out of its path. Her mind screamed at her to move, but her limbs refused to obey. She braced herself, knowing with a dreadful certainty that she was about to be trampled...

Antony, he still had his eyes upon her.

He could not drag his gaze away, which was why he spotted the nightmare unfolding. The horse... it was out of control, barreling down the street. But worse than that, it was headed towards Chloe. His heart lurched. Without a moment's hesitation, he sprang into action, his only thought to protect her. The world around him blurred, and all he could focus on was reaching her in time.

"Chloe!" he shouted, his voice getting lost in the chaos of the street.

His legs moved faster than he thought possible, every stride bringing him ever closer to her. The horse, wild and uncontrollable, charged forward, its eyes wide with fear. Anthony's heart pounded in his chest, each beat a count down to disaster. He was running out of time.

He could not run out of time.

With a burst of adrenaline-fueled strength, Anthony leapt and reached out to Chloe. He wrapped his arms around her waist, yanking her to safety at the very last second. The animal thundered past them, missing Chloe by inches. They tumbled to the ground, rolling away from the horse's lethal hooves. Breathing heavily, Anthony held Chloe close, his heart still racing with fear and relief.

"Are you alright?" he asked urgently, his eyes scanning her for any sign of injury.

“Oh, Chloe...”

Chloe looked up at him, her eyes wide and filled with shock.

“Yes... yes, I think so,” she stammered, trying to catch her breath. “I did not know...”

Their hearts were racing in unison. He could feel her pulse pounding just as his was. Rose, who had been pushed aside in the chaos, rushed to Chloe’s side, her face struck with sheer panic.

“My lady! Are you hurt?” she asked, her voice trembling.

“I am fine, Rose,” Chloe assured her, though her voice was still shaky. She turned back to Anthony, her gratitude and confusion mingling in her eyes. “Thank you, Anthony. I did not see it coming until it was too late. I could not seem to move no matter how much I wanted to. You saved me.”

Anthony’s grip on her waist loosened slightly, but he did not let go entirely. He needed to be sure she was truly safe.

“What happened?” he gasped out.

Chloe managed a small, shaky smile. “I suppose I was lost in my thoughts.”

As the shock of the moment subsided, Anthony helped Chloe to her feet, his hands lingering on her arms a moment longer than necessary. The crowd that had gathered around them filled the air with hushed whispers. Lady Swift and Leonora rushed to their side, their faces etched with concern and relief.

“Chloe, my dear, are you alright?” Lady Swift asked, her voice trembling as she clasped Chloe’s hands. “What happened? I heard all the chaos.”

“Yes, Mother, I am fine,” Chloe replied, her voice steady. She turned to Anthony, her eyes filled with gratitude. “Thanks to Anthony.”

Leonora looked at Anthony, her expression a mixture of gratitude and suspicion. “Thank you, Anthony. We are indebted to you.”

Anthony nodded, still keeping a protective hand on Chloe’s arm. “I am just glad I was here. A runaway horse came out of nowhere. I do not know what has happened to it...”

At that moment, the sound of hurried footsteps drew their attention. The carriage driver, out of breath and disheveled, was chasing after the runaway horse, weaving through the throngs of people who had gathered. His face was a mask of determination and worry.

“Make way! Make way!” he shouted, his voice strained with effort.

Anthony glanced back at Chloe, ensuring she was steady on her feet, before turning to the driver.

“What happened?” he called out.

The driver slowed to a halt, bending over with his hands on his knees as he tried to catch his breath.

“The horse... it got spooked,” he gasped. “A dog... a loud bark... lost control.”

Anthony’s brow furrowed with concern. “Is there anything we can do to help?”

The driver shook his head. “I need to catch it... before it causes more trouble. Thank you, sir, for helping the lady.”

With that, the driver took off again, his pursuit of the horse resuming. The crowd began to disperse, the excitement dying down, but the incident left a lingering tension in the air.

Lady Swift, still clutching Chloe's hands, turned to Anthony. "This is too much excitement for one day. We must get Chloe home to rest."

"Indeed," Leonora agreed, her voice firm. "Anthony, would you accompany them to the carriage? I feel safer knowing you are with them after this... incident."

Anthony nodded without hesitation, his concern for Chloe overriding any social propriety. "Of course I will."

Chloe glanced at him, her eyes still wide with residual fear and gratitude. "Thank you, Anthony. I do not know what I would have done if you had not been there."

Anthony's heart swelled at her words, but he kept his expression calm. "It was nothing, Chloe. I am just relieved you're safe."

They made their way to the waiting carriage, the tension from the incident still hanging in the air. Anthony kept a watchful eye on Chloe, ensuring she did not falter. His protective hand remained lightly on her arm, a reassuring presence she seemed to lean into.

"Be safe," he told her before he closed the carriage door. "Please, Chloe."

After all that had happened, Anthony also felt like it was time to go back home. Thankfully, once he returned to his family they agreed with him. The carriage ride was filled with his sister's chatter about the day, but Anthony could not say a word. His thoughts were far too consumed by Chloe and the day's harrowing events. Even as Hannah and Caroline discussed the near miss with concern and relief, Anthony

remained silent, staring out the window, lost in his reflections.

Upon arriving home, Anthony excused himself immediately, his mind still reeling. He went straight to his study, where he hoped to find some solace among his books and letters. But as he sat at his desk, the correspondence and business matters that usually demanded his attention seemed trivial. He could not focus on anything but Chloe and the intense emotions that had been stirred within him.

The image of Chloe in peril haunted him... the fear in her eyes as the horse charged towards her, the desperate urgency with which he had reached out to pull her to safety. He remembered the rush of adrenaline, the pounding of his heart drowning out all other sounds except for her name on his lips. The memory of holding her close after the danger had passed was vivid. Her body pressed against his, her warmth seeping into him, had brought forth a wave of emotions he had buried deep within. The relief that she was unharmed mingled with a profound longing, a longing he had tried so desperately to suppress over the years. Anthony had convinced himself that distance and time would dim the intensity of his feelings for Chloe.

Yet, seeing her again, in such a vulnerable moment, had shattered that illusion. The years apart had not diminished his love for her; if anything, they had amplified it, reminding him of all he had left behind. He had left for the Grand Tour to escape the pain of their separation, to carve out a future that did not revolve around the ache in his heart. But Chloe had never truly left his thoughts. Her laughter, her smile, the way she looked at him with those eyes that held a universe of emotions... those memories had stayed with him, even across oceans and continents.

Now, fate had brought them together again, under circumstances that felt both miraculous and agonizing.

Anthony rose from his desk and paced the room, running his fingers through his hair in frustration. He knew that his feelings for Chloe had never truly faded, despite the

years of separation and the obstacles that had kept them apart. The memory of her father's stern warning echoed in his mind, a painful reminder of the class divide that stood between them. Yet, as he reflected on the events of the day, Anthony could not help but feel a glimmer of hope. The way Chloe had looked at him in the aftermath of the incident, the gratitude and something more profound in her eyes, suggested that perhaps her feelings for him had not entirely vanished either.

But what on earth could they do about that?

The more that he thought about it, the more helpless he felt. He knew he had to tread carefully. The societal expectations, the disapproval of Chloe's father, and the complexities of their own emotions created a labyrinth he was unsure how to navigate. But he also knew that he might regret it forever if he let her slip through his fingers.

The last thing he wanted was a lifetime of regrets.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:15 am

Chloe sat in the carriage, her heart still racing from the incident. She could not shake the feeling that this moment had irrevocably altered the course of her life. Anthony's arms around her, his voice calling her name, and the sheer terror she had felt seemed to have imprinted themselves on her soul. She had never felt so many things all at once. She truly was a mess.

As they arrived home, the reality of what had happened began to really sink in. Her mother immediately summoned the family physician to examine Chloe, to see what the injuries truly were. Although Chloe felt like the worst injuries were inside, where they could not be seen.

"There is slight bruising," the older gentleman physician said, his voice calm and reassuring. "Nothing serious, but you should take some time to rest, my dear. You have had quite a fright."

Chloe nodded, barely hearing his words. Her mind was still on Anthony, the way he had looked at her with such intensity, such concern. She could not help but wonder what it all meant. If it meant anything at all...

When her father returned home, he came to the drawing room where Lady Swift and Chloe awaited him, his expression one of mild annoyance.

"What is all this fuss about?" he demanded. "Did I just see the physician leaving here?"

Lady Swift stood up, her face pale but composed.

“Neville, there was an incident in town,” Lady Swift started. “Chloe was nearly trampled by a runaway horse. It was dreadful. Luckily, we had just run into the James family, and Anthony was around to rescue her.”

Chloe watched as her father’s expression darkened. He should be pleased that his daughter had been rescued, yet his demeanor suggested otherwise.

“Anthony, you say?” Lord Swift’s voice was tight, controlled. “How... fortuitous.”

Chloe felt a pang of hurt at her father’s reaction. “Yes, Father, he saved my life. If it were not for him, I might have been seriously injured, or worse.”

Lord Swift turned his sharp gaze on her, and for a moment, Chloe felt like a child again, chastised for some minor infraction. “You were careless, Chloe. How could you not see a horse barreling towards you?”

Her mother interjected softly, “Lord Swift, this is hardly the time to scold her. She has been through enough today.”

Chloe’s eyes filled with tears. “I was lost in my thoughts, Father. It was an accident.”

Lord Swift’s face softened slightly, but the tension in the room was palpable. “Well, you are safe now. That is what matters. But you must be more careful in the future.”

Chloe nodded, biting her lip to keep the tears at bay. She wanted to defend herself, to make her father understand the terror she had felt, but she knew it was pointless. He would never see past his disapproval of Anthony. A disapproval that only came because Anthony did not have the sort of title that he would like.

“We must be particularly careful,” her father continued. “At the moment. We do not want some sort of scandal to get in the duke’s mind...”

Luckily, her mother stepped up and interrupted. Lady Swift gently placed a hand on Chloe's shoulder. "Rest now, Chloe. You've had a difficult day. We will discuss this further when you are feeling better."

But that was not truly a relief because they were still going to have to discuss this further...

Chloe sat in the drawing room the next morning, a soft ache radiating from her right side where she had tumbled with Anthony the previous day. Despite the discomfort, she was grateful for the excuse to stay indoors and avoid another taxing day out in London among the ton. Seraphina had come over almost immediately after hearing of Chloe's mishap, her concern touching Chloe deeply. She had taken to sitting with Chloe, silently caring for her, while also talking to Chloe's mother. Chloe was not sure what about, she could not focus on any of it. Probably recounting some scandal or another from a previous ball. The usual gossip that simply did not interest her today.

Chloe sipped her tea, the warmth of the liquid offering little comfort against the thoughts swirling in her mind. Her thoughts were consumed by Anthony, and the way his strong arms had felt around her as he caught her from her fall. She had not even known that he was back in London, so she certainly did not expect to have him hold her like that. A shiver ran down her spine at the memory. It had been so long since she had seen him, and his sudden reappearance had thrown her emotions in to disarray.

If only she had been given time to prepare herself...

The cool, polite facade she had maintained during their brief encounter on Bond Street had cost her dearly. She had wanted nothing more than to scold him for his

absence, to demand an explanation for his silence. But the public setting and the presence of his family had made such an outburst impossible. Not unless she wanted to draw attention to herself by causing a scene, and maybe even a scandal. Of course, her father had it drilled into her that she absolutely must not cause a scandal, no matter what. Not that she had been successful in keeping out of the eyes of the ton.

“Chloe, are you quite alright?” Seraphina’s gentle voice broke through her thoughts.

Chloe started slightly, realizing she had been absent mindedly stirring her tea for several minutes.

“Yes, yes, I am fine,” she replied, forcing a smile. “Just a bit sore from my fall.”

“You seemed miles away,” her mother remarked, her eyes narrowing with curiosity.

“Are you sure there is nothing else on your mind?”

Chloe shook her head, unwilling to divulge the turmoil within her.

“Nothing of importance,” she said, hoping to deflect the conversation. “Sorry, I did not mean to be so distracted today.” Chloe offered a faint smile and resumed sipping her tea.

Her mind, however, continued to drift back to Anthony. She remembered the intensity in his eyes when he looked at her, the way his presence had filled the air around them. There had been a flicker of something in his gaze, a longing that mirrored her own. It was a look that she had dreamed of all night long. And that was not to mention the electrical current of desire that ran through her body as they touched. It was no wonder that she had not managed to move on when no other man made her feel anything like that. No one ever had, and she was quite sure that no one ever would.

The tranquility of the moment was shattered by the butler entering the room.

“His Grace, the Duke of Fladbury has arrived,” the butler intoned. “He has requested a meeting.”

Chloe’s heart sank.

The drawing room suddenly felt oppressive, as if the walls were closing in on her. She steeled herself for the encounter, straightening her posture and smoothing the skirts of her pale blue morning dress. She knew that she must maintain a facade of polite interest, even though the very thought of the duke’s presence filled her with a sense of dread.

“Thank you, Rogers,” Chloe's mother replied, nodding to the butler. “Show him in, please.”

Chloe took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. She had not expected the Duke of Fladbury to call on her, especially not so soon after the incident. Her mind raced with questions. Why was he here? What did he want? The atmosphere in the drawing room shifted once more as Lord Frampton entered, carrying a large bouquet of flowers. His entrance was grand, almost theatrical, as he presented the flowers to Chloe with a flourish.

“My dear Lady Swift,” Lord Frampton began, his voice filled with what almost sounded like genuine concern. “I heard about the dreadful accident in Bond Street yesterday and came as soon as I could. I hope you are recovering well.”

Chloe felt her cheeks warm with embarrassment. Tongues were already wagging. She had already become a topic of gossip which was never a place she wanted to be. The thought made her stomach churn. She accepted the flowers, their fragrance overwhelming her senses.

“Thank you, Your Grace. That is very kind of you.”

As she glanced around the room, she caught a glimpse of both her mother and Seraphina’s concerned expressions. Lady Swift’s eyes held a mix of worry and pride, while Seraphina’s gaze was filled with sisterly affection and concern.

“Lady Swift,” Lord Frampton continued, seating himself across from Chloe, his eyes never leaving her face, “I must say, London society is all the poorer when you are not out amongst us. Your presence brings a light to any room.”

Chloe forced a polite smile, her mind racing for a suitable response. “You are too kind, Your Grace. I am sure society can manage quite well without me for a day or two.”

Frampton’s eyes glinted with amusement. “Ah, but society’s loss is my gain. I must admit, I find your company most agreeable.”

Chloe felt a shiver of discomfort at his words. There was something in the duke’s gaze that made her uneasy, a possessiveness that she could not shake. She could only hope that this conversation would end soon and that she would not have to endure his presence for much longer.

“Your Grace,” Lady Swift interjected smoothly, sensing her daughter’s discomfort, “might I offer you more tea?”

“Indeed, Lady Swift,” Lord Frampton replied with a gracious nod, “I would be delighted.”

As Lady Swift motioned for the butler to bring more tea, Chloe took the opportunity to compose herself. She needed to remain calm and poised, no matter how unsettled she felt. She knew her father would be furious if she did anything to jeopardize her

potential match with the Duke. She had to play her part, even if it meant concealing her true feelings.

Chloe struggled to maintain a polite smile as Lord Frampton talked, her mind drifting to thoughts of Anthony and the genuine connection they shared. She could not help but compare Lord Frampton's superficial charm to the depth of emotion she felt in Anthony's presence. The difference was stark, and it made her heart ache with longing for the man who truly understood her.

Julian settled into the plush chair across from Chloe in her drawing room, his posture relaxed and confident. The delicate clinking of china filled the air as Lady Swift poured the tea that had been brought for them, but his attention was solely focused on Chloe. He allowed himself a moment to admire her, his eyes tracing the delicate lines of her features, from her soft curls to her porcelain skin. She would make a stunning addition to his life, a perfect complement to his grandeur.

"Lady Swift, I must say your home is quite charming," Julian began, his voice smooth and practiced. "It reflects your own elegance and refinement."

"Thank you, Your Grace," Chloe replied, her tone polite but distant. She shifted slightly in her seat, clearly uncomfortable under his scrutinizing gaze. "That is very kind of you."

She was less enthusiastic than other women in his presence. But that continued to excite him, he liked the thrill of the chase. It would make the inevitable catch that much more worth while.

Julian continued, unworried by her discomfort. "You know, I was recently in correspondence with Lord Pembroke. He was quite impressed with the developments

in my latest venture. The success of my investments in India has been nothing short of remarkable. I told you about them at the ball, did I not?"

"You did," Chloe replied with a nod.

"I have heard that you are quite an impressive man," Lady Seraphina joined in, but Julian did not want to give her any attention, so he ignored her remark.

"Indeed," he said, redirecting his focus to Chloe. "It is essential to maintain a certain level of prestige and influence in our circles. Connections and wealth are what keep us at the top, after all. But I am sure you know as much."

Julian sipped his tea, his eyes never leaving Chloe's. Chloe's polite smile remained, but he could sense the tension in her. She was a challenge, and he relished the thought of winning her over. Because of course he would win her over.

"Lady Swift," He said, leaning forward slightly, "I wonder if you enjoy games."

"Games, Your Grace?" Chloe looked puzzled, her fingers tightening around her teacup.

"Yes, games of wit and intellect. For instance, a game of chess or perhaps a friendly wager." His eyes sparkled with vindictiveness. "I wonder if you would like to play a game with me."

Chloe's cheeks flamed red. It was the first time he had spotted a vulnerability within her.

"I do not know if I would win a game against you."

"Oh," he agreed. "I have no doubt that you would lose."

Julian watched as Chloe's expression shifted, a mix of irritation and curiosity flashing in her eyes. He was getting to her, and he found it exhilarating.

"But," he continued, leaning back slightly, "the true challenge lies in the effort, does it not? One can always learn from their defeats and grow stronger. It is not always about winning, but about the journey."

He had baffled her, he could see that, and that was the most fun of all. He was not going to allow Lady Swift to slip through his fingers easily. Perhaps not at all.

"You see, Lady Swift, much of my life has been dedicated to ensuring the prosperity and reputation of my family. My ventures in commerce and finance have not only secured our standing but have elevated it to unprecedented heights. So fun and games... that is something I value because I have little time to partake in them."

He paused, allowing the weight of his words to settle in the room. Chloe listened intently, her eyes fixed on him, though the faintest hint of skepticism lingered in her expression. Undeterred, he pressed on.

"I take great pride in my business acumen," he continued, his voice carrying the confidence of one accustomed to commanding attention. "My family relies on my foresight and leadership, just as my employees rely on my decisions to safeguard their livelihoods. It is a responsibility I do not take lightly."

He needed her to see, to understand that he was the best prospect for her. That there could be no one better, otherwise he would not win this game. Chloe's gaze never wavered, though her knuckles whitened as she gripped her teacup tighter. Julian sensed he was on the verge of breaking through her composed exterior, but he also knew he had to tread carefully. Especially because her mother and best friend were in the room.

“Your dedication is admirable, Your Grace,” Chloe said, her voice steady, though her eyes flashed with a challenge. “However, I believe that true strength lies not just in power or wealth, but in the ability to empathize and connect with others on a deeper level.”

Julian smile faltered slightly. This was unexpected. Most women were enthralled by his wealth and influence, but Chloe was pushing back, questioning his very foundation. He was not too sure how to handle that.

“Hmm, perhaps.” He scanned his eyes around the room, wondering how he could impress next. “Ah, a pianoforte. You know, I play...”

"Really?" Chloe arched an eyebrow, genuine surprise flickering in her eyes. “As do I.”

Oh.

That would not impress her if she also knew how to play. But he did not mind, she was a worthy opponent, that was for sure. He just needed to focus on the things that women could not do. That would impress her. He leaned back, feigning casual interest.

"How splendid," he said. "Perhaps we should play a duet sometime. But, I must say, my true passion lies in the more strategic realms. I find the art of fencing to be particularly invigorating. Have you ever tried your hand at it, Lady Swift?"

Chloe shook her head, her expression guarded. "No, Your Grace, I have not."

And he found himself back on track, just like that.

“Well, it is one of the games that I am rather accomplished at...”

When will this be over?

Chloe could not stand this. She hated it. Half the time, she did not know what Lord Frampton was talking about, and she most certainly had no idea what he was getting at. There always seemed to be an under lying meaning. Something there to trip her up. It was terrible.

And now this very strange mention of games...

Well that truly worried her.

She sat stiffly, her hands clasped tightly in her lap, trying to maintain a semblance of politeness as Lord Frampton droned on about his latest hunting expedition. His voice, though smooth and cultured, grated on her nerves, each word stretching out the minutes into what felt like hours.

“Ah, Lady Swift, you should have seen the size of the stag,” Lord Frampton was saying, his eyes glinting with a predatory gleam. “You would have been impressed; I am sure.”

Chloe forced a smile, nodding at appropriate intervals, but her mind was elsewhere. She wondered where Anthony was at that very moment and what he might be doing. Was he also thinking of her and what happened? Or was he excited about all the connections he was likely to make during the Season? The idea of him planning to court others, especially the beautiful new debutantes that had recently come out, was a little sickening to Chloe. Even more than this conversation.

The minutes seemed to drag on interminably, each tick of the grandfather clock in the corner a reminder of how little time she had to herself. She glanced at the clock,

noting that it had only been a quarter of an hour since Lord Frampton's arrival, yet it felt like an eternity. Even with Seraphina and her mother in the room, the atmosphere was terrible.

Finally, Lord Frampton paused, his tale of conquest seemingly complete. He straightened in his chair, his eyes narrowing slightly as he regarded her.

"Lady Swift," he said, his tone suddenly formal, "I have a proposition for you."

Chloe's heart skipped a beat, and she forced herself to meet his gaze, bracing for whatever was to come.

"I would be honored if you would accompany me to the opera on Wednesday evening next week," Lord Frampton continued, his expression unreadable. "I think it is something that you should enjoy very much."

Caught off guard by the sudden request, Chloe hesitated, her mind racing. How could this man possibly know what she might enjoy? He was yet to even ask her one question about herself. She knew that her father would not be thrilled by the prospect of her turning down such an invitation. Lord Frampton was a powerful man, and an advantageous match in her father's eyes. The most powerful that she had attracted yet during the Season.

After a brief, tense moment, she nodded. "Of course, Your Grace. I would be delighted to attend."

Lord Frampton's lips curved into a satisfied smile, and he rose to his feet. He took a step closer to her, bowing slightly as he extended his hand. Chloe placed her gloved hand in his, suppressing a shudder as his lips brushed against her knuckles.

"It will be a night to remember, my lady," Lord Frampton murmured, his voice low

and intimate.

Chloe forced another smile, though she could feel the revulsion creeping up her spine.

“I look forward to it,” she managed to say, her voice steady despite the turmoil inside her.

With a final, lingering look, Lord Frampton straightened and made his way to the door. Chloe watched him go, her heart pounding in her chest. The moment the door closed behind him, she let out a shaky breath, her composure crumbling. With the Duke’s long awaited departure, Chloe sank back in to her chair, the weight of her own desires and the expectations placed upon her threatening to crush her spirit. Seraphina, seemingly sensing her friend’s distress, reached out to clasp Chloe’s hand in a gesture of support. The two young women shared a look of understanding, both keenly aware of the pressures they faced in a society that valued status and wealth above all else. At least she had Seraphina with her. Someone who understood what she was going through.

“Are you alright, my dear?” Lady Swift’s voice was gentle, concern etched upon her delicate features. “That was a lot, I know.”

Chloe sighed, her voice trembling slightly. “I could never envision myself married to a gentleman as arrogant and conceited as the Duke of Fladbury,” she admitted. “But I know Father will expect nothing less.”

Lady Swift tried to console her daughter, her words offering a momentary relief to Chloe’s troubled heart. “I understand, Chloe. We must have hope that your father will come to see reason in time.”

But both women knew they were powerless to defy his wishes. Chloe’s eyes welled

with unshed tears as she contemplated the bleak future that lay ahead if she did not find a way to alter her path.

“When will this be over?” Chloe whispered again, more to herself than anyone in the room.

The despair in her voice was palpable. Seraphina tightened her grip on Chloe’s hand, her own eyes reflecting the empathy and frustration she felt for her friend.

“We will figure something out,” she murmured. “We always do.”

Chloe offered her a weak smile, appreciating the sentiment, though it did little to ease the weight pressing down on her chest. She did not think anything would ever ease the stress of this. Not until it crushed her completely.

As the room settled into a heavy silence, Chloe’s mind wandered to the dreaded prospect of attending the opera with Lord Frampton. The very thought of spending an entire evening in his company filled her with a deep sense of foreboding. She could already picture the scene: Lord Frampton, with his smug smile and overbearing presence, guiding her through the crowded hallways, reveling in the attention and admiration that his status commanded. He would surely expect her to hang on his every word, to laugh at his jokes, to nod and smile as he recounted his endless tales of bravado and conquest. Chloe knew she would be forced to maintain a façade of politeness, to suppress her true feelings and play the part of the dutiful daughter. The thought made her stomach churn.

“What if I can not do it?” she voiced her fear aloud, her eyes fixed on a distant point beyond the window. “What if I can not pretend for an entire evening at the opera with him? What if I find him so unbearable that it is simply written all over my face?”

Chloe could feel Seraphina’s eyes upon her, willing her to do what she needed to. She

had to get through this as best as she could, without creating a scandal. That was her main priority. Especially now that she was already the center of gossip, simply because a run away horse had almost killed her. It did not seem fair. Not at all.

"Perhaps you do not need to pretend," Seraphina suggested gently, breaking the silence that had enveloped them. "Maybe you can find a way to turn the conversation to things you enjoy or steer it towards neutral topics. Maybe even find a way to talk about yourself a little."

Chloe sighed, shaking her head. "Lord Frampton does not seem like the type to allow his conversations to be directed by anyone but himself. And he does not truly appear to care about what I think or feel. He is only interested in impressing me. Or impressing everyone."

Seraphina nodded, understanding Chloe's predicament. "Still, it might be worth a try. Sometimes, these men are so wrapped up in their own world that they do not even realize when someone else takes control of the conversation. He certainly seemed to be wrapped up in himself then."

"That is how he was at the ball also."

Seraphina looked grim. "Well then, you need to make him see you. You are wonderful, Chloe, and you deserve to be seen."

Chloe smiled faintly, appreciating Seraphina's attempts to lighten her burden. "You always know what to say to make me feel better."

But she knew that she would not be able to feel this way for a long time. Soon her father would be home and she would have to pretend that this was a wonderful thing, and that she simply could not wait for it. It was nice to know that she was not alone in this, and that she had the support of her mother and best friend, but nothing was going

to truly help her with her mother. Nothing would be able to stop him if this was who he really wanted her to be with, and judging by the glint in Lord Frampton's eye every single time he looked her way, it seemed like he wanted to claim her as well.

Although she was not entirely sure why, since he truly did not yet know a single thing about her.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:15 am

I should never have left her.

That was the one thought that Anthony was struck with now. He never should have left London, and most certainly should not have left Chloe. He had to, of course, he had been left with very little choice, but that did not make it any easier. The air of Anthony's study was heavy with the scent of leather bound books and the faint crackle of a dwindling fire in the hearth. But none of that drew his attention. Not like the smooth pebble that Anthony had been using as a paper weight for as long as he could remember. The pebble that Chloe had given him years ago.

At the time, it was a symbol of their unbreakable bond, but now... now it felt like they had been making a promise to one another that they did not understand. One that was supposed to keep them in one another's lives, as close as possible. But he was the one who ran away. Not her. Seeing that runaway horse, knowing that Chloe was in danger, almost losing her...

It haunted him.

It was as though time had frozen in that moment, his heart stopping as he reached out to catch her. The weight of the realization settled like a leaden weight in his stomach... she could have been lost to him forever, taken away in an instant. The mere thought sent a chill down his spine, shaking him to his core. His fingers tightened around the pebble, seeking comfort in its familiar shape and texture. The pebble in his hand felt cold now. Painfully so.

Anthony closed his eyes, trying to steady his breathing. Guilt gnawed at him... guilt for the years of silence, for not being there when she might have needed him most.

He had thought of Chloe often, though he had never found the courage to reach out, to bridge the chasm that had grown between them.

I should have written to her.

He could have done, and he wanted to, in many of the countries that he had visited. But every single time he put pen to paper, it just felt wrong. He could not be honest with her, so he did not see the point in saying anything at all. Now, he realized that saying anything was better than saying nothing. The cool reserve in her eyes, the distance in her voice on Bond Street before the incident ... it spoke volumes of the hurt he had caused, of the barriers that now stood between them.

He longed to go to her, to explain himself, to beg for forgiveness. But words failed him, trapped as they were in his throat, choked by years of regret and longing. How could he make her understand? How could he make amends for the silence that had stretched like an endless void between them? How could he tell her the truth of why he really had to leave?

Anthony opened his eyes, his gaze falling on the portrait of his parents hanging on the wall opposite him. Theirs had been a love story for the ages, a bond that had weathered storms and trials. He had always hoped to find that same steadfastness with someone. No, with Chloe, because it was always Chloe.

With a sigh, Anthony released his grip on the pebble, letting it rest on the desk before him. He knew he could not undo the past, could not erase the mistakes he had made. But he did not know what he could do.

Anthony's thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door, and he looked up to see his butler entering the room, announcing the arrival of his close friend and business partner, Trevor Walcot, whom he had not been lucky enough to see in person for years. Trevor entered the study with a brisk step, his face alight with the familiar

energy that Anthony had always admired. The two men embraced warmly, their friendship untouched by the passage of time.

"Anthony! It has been too long," Trevor said, his voice filled with genuine pleasure.

"Indeed, Trevor. Far too long," Anthony replied, managing a smile despite the turmoil inside him.

Anthony spent a moment pouring them each a measure of much needed brandy from the decanter on the side board with a small smile playing on his lips. Trevor accepted the glass with a nod of gratitude, his sharp eyes studying Anthony with the perceptiveness that had always been his hallmark.

"You have changed, Anthony. There is a weight about you that was not there before."

Anthony sighed, swirling the amber liquid in his glass. "Travel does that to a man, I suppose."

Trevor leaned back in his chair, his curiosity evident. "Tell me about it. Where did you go? What did you see?"

Anthony took a deep breath, memories of his travels flooding back. "I went everywhere, Trevor. Europe, Asia, the Americas."

As they settled in to the comfortable leather chairs by the fireplace, Trevor's knowing smirk indicated he had some news.

"And yet, you have hardly been back in London, and already you are the talk of the town," Trevor said with a chuckle. "Who would have thought it?"

Anthony raised an eyebrow, his curiosity piqued. "Oh? And what are they saying

about me this time?”

“The story of your heroic rescue of Lady Chloe Swift has spread like wild fire among the ton,” Trevor revealed, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

Anthony felt his stomach twist in to knots, his mind racing with the potential consequences of his actions. He could only imagine Lord Swift’s reaction, the fury and disdain that would surely be directed his way. He had not been thinking about anything or anyone else when he took his action. But he should have been. In London, he always needed to be aware of what he was doing.

Anthony tried to play it cool, taking a sip of his brandy. “I was simply in the right place at the right time.”

Trevor was not fooled. He leaned forward, his expression earnest. “But Anthony, you can not hide your truth from me. I know that you have cared for her...”

Anthony’s gaze dropped to the glass in his hand, swirling the amber liquid.

“Do you still?” Trevor asked.

“Of course I do. I never stopped caring. But that does not change a thing. The issues that we faced before are still here.”

Trevor nodded slowly, seemingly understanding the complexity of Anthony’s emotions. “I know the situation with her father and the expectations of the ton. But maybe this time, you can find a way to navigate through it.”

Anthony liked that idea, but he did not know how realistic it was. “I do not know, Trevor. I am sure that she will not even forgive me for leaving her like I did.”

“But you are her hero now...”

Anthony sighed, setting his glass down and leaning back in his chair. “Being her hero in a moment of crisis will not erase the pain I caused by abandoning her. It is a start, maybe, but it is not enough.”

“You will never know if you do not try,” Trevor reminded him. “You do not want to live a life with nothing but regrets.”

Anthony agreed. He did not want that at all, but he was also utterly terrified that everything might go all wrong. Anthony stared in to the fire, the warmth barely penetrating the chill of his fears. The flickering flames seemed to mock his indecision. He knew Trevor was right... he had to try. Living with regret was no longer an option, but where did he begin? How could he even make a start on this?

Anthony could feel Trevor studying his inner turmoil with concern. "Anthony, this Season is the perfect opportunity. You know how it works. Parties, balls, gatherings. It is the best time to rekindle old connections and make new ones."

“If she should want to reconnect that is.”

Trevor beamed. “You will not know if you do not try. And if things do not go your way, then you need to at least open yourself up to the possibility of meeting another, and there is no better way.”

Anthony’s breath got caught in his throat. He could not even envision it. He could not imagine anyone else making him feel like Chloe did. No one had on his travels, not even close, and he could not imagine that changing here and now. In London, it was worse, because she was there the whole time.

Anthony shook his head, the thought of someone other than Chloe feeling like a

betrayal. "I do not think I am ready for that, Trevor. Chloe... she is the only one."

Trevor nodded, understanding. "Then focus on her. Start by being present, showing her that you are here to stay this time. That is a start."

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:15 am

“You must make the most of every opportunity to be seen by the Duke of Fladbury.”

Chloe’s father’s words haunted her as the carriage wheels crunched over the gravel drive way at the Fairfax residence. It was time for yet another ball, this time held at the home of Seraphina’s mother, but even that did not make Chloe feel any more comfortable about this evening. Chloe’s heart pounded with anticipation and a touch of anxiety. Despite the ache in her muscles from her accident, she still had to be here. Her father would not let her stay home, not when she was so close to making the right connection with the duke.

The grand entrance hall was a flurry of activity, with liveried foot men hurrying to assist the arriving guests. The strains of music floated through the air, promising an evening of enchantment and intrigue. Chloe stepped gracefully from the carriage, careful not to let her nerves show. Her gown of shimmering ivory silk, the one her mother had painstakingly chosen, caught the light, making her feel almost like a princess. Her golden hair, arranged in an elegant coiffure, added to the illusion. She might have looked her best, but she certainly did not feel it.

Her father offered his arm, and Chloe took it, needing all the strength that she could grasp to help her inside, even if it came from the one person who made her feel more anxious than she thought possible. As they made their way up the stone steps, Chloe caught a glimpse of a sight that made her heart race even faster, Anthony helping his mother alight from their own carriage. Their eyes met across the distance, and for a moment, the world seemed to fall away. Chloe felt a flutter of butterflies in her stomach, her heart racing at the sight of him. She watched as Anthony’s gaze lingered on her, a mixture of longing and sadness in his eyes.

What did that mean?

What did he want to say to her?

She could almost feel him trying to talk, but something was holding him back. Just as it was her... but much as she wanted to stay exactly where she was, her father needed her to continue.

As they entered the hall, Chloe could not help but marvel at the opulence. Stunning crystal chandeliers hung from the high ceiling, casting a warm, golden glow over the guests. The walls were adorned with intricate tapestries, and the floor was a mosaic of polished marble that seemed to dance under the candle light. Seraphina's mother had to be proud of what she had achieved. This truly might turn out to be the event of the Season... unless the host that followed went even further, of course.

"Remember, Chloe," her father whispered, his tone firm but not unkind as he reminded her yet again, "tonight is important. The Duke will be here. You must seize every opportunity to impress him."

But of course, it was not the duke that she wanted to see tonight. It was him. As they made their way further in to the hall, Chloe's family converged with Anthony's, almost as if fate had brought them in to one another's paths. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw her father give Anthony a cutting look before any words could even be spoken. Anthony's expression fell, his face momentarily contorted with pain before he quickly masked it with a polite smile. Chloe felt a pang of guilt and frustration. What on earth was going on?

"Good evening, Lady James, Lord James," Chloe's father said, his tone courteous but distant. "It is good to see you this evening."

"Good evening, Lord Swift," Lady James replied with a strained smile. "We are

delighted to be here.”

Chloe could feel the tension in the air, thick and palpable. Her father’s animosity toward Anthony was as clear as the crystal chandeliers above them.

Anthony’s mother, Lady James, maintained her composure, her smile never faltering despite the evident discomfort. “Lady Chloe, you look absolutely stunning tonight. Your gown is exquisite.”

Chloe forced a smile, grateful for Lady James’s kind words. “Thank you, Lady James. It is lovely to see you.”

Anthony stepped forward, his eyes locking onto Chloe’s. “Lady Chloe,” he said softly, inclining his head in a respectful bow.

“Lord Anthony,” Chloe replied, her voice catching slightly.

She wanted to say more, to ask him about the sadness she had seen in his eyes earlier, but her father’s presence loomed over her like a shadow. Their brief, charged moment was abruptly interrupted by a booming voice. "Lord Swift! There you are, old friend!"

Lord Beamont, an old companion of Chloe's father, approached with a broad smile and a firm handshake. His presence was as commanding as his voice, drawing the attention of everyone around them.

"Beamont," Chloe's father replied, his demeanor shifting to one of practiced cordiality. "It has been too long."

Chloe’s eyes flickered toward Anthony again, who was now engaged in a polite but superficial conversation with another guest, his face a mask of composed

indifference. It seemed like their conversation was already over and done with. She scanned her eyes around the crowd, needing an escape. Just then, she spotted Seraphina, who was engaged in lively conversation with a group of young ladies near the refreshment table, being ever the graceful hostess. Excusing herself from her father, Chloe made her way toward her friend, hoping for a moment of respite.

“Chloe, darling!” Seraphina exclaimed, her face lighting up with genuine delight. “I am so glad you could make it. How are you feeling after your accident?”

Chloe forced a smile, though she appreciated the concern in Seraphina’s eyes. “I am managing, thank you. The doctor says I just need to avoid too much exertion for a while.”

“So, should you be here?”

Chloe’s eyes darkened. “My father would not allow me a night of reprieve.”

The two grabbed a lemonade before turning to survey the glittering crowd. The room was a sea of colorful gowns and dashing gentlemen, the air thick with the scent of perfume and the hum of conversation. Chloe tried to lose herself in the moment, to forget the weight of her troubles and simply enjoy the festivities, but her mind kept wandering back to Anthony and the unspoken feelings that hung between them like a delicate veil.

“What will tonight bring?” Seraphina asked her friend excitedly. “I can not wait to find out.”

As if he heard her, a pair of young eager lords approached them as the orchestra began to play. Their requests for a dance were accepted, albeit not eagerly. Chloe went through the motions of the dance, her feet moving in time to the music, but her heart was not in it. Her gaze kept drifting to Anthony, who was dancing with his

mother on the other side of the room. She could feel the heat of his gaze upon her, the intensity of his emotions barely concealed beneath the veneer of polite society.

“Lady Swift,” Lord Pembroke said, his voice breaking through her reverie. “You seem a bit distracted this evening. I hope I am not too dull a companion?”

“Oh, not at all, Lord Pembroke,” Chloe replied quickly, forcing a brighter smile as she snapped her attention back to her dancing partner. “I am merely preoccupied with a few family matters, but I assure you, I am enjoying our dance.”

“It is not because of your injuries?”

Chloe heated up all over. Of course he knew about her accident with the runaway horse. Everyone did.

“Thank you for your concern, Lord Pembroke,” Chloe said, her voice steadying as she forced another smile. “I am quite all right, just a little tired.”

Lord Pembroke nodded, his eyes lingering on her with a hint of sympathy. “I understand. If you need a moment to rest, please do not hesitate to tell me.”

“I appreciate your kindness,” Chloe replied, her gaze involuntarily drifting back to Anthony.

He was still with his mother, but his eyes were fixed on Chloe, filled with an emotion that made her heart ache.

The dance came to an end, and Lord Pembroke bowed to her, his manner courteous and respectful. Chloe curtsied in return, grateful for his understanding. As she straightened, she noticed the Duke of Fladbury approaching, his gaze predatory and intent. Her blood ran ice cold. Must she face this already?

“Lady Swift, may I have the honor of this next dance?” Lord Frampton’s voice was smooth, almost hypnotic, as he extended his hand.

Yes, it seemed like she really did have to face this already. She supposed that the only benefit was dancing with him now meant she would not be expected to again. Chloe’s heart sank, but she knew she could not refuse.

“Of course, Your Grace,” she replied, taking his hand with as much grace as she could muster.

As they moved to the center of the floor, Lord Frampton’s hand rested possessively on her waist. Chloe fought the urge to recoil from his touch. She knew that she must play her part, that she must smile and laugh and pretend to be enraptured by his every word, but the task felt increasingly impossible with each passing moment. The dance began, and Lord Frampton led her around the floor with a practiced sense of ease.

“You are looking particularly lovely this evening, Lady Swift,” he said, his voice low and intimate.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Chloe replied, forcing a smile. “You are very kind.”

“I know that you had a bit of an accident recently. I do hope you are fully recovered,” Lord Frampton continued, his eyes glittering with a strange intensity.

“Yes, I am quite well now, thank you,” Chloe said, trying to keep her tone light. “It was a minor mishap, nothing more. Nothing to worry about.”

“I am pleased to hear that,” he said, his hand tightening slightly on her waist. “I would hate for anything to mar your beauty.”

Chloe’s smile faltered slightly, but she quickly regained her composure. “You are too

kind, Your Grace.”

Again, he was complimenting her about the way that she looked, but of course he had still not asked a question about her. As Lord Frampton twirled her around, she found herself in Anthony’s direct eye line once more. His eyes locked onto hers, filled with concern and something else she could not quite decipher. Was it jealousy? Anguish? Whatever it was, it made her heart ache even more.

But then Lord Frampton’s voice brought her back to the present. “I must say, Lady Swift, you are a vision tonight. I have no doubt you will make a most desirable match this Season.”

Chloe’s heart sank at his words. She knew he was referring to himself, and the thought filled her with dread. “You flatter me, Your Grace.”

“It is not flattery, my dear. It is simply the truth,” he said, his smile widening. “I look forward to spending more time together.”

His grip on her hand was firm, and as he led her around the room, he continued to speak, his words filling the air with a stream of self importance once more. It was as if he could simply not talk about anyone other than himself.

“...you see, Lady Swift, the tenants there are quite loyal to me, of course. They know they have a fair and generous landlord...”

Much as he did not know anything about her, she was starting to realize that she did not know anything about him, either. All he did was brag.

“...and of course, there is the matter of my stables. I dare say I have the finest horses in all of England. My prize stallion, Apollo, has won numerous races. You should come see him sometime, Lady Swift. I am certain you would be impressed...”

Chloe nodded again, feeling the weight of his words pressing down on her. She was aware that he was trying to impress her, to make himself seem larger than life, but all it did was make her feel smaller, trapped in a conversation she had no interest in. She could not even follow the conversation, much less contribute to it. The dance finally came to an end, and Chloe felt a wave of relief wash over her.

Lord Frampton bowed deeply, his eyes never leaving hers. “Lady Swift, it has been an absolute pleasure.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Chloe said, curtsying. “The pleasure was mine.”

It was not long until it was time for the guests to make their way to the dining room for supper. The seating plan had been arranged specifically to place people next to the opposite gender, ensuring a lively conversation throughout the meal. Chloe, to her dismay, found herself seated next to Lord Frampton. On her other side was Lord Pembroke, while across the table sat Anthony and Seraphina. This was a strange nightmare, and again, she could not escape it.

The long table was set with the finest china and crystal, the candles casting a soft glow over the assembled company. The atmosphere was one of elegance and sophistication, yet Chloe felt trapped, the walls closing in around her. Lord Frampton, beside her, continued his monologue about himself. Anthony sat across from her, his gaze upon her, his eyes boring into her very soul. It was as if he could see through the facade she was forced to maintain, as if he knew the turmoil that raged within her. She tried to focus on the conversation around her, to feign interest in Lord Frampton’s endless stories of his hunting expeditions and estate affairs, but her heart was not in it. Every word felt hollow, every smile a strain.

“Are you enjoying the evening, Lady Swift?” Lord Frampton asked, his voice dripping with condescension.

“Of course, Your Grace,” Chloe replied, forcing a smile. “It is a most delightful gathering.”

Anthony’s eyes never left her, and she could see the pain and frustration in his expression. He knew she was lying, that she was merely playing the part expected of her. The unspoken words between them felt like a tangible presence, a delicate veil that could tear at any moment. As the meal progressed, Chloe could feel the weight of Lord Frampton’s gaze and the persistent emptiness of their conversation bearing down on her. The food tasted like sawdust, and the laughter around her seemed distant and hollow. The meal seemed to last a lifetime, Chloe could not have been more relieved when it came to an end, and it was time for the gentlemen to retire to the billiards room while the ladies withdrew to the drawing room.

The room buzzed with chatter and laughter, but Chloe still felt suffocated by the evening. She could not engage with anyone with her thoughts so scattered. Lord Frampton’s constant attention had been truly unpleasant tonight, maybe even worse than ever before. The weight of her father’s expectations and the future that loomed ahead pressed down on her, and she knew she needed to escape, if only for a moment.

Seizing the opportunity, she slipped away to the terrace, seeking a moment of solitude. The night air was cool and refreshing, a stark contrast to the stifling atmosphere inside. Chloe leaned against the stone balustrade, closing her eyes as she took a deep, steadying breath. The scent of jasmine filled the air, and the gentle rustling of the leaves helped to calm her a little.

But her moment of peace was short lived. The sound of footsteps behind her caused her heart to leap into her throat.

Who was following her now?

She turned, her breath catching as she saw Anthony . He smiled at her, his eyes filled

with a mixture of concern and longing. For a moment, neither of them spoke, the weight of their shared history hanging heavily in the air between them.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:15 am

Anthony leaned against the billiards table, his cue stick forgotten as the game progressed around him. His fellow gentlemen laughed and joked, their attention focused on the colorful balls and the clinking of glasses filled with brandy. But Anthony's mind was elsewhere, his thoughts consumed by the sight of Chloe seated across from him at supper with Lord Frampton by her side. The way Lord Frampton's hand had rested possessively on Chloe's waist during the dance gnawed at him. Anthony could hardly bear to watch as the Duke of Fladbury leaned in close to whisper in Chloe's ear, his lips curling in to a self satisfied smirk. A hot, sickening jealousy churned in Anthony's stomach, his fists clenching involuntarily at his sides.

"What is the matter? Lost your touch?" Edward teased as Anthony missed an easy shot.

Anthony forced a smile. "Just a bit distracted, I suppose."

Edward laughed, giving Anthony a friendly clap on the shoulder. "Well, focus up. We have got a game to win."

But focus was the last thing Anthony could muster. His gaze kept drifting to the door, his thoughts relentlessly circling back to Chloe. The evening had been a torture, every moment a reminder of the distance between them, of the barriers that kept them apart.

"I need some air," he muttered, turning on his heel and making his way towards the door without even waiting to see what Edward had to say about this.

He stepped outside, the cool night air hitting him like a refreshing wave. He took a deep breath, trying to calm the storm of emotions raging inside him. As he moved

further on to the terrace, he was surprised to see a figure already there, leaning against the stone balustrade with her eyes closed.

“Chloe,” he said softly, unable to keep the surprise from his voice.

She turned, her eyes widening in surprise and relief. “Anthony,” she whispered, a mixture of emotions crossing her face.

“I did not expect to see you here,” he said, stepping closer.

“I needed a moment alone,” she replied, her voice trembling slightly. “It is all too much.”

They stood in silence for a couple of moments, both of them lost in their thoughts. Until Chloe shattered it, her words just came flying out in a desperate rush.

“Anthony,” Chloe finally began, breaking the silence, her eyes filling with tears. “I feel so lost. I can not stand this.”

Anthony's heart ached at the sight of Chloe's distress. He moved closer, his voice gentle and filled with concern. "Chloe, what is it? What has happened?"

She sobbed harder. He could not believe this. What on earth had happened to his friend after he left?

“The pressure to secure a suitable match is suffocating,” she finally continued. “My father’s expectations are crushing me, and the duke’s relentless pursuit is making everything worse. I fear for my future, for a life spent in a loveless marriage. I do not know what to do.”

It was as if the flood gates had opened, and she could not stop the words from spilling

out. Anthony listened intently, his heart breaking for the pain and confusion he saw in her eyes. He reached out, gently taking her hands in his.

“Chloe, I can not imagine the pressure you’re under,” he said softly. “But know this: you deserve to be happy. You deserve to love and be loved in return. I wish I could take all this burden away from you.”

She looked up at him, her eyes searching his. “You do?”

He nodded, his gaze unwavering. “Of course, Chloe. I care about you more than anything.”

Chloe hesitated for a moment, then took a deep breath, as if steeling herself for what she was about to say. “Because I might have a plan...”

Anthony frowned slightly, unsure of where she was going with this. “What do you mean?”

She had always come up with ‘plans’ when they were younger, and often they got him in trouble. He had no doubt that this would not be any different, but he wanted to find out more regardless.

She bit her lip, her hands trembling in his. “A fake courtship.”

Anthony hesitated. “What do you mean?”

Of all the things he might have been expecting, this was not it. He did not even understand her words, truth be told.

“If we pretend to be courting, it might ward off the duke’s advances and buy me some time to figure things out. Maybe it will give us a chance to convince my father

that there are other options.”

His heart skipped a beat at her proposal. The idea of being close to Chloe, even under false pretenses, was both thrilling and dangerous. He knew the risks involved, but seeing the desperation in her eyes, he could not refuse her.

“Chloe,” he said slowly, “are you sure about this? It is a risky plan. If people find out we are faking it, it could ruin both our reputations.”

She nodded, her eyes shining with unshed tears. “I know. But I do not see any other way. Please, Anthony, will you do this for me? For the sake of our friendship? Of everything that we shared? Even if it was a long time ago now...”

Anthony hesitated, his mind filled with the echoes of Lord Swift’s warnings and the fear of the consequences that would surely follow. But as he looked into Chloe’s eyes, seeing the depth of her pain and the strength of her resolve, he knew he could not deny her. With a heavy heart, he agreed to the plan, knowing that he had no choice in the matter. It was not like this would hinder his Season anyway, since the only woman that he had an eye on was right in front of him.

“Chloe,” he finally said, his voice steady despite the turmoil within him, “I will do it. For you, I shall do whatever it takes.”

Relief washed over Chloe’s face, and a glimmer of hope sparked to life within her. She squeezed his hand, the simple gesture filled with a depth of meaning that words could not express.

“Thank you, Anthony,” she whispered, her voice trembling with emotion. “I do not know what I would do without you.”

He pulled her in to a gentle embrace, feeling the weight of their decision settle upon

him. “We will get through this together,” he murmured, his chin resting on her head. “I promise.”

They stood like that for a few moments longer, drawing strength from each other.

Finally, Chloe pulled back, her eyes red but determined. “We should return inside before anyone notices our absence.”

Anthony nodded, his heart heavy yet resolute. “Yes, we should.”

As they walked back in to the house, the warmth and noise of the gathering enveloped them once more. Anthony escorted Chloe to the drawing room, where she rejoined the other ladies. He lingered for a moment, watching her as she effortlessly slipped back into her social role, her distress hidden behind a practiced smile.

With a sigh, he turned and made his way back to the billiards room. As he walked, he thought about the coldness with which Lord Swift had greeted him tonight. It had been years, and the distain was still there, but that did not surprise Anthony at all, nor did his relentless pursuit of a duke for Chloe. It was a pattern, a script he had seen unfold before.

His mind drifted back to that fateful day in the study of the Swift family’s country estate. He remembered every detail with painful clarity...

Anthony stood in the dimly lit study, his heart pounding as Lord Swift paced before him, his face etched with disapproval. The room was filled with the scent of old leather and polished wood, the heavy curtains drawn against the afternoon sun. The air was thick with tension.

“Anthony,” Lord Swift began, his voice cold and unyielding. “When Chloe makes her come out, I want you to stay clear away from her.”

The words cut through the air like a knife, each syllable laced with disdain. Anthony felt a knot form in his stomach, his mouth dry as he struggled to find his voice.

“Sir, I care for Chloe deeply,” he managed to say, his voice trembling. “I want nothing more than to make her happy.”

Lord Swift’s eyes hardened. “My daughter deserves a gentleman of high ranking, someone who can provide her with the life of wealth and status she deserves. You can not offer her that.”

Anthony’s heart ached. “But...”

Lord Swift silenced him with a raised hand. “If you truly care for Chloe, you will step back and allow her to find a more suitable match.”

The words hung heavy in the air, and Anthony felt a sense of despair wash over him. He knew he could not go against Lord Swift’s wishes without risking Chloe’s reputation and future. The weight of the decision pressed down on him, suffocating.

“But... Sir, I am not without prospects. My family...”

Lord Swift silenced his further attempts with a raised hand. “Your family’s standing is of no consequence. Chloe is destined for a life far beyond what you can provide. If you truly care for her, you will do as I ask and allow her to find a more suitable match.”

Anthony felt sick to his stomach. “Sir, with all due respect, Chloe and I have known each other for years. We share a bond, a connection that...”

“Enough!” Lord Swift’s voice was sharp, cutting through Anthony’s plea. “You will not defy me in this. If you persist in this foolishness, I will ensure that your family is

ruined. I will not have my daughter's future jeopardized by a mere infatuation."

Anthony felt his blood run cold. The threat was clear and unmistakable. He knew Lord Swift had the power and influence to carry out his words. To defy him would be to condemn not only himself but his family as well.

With a heavy heart, he nodded his understanding, his voice barely above a whisper. "I will keep my distance."

As he turned to leave the study, he caught a glimpse of Chloe through the window. She was strolling through the gardens, her laughter carrying on the breeze. The sight of her, so beautiful and care free, only served to deepen the ache in his chest. He knew he must let her go, for her sake. He also knew that the only way he could handle this would be to get away. Perhaps to go on a Grand Tour...

Anthony sighed heavily, shaking off his memories from the past, as he stepped in to the billiards room, trying to act naturally after his deep and intense conversation with Chloe where she had presented a crazy plan to him. A plan that he had agreed to, without thinking too much about it. But it was hard to keep his head in order when he found himself immediately greeted by the sight of Lord Swift and Lord Frampton engaged in a deep conversation, their heads bent together conspiratorially. There most certainly was some planning going on, there was no denying that.

The room was filled with the clink of glasses and the murmur of masculine laughter, but Anthony could not shake the feeling that he had just stepped in to a great battle. A battle with the man who had once sent him running across the world. Lord Swift looked up, his eyes narrowing as he took in Anthony's appearance. There was a flicker of suspicion in his gaze. It was almost as if Chloe's father sensed that something was going on. Something that he would not stand for, no matter what.

As he sipped his brandy, Anthony's mind raced with thoughts of the promises he had

made to Chloe and the risks they were taking by embarking on this fake courtship. He knew that they were playing a dangerous game, one that could easily back fire and destroy both of their reputations. But he also knew that he could not stand idly by and watch as Chloe was forced in to a loveless marriage. Especially with a cold and unpleasant man like Lord Frampton. A man with a reputation for being power hungry and nasty.

Not the sort of man that Chloe would ever fall in love with.

He might not be able to have her in the way that he so desperately wanted, but he could at least help her, to ensure that he made up for his mistakes of the past. That would have to be enough. As long as he could make things up to her and cause her to forgive him for the past, then he would have to be happy with that. Even if he eventually had to stand back and watch her marry someone else... even the idea of that absolutely killed him.

Taking a deep breath, Anthony moved further into the room, determined to keep up appearances and play his part in the charade. He had to keep his wits about him, for Chloe's sake and his own. They were in this together now, and there was no turning back.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:15 am

“Good boy, Sir Winston,” Seraphina cooed as the women walked around Hyde Park. “You are such a good boy.”

The morning was bright and clear, with a gentle breeze rustling the leaves of the ancient oaks that lined the pathways. It really was the perfect day for a stroll, and Seraphina’s pug seemed to agree with that. He trotted happily beside Chloe and Seraphina, his little legs working hard to keep up with his mistress. Their lady’s maids followed at a respectful distance, allowing the two friends some semblance of much needed privacy.

Chloe’s heart raced as they strolled along the picturesque path. The serene beauty of the park did little to calm her nerves. She had been rehearsing what she needed to say all morning, but now that the moment was here, her words seemed to catch in her throat. Seraphina, blissfully unaware of Chloe’s turmoil, chatted animatedly about the ball, recounting various bits of gossip and the latest fashions. Chloe listened with half an ear, her mind occupied with the weight of her secret.

“Did you see Lady Abigail’s dress?” Seraphina continued, oblivious to Chloe’s inner struggle. “I swear, she must have hired a magician to fit her into it. And the color! Who wears chartreuse to a ball?”

Chloe managed a weak smile, her thoughts still racing. She knew she had to tell Seraphina about her plan with Anthony. Seraphina was not just her closest friend; she was also her confidante. If anyone could offer advice or support, it would be her. Taking a deep breath, she seized a pause in Seraphina’s monologue.

“Sera, there is something I need to tell you,” Chloe said, her voice trembling slightly.

Seraphina, sensing the gravity in Chloe's tone, stopped and looked at her friend with concern. "What is it, Chloe? You look as though you have seen a ghost."

Chloe glanced around to ensure no one was within ear shot, then began. "It is about Anthony and me... There is something you need to know."

Seraphina's eyes widened with curiosity and a touch of apprehension. "Go on," she urged gently.

Chloe took another deep breath and launched into her confession. "Anthony and I... we are going to embark on a fake courtship. A ruse, a pretense to keep my father at bay preventing him from securing a match with the Duke of Fladbury."

Seraphina's eyes widened with each revelation. She stopped in her tracks, turning to face Chloe directly. "How will that work? Will your father not simply forbid you from courting Anthony?"

Chloe shook her head. "I am sure that he will not be too happy about it, but I am hoping that my mother will help me out and root for me. I am hoping that he will see that I could be so much happier with someone else."

"Chloe, do you realize what you are doing? This could ruin you if anyone finds out. A fake courtship is dangerous, and it is bound to end in heart break or scandal."

Chloe nodded, her hands twisting together in anxiety. "I know, Sera. But I did not know what else to do. Father is relentless, and I can not bear the thought of being forced into a marriage with someone I do not love."

Seraphina's brow furrowed with worry as she considered the implications. "Chloe, you are playing with fire. If your father discovers the truth, he shall be furious. And what about Anthony? How does he feel about this arrangement?"

Chloe's heart ached at the question. She looked down, her voice barely a whisper. "I... I do not know."

Secretly, she hoped that by spending time with Anthony that he would see how much they belonged together and that his feelings for her were far from fake. But she was far too nervous to say that aloud. She feared what rational response her friend might have for her.

Suddenly, Sir Winston began barking anxiously as he strained against his leash, making it impossible for Chloe to get the advice that she so desperately needed. Chloe and Seraphina turned to see someone dismounting from his horse and approaching them.

Lord Frampton.

Chloe felt her stomach twist in to knots, and she took a moment to compose herself, plastering a polite smile on her face as she greeted him. "Good morning, your grace," Chloe said, her voice steady despite her inner turmoil.

"Lady Chloe, Lady Seraphina," Lord Frampton replied with a charming smile, though his eyes held a predatory gleam. "What a pleasant surprise to find you both enjoying this fine morning."

Chloe noticed Seraphina tightened her grip on Sir Winston's leash, her expression wary. "What brings you to Hyde Park today?"

Lord Frampton's smile widened, but there was something calculating in his gaze as he looked at Chloe. "I was out for a ride. It is merely lucky that I ran into you. How have you been, Lady Chloe? And you, Lady Seraphina? The weather is quite lovely today, is it not?"

“Yes, indeed,” Seraphina replied, trying to sound cordial despite her growing unease. “It is a perfect day for a walk.”

Lord Frampton’s charm was as polished as ever, but as he spoke, Sir Winston continued to growl and bark at him, much to Seraphina’s embarrassment and Lord Frampton’s annoyance. The pug’s behavior was unusual, and it only added to the tension in the air.

“Sir Winston, hush now,” Seraphina admonished softly, trying to calm the little dog. “I am terribly sorry. He is usually so well behaved.”

Chloe had to muster all of her will power not to show her amusement at Sir Winston’s apparent disdain for Lord Frampton. The pug’s incessant barking and growling were almost comical, and Chloe could not help but feel a small sense of satisfaction at the animal’s judgment of the man.

Lord Frampton, seemingly growing increasingly irritated by Sir Winston’s behavior, shot the pug a glare. “Really, Lady Seraphina, it is quite alright. Perhaps Sir Winston just needs to get used to my presence.”

As if in response to Lord Frampton’s words, Sir Winston suddenly lunged forward, his small body propelled by a surge of canine determination. The pug’s muddy paws landed squarely on Lord Frampton’s pristine breeches, leaving dark smears across the fabric.

Seraphina’s cheeks flushed with embarrassment. “Oh, I am so terribly sorry!”

She bent down to retrieve Sir Winston, who seemed quite pleased with himself.

Lord Frampton’s jaw clenched with barely concealed frustration. He forced a tight smile, though his eyes betrayed his annoyance. “It is quite alright, Lady Seraphina.

Just an unfortunate... accident.”

Chloe could see the tension in Lord Frampton’s posture and knew that his patience was wearing thin. She decided it was best to end the encounter before things could escalate further. “Thank you for your understanding, your grace. We should be on our way now.”

Lord Frampton inclined his head, his eyes flickering with a mix of frustration and calculation. “Of course. Ladies, enjoy the rest of your morning.”

With that, he turned on his heel and strode back to his horse, his movements stiff with irritation. He mounted with a swift, practiced motion, and without another word, rode off, leaving Chloe and Seraphina standing on the path.

As soon as he was out of sight, Seraphina let out a sigh of relief. “That was mortifying. Sir Winston has never behaved like that before.”

Chloe finally allowed herself to laugh, the tension of the encounter melting away. “Perhaps he senses something about Lord Fladbury that we do not.”

Seraphina shook her head, her expression torn between amusement and embarrassment. “I sincerely hope that does not happen again. But, Chloe, about your plan with Anthony...”

Chloe’s laughter faded as she returned to the seriousness of their earlier conversation. “Yes, Sera, I know it is risky, but I do not see another way. You have seen what he is like. He is an unpleasant man, who I do not know. He does a lot of talking about himself, but I still do not know a thing. Plus, he does not know anything about me either, and he does not care to know.”

“But you have the opera...”

“I honestly do not see anything changing.” Chloe offered her friend a one shouldered shrug. “I just can not imagine taking that further. It is worth the risk.”

Seraphina sighed, her expression softening. "I understand, Chloe. But we need to be smart about this. Let us plan it thoroughly so we minimize the risks. We must ensure your father and Lord Frampton are convinced of your courtship with Anthony. Until..."

“Until?” Chloe asked.

“Well, until the end of it, of course. What is the plan then?”

Chloe looked down at her hands, fidgeting with the lace of her gloves.

"The plan is to end it amicably, of course. To make it seem as though we discovered we were not suited for each other. Anthony has agreed to support this narrative."

Seraphina nodded thoughtfully. "And what if... it does not end as planned? What if your feelings for him..."

Chloe's heart skipped a beat. The question brought to the surface the hope she had been trying to suppress.

"I suppose we will cross that bridge when we come to it. For now, we must focus on convincing everyone of the authenticity of our courtship. I cannot worry about more."

But of course, that worry was not really going to go anywhere. She could not truly shake it off.

Anthony sat at his mahogany desk, the papers in front of him detailing the latest updates on their international trade ventures. His business partner and close friend, Lord Trevor Walcot, was pacing the room, deep in a rant about the recent fluctuations in the market. Despite the important matters at hand, Anthony's thoughts kept wandering to Chloe and the fake courtship they had embarked upon. He could not quite believe that had happened.

He was still in shock.

Trevor, pausing in his analysis, glanced at Anthony and seemed to finally notice his friend's far away expression. He leaned against the desk, crossing his arms and staring deeply at Anthony. "Anthony, you seem miles away. What is troubling you?"

Anthony let out a heavy sigh, pushing the papers aside. "I am sorry, I know that I am distracted at the moment. But I have a lot on my mind."

Trevor took a seat opposite him and clasped his hands together. "Go on."

Anthony smiled, grateful that at least he could be honest with Trevor, and hopefully get some much needed advice. "It is Lady Chloe Swift," he admitted, running a hand through his short, dark brown hair. "She has asked me for a favor. A big one."

"Well, you know that you can not leave it there," Trevor chuckled. "I am going to need much more information than that."

Anthony sucked in a sharp breath before continuing. "Well, she has asked me to embark on a fake courtship with her, to help her escape the Duke of Fladbury."

Trevor's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "A fake courtship? That does not sound like you, Anthony."

Anthony stood up and moved to the window, looking out at the bustling streets of London below. The sunlight cast a warm glow over the city, but it did little to ease his deep inner turmoil. “Chloe’s father, Lord Swift, is determined to see her marry well, preferably to someone like Fladbury. Chloe proposed the idea of a fake courtship to buy herself time and avoid the Duke’s advances because she does not like him. Not one bit.”

Trevor gave a low whistle. “That is quite the gamble. How do you feel about it?”

Anthony turned back to his friend, his eyes clouded with emotion. “I will do anything to help her. I know that this is unconventional, but I cannot allow someone that I care so much about to be put in such a position.”

Trevor nodded thoughtfully. “And what of your own feelings? This could complicate things.”

Anthony sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. “I know, but...”

“And you must consider the risk to yourself here,” Trevor continued. “Both your and Chloe’s reputation could be utterly ruined if this ruse is unveiled. Have you thought about that? And have you considered the fallout when you call off your fake courtship?”

Anthony could not catch his breath. Of course he had not thought about any of these things. He had just wanted to help Chloe out. All these doubts now gnawed at him and made him feel incredibly uncomfortable.

Anthony ran a hand through his hair, admitting, “I have not quite thought everything through. When Chloe asked, it was a highly charged emotional moment. I just... I could not bear to see her suffer.”

Trevor's words weighed heavily on his mind, and he found himself grappling with the consequences of his actions. The thought of losing Chloe forever, of watching her wed another man, filled him with a deep ache that he could not shake.

"I know what you are saying, Trevor," Anthony admitted, turning back to his friend. "But the thought of Chloe being forced in to a loveless marriage is unbearable. I had to do something."

Trevor studied him for a moment before responding. "Anthony, I understand your intentions, but you need to be prepared for the worst. If Lord Swift discovers the truth, it will not just be Chloe's reputation on the line... it will be yours as well."

Anthony nodded slowly. "I know. I just... I did not think about the consequences. I was so focused on helping Chloe."

"Do you love her?" Trevor asked bluntly.

"I..." Anthony's words trailed off. "I should not. I left to escape those feelings because I know that I can not pursue them."

"But that does not answer my question."

Anthony felt a pang of vulnerability as Trevor's question hung in the air. He took a deep breath, meeting his friend's steady gaze.

"Yes, I love her," he admitted, his voice barely above a whisper. "I have loved her for as long as I can remember. That has not changed. I was not able to escape my feelings, no matter how far I traveled."

"Then this is going to be dangerous, do you not think?"

Anthony nodded, the weight of Trevor's words settling heavily on his shoulders. "Yes, it is dangerous. But like I said, I cannot stand by and do nothing while Chloe is forced in to a marriage with a man she does not love."

Trevor leaned back in his chair, his expression contemplative. "You need a plan, Anthony. A way to navigate this without ruining both your lives. Have you thought about how long this charade will last? What will you do if the Duke starts to suspect, or if Chloe's father demands an explanation?"

Anthony sighed, rubbing his temples. "I know we cannot keep this up indefinitely. Chloe and I need to discuss how we will proceed, and what our end goal is. I need to make sure she is fully aware of the risks and prepared for any consequences."

Trevor was not exactly giving him support. But then he was probably asking the questions that Anthony should have been asking himself. Questions that he perhaps should have asked before he agreed to this facade. But truth be told, he knew that he would have agreed to this no matter what. Because it was Chloe who had asked him, and he could never turn his back on her.

Not again.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:15 am

“You look beautiful, my lady,” Rose declared as she stepped back from helping her dress for the evening. “I am sure you will have all eyes on you tonight at your mother’s soiree.”

Chloe’s heart raced. “Thank you, Rose. You always know how to make me look my best.”

She rose to her feet and stared at herself in the mirror. Chloe’s reflection in the mirror stared back at her, eyes wide with a mixture of hope and fear. She turned to admire her golden curls which were secured with delicate pearl pins that glimmered in the light. But the nerves continued to dig in to her side. The thought of seeing Anthony again was truly nerve wracking. Tonight was the night that they truly began their fake courtship. But it was more than the lie that unnerved her. It was the knowledge that this might be her only chance to reconnect with Anthony and show him that what they shared was more than just a friendship. That really was what she wanted.

Do not forget the danger, she reminded the woman staring back at her in the mirror.

Chloe knew that she risked so much. Not just a broken heart, but her father’s wrath and the potential ruin of her reputation. If this went wrong, she could lose it all. But if this went right...

Well, she knew that she needed to stop daydreaming about it all going right, just in case this did not happen. Just in case she could get a chance with Anthony. Her heart fluttered at the idea. It was something that was most certainly not promised, but there was a chance, right? This was the closest that she was ever going to get to him. Especially now that he was back from his travels.

Since he had taken over his father's estate, she could only assume that he was not going to leave again, but she could not be sure. The uncertainty gnawed at her, but she knew that tonight was her opportunity to make an impression, to show Anthony that their bond could be so much more if he gave her chance. Once upon a time, she thought that he might have seen her that way as well anyway. But now she was not so sure.

Now she did not know how he was feeling about anything...

Taking a deep breath, she smoothed down her gown one last time and turned to Rose with a determined nod.

"I do not want to keep everyone waiting," she said, her voice steady despite the storm of emotions inside her. "I think it is time to go."

Rose smiled softly at her, almost as if she could sense the inner turmoil in her heart.

With a deep breath, Chloe steeled herself and left her room, making her way down the grand staircase. The staircase seemed longer than usual as Chloe descended because her heart was absolutely racing. She had to focus on each step so she did not fall. That was not the way she wanted to start the evening. As she descended, she could hear the lively sounds of the soiree preparations in progress. The guests would be here soon, and of course her family wanted to make the best impression possible. All the most important members of the ton, under her roof.

As Chloe reached the bottom of the staircase, her mother turned and her eyes lit up.

"Chloe, you look absolutely radiant," she exclaimed, beaming with pride.

"Thank you, Mother," Chloe replied, offering a small smile. She turned to her father, Lord Swift, who gave her an approving nod.

“You look lovely, Chloe,” he said, though his tone carried a hint of sternness. “Remember, tonight is an important night. Conduct yourself with the utmost decorum.”

“Of course, Father,” Chloe replied, her smile faltering slightly.

Did she always have to be reminded of that? She knew the expectations were high, and the pressure to meet them was always present. There was no mention of the duke though, which was a relief. Chloe was sick of discussing him. She hoped that was the way that it remained all evening long. That the Duke was no longer on her father’s mind because he had other things to think about. Other people to be concerned with. Then once people thought that she was courting Anthony, it would all be over...

She hoped.

Chloe took her place beside her parents as the first guests began to arrive. She greeted them with the grace and poise expected of her, her practiced smile never faltering. However, her mind remained preoccupied with thoughts of Anthony and their impending performance. How on earth were they going to pull this off? Were they going to get through this?

The drawing room filled with the hum of conversation and laughter as more guests arrived, their elegant attire adding to the excitement of the evening. Chloe’s heart pounded in her chest as she kept her eyes peeled for Anthony. She could not help but feel a pang of anxiety as each new face entered the room.

As the minutes ticked by, Chloe's anticipation only grew. The room was now abuzz with the chatter of the ton. Finally, the grand double doors at the entrance of the drawing room swung open, and Anthony stepped inside. Chloe's breath caught in her throat. He was as dashing as ever, his tall frame clad in a tailored navy blue coat, his dark hair impeccably styled. His eyes, deep and piercing, scanned the room until they

found hers. For a moment, everything else seemed to fade away. The noise of the party, the watchful eyes of her parents, and the expectations of the evening... all of it melted into the background as Anthony made his way towards her.

Thank goodness he was here. The night could get started now. It was time to start their performance...

And to hopefully make Anthony see that it perhaps did not have to be a performance after all...

Tonight is the night.

The night that it all begins.

Anthony sat in the carriage beside his mother, the rhythmic clatter of hooves against cobble stones filling the air. The city's hustle and bustle played a distant symphony outside, but inside the carriage, a tense silence reigned. His mother amused herself with a novel, occasionally glancing at her son with concern. But these were not concerns that he could share with his mother, so he was grateful that she had not asked him anything. Anthony's thoughts were a whirlwind of emotions as he contemplated the evening ahead.

The memory of Chloe in his arms, the warmth of her smile, and the depth of her green eyes flooded his mind. He had agreed to this fake courtship to help her, but the feelings he had long tried to suppress were resurfacing with a vengeance. His love for her had never truly faded and that was impacting him now more than ever. How was he going to manage the two? The more that he tried to think about it, the more he did not think that he could do it. Trevor's warnings had worried him deeply, but he also knew that he could not back off now.

It was too late.

If he left Chloe to it, then she would be forced into marriage with the duke.

“Are you all right, Anthony?” his mother’s voice finally broke through his reverie. It seemed like she could not hold back her worry any longer.

“Yes, Mother,” he replied, managing a faint smile. “Just a bit anxious, I suppose. It is strange to come back into society like this after so much time away. I suppose I am still getting used to it.”

His mother reached over and patted his hand gently. “You have always been resilient, my dear. You will manage splendidly, I am sure. Tonight will be a lot of fun.”

The carriage came to a stop, and he took a deep breath, preparing himself for what was to come. As they stepped out, the grand entrance of Chloe’s family estate loomed before them, a beacon of light and festivity against the night sky.

Anthony’s mind drifted back to his childhood as they approached the grand entrance. Memories of running through these very gardens with Chloe, their laughter echoing through the air, filled his thoughts. He remembered the tree house they had built together, hidden among the ancient oaks, and the secret picnics they had shared by the pond. He recalled the summer evenings when they would sit on the porch, sharing dreams and secrets as the sun set. Chloe had always been there, a constant presence in his life, her companionship a source of comfort and strength.

As they grew older, those feelings had deepened, and he truly wished that there was some way he could get it back. As they approached the grand entrance of the ballroom, Anthony took a deep breath. He was a mess, not ready for this at all. Especially considering the atmosphere was utterly electric. It was too much for him. Yet, the sight of Chloe, standing gracefully by her mother’s side, filled him with a

renewed sense of purpose. This was all for her, after all.

Chloe turned her head slightly, her eyes meeting his across the room. Her face lit up with a warm, inviting smile, and Anthony felt his nerves begin to settle. That was until it was time to greet the hosts of the evening. As Anthony and his mother approached, Lady Swift stepped forward with an air of regal grace.

Her eyes sparkled with genuine warmth as she said hello. “Welcome.”

“Thank you for having us,” Anthony’s mother replied with a smile.

However, Lord Swift’s greeting was cold and perfunctory, his disdain barely concealed. Anthony was a little surprised that no one else reacted to his behavior. It was polite enough, sure, but the under tone could not have been more obvious as he spat every single word out.

“Lord Anthony, Lady Lenora,” he said, inclining his head slightly. “Welcome.”

“Thank you, Lord Swift,” Anthony replied politely, refusing to sink to the man’s level. “It is a pleasure to be here.”

Chloe’s eyes met his, and for a moment, the rest of the world faded away. Nothing else mattered, least of all her father’s actions. His heart raced as he took her hand, their fingers brushing lightly. The simple touch sent a jolt of electricity through his body, and he struggled to maintain his composure. Chloe's hand was warm and soft, her touch both comforting and thrilling. He could feel his pulse quicken, his breath catching in his throat as he gazed into her eyes.

“Anthony,” she said softly, a smile tugging at her lips.

“Chloe,” he replied, his voice warm with affection. “You look stunning.”

“Thank you,” she murmured, her cheeks flushing slightly. “I am so glad you could make it.”

As Anthony stood there, gazing in to Chloe’s eyes, he felt a surge of emotions that threatened to overwhelm him. Every fiber of his being longed to protect her, to keep her safe from the pressures and expectations that loomed over her like dark clouds. All the nerves that he had been feeling, all the doubts that Trevor had put in to his mind, faded away into absolute nothingness. And that was why he could not allow Lord Swift’s disapproval of him get in the way. He had to protect her no matter the cost.

No matter what it did to him. Even if it absolutely shattered his heart in to a million pieces. Even if he did lose it all in an attempt to care for her.

Anthony straightened, determination firming his resolve. He had agreed to this fake courtship to protect Chloe from an unwanted marriage, and now more than ever, he knew he could not back down. His love for her was too strong to allow her to face this alone.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:15 am

As the evening unfolded, Chloe found herself gliding through the intricate dance steps with various gentlemen, as was expected of her as daughter of the hosts. She even just about managed to hold conversations with everyone, just as she knew her parents would expect her to do. The ballroom buzzed with music and conversation, the atmosphere alive with the elegance of the event, and Chloe was right at the center of all of it, just as she was expected to be.

Yet despite her outward composure, Chloe could not help but be acutely aware of Anthony's presence lingering on the edge of the room. She could feel his eyes upon her, sense his nerves at all times, she could almost feel the anxiety coursing through his veins, which of course spiked it within her as well. This was a lot harder than she had thought it was going to be, and she was sure that he had to feel the same way. Soon, he was going to have to ask her to dance, to get the fake courtship in motion, and he was obviously nervous about it. Chloe wondered how he would feel if he knew that she was thoroughly excited too. She could not push that emotion down because a part of her felt like she was really getting what she wanted at long last.

For Lord Anthony James to belong to her .

It was the start of all her childhood dreams becoming reality.

As the dance ended, Chloe excused herself politely from Lord Howard and made her way to the refreshment table where she could have just a moment of respite. She took a moment to compose herself, stealing glances across the room at Anthony, who was engaged in conversation with his mother. Their eyes met briefly, a silent exchange of understanding passing between them. It was time. He was finally working up the courage to claim her as his own.

Chloe's heart fluttered with a mix of apprehension and enthusiasm as she watched Anthony start to move. This was it. The moment they had both been anticipating. Just as Chloe was contemplating their next move and how it was going to feel, a familiar figure approached with a bow. It was Lord Frampton, his arrogance barely concealed behind a charming smile as he reached out his hand to her.

"I believe the next dance set belongs to us."

Chloe's polite smile faltered for a moment, but she recovered quickly, accepting his offer with a nod. She could not refuse, not if she wanted to keep enjoying the evening. If she did not want her father breathing down her neck all night long. Unfortunately, she and Anthony were going to have to wait a little while longer. She hoped that he was not too upset about this.

"Of course, Your Grace."

As Chloe placed her hand in Lord Frampton's, she could not help but steal another glance at Anthony. His face remained composed, but she could see the flicker of disappointment in his eyes. She hoped he understood that this was a necessary delay, a part of the intricate dance of societal expectations they both had to navigate. No one wanted to dance with the duke less than her, but right now she could not halt it.

They moved on to the dance floor, Lord Frampton guiding Chloe through the steps with an air of entitlement. As Chloe and Lord Frampton began to waltz, she steeled herself for the usual barrage of self aggrandizing stories. To her surprise, he seemed to take a different approach tonight.

"Did you see Lady Penelope's dress?" he began, his tone dripping with disdain. "Positively atrocious. One would think with her family's wealth, she could afford something more becoming."

Chloe's smile tightened, but she remained silent, allowing him to continue. She was intrigued to see where this might go...

"And Lord Howard," Lord Frampton went on, his voice lowering conspiratorially. "Did you know his estate is nearly bankrupt? It is a wonder he still shows his face at these events."

Chloe's heart sank. Lord Frampton's tactic tonight was no less distasteful than his usual boasting. Instead of elevating himself, he was tearing others down, and it only served to put her off even more. She glanced at Anthony, who was now in conversation with a group of guests, his eyes occasionally flicking over to her with concern.

"Your Grace," Chloe interjected, her voice cool and measured, "I am sure everyone here has their own struggles and challenges. It is not our place to judge."

Lord Frampton raised an eyebrow, clearly taken aback by her response.

"Perhaps," he conceded, though his tone suggested he did not agree. "But one must maintain standards, do you not think?"

Chloe did not dignify that with a response, focusing instead on the steps of the dance. She counted the beats in her head, willing the song to end quickly so she could escape this unpleasant conversation.

"I hear Lord Anthony James has returned from abroad," Lord Frampton continued, his voice now tinged with curiosity. "Interesting fellow, I have heard. Though I wonder what he has been doing all this time. Some say he has been hiding from some scandal."

Chloe's grip on Lord Frampton's hand tightened involuntarily. It was bad enough that

he had been horrible about other people, but this was a step too far.

"Lord Anthony is a good man," she said firmly, her eyes flashing. "And a dear friend. I would appreciate it if you refrained from spreading baseless rumors about him."

Lord Frampton looked momentarily chastened, but his smirk quickly returned. "Of course, Lady Chloe. I meant no offense."

"That is quite alright," Chloe replied, her tone carefully neutral. She fought to keep her irritation in check, but his arrogance was becoming increasingly difficult to tolerate.

He was difficult to tolerate.

Yet, amidst her annoyance, a mischievous thought crossed her mind, causing a small smile to tug at her lips. She recalled Sir Winston jumping on Lord Frampton's breeches when he approached her and Seraphina at Hyde Park. The image of Lord Frampton's discomfort and the memory of Sir Winston's antics provided a brief moment of amusement in an otherwise tense situation. But it did not help her get out of this situation. She was stuck here, at least for a little while longer.

Now all she needed to do was try not to laugh out loud, especially as Lord Frampton continued to act like he was truly the most desirable man in the room...

Julian smiled smugly to himself.

She was smiling. Chloe was finally coming around to his charms. He just had to make sure he did not say anything more about her so called friend, Anthony. Not that she would be friends with him for much longer, if he had anything to do with it.

Perhaps it was for the best that he stopped talking about other people. It was actually a lot easier when he spoke about himself. He was a fascinating subject, so why not?

“Have I ever told you about the time I climbed Mount Kilimanjaro?” he asked, his voice brimming with excitement. He did not wait for her to respond before launching in to the tale. “It was grueling, but I made it to the top in record time. The view was breath taking, of course. Not everyone can handle that kind of challenge, but I thrive on it. I have always thrived upon a challenge, which is why I have the reputation that I do. As someone brave and strong.”

As he spoke, his eyes flicked around the room, assessing the reactions of others. He took note of the admiring glances from some of the younger ladies, the envious looks from the gentlemen. This was his realm, his stage, and he relished every moment of it. He needed to continue, to try and draw more eyes his way. He wanted everyone to look at her.

“You should have seen the sun rise from the summit,” he said, his voice filled with self satisfaction. “It was a sight unlike any other, a testament to the rewards of perseverance and bravery. I have never met anyone else who has achieved the same things that I have.”

He barely noticed Chloe’s disinterest, nor did he care. He had her under his spell now, the chasing part was done. Anyway, his stories were for his own enjoyment as much as anyone else’s. He thrived on the sound of his own voice, the admiration of others, and the knowledge that he was, without doubt, the most fascinating person in the room.

When Chloe responded with a light, conversational tone, “It sounds like quite an adventure, Your Grace. You must have felt a great sense of accomplishment,” he puffed up even more.

Her words, even if insincere, were enough to feed his ego.

"Absolutely, Lady Chloe," he responded, his chest swelling with pride. "Few people understand the true meaning of accomplishment. It is not just about reaching the summit, but about the journey itself, the obstacles overcome, and the sheer will power required. It is a metaphor for life, really."

As the dance continued, now that his ego had been fed, Julian found himself increasingly fixated on Chloe once more. She was different from the other women he had courted, more challenging, more elusive. Her initial resistance only made her more desirable in his eyes. Even now that she was under his spell, he knew that he had to keep grabbing her attention or it might wander. That was something he had never experienced before. He began to envision a future where she was his, a future where he could show her off as his prize.

What had started off as a bit of a game for himself had now become something he desperately needed. She really was the one he wanted by his side always.

Julian's mind raced with the possibilities of a future with Chloe. The thrill of the chase was evolving into something deeper, something more urgent. The idea of possessing her, of having her look at him with admiration and maybe even love, drove him to new heights of determination. He watched her carefully, noting the subtle shifts in her expression, the way her eyes flicked around the room as if seeking escape. He could not allow that. She needed to see him as the only option, the only man worthy of her time and attention.

He was determined to solidify his hold on Chloe's attention, to ensure she saw him as the most captivating presence in her life. He decided that their next outing would have to be something truly exceptional, something that would leave a lasting impression. An idea struck him, and he couldn't help but smile to himself.

“Lady Chloe,” he began, his voice smooth and confident, “are you looking forward to our trip to the opera?”

Chloe glanced up at him, her expression momentarily guarded before she offered him a polite smile. “Yes, Your Grace. I am quite looking forward to it.”

Julian’s smile widened, his confidence bolstered by her response. “Excellent. It will be an evening to remember, I assure you. The opera is one of my greatest passions. There is something profoundly moving about the combination of music and drama. I do not have much time for pastimes, because of my terribly busy lifestyle, but I will always make time for the opera.”

“I can imagine,” Chloe replied, her tone measured. “I have heard much about its beauty.”

He seized the opportunity to delve into another tale. “I remember the first time I attended an opera. It was in Vienna, Italy, the heart of music...”

The dance was drawing to a close, and Julian led Chloe to the edge of the dance floor. As the final notes of the music played, he bowed gracefully, and she curtsied in return.

“Thank you for the dance, Your Grace,” Chloe said, her voice soft and polite.

“The pleasure was all mine,” he replied, his eyes lingering on her. “I look forward to our evening at the opera.”

As they walked, Lord Frampton felt a swell of pride. She was perfect. Her grace, her beauty, her poise... all would be excellent additions to his status.

He was grateful that he had found her. This Season was most certainly going to be the

most exciting one he had experienced. Maybe it would be the one where everything came together in his life at long last...

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:15 am

He should have moved faster.

Anthony was getting sick of knowing what he should have done far too late. It was starting to become a very uncomfortable pattern for him. As he stood at the edge of the ballroom, trying to keep his focus on the conversation with his mother, he hated that he had allowed Lord Frampton to get to Chloe before him. This was supposed to be his dance. And the start of the fake courtship as well. He was supposed to keep Chloe away from the duke, she did not want to throw him right in to her arms.

“When are you going to dance?” his mother asked him curiously as she seemed to sense that his attention was elsewhere. “I do not think I have seen you on the dance floor at all yet.”

“I will dance soon,” Anthony promised. “I am just... waiting for the right moment.”

Anthony’s mother raised an eyebrow, clearly not convinced. “The right moment? Or the right partner?” she asked, her gaze drifting over to Chloe and Lord Frampton.

Perhaps Anthony was not being as discrete as he thought. They were gliding effortlessly across the dance floor, and Lord Frampton’s confident smile only fanned the flames of Anthony’s growing jealousy.

Anthony forced a smile, attempting to hide his frustration. “Perhaps a bit of both,” he replied, his eyes never leaving Chloe.

His mother sighed softly. “Do not let opportunities pass you by, Anthony. Sometimes, you have to create the right moment yourself.”

Anthony turned his gaze back to his mother, her words piercing through his frustration. She was always good at cutting to the heart of the matter. His mother's eyes softened, and she gave him a knowing look.

"You remind me so much of your father," she said quietly, a wistful smile playing on her lips.

Anthony was taken aback. "How so?"

"Your hesitation," she explained, her eyes taking on a distant look as she remembered. "He was always so careful, so deliberate. He wanted everything to be perfect, just like you. But sometimes, Anthony, life does not wait for perfection. Sometimes, you have to take a leap of faith."

Anthony's curiosity was piqued. "Did he miss many opportunities?"

"He almost missed the most important one," she said with a chuckle. "Our first dance."

Anthony's eyes widened in surprise. "Father? Hesitate when it comes to you? I find that hard to believe."

She laughed softly, shaking her head. "Oh yes, he was quite the nervous young man back then. We were at a grand ball, much like this one. I saw him standing at the edge of the dance floor, much like you are now, watching me dance with another suitor."

Anthony could not help but smile at the image. "What happened?"

"He stood there for what felt like an eternity, just watching. I had almost given up hope that he would ask me to dance. But then, as the final dance of the evening was announced, he finally gathered his courage. He walked straight across the ballroom

and asked me for the honor of the last dance. It was bold, unexpected, and it took my breath away. From that moment on, he had my heart.”

Anthony felt a pang of regret. “I wish I had his courage.”

“You do, my dear,” she assured him, placing a comforting hand on his arm. “You just need to find it within yourself. Do not let fear of imperfection hold you back. Your father was not perfect, but he loved with all his heart. And that made all the difference.”

Anthony looked at his mother, her eyes filled with love and wisdom. He glanced back at the dance floor where Chloe was now laughing at something Lord Frampton had said. The sight made his heart ache, but his mother’s words resonated deeply within him.

“I will,” he muttered more to himself than his mother. “As soon as I can, I will.”

Lord Frampton twirled Chloe, and she moved with such grace that it made Anthony’s heart ache. Even knowing that there were no feelings coming from Chloe, he could not stop the tension from coiling in his gut. He wanted to be the one holding her, making her smile. He clenched his fists, his nails digging in to his palms. He had to do something, anything, to change the course of the evening.

As the music came to an end, he finally saw Lord Frampton escort Chloe off the dance floor. He took a deep breath, hoping that he could be next. But before he got the chance to move, a presence appeared beside him. This time, it was not his mother. She had gotten caught up in a conversation with another lady on the other side of her...

No, this was Lord Swift. With a look of disdain on his face.

“Anthony,” Lord Swift said, his voice low and hushed so no one else could hear him. “I think it is better that you keep off the dance floor tonight. Would you not agree?”

Anthony’s eyes narrowed as he faced Lord Swift. “And why would you think that, Lord Swift?” he asked, his tone icy.

“Because you should not be here.”

Anthony was struck cold. “What do you mean?”

Lord Swift turned to smirk at Anthony. “I must say, the only reason you are here is because of Lady Swift’s friendship with your mother. Otherwise, I would have had the foot men remove you a long time ago.”

Anthony felt a surge of anger but forced himself to remain calm as Lord Swift let him know that he was most certainly not welcome here. His words were intended to provoke him, to test his patience. He clenched his jaw and nodded, not trusting himself to speak immediately.

“I see...”

What was he supposed to say to that? How would anyone respond?

“Thank you for your... words, Your Grace,” he said politely. “Now, if you will excuse me, I believe I have just spotted a business acquaintance.”

Getting away from this man was the safest thing that he could do right now. The last thing he wanted to do was make a scene. It was as if he had become more attuned to the tensions clinging to the air now. The unspoken rivalries and hidden agendas simmering just beneath the surface. Anthony could feel it in the air, a palpable sense of unease that seemed to radiate from every corner of the ballroom.

He truly wanted to escape, but he had a job to do yet. He scanned the room, searching for Chloe. She was laughing with a group of young women near the refreshments table, her eyes sparkling under the chandeliers. Anthony's heart quickened at the sight. This was his moment. He could not let anyone or anything else stand in his way. Steeling himself, he began to weave through the crowd, nodding politely at acquaintances and ignoring the occasional disdainful glance. He was almost there, just a few steps away, when he felt a hand on his arm.

"Anthony!" It was Lady Penelope Caldwell, a woman whom he has known in childhood. "I simply must speak with you about the upcoming charity event that I am running. I have been told you are the man to see about donations."

He forced a smile, though inside he seethed with frustration. "Of course, Lady Penelope. Perhaps we can discuss this another time? I am afraid I have an urgent matter to attend to right now."

Her grip tightened, her eyes narrowing slightly. "Surely you can spare a moment. It will not take long. I just want to tell you everything..."

Anthony glanced over her shoulder at Chloe, who was now beginning to turn away from the group, perhaps to seek him out. Time was slipping away, and with it, his chance.

"I really must insist, Lady Penelope," he said, gently but firmly removing her hand from his arm. "I promise we will speak later. I will most certainly donate, but not right now."

Without waiting for a response, he stepped past her, his eyes fixed on Chloe. At last, he reached her side. Chloe turned, her expression brightening as she saw him.

"Chloe," he said, his voice a mix of relief and determination as the words tumbled out

of his mouth at the speed of light. “May I have this dance?”

Her smile widened, and she placed her hand in his. “I thought you would never ask.”

As they moved to the center of the floor, the orchestra struck up another waltz. Anthony placed his hand on Chloe’s waist, and they began to glide across the polished wood, the world around them fading away. They danced as if no one else existed, their steps perfectly in sync, the rhythm of the music guiding them effortlessly. Chloe’s hand in his felt like the most natural thing in the world. Her touch sent a shiver of warmth through him, anchoring him in the moment. The risks were still there of course.

Neither of them had forgotten what they were potentially going to face if this whole plan went wrong.

But in that moment, it truly felt right.

Everything was worth it to be with Chloe in this moment.

I do not like this, Julian thought to himself. I do not like this one bit.

Julian watched Chloe and Anthony with narrowed eyes, his suspicions growing as he took in the undeniable connection between them. They moved together with an effortless grace, their bodies swaying in perfect harmony to the music. Chloe’s face lit up when she looked at Anthony, her eyes sparkling with a joy that made Julian’s chest tighten with jealousy.

He did not like jealousy. He did not like the sensation of losing control. It was not something that he was used to. He took a deep breath, trying to steady his emotions.

This was a set back, but nothing he could not overcome. Julian had faced and conquered greater challenges before. He was a man of power and influence, and he would not be bested by a mere baron, especially not when Chloe's hand was at stake.

Julian's mind raced with strategies as he sipped his champagne, his eyes never leaving the couple on the dance floor. Anthony might have Chloe's attention for the moment, but Julian had the means to secure her future. He would redouble his efforts to win her, no matter the cost. As he continued to sip his drink, his thoughts grew darker.

This game is definitely one that I will win, he vowed silently. I have to.

His anger simmered beneath his composed exterior. Losing was not an option for him. He was used to bending the world to his will, and this situation would be no different. He watched Chloe laugh at something Anthony said, and the sight only fueled his anger. How dare Anthony think he could come between him and what was rightfully his? Julian's mind raced with strategies as he formulated his next move. If charm and influence were not enough, he would find other ways to ensure his victory.

He needed to make more progress in speaking to Chloe's father about aligning their business interests through marriage. Securing Lord Swift's full support was crucial. With the right pressure and the promise of significant advantages, Julian knew he could sway him. Once that was done, Chloe would have little choice but to see the sense in their union.

Julian's jaw tightened as he considered the options.

He had already begun laying the groundwork with Lord Swift, but it was time to accelerate his efforts. The old man valued his business more than anything, and Julian knew exactly how to exploit that. A few well-placed investments, a subtle hint of potential losses without his partnership, and Lord Swift would be singing his praises.

Julian's eyes flicked back to Chloe, who was now resting her head on Anthony's shoulder as they swayed to a slow waltz. The sight was infuriating. He drained his glass and set it down with a determined clink. He would not let this go on any longer.

No one beats me, he thought determinedly. No one ever has done, and no one ever will.

Julian's eyes scanned the room, searching for Lord Swift. If he could just get a moment alone with him, perhaps he could expedite his plans. However, being the host of the evening meant that Lord Swift was constantly being approached by guests, offering their congratulations and exchanging pleasantries. The man was the most popular man of the evening.

Julian knew he needed to take control of the situation quickly. He could not afford to let Anthony's apparent success with Chloe continue. His mind raced with possibilities as he continued to navigate the room, every step bringing him closer to his goal. Lord Swift enjoyed Julian, and he liked his status. He should not be so difficult to convince when the time came.

Julian's eyes continued to track Lord Swift as he navigated the room, his patience wearing thin with every passing minute. He needed a strategic moment, a lull in the constant flow of guests, to catch Lord Swift alone.

Finally, Julian saw his chance.

Lord Swift stood near the balcony, taking a brief respite from the festivities. Julian excused himself from his current conversation and moved swiftly, cutting through the remaining guests with determined strides.

"Lord Swift," Julian greeted him with a firm handshake, his voice low and serious. "A moment of your time, if you will."

Lord Swift turned, surprise flickering in his eyes before he nodded. "Of course, Your Grace. What is on your mind?"

Julian cast a quick glance around to ensure they were not overheard. "It is about Lady Chloe. We need to discuss our mutual interests regarding her future."

Lord Swift's expression shifted to one of curiosity. "Go on."

Julian took a deep breath, choosing his words carefully. "We both understand the strategic advantages of aligning my resources with your family's interests. Lady Chloe is a remarkable woman, and I am determined to secure her future with all the means at my disposal. However, we must act swiftly to ensure that less advantageous suitors do not disrupt our plans."

Lord Swift nodded slowly, his eyes narrowing as he considered Julian's words. "You have my attention. What exactly do you propose?"

Julian leaned in, his voice firm and confident. "We both know that your family's holdings, while substantial, could greatly benefit from the security and expansion that my assets could provide. My influence within the court and my extensive network of allies could ensure not only a prosperous future for Lady Chloe but also solidify your legacy as one of the most influential families in the city. That is what you want, is it not? That is what you said to me."

"That is what I want."

Julian smiled at the agreement. "So let us move forward."

"Come to see me," Lord Swift declared. "We shall have a meeting about this. Discuss everything under better circumstances."

It was not quick enough for Julian, but he knew that this was just another part of the game.

A game that he was now much closer to winning.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:15 am

Chloe sat rigidly at the breakfast table, her hands clasped in her lap, as the palpable tension in the room tightened like a vice around her chest. There was a storm brewing, and she knew it would not be long before everything erupted and everything shifted and changed.

“Chloe,” Lord Swift finally snapped, shattering the tension. His voice was cold and controlled, though the anger beneath the surface was evident. “You were remarkably inattentive to the Duke of Fladbury last evening. Do you have any idea how important it is that you secure his interest? Have I not been clear about that?”

Chloe swallowed hard, her eyes fixed on her plate. “I apologize, Father,” she said quietly. “I was simply...”

“Simply what?” Lord Swift interrupted, his tone sharp. “Dancing with a mere baron will not provide you with the life of luxury and security that the Duke can offer. Lord Anthony James is not your concern.”

“Anthony is an old friend,” Lady Swift interjected gently, her voice a soothing contrast to her husband’s. “There is no harm in maintaining those connections, surely.”

Lord Swift’s hand slammed down on the table with a force that made the china rattle. Chloe flinched at the suddenness of his outburst, her heart pounding in her chest.

“Anthony James is not suitable for our daughter,” he declared, his voice icy. “He is a baron, nothing more. Chloe’s future lies with the duke, and she must remember her place in society. I have seen how unhappy the duke was with the way that you treated

him, Chloe, and it has me worried that you might lose him completely.”

Chloe felt a lump form in her throat, the weight of her father’s expectations bearing down on her. The thought of a life time spent in a loveless marriage with the Duke filled her with dread. She wanted to lose him completely, could her father not see that? She could feel her mother’s concerned gaze upon her, but she could not bring herself to look up. Even for the much needed sympathy.

“Father,” she began hesitantly, “I understand your concerns, but must I marry someone I do not care for? Must I sacrifice my happiness for...?”

“Happiness,” Lord Swift scoffed, cutting her off. “Do you think happiness is more important than duty? Than the security and reputation of our family? You will do as you are told, Chloe, and that is final. Luckily for you, I have managed to placate the duke, but I can assure you that it will not last forever.”

Tears pricked at Chloe’s eyes, but she blinked them back, refusing to let them fall. She knew better than to defy her father openly, but the thought of giving up her heart to a man like the duke was unbearable. Lady Swift reached out and gently placed her hand over Chloe’s, her touch a small comfort.

“Lord Swift, please,” she said softly, “Chloe is still young. She needs time to...”

“She has had enough time,” Lord Swift snapped. “This is her third Season, Lady Swift. It is high time she secured a suitable match.”

Chloe’s heart ached at her father’s words. She had hoped that this Season would be different, that perhaps Anthony’s return would bring some semblance of the happiness she had longed for. But now, it seemed that even that small hope was slipping through her fingers. She hated this intense sense of hopelessness that overcame her.

After breakfast, Chloe sought solace in the drawing room, her fingers gliding over the keys of the pianoforte as she lost herself in the melancholy strains of a familiar melody. The tension from the morning still clung to her, a suffocating weight pressing down on her chest. Her mind was consumed with thoughts of the fake courtship, and the fear that it might not succeed in the face of her father's outburst at breakfast. She wondered how long she could keep up the charade before the truth came to light and shattered the fragile hope she clung to.

Her father's voice still echoed in her ears, his harsh words leaving a raw wound in her heart. She had always known her duty, had always understood the expectations placed upon her, but hearing them spelled out so coldly made the future she dreaded seem all the more imminent. The idea of a loveless marriage with the Duke filled her with a deep, abiding dread. Especially when it seemed to be drawing closer to her by the minute.

As she played, Chloe tried to envision a different future, one where she could follow her heart rather than the dictates of duty. But no matter how hard she tried, the image of her father's stern face always intruded, reminding her of the reality she could not escape.

Suddenly, the butler's voice interrupted her reverie, announcing the arrival of a caller. Chloe's heart sank, assuming it to be Lord Frampton. She was about to inform the butler that she was indisposed when a familiar voice reached her ears.

"Chloe?" Anthony stepped in to the room, carrying a bouquet of her favorite flowers.

Chloe felt her heart skip a beat, a warmth spreading through her chest at the sight of him. Now this was a visit that she absolutely did want!

"Anthony," she said softly, her fingers stilling on the keys. She could not stop a bright smile from spreading across her face. Chloe rose from the pianoforte, her gaze

fixed on Anthony as she moved.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

Anthony stepped closer, his voice soft and filled with a tenderness that made Chloe’s heart flutter. “I hope you still favor these flowers, just as you did when we were younger,” he said, a gentle smile playing on his lips.

He remembers.

That thrilled her.

He might have abandoned her, but he had not forgotten her. That had to mean something, right?

As Chloe took the bouquet, their hands brushed, sending thrills of awareness down her spine. The simple touch felt like a lifeline, grounding her amidst the storm of emotions that had been swirling within her since breakfast. She looked up into Anthony’s eyes, finding a comforting reassurance there that made her feel, for a moment, that everything might somehow be alright.

“They are beautiful,” Chloe said, her voice barely above a whisper. “Thank you, Anthony. They most certainly are my favorite flowers, even now.”

Anthony’s eyes softened at her words, a smile curving his lips. “I am glad to hear that,” he replied. “I remember how much you used to love them. I hoped they might bring a bit of cheer to your day.”

Chloe’s smile widened, and she felt a glimmer of hope. “They have,” she assured him. “More than you know.”

Before she could say more, the door to the drawing room opened once again, and Lady Swift entered, with a maid behind her carrying a tray laden with tea. “Anthony, I heard that you were here. I thought that you might want tea.”

“Good morning, Lady Swift,” Anthony responded, bowing slightly. “It is always a pleasure.”

Lady Swift’s eyes flicked to the bouquet in Chloe’s hands, and a knowing smile touched her lips. “Ah, I see you have brought flowers. How thoughtful of you, Anthony.”

Anthony nodded, his gaze returning to Chloe. “I hoped they might brighten her day.”

“Well, I have a lot to do so I will leave you two to talk.”

Anthony took a seat beside Chloe as they sipped their tea, his eyes still filled with concern and longing. “I have missed hearing you play,” he admitted softly, his gaze locked on the piano.

Chloe smiled, a genuine warmth in her eyes. “And I have missed having someone who truly appreciates my playing.”

For the next half hour, they fell in to easy conversation, reminiscing about old times. For a while, it felt as though nothing had changed, the years melting away as they basked in each other’s presence. Chloe’s eyes sparkled with genuine joy, a stark contrast to the earlier tension that had gripped her. As the conversation continued, Chloe and Anthony shared memories of their childhood, laughter filling the room. Anthony’s stories of their escapades brought a bright smile to Chloe’s face, and she found herself relaxing more with each passing moment.

The world outside seemed to fade away, leaving just the two of them, lost in their

shared history.

Anthony's voice grew serious as he recounted a particularly memorable day at the lake, when they had spent hours trying to catch fish with nothing but a stick and some string. "You were so determined to catch something, even when the rest of us had given up. You never gave up, Chloe, and you still have not. That's what I admire most about you."

Chloe's eyes glistened with unshed tears, touched by his words. While Lord Frampton did not know a single thing about her, and did not seem to care to know, Anthony knew her inside and out. He recalled things about her that even she had forgotten. Talking with Anthony made her feel special. It was no wonder that Chloe could never meet anyone else...

Eventually, their wonderful time together had to come to an end.

Much as Chloe was not ready for it, she understood as Anthony rose to his feet when her mother came back into the room.

"Lady Swift, Lady Chloe," he said, turning to them with a smile, "it has been a delightful visit. But before I go, I wish to extend an invitation."

Chloe's heart skipped a beat. She tried to remain composed, but the idea of spending more time with Anthony filled her with a joy she could not quite conceal.

Anthony continued, "My family and I are planning a picnic tomorrow. We would be honored if you could join us."

Chloe saw her mother's eyes twinkle with delight. "What a wonderful idea!" she exclaimed before Chloe could even respond. "We would be delighted to join you, do you not agree, Chloe?"

Chloe's cheeks flushed, and she managed a smile. "Yes, that sounds lovely."

Anthony's gaze lingered on her for a moment, a hint of something unspoken in his eyes. It left her wondering if he thought it was false, or more, himself.

"Wonderful," he said softly. "We will expect you at noon, then."

As Anthony bid them farewell, Lady Swift turned to Chloe, a knowing smile on her face. "You know, Chloe," she began, her voice filled with warmth, "I have always been fond of Anthony. I once believed that he and you would marry."

Chloe stared at her mother, stunned by the revelation. Her heart raced as she asked, "What led you to believe such a thing, Mother?"

Lady Swift simply smiled, her voice gentle. "It is obvious from the way Anthony looks at you that he is in love with you. And your own feelings for him are just as apparent."

Chloe's breath caught in her throat, her mind racing. "Mother, do you truly believe that?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Lady Swift nodded, her eyes soft with affection. "Yes, my dear. I have seen the way he looks at you, the way he speaks to you. There is a tenderness there that can not be denied. And you, Chloe, you light up when he is near. It is as if you are both drawn to each other."

Chloe felt a rush of emotions—hope, fear, love, and confusion— all swirling within her.

"But what about Father?" she asked, her voice trembling. "He would never approve."

Lady Swift sighed, her expression growing serious. "Your father is a difficult man,

set in his ways and driven by his ambitions. But, Chloe, you deserve happiness. You deserve to follow your heart. I believe that, in time, your father will see that as well.”

Chloe nodded, her mother’s words offering a glimmer of hope. “Thank you, Mother,” she said, her voice filled with gratitude. “I do not know what the future holds, but I know that I want to be with Anthony.”

Lady Swift hugged her daughter tightly. “And I will support you, no matter what. Remember, love is worth fighting for, my dear. Do not let anything or anyone deter you from your happiness. Even your father, which I know is easier said than done...”

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:15 am

Anthony did not want to leave. He could have sat with Chloe all day long. But he had business to attend to, and it was likely that she had things to do as well. He could not stop the smile from spreading across his face. But as he made his way to the front door, he caught a glimpse of the butler leading an imposing figure down the corridor. None other than the Duke of Fladbury himself.

The realization that Lord Frampton had come to call on either Chloe or Lord Swift, no doubt to discuss the prospect of asking for Chloe's hand, filled Anthony with a sense of dread. He knew that in Lord Swift's eyes, he would never be seen as good enough for Chloe; his status as a baron paled in comparison to the duke's wealth and influence. Anthony's heart sank as he saw the duke, tall and impeccably dressed, walking with the confident air of someone who always got what he wanted. It was a stark reminder of the social chasm between them and the formidable opponent he faced in his quest to win Chloe's heart.

Despite the mounting pressure, Anthony squared his shoulders, determined not to let his resolve falter. He turned to the butler, who had paused to acknowledge him.

"Thank you for your hospitality," Anthony said, keeping his voice steady. "Please extend my regards to Lord Swift."

The butler nodded, his expression neutral. "Of course, my lord. Safe travels."

"Good afternoon, Your Grace."

Lord Frampton merely nodded back. He did not bother to say a word. There was a reason that he had such an unpleasant reputation, and Anthony could see it shining

through right now. He watched the duke wander through the halls of the house, knowing that he would never know this building as well as he did, but that might not matter. That man still might end up as Chloe's husband. Especially as their fake courtship had not even taken off as yet. They had not been given enough time. The duke was moving far too quickly.

Unfortunately, there was nothing that he could do about it right now, even if he really wanted to. As Anthony stepped outside, he took a deep breath, the cool air doing little to calm his racing thoughts. The encounter with the duke had only strengthened his resolve. He had to find a way to make Lord Swift see reason, to prove that his love for Chloe was genuine and that he could provide her with a life of happiness, if not luxury.

Anthony walked down the steps of the manor, his thoughts a whirlwind of emotions. The encounter with the duke had shaken him, but it also ignited a burning determination within him. He could not let someone like Lord Frampton, with his air of entitlement and wealth, come between him and the woman he loved. The woman that he had always loved. As he mounted his horse, Anthony replayed the morning's events in his mind. The joy on Chloe's face, the way her eyes lit up when he presented her with the flowers, and the promise of the picnic tomorrow... it all filled him with hope.

He could not let that hope slip away. He just had to hope that this time he did not move too slowly again. Riding away from the manor, Anthony's thoughts turned to strategy. How could he win over Lord Swift? How could he prove that his love for Chloe was not only genuine but also the best choice for her happiness? How could he make this work for everyone?

The answers did not come easily, but Anthony knew he had to act swiftly. As he rode, Anthony's mind was a tumultuous mix of fear and determination. He could not shake the vision of Chloe standing at the altar, her radiant face tinged with a forced

smile, while Lord Frampton stood beside her, claiming her hand with the same cold arrogance he had displayed earlier. The same arrogance that he always displayed. That man could not love Chloe, could he? Not in the same way that Anthony did, no way. Anthony's love for her was pure and deep. It was everything .

The picturesque landscape passed by in a blur, and Anthony barely noticed the vibrant colors of summer flowers or the gentle rustling of the leaves in the breeze as he continued home. His mind was consumed with finding a way to prevent the nightmare he envisioned from becoming a reality. He knew that he could not compete with Lord Frampton's wealth and title, but there had to be something, some way to show Lord Swift that his love for Chloe was pure and unyielding.

He thought back to all the moments he had shared with Chloe, the little glimpses of joy that had passed between them. The way she had looked at him when he brought her the flowers, the soft brush of her hand against his as they strolled through the gardens. These memories were his ammunition, the proof that his feelings were real and reciprocated.

But would it be enough to sway Lord Swift?

That man had done nothing to make Anthony think that he would ever come around. Lord Swift had all but forced him to leave London a few years back, then he made it very clear that he was not even welcome at his home. Was that something Anthony could ever overcome?

As Anthony rode, the rhythmic clatter of hooves against the dirt road did little to soothe his turbulent thoughts. He was a man of action, and the helplessness he felt gnawed at him. Lord Swift's disapproval had been a barrier before, one that Anthony had begrudgingly accepted, but now, with Lord Frampton's sudden and aggressive pursuit, the stakes were infinitely higher.

The thought of losing Chloe to the duke was unbearable. So unbearable that he could not stand it.

So unbearable that he would do anything .

Julian entered Lord Swift's study, the heavy oak door closing softly behind him. The room was a testament to wealth and power, with its rich mahogany shelves lined with leather bound books and an ornate Persian rug that muffled his footsteps. Julian would have been impressed, if he had not seen more wealth than this many a time. Lord Swift sat behind a grand desk, the light from the window casting shadows across his stern features as he took in Julian's presence.

"Your Grace," Lord Swift greeted, his tone formal but not unwelcoming.

Julian could tell that Chloe's father was taking this meeting very seriously, which he truly did enjoy.

"Lord Swift," Julian replied with a respectful nod.

"Please, take a seat and let us talk."

He settled into a plush armchair; his posture relaxed yet exuding confidence. He knew he was in his element here, negotiating power and influence. Lord Swift already liked him. Now was simply the time to seal the deal.

Julian began to speak, his tone measured and deliberate. "I appreciate you taking the time to meet with me, Lord Swift. I wanted to discuss a matter that I believe could be of great mutual benefit to both our families, as I stated at the ball last night."

Lord Swift's interest was piqued, and he leaned forward slightly. "Go on."

"Your daughter is a remarkable young woman. Intelligent, graceful, and poised. It is clear she would make an excellent partner. I propose a marriage between myself and Lady Chloe. Such an alliance would not only unite two prominent families but also merge our business interests, creating an unparalleled force in both social and economic spheres."

Julian paused, allowing his words to sink in. He could see the calculated consideration in Lord Swift's eyes, the allure of power and wealth clearly evident.

"With my resources and your business acumen, we could expand our influence significantly. Investments, estates, political connections... the possibilities are vast," he continued. "Together, we could shape the future in ways few could even dream of."

Lord Swift leaned back in his chair, his fingers steepled as he considered Julian's proposal. Julian could see the wheels turning in the older gentleman's mind, the temptation of the offer clearly evident.

However, Julian knew better than to rush things. He understood that a gentleman like Lord Swift needed time to consider such a significant decision, to weigh the advantages and potential risks.

With a casual air, Julian stated, "I will be taking Lady Chloe to the opera this evening, a gesture of my growing interest in her. An invitation that I extended a while back."

Lord Swift nodded, a flicker of approval in his eyes as he took in Julian's words. "Your proposition is intriguing, Your Grace," Lord Swift finally said, his voice thoughtful. "And one that I can not find any fault with. Although my daughter, of

course, is utterly insistent that she needs to have happiness in her life...”

“Of course,” Julian agreed smoothly as he felt the test coming his way. “I assure you, Lord Swift, Chloe’s well being and happiness are my top priorities. I will ensure she is treated with the utmost respect and care.”

Lord Swift nodded, his expression one of careful consideration. “I will give this matter the thought it deserves. In the meantime, I appreciate your gesture of taking Chloe to the opera. It will give you both an opportunity to become better acquainted.”

He had done it. Julian knew that he had done it. Lord Swift was simply testing him further, trying to see how far he could push him. He was playing the game as well, which Julian could appreciate.

“Thank you, Lord Swift,” Julian said, standing and offering a slight bow. “I look forward to this evening.”

As Julian left the study, he felt a surge of triumph. He was one step closer to securing Chloe as his bride and furthering his ambitions. As he stepped out into the sunlit street, Julian allowed himself a small smile. He had no intention of letting anything stand in the way of his desire for Chloe, and he was confident that, in time, she would come to see the inevitability of their union. As he made his way to his waiting carriage, Julian’s thoughts were already focused on the evening ahead.

The opera would be the perfect setting to further endear himself to Chloe, to show her the life of sophistication and power that he could offer. He was determined to win her over, to make her see that their marriage was not only advantageous but also destined. He only had a few more steps to go. However, as he settled into the plush interior of his carriage, Julian's confident demeanor faltered for a moment.

He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a letter, the edges frayed from

handling. It was a reminder of a more precarious reality that he carefully kept hidden. The letter was from his banker, a stern reminder of debts owed and fortunes dwindling. The duke's vast wealth was not as secure as it appeared, and his investments had taken a turn for the worse in recent months. All his talk might not have been the whole truth, but it would be true. Julian would have everything soon enough. As long as all of this worked out for him...

Julian's smile faded slightly as he tucked the letter back into his pocket. Securing a marriage with Chloe was not just about power and influence; it was also about securing his own financial future. The pressure to succeed, to maintain the facade of unassailable wealth, was immense. He knew he had to keep up appearances, to play the part of the unflappable duke, but the cracks were beginning to show.

As the carriage rolled towards his estate, Julian steeled himself. He had to win Chloe over tonight, to ensure that his plans stayed on course. Failure was not an option, and he would do whatever it took to secure his future.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:15 am

The grand chandeliers of the opera house glittered like a thousand tiny stars, casting a golden glow over the elegant crowd below. The rich velvet curtains, the opulent décor, the hushed murmurs of anticipation... it was a scene of breath-taking splendor. Yet, as Chloe sat beside Lord Frampton in his private box, the weight of her unease overshadowed the evening's magnificence.

Lord Frampton's private box was a symbol of his power and influence, positioned perfectly for an unobstructed view of the stage. His presence beside her, commanding and confident, only added to the sense of entrapment she felt. Despite his courteous demeanor and the attentive way he leaned in close to comment on the performance, Chloe could not shake the gnawing discomfort that plagued her.

"This is one of the finest performances I have attended in years," Lord Frampton remarked, his voice smooth and polished. "The soprano's voice is truly remarkable, do you not think, Lady Swift? It must be incredibly hard to sing in such a way."

Chloe forced a smile, nodding as if in agreement. "Yes, quite remarkable," she replied, though her mind was far from the music.

She could feel Lord Frampton's eyes on her, assessing, gauging her reactions. It made her skin prickle. Especially because he seemed to have an even deeper confidence tonight. She could only hope that had not come with the meeting he'd had with her father today. Chloe knew about it, but she had no idea what had been said, which made her incredibly anxious.

She tried to focus on the stage, but all she could think about was Anthony. The memory of his striking blue eyes—the way they had locked on to hers with a

promise of hope and reassurance— haunted her. She longed to be by his side, to feel the warmth of his presence and the sincerity of his love.

If she was watching the opera with him , it would be a totally different experience. Lord Frampton's hand brushed lightly against hers as he pointed out another highlight of the performance, and Chloe fought the urge to pull away.

“It is truly an art form, capturing such emotion,” he said, his tone appreciative.

“Yes, it is,” Chloe agreed again, her voice distant. “Quite wonderful.”

She glanced at the audience below, searching for a familiar face, hoping to catch a glimpse of someone familiar. Hoping for a glimpse of Anthony...

“Are you enjoying the evening, Lady Swift?” Lord Frampton asked, his eyes narrowing slightly as he studied her.

Chloe turned to face him, summoning another smile. “Of course, Your Grace. It is a splendid performance.”

Lord Frampton's gaze lingered on her for a moment longer before he returned his attention to the stage. Chloe exhaled quietly, relieved to have escaped his scrutiny, if only for a moment. The opera continued, the music rising and falling in waves of emotion, but Chloe's heart remained heavy, burdened by the lie she was living.

As the final act approached, Chloe's mind was consumed with the events of the day... her father's harsh words, Anthony's unexpected visit, and now this . She knew she was treading on dangerous ground, risking not only her own heart but also the wrath of her father and the disapproval of society. Yet, even as doubt and fear threatened to overwhelm her, Chloe could not deny the strength of her feelings for Anthony. Even this night at the opera could not change her mind.

She only wanted him .

But of course, her father was not going to give her a chance at love. He had made that very clear....

The morning sun streamed through the windows, casting a golden glow over Chloe's room as she dressed for the day. Her heart fluttered with anticipation, the memory of Anthony's warm smile and tender words from the previous day still fresh in her mind, thankfully overshadowing her terrible time at the opera last night. That she did not want to recall. Nor did she wish to think about how excited her father had been when she got home last night...

As she finished smoothing down her dress, there was a light tapping on her door.

"Come in," she called, turning to see her mother enter, her face alight with excitement.

"Are you ready, my dear?" Lady Swift asked, her eyes sparkling.

Chloe nodded, a smile tugging at her lips. "Yes, Mother. I am ready. The weather is glorious, it seems like the perfect day for a picnic."

They made their way downstairs and in to the waiting carriage, Chloe's heart racing with excitement the whole time. The ride to Richmond Park was filled with Lady Swift's cheerful chatter about the beauty of the park and the pleasantness of the weather. Much as Chloe tried to focus on her mother's words, her thoughts kept drifting to Anthony and the prospect of spending the day with him.

When they arrived, the sight of the lush greenery and the tranquil Pen Ponds filled

Chloe with a sense of peace. A sense of calm that this was going to be an amazing day. The warm sun and gentle breeze created a perfect atmosphere for their gathering. Anthony, his mother Lady Leonora, and his younger twin sisters, Hannah and Caroline, were already there, setting up a beautiful looking picnic. Anthony's eyes lit up when he turned to see Chloe, and he stepped forward to greet them.

"Lady Swift, Lady Chloe, welcome," he said, his smile warm and genuine.

"Thank you for inviting us," Lady Swift replied, her tone cheerful. "It is such a beautiful day."

Chloe's heart skipped a beat as Anthony's gaze locked on to hers.

"I am glad you could join us, Chloe," he said softly.

They settled on the soft grass near the water's edge, the picnic blankets spread out in a colorful array. The conversation flowed easily, filled with laughter and shared stories. Chloe felt a sense of relief wash over her, grateful that her father was too preoccupied with business matters to accompany them for this trip. It was so much easier without him looming over her like a dark cloud. The whole time the picnic continued, Chloe and Anthony found themselves naturally gravitating towards each other. They could not keep away from one another, no matter what. Again, they found themselves talking about all the good times they had shared, before Anthony had left.

It was nice to think about that. It took them away from the darker times.

"Do you remember the time we tried to build a raft?" Anthony asked, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

Chloe laughed, nodding. "How could I forget? We were convinced we would sail

across the lake, but it fell apart the moment we pushed it in to the water.”

Anthony chuckled. “I have never seen my father so exasperated. He said it was a miracle we did not drown.”

“He was probably right,” Chloe laughed. “I do not think we had done a very good job of building it at all.” She paused thoughtfully for a second. “Although as it turned out, you did not need our raft to cross the ocean in the end. That was something you did all by yourself.”

Perhaps she should not have brought up Anthony’s Grand Tour, but at the same time, it was not something she could simply ignore. Not any longer. He really did leave her all alone when she needed him in London with her. The dark times were always going to be there if they did not address them.

“I know.” Anthony hung his head low. “But I am back now. And I am not going anywhere.” He turned to Chloe with a soft smile. “Would you like to join me for a walk?”

Chloe’s heart pounded, her cheeks flushing with a mix of anticipation and joy.

“I would love that,” she replied, linking her arm with his.

Perhaps this would be the time that she got all the answers that she so desperately needed. They strolled along the edge of the Pen Ponds, the water reflecting the golden hues of the late afternoon sun. Birds chirped softly, and the rustle of leaves accompanied their steps, allowing Chloe to get lost in the gorgeous atmosphere surrounding them.

She did not want to do anything to ruin this beautiful moment, but at the same time, there were so many things that she still needed to know...

As they stood by the pond's edge, Anthony picked up a smooth pebble, effortlessly skipping it across the pond's surface. Each skip created gentle ripples, spreading outwards in concentric circles. Chloe followed suit, picking up a pebble of her own and mimicking his actions. She could not help but smile as she recalled the time she had given him a similar pebble years ago, not long after they had promised to always be in one another's lives. Back when they thought that was a promise that was still possible to keep...

To her surprise, almost as if he could read her mind, Anthony reached into his pocket and retrieved a small, worn pebble. He held it out to her, the stone's surface smooth from years of being carried and touched. The "C" and "A" still scratched into the surface.

"Do you remember this?" he asked, his voice filled with tenderness.

Chloe's breath caught in her throat as she recognized the pebble immediately. "I cannot believe you still have it," she whispered, her eyes wide with wonder.

Anthony's gaze softened, his blue eyes holding a depth of emotion that made her heart ache. "I have carried it with me ever since you gave it to me. It reminded me of you, of us, and of everything we shared. It gave me strength when I needed it the most."

"Even when you traveled?" He nodded. Tears welled in Chloe's eyes, and she blinked them away, overwhelmed by the significance of his words. "Anthony, I had no idea..."

Chloe felt a profound connection to him in that moment, as if the years of separation had melted away, leaving only the bond they had always shared. As if no time had passed at all, and they were still the young and excitable children who had just had an afternoon of fun with no pressure weighing down on them at all.

Anthony took a deep breath, his expression earnest. “Chloe, there is something I have wanted to explain to you for so long. Why I left without even a goodbye...”

Just then, the sound of laughter interrupted them. Hannah and Caroline came bounding over, their delighted exuberance breaking the spell of the moment.

“Anthony, Chloe! Come see this!” Caroline called, her face alight with excitement.

Chloe forced a smile, hiding her disappointment. They were almost there. She nearly learned the truth. Who knew when that moment would come again. The unspoken question hung heavily between them, a promise of a conversation yet to come. She squeezed Anthony’s hand reassuringly before turning to his sisters.

“What is it, Caroline?” she asked, her voice bright despite the turmoil in her heart.

“We found a family of ducks!” Hannah exclaimed, pointing towards a cluster of reeds near the water’s edge.

Anthony smiled, though a hint of frustration flickered in his eyes. “Let us go take a look,” he said, his tone gentle. “We have plenty of time to talk...”

Chloe nodded, grateful for the distraction even though she longed for answers. The walk to the reeds was filled with the twins’ animated chatter, their excitement contagious. As they approached the cluster of reeds, the sight of the duck family brought a genuine smile to Chloe’s face. The ducklings waddled clumsily after their mother, their soft peeps a sweet melody. Anthony crouched down, beckoning the twins to join him in watching the ducks up close.

“They are so adorable,” Caroline whispered, her eyes wide with wonder.

“Yes, they are,” Anthony agreed, his voice gentle. He glanced up at Chloe, his

expression softening. “Just like certain memories.”

Chloe’s heart fluttered at his words. She moved to stand beside him, feeling the warmth of his presence. Despite the unanswered questions lingering between them, she felt a sense of peace.

They had time, and for now, that was enough.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:15 am

The morning dawned bright and clear, a perfect day for a garden tea party. Chloe stood in front of her mirror, her maid adjusting the final bow on her gown. The dress was a soft lavender, delicate lace trimming the hem and sleeves. Despite the beauty of her attire, Chloe's thoughts were far from the fashion of the day. They were consumed with memories of Anthony and the magical moment they had shared in Richmond Park the previous day... the moment that she had almost learned the truth about everything at long last.

"Chloe, are you ready?" her mother called from downstairs.

Chloe took a deep breath, trying to push her emotions to the side. "Yes, Mother. I am coming."

It was not just her mother waiting for her though. Her father was there too, with all the pressures that he had to press down on her. Chloe held her breath, hoping desperately that the rants did not start right away. Luckily, or unluckily, Chloe was not quite sure how to view it, the journey was a surprisingly silent one.

As they arrived at the Wilton estate, Chloe's senses were overwhelmed by the grandeur of the event. The sprawling gardens were a sea of vibrant colors, with tables adorned with delicate china and vases overflowing with fragrant blooms. Lady Wilton, a prominent member of the ton, had outdone herself, creating an elegant affair that seemed straight out of a fairy tale. If Chloe was not so tense, she might have been able to really enjoy this.

Chloe and her parents stepped in to the garden, immediately surrounded by the buzz of polite conversation and the clinking of tea cups. Her gaze swept over the guests,

searching for familiar faces. But instead of the comfort of friends, her eyes fell upon Lord Frampton. He stood tall and imposing among the other guests, his presence commanding attention as always. And that was when it happened.

Her father leaned in close, his voice low and stern. “Chloe, remember to be on your best behavior. The duke will be watching you.”

Chloe nodded, a knot forming in her stomach. “Of course, Father.”

Why would Lord Frampton be watching her? Had he not had enough of her by now? Was she really going to have to endure him again?

They made their way through the garden, exchanging pleasantries with other guests. Chloe tried to maintain a polite smile, but her mind kept wandering as she thought about the only person that she did want to see once more. She longed to see Anthony, to feel the warmth of his presence and the comfort of his touch. He would make this day feel so much better.

“Lady Swift, it is a pleasure to see you again,” Lord Frampton’s voice interrupted her thoughts, almost as if he could sense that she was thinking about the man she really wanted to talk to.

She turned to find him standing before her, his eyes cold and calculating despite the charming smile he wore.

“Your Grace,” she replied, curtsying. “It is a pleasure to see you also.”

As he straightened, her father stepped forward, his expression one of approval. “Your Grace. My daughter has been looking forward to this event.”

Chloe forced a smile, nodding in agreement. “Yes, it is a beautiful gathering.”

She did not know what she was supposed to say to this man. She never knew what to say to him because he caused knots of anxiety to swirl through her, especially with her father's eyes resting judgmentally upon her.

"Ah, I can see a business associate of mine," Lord Frampton declared, much to Chloe's relief. She was not sure why he was not sticking around for longer, but she was truly grateful for it. "I must go and speak with him about something. I hope you will excuse me."

"Of course, Your Grace," Chloe replied, curtsying again. "Please, do not let us keep you."

Lord Frampton nodded and walked away, leaving Chloe feeling a mix of relief and frustration. Her father's gaze lingered on her, his eyes narrowing slightly.

"Remember, Chloe," he said in a low voice, "this is an important opportunity. Do not waste it."

"I understand, Father," she replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

As her father turned to engage in conversation with another guest, Chloe seized the chance to escape. Spotting Seraphina by the refreshment table, she made her way over, grateful for a momentary reprieve from the pressures of the event.

"Seraphina," Chloe greeted warmly, "thank goodness you are here."

Seraphina turned, her face lighting up with a bright smile. "Chloe! I have been looking forward to seeing you as well. I have to say, I love that color on you."

"Thank you," Chloe replied, feeling a bit more at ease. "You look lovely as well."

They chatted about trivial matters for a little while, Chloe's tension gradually easing with each passing minute. The laughter and easy conversation with her friend provided a much needed distraction from the weight of her father's expectations and the looming presence of Lord Frampton.

At least that was how she felt until he appeared. Anthony. With his mother. They were here at last. Their presence sent a flutter of excitement through her body, and she could not help but steal glances in their direction. Anthony's eyes found hers across the garden, and in that moment, everything else seemed to just fade away. The intensity of their shared gaze spoke volumes, conveying unspoken words and emotions that stirred Chloe's heart.

Just as she felt a rush of warmth and anticipation, Lord Frampton approached her once more, his presence disrupting the fragile moment between her and Anthony. He greeted Chloe with a courteous smile, offering his arm.

"Lady Swift, may I escort you to the garden tea table?" Lord Frampton asked with a sly smile. It was almost as if he knew that this was the worst possible moment to come for her.

Lord Frampton's smile widened as Chloe hesitated, her eyes flickering between him and Anthony. She felt Seraphina's concerned gaze upon her, but Chloe could not bring herself to meet her friend's eye. What other choice did she have? Lord Frampton was a powerful man, and her father had made it clear that this interaction was crucial.

"Of course, Your Grace," Chloe finally replied, her voice betraying a hint of resignation. "Thank you very much, how kind of you."

She placed her hand on Lord Frampton's proffered arm, a gesture that felt forced compared to the easy warmth she shared with Anthony. Lord Frampton guided her

through the garden, speaking about...

Well. Chloe was not sure. His business, she assumed, but it seemed to be yet another conversation that she did not need to be a part of. As they walked, Chloe's thoughts were miles away, back to Richmond Park and the moments she had spent with Anthony, where she would much rather be. The connection they had felt was undeniable, yet here she was, arm in arm with the Duke of Fladbury, a man whose presence filled her with dread rather than delight. But Lord Frampton continued to talk regardless of her increasingly darkening mood.

"...the Wilton estate is known for its beauty, much like its hostess. Speaking of beauty, I must say, you look exceptionally lovely today."

Lord Frampton's words felt hollow, but Chloe forced a polite smile. "Thank you, Your Grace. The estate is indeed beautiful." So they were talking about the party. She had caught up at last.

As they reached the garden tea table, Chloe noticed the seating arrangements. Lady Wilton had meticulously planned the seating, and Chloe found herself positioned directly across from Anthony. The proximity was both thrilling and torturous, a constant reminder of what her heart truly desired. Especially because Lord Frampton was to take the seat beside her.

As the other guests took their seats, Chloe felt the heat of Anthony's gaze on her, and she dared to steal a glance at him. The intensity in his striking blue eyes sent a shiver down her spine, but she quickly looked away, aware of Lord Frampton's scrutinizing presence beside her. If the duke was talking to her father, then she did not want to give him anything to report back.

Lord Frampton talked. He talked endlessly. Chloe made agreeable noises every so often, but that was all she needed to give thank goodness. This was all hard enough.

She did not even have the strength to drink her tea... just as the discomfort was really starting to get to Chloe, Lady Wilton's voice cut through the low hum of chatter.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have a delightful suggestion. Why not partake in a game of Battledore and Shuttlecock? Or perhaps a stroll in the rose garden for those who prefer a more leisurely activity?"

Chloe's heart quickened. She dreaded the idea of spending any more time near Lord Frampton. She certainly did not want to play any more games with him. Not when she knew that he was obsessed with games...

She glanced around the garden, seeking a means of escape. Her eyes found Anthony across the table, his striking blue eyes already fixed on her. He seemed to sense her unease, and in an instant, he was moving towards her.

"Chloe," he said, his voice gentle yet firm, "would you care to join me for a turn in the rose garden?"

Chloe's heart skipped a beat. She looked up at him, seeing not just the boy she had once known but a man who was always going to be there for her, no matter what.

"I would be delighted, Anthony," she replied, her voice steady despite the turmoil inside her. "Thank you."

As she rose, she could feel the eyes of the others upon them. Most notably, she felt the intense, disapproving gaze of her father. She avoided his eyes, not wanting to see the anger and disappointment she knew would be there. She took Anthony's offered arm, and they made their way to the rose garden where they could finally have a moment to breathe. The scent of roses greeted them as they walked down the gravel path. The garden was a symphony of color and fragrance, the blooms in full display.

Chloe's pulse was racing, each step feeling like a small rebellion against the constraints that had bound her for so long. Anthony glanced at her, his expression softening.

"You seemed rather trapped at the tea table," he said quietly. "Like you were not enjoying yourself at all."

Chloe sighed, the tension easing slightly as they put distance between themselves and everyone else. "Thank you for rescuing me. Lord Frampton's attentions are becoming unbearable."

Anthony's jaw tightened at the mention of the duke. "Yes, I have noticed that."

As they strolled through the fragrant blooms, chaperoned by the ever-watchful Rose, Chloe longed to ask Anthony about his abrupt departure years ago once more, but something in his demeanor held her back. She sensed that this was not the time to bring up things from that difficult time in their lives. She could only hope that the time would come when they could talk about it all. Instead, she steered the conversation towards a cherished childhood memory, one that never failed to bring a smile to her face.

"Do you remember," she began, a hint of mischief in her voice, "the time we snuck into the kitchen at your family's estate, drawn by the irresistible aroma of freshly baked biscuits?"

Anthony's expression softened, a nostalgic smile playing at the corners of his lips. "How could I forget? We waited until the cook's back was turned, then quickly snatched a handful of the warm, buttery treats and giggled as we made our escape."

Chloe laughed, the memory vivid and sweet. "I can still taste those biscuits. They were the best I have ever had. We thought we were so clever, but we left a trail of

crumbs all the way to the stables. Your mother knew exactly what we had done.”

Anthony chuckled, the sound rich and comforting. “Yes, she did. But instead of scolding us, she simply smiled and told us to be more careful next time. She always had a soft spot for you.”

The rose garden was a beautiful, serene escape from the pressures of the party, and Chloe felt her spirits lift as they wandered deeper into its heart. Anthony’s laughter rang out, the sound warm and genuine as he recalled the fun that they had once shared. For a brief instant, the years melted away, and they were those care free children once more, bound by a bond that had seemed unbreakable.

Eventually, they automatically made their way back to the party because they knew that they could not be missing for too long, the noise and bustle of the gathering gradually enveloping them once more.

Anthony paused, turning to face her. “I was wondering, Lady Chloe, if you would do me the honor of accompanying me to the promenade hour tomorrow.”

Chloe’s breath caught, her heart skipping a beat. Was this the fake courtship or did he really want to spend time with her? Either way, her answer was going to be the same.

“I would be delighted,” she said, unable to keep the smile from her face.

Anthony’s eyes sparkled with relief and joy. “Wonderful. I shall call for you at three o’clock.”

“I shall be ready,” Chloe promised.

Her heart fluttered at the idea of spending more time with Anthony. As they rejoined the other guests, Chloe and Anthony were greeted by the sight of Lord Swift and

Lord Frampton engaged in hushed conversation, their heads bent together conspiratorially. Chloe's heart sank, knowing her father's machinations were likely at play. Lord Frampton's cold gaze briefly flicked to her and Anthony before he returned his attention to her father. Chloe exchanged a worried glance with Anthony, who gave her a reassuring smile. Not that it did anything to make her feel any better...

All of a sudden, she spotted Lord Frampton walking determinedly towards her. She was not going to escape this, however much she wanted to.

"Anthony..."

"Lady Swift," Lord Frampton interrupted, his tone smooth and commanding. "Would you do me the honor of joining me for a game of battledore and shuttlecock? I have yet to find a partner worthy of the challenge."

Before Chloe could respond, Lord Frampton took her arm, whisking her away from Anthony. She cast a helpless glance back at Anthony, who stood there, his expression a mix of concern and frustration. Lord Frampton's smug grin as he glanced back at Anthony only deepened Chloe's unease.

"Your Grace, I am not very good at..." Chloe started, but Lord Frampton cut her off.

"Nonsense, Lady Chloe. I am certain you will enjoy this diversion. It is a delightful game, and I am confident we will make an excellent team."

Chloe forced a smile, her mind racing. She had no choice but to play along, knowing her father's eyes were likely on her, watching her every move. As they began the game, Lord Frampton's competitive nature became evident. He played aggressively, his smirk never leaving his face. Chloe did her best to keep up, but her thoughts kept drifting back to Anthony and the promise of their meeting tomorrow. That was the

only thing getting her through this nightmare.

During a brief pause in the game, Lord Frampton leaned in, his voice low. "I must say, Lady Chloe, you have quite the talent. It is no wonder your father speaks so highly of you."

"Thank you, Your Grace," Chloe replied, her tone polite but distant. She wished she could be anywhere else, preferably back with Anthony. If she were playing a game with him, she was sure that she would be enjoying herself.

The game continued, and Chloe tried to focus, but her heart was not in it. Lord Frampton's presence was overbearing, his intentions clear. She felt trapped, a pawn in her father's and Lord Frampton's plans. She was scared that it was already too late for her to change the course of her future.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:15 am

“Anthony, you look like you have not slept a wink,” Trevor observed, raising an eyebrow as he took a sip of his brandy. “You normally very much enjoy our trips to White’s.”

That was true. Anthony did normally enjoy the gentleman’s club they frequented. The atmosphere was one of luxury and relaxation, but he could not feel it right now.

Anthony sighed, running a hand through his short, dark hair. “Sorry, please, continue with what you were saying.”

Anthony’s mind wandered back to the previous night, the moment they had returned from Lady Wilton’s garden still vivid in his memory. Lord Swift’s uncharacteristic restraint as they reentered the garden had left Anthony puzzled and on edge, bracing himself for a confrontation that never came. The unsettling feeling had stayed with him, growing in the pit of his stomach, and even now, sitting in the familiar comfort of White’s, it lingered.

“I received a letter from our agent in the West Indies,” Trevor continued. “The latest shipment has encountered some delays due to inclement weather, but it should arrive in London within the fortnight.”

Anthony nodded thoughtfully. “That is good news, all things considered. We can adjust our plans accordingly. The market for spices has been particularly strong this season.”

Unfortunately, Anthony still could not focus. Not when the sound of voices at a nearby table caught his attention.

“Mark my words, Percival,” came the smooth, self-assured tone of Lord Frampton. “Lady Swift will soon be mine. The girl has no other prospects, not ones that match my rank and fortune, anyway.”

Anthony’s ears perked up, his heart quickening. He turned slightly in his seat, subtly angling himself to better hear the conversation.

“That is interesting,” Percival, Lord Frampton’s companion, jumped in. “I have not heard much about her.”

Lord Frampton’s words were laced with arrogance.

“The Earl of Hadleigh is an easy target,” he said, his tone turning derisive. “He is so blinded by ambition that he will throw his daughter at anyone with a title and a sizable fortune. And Lady Chloe Swift, while undeniably beautiful, is little more than a trophy. She will look good on my arm, and you know how other men react when you have a beautiful woman with you.”

Percival laughed loudly. “Oh yes, there will certainly be more respect there.”

Anthony’s grip tightened around his glass, his knuckles whitening. How dare Lord Frampton reduce Chloe to a mere decoration, a tool for his own gain? She was intelligent, kind, fiercely independent... qualities Lord Frampton could never appreciate or understand.

“Lady Swift may not know it yet,” Lord Frampton continued, his voice filling the whole bar, almost as if it were purposeful. “But she will come to understand that a match with me is her best option. Once the earl pressures her enough, she shall have no choice but to comply. I will make sure she sees that resisting is futile.”

“I am sure no one would dare to reject the Duke of Fladbury,” Percival agreed. “And

then you will have everything you want.”

“Well, I will need a male heir, of course,” Lord Frampton added, with a tone that made Anthony’s blood boil. “Life will not be complete without that.”

Anthony could not listen any longer. His anger and frustration reached a boiling point. He turned back to Trevor, who had not noticed a thing, and was still discussing business.

“...and then I think it might be wise for us to arrange a meeting with Lord Thompson. Now, I know you are not a big fan of his, but...”

Fury boiled within Anthony, his fists clenching beneath the table as he fought the urge to confront Lord Frampton and defend Chloe’s honor. He knew that causing a scene would only serve to fuel the gossip mill and potentially harm Chloe’s reputation, so he forced himself to remain seated, his jaw set in a hard line. Unaware of Anthony’s presence, Lord Frampton continued his conversation, his voice dripping with smug satisfaction as he likened his pursuit of Chloe to a business deal, a mere transaction to be concluded.

Anthony’s mind raced. How could Lord Frampton speak so callously about Chloe, reducing her to nothing more than a pawn in his game of social advancement? How could Lord Swift prefer this for his daughter, rather than someone who really loved her? It did not make any sense. Lord Frampton’s arrogance was infuriating. Anthony had to do something, but it had to be calculated, not impulsive. He took a deep breath, trying to calm the storm raging inside him.

“...I think it might be good for us...”

“Trevor,” Anthony interrupted, his voice tight with barely controlled anger, “we need to leave.”

Trevor looked up, startled. “What? Why? We have not finished our drinks.”

Anthony leaned in, his voice low and urgent. “Julian Frampton is here, and he is talking about Chloe in the most despicable terms. I need to get out of here before I do something that will cause a scandal.”

Trevor’s eyes widened as he glanced toward Lord Frampton’s table, then back at Anthony. He nodded quickly, understanding the gravity of the situation. “Very well, let us go.”

They rose from their seats, Anthony’s movements stiff with suppressed rage. As they made their way out of White’s, Anthony cast one last glance at Lord Frampton, who was still obviously engrossed in his vile conversation. Anthony vowed to himself that he would protect Chloe from that man, no matter what it took. He might not be able to do what he wanted to right now, but he would most certainly make sure that the duke did not get what he wanted. He was just grateful that Chloe had trusted him with the false courtship. As scary as it was, and as risky as it was, he knew now that it was going to be worth it.

Once outside, the cool night air did little to soothe Anthony’s anger. He took several deep breaths, trying to steady his racing thoughts. Trevor clapped a hand on his shoulder, his expression a mix of concern and determination.

“Do not worry,” Trevor did his best to reassure him. “You will save Chloe from being married to him; I just know it.”

Anthony nodded, grateful for his friend’s support. “I appreciate it, Trevor. I just need to clear my head and think of a plan. I can not let that man anywhere near Chloe. No matter what.”

Anthony could feel his heart hammering against his rib cage as he stood at the base of the grand staircase of the Swift residence, waiting for Chloe to join him for their walk on the promenade. He adjusted his cravat, taking a steadying breath. Today was crucial, not only for their scheme but also for his own heart.

As the clock chimed, he heard the soft rustle of skirts descending the staircase. Chloe appeared, a vision in a delicate pastel gown that seemed to float around her as she moved. Her golden hair was styled in elegant curls, framing her porcelain face and expressive green eyes. Anthony's breath caught in his throat, and he found himself momentarily speechless. She was more beautiful every single time he saw her, and the sight of her stirred a longing deep within him. A stirring he was not sure he was truly permitted to feel.

As Chloe reached the bottom step, Anthony stepped forward and took her gloved hand in his. Unable to resist, he raised it to his lips, placing a soft kiss upon her knuckles. The simple touch sent a jolt of electricity through him, and he saw a faint blush rise to Chloe's cheeks.

"Chloe," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "You look stunning."

"Thank you, Anthony," Chloe replied, her voice soft but filled with warmth. "I am glad I could accompany you today."

Their tender moment was abruptly interrupted by the sound of footsteps. Anthony turned to see Lord Swift approaching, his expression unreadable. Anthony braced himself for the sharp rebuke he had come to expect from Chloe's father, but to his surprise, Lord Swift merely smiled. A smile that did not quite reach his eyes.

"Lord Anthony," Lord Swift said, his tone a touch too saccharine to be entirely sincere. "How good of you to escort my daughter today. I trust you will ensure she has an enjoyable outing."

Anthony inclined his head, masking his surprise. "Of course, Lord Swift. It is my honor."

Lord Swift's smile remained fixed. "Very well, then. Do enjoy yourselves."

With a final nod, Lord Swift turned and walked away, leaving Anthony and Chloe in a brief silence. Anthony glanced at Chloe, who seemed equally taken aback by her father's uncharacteristic politeness.

"Shall we?" Anthony asked, offering his arm.

Chloe smiled and took his arm. "Yes, let us go."

As they stepped out in to the carriage, Anthony's mind whirled with thoughts. Lord Swift's sudden change in demeanor was unsettling. The man had always been hostile towards him, seeing Anthony as unworthy of his daughter. This newfound politeness was suspicious. What was Lord Swift up to?

"Is something troubling you, Anthony?" Chloe asked, her voice gentle.

Anthony forced a smile. "Just pondering, my lady. Your father's mood seems quite improved today."

Chloe sighed, glancing back at the house. "Father is often difficult to read. I never know what to expect from him."

Anthony nodded, though he could not shake the feeling that there was more to it. Lord Swift's behavior could not be a mere coincidence, not when Lord Frampton was actively scheming to secure Chloe's hand. Could Lord Swift have struck some sort of deal with Lord Frampton already? The thought made Anthony's blood run cold.

As they strolled through promenade park, arm in arm, Anthony could not stop smiling. Reminiscing with Chloe was the most fun that he'd had in a very long time. It always was. He adored talking with Chloe, especially about the times that they had shared, but today it felt even more special.

"I remember the time you convinced me to climb that enormous oak tree," Anthony said, chuckling. "I was certain we would be able to see all the way to London from the top."

Chloe giggled, her eyes sparkling with mirth. "And then we got stuck halfway up, and poor Rose had to fetch Father to get us down."

Rose, their silent chaperone, trailed behind them at a respectful distance, but for a moment, it felt as though Chloe and Anthony were the only two people in the world. They came upon a small pond, its surface reflecting the clear blue sky and the lush greenery surrounding it. Anthony led Chloe to a bench overlooking the water.

"Do you remember the time we tried to catch frogs here?" Chloe asked, a mischievous glint in her eye.

Anthony laughed. "How could I forget? You were determined to bring one home as a pet, and I ended up falling into the pond."

Chloe's laughter joined his, a bright, melodic sound that filled the air. "You were soaked from head to toe, and Mother made you stay in the servants' quarters until your clothes dried."

Anthony smiled, the memory bringing a sense of nostalgia. "Those were simpler times."

Chloe nodded, her expression softening. "Yes, they were. We had so much freedom

back then. No worries about societal expectations or family pressures. We could just have fun, without worrying about what might come next.”

Anthony glanced at her, his heart aching at the thought of what she was currently enduring. “Chloe, do you ever wish we could go back to those days? When everything was easier?”

Chloe sighed, looking out at the pond. “Sometimes. But we cannot go back, can we? We can only move forward and try to make the best of our situations.”

Anthony’s thoughts drifted to Lord Swift and his unexpected politeness earlier. What game was he playing? What did he hope to gain by pushing Chloe towards Lord Frampton? Anthony’s mind whirled with possibilities, but one thing remained clear: he had to protect Chloe at all costs.

“Anthony,” Chloe said, breaking the silence. “Do you ever wonder what life would have been like if things had been different?”

He looked at her, curiosity piqued. “Different how?”

“If we were not bound by societal expectations,” Chloe continued, her voice thoughtful. “If we could have pursued our own paths without worrying about titles and fortunes. It would be much better, would it not? If we could all just follow our hearts.”

Anthony squeezed her hand, a wistful smile on his face. “I think about that often. I imagine a world where we could be free to follow our hearts. I visited a lot of places like that on my travels, and it truly looked wonderful to be free.”

“And yet... you returned.”

He gave her a knowing look. “That I did. Father passed away and my duties awaited me.”

But of course, that was not the only reason he had come back to London. But could he tell Chloe the truth right now? He parted his lips, wanting to say something, but nothing came out. It was almost as if there was something in the base of his throat, blocking him from speaking. He had almost said it. When they were at Richmond Park, he almost got those words out, but after seeing Lord Swift behave like he did... it had put him off.

Eventually, they returned to the Swift residence, the ride in the carriage was unusually silent. Chloe seemed deep in thought, her brow furrowed as she gazed out the window. Anthony, too, was lost in his own reflections, the earlier light heartedness replaced by a sense of impending seriousness. Upon arrival, Chloe turned to Rose, her trusted maid and chaperone.

“Rose, could you give us a moment alone, please?” she requested, her tone gentle but firm.

Rose nodded, looking as if she understood the gravity of the situation, and stepped out of the carriage, closing the door behind her. Anthony felt his heart pound harder in his chest. He sensed that Chloe was about to address the lingering question that had haunted both of them for years. He braced himself, knowing that whatever she asked, he had to be honest. It was time. No matter what Lord Swift was doing, he could not hold it back any longer.

Chloe took a deep breath and turned to face him, her eyes searching his face with a mixture of longing and pain. “Why did you leave without saying goodbye, Anthony?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

The vulnerability in her tone pierced through Anthony’s defenses. His chest

tightened, and he struggled to find the right words. “Chloe...” he began, but the words caught in his throat.

He took her hands in his, their warmth grounding him. Instead of answering with words, he pulled her close, his lips finding hers in a sweet, tender kiss that said everything he had been too afraid to put in to words. Her lips were soft and warm against his, a perfect fit that spoke of years of longing and unspoken love. The kiss was gentle at first, a tentative exploration of feelings that had been buried for too long. But as the seconds stretched on, it deepened, becoming a passionate declaration of everything he had kept hidden.

When they finally parted, both breathless and flushed, the world around them seemed to shift. The carriage, the bustling streets of London, and the imposing figure of the Swift residence all faded away, leaving only the two of them and the undeniable connection that pulsed between them. The promise of a future together suddenly felt within reach, a tantalizing possibility that made Anthony’s heart soar. Anthony held Chloe’s hands tightly, his heart racing as he gazed into her eyes.

The crackling fire cast a warm glow around the study, its flames flickering shadows against the dark mahogany walls. Anthony paced back and forth, his mind a storm. His heart pounded, his breaths uneven as he replayed the events of the evening. The kiss he had shared with Chloe had been more than a simple act in their ruse; it had been a revelation. He stopped in front of the fireplace, staring into the dancing flames as if they held the answers he sought.

He had always known his feelings for Chloe were deep, but he had convinced himself they were manageable, something he could control and hide if that was what he was forced to do. Yet the moment her lips had touched his, the world had shifted. The passion, the undeniable connection, had torn down the walls he had built around his

heart.

Anthony ran a hand through his hair, his fingers trembling slightly. He could still feel the softness of her lips, the warmth of her body pressed against his. It had been a moment of pure, unfiltered emotion, and it had shattered the fragile balance he had tried to maintain. The fake courtship had been a desperate gamble to protect Chloe from the advances of Lord Frampton and to buy her time from her father's relentless pressure. But it had become so much more. He could no longer pretend that his feelings for Chloe were anything less than profound, anything less than love.

Love.

He really did love her, with all of his heart. But what on earth could he do now? He thought of the years he had spent abroad, trying to forget her, trying to bury his love under the weight of his responsibilities and travels. It had all been in vain. Chloe had never left his heart, and now, standing on the precipice of losing her forever, he realized he could not continue living a lie. Anthony knew he had to confront the truth. He could no longer deceive himself or Chloe. He had to find a way to be with her, to claim her as his own and build a future together.

But the obstacles were daunting. Her father's disapproval, the social expectations, and the ever present threat of the Duke of Fladbury loomed over them like dark clouds. He clenched his fists, determination hardening his resolve. He had respected Lord Swift's wishes for far too long, allowing them to dictate his actions and keep him away from the woman he loved. But no more. It was time to fight for what he wanted, to fight for Chloe and the life they could have together.

The thought of eloping crossed his mind, a desperate, reckless plan that could free them from the constraints of society and the expectations placed upon them. The idea of whisking Chloe away to a place where they could be together without the scrutiny of her father or the Duke of Fladbury was both thrilling and terrifying. It was a drastic

measure, one that would surely scandalize their families and friends. But for a brief, tantalizing moment, Anthony allowed himself to envision it. He pictured himself and Chloe, hand in hand, running through the darkened streets of London to a waiting carriage. They would flee to Gretna Green or some other remote village where they could marry without her father's interference.

They would start a new life together, far from the oppressive expectations of the ton. The image was so vivid, so tantalizing, that it nearly made his heart leap with hope. But as quickly as the thought came, reality set in. Eloping would not solve all their problems; it would only create new ones. Chloe's reputation would be in tatters, her relationship with her family irreparably damaged. And Anthony, too, would face the wrath of his mother and the potential loss of his standing in society. For his sisters as well as himself. It was too risky, too fraught with uncertainty.

He could not subject Chloe to such a precarious future, no matter how much he longed to be with her. Anthony sank into his chair, his head in his hands, grappling with the impossible choice that lay before him. The ticking of the clock on the mantel seemed to mock him, a reminder of the precious time slipping away with each passing second.

Knock, knock.

The sound shook him from his thoughts.

"Yes?"

"Can I come in?" his mother asked. "I need to speak with you."

Anthony sighed. "Of course."

His mother stepped in to the room, her brow furrowed with concern as she took in her

son's troubled expression. "Oh my, what is wrong?" Her voice was gentle and coaxing, inviting him to unburden his heart.

Anthony hesitated for a moment, the words caught in his throat. But as he met his mother's gaze, he saw the love and understanding shining in her eyes, and he knew that he could no longer keep his secrets to himself.

"Mother," he began, his voice shaky, "I do not know what to do."

She moved closer, taking a seat across from him and waiting patiently for him to continue. "It is Chloe," he said, running a hand through his hair again.

"Chloe?"

"I love her." It felt like a giant weight lifting off his shoulders. "I have always loved her."

His mother stared at him, confused. "So, what is the problem?"

"There are so many obstacles in our way. Her father, Lord Frampton... society's expectations. I can not bear the thought of losing her, but I am terrified of what could happen if we try to be together."

His mother sighed softly, her expression thoughtful. "Love is never easy, Anthony. And true love is often the most difficult of all. But you must ask yourself, is it worth the fight? Is Chloe worth it?"

"Of course she is," Anthony replied without hesitation. "She is worth everything."

"Then you must be willing to take risks," she said gently. "You must be willing to face the challenges head on and find a way to be together, no matter what society

thinks or what obstacles are placed before you.”

Anthony nodded, but his heart was still heavy. “There is more to this than just societal expectations. Lord Swift... he has done something unforgivable. Years ago, but it still haunts us now.”

“What do you mean?”

“He told me to leave Chloe alone because she needs a title, just before I left on my Grand Tour. That is why I left on my Grand Tour.”

Leonora’s eyes widened with shock and dismay. “Lord Swift did that? How could he be so heartless?”

“Well, he is also being heartless in trying to push Chloe to marry Lord Frampton, whom she does not like. Which is why she asked me to fake a courtship with her...”

“But how can you, when you have real feelings for her?”

Anthony’s voice was raw with emotion. “I thought I could manage it, Mother. I thought I could help her without letting my own feelings get in the way. But after tonight, I realize I cannot do it anymore. I can’t pretend. I cannot lie to myself or to Chloe. I love her too much.”

Leonora’s gaze softened. “Then you must be honest with her. She needs to know how you truly feel, and she deserves to make her own choices based on the truth. Deception, even if well intentioned, can only lead to more heart ache.”

“But what if she does not want me too?”

Anthony’s voice trembled with the weight of his fear. The idea of Chloe rejecting

him, of her not reciprocating his feelings, was a possibility he could barely endure.

Leonora reached out and took his hand in hers, her grip warm and reassuring.

“Anthony, if Chloe truly cares for you, she will understand. She will see the sincerity in your words and actions. You must give her the chance to know the real you, not the man hiding behind a facade.”

Anthony sighed deeply, his mind racing with doubts and hopes. “I want to believe that, Mother. But the risk of losing her, even as a friend, is terrifying.”

“True love always involves risk, my dear,” Leonora said softly. “But the rewards of that love are worth every fear, every moment of uncertainty. You owe it to yourself and to Chloe to be honest. Only then can you both find true happiness.”

Her words, though simple, resonated deeply with Anthony. He knew she was right. He had to take the risk, to lay his heart bare before Chloe and hope she would accept it. The alternative... continuing to live a lie and letting her slip away, was far worse.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:15 am

Sir Winston returned to her side, barking excitedly, needing her attention. Chloe absentmindedly threw the stick for him again. Hyde Park might have been utterly beautiful, but Chloe was distracted. All consumed with thoughts of Anthony and the way his lips felt against hers. She felt a dreamy smile tugging at the corners of her mouth, unable to suppress the joy that filled her heart.

“Chloe, darling,” Seraphina’s voice broke through her reverie, her tone equal parts curious and teasing. “What has you smiling so sweetly? You look positively radiant, as if you have been kissed by an angel.”

Chloe’s cheeks flushed, the color rising to her porcelain complexion. She glanced at Seraphina, her eyes sparkling with excitement. Did her friend know? Could Sera tell what had happened? “Oh, Sera, I can not contain it any longer. I must tell you.”

Seraphina’s eyes widened with anticipation. “Ooh, now this sounds exciting...”

Chloe took a deep breath, her heart fluttering with the thrill of her secret. “Anthony and I... we shared a kiss.”

Seraphina’s mouth fell open in delighted surprise. “A kiss? With Lord Anthony James? Tell me everything!”

Chloe laughed. “It was more than just a kiss, Sera. It was... magical. I felt as though the world had stopped, and it was just the two of us. It was like the sort of kiss that might be written about in a story.”

“But you have never been kissed before,” Seraphina teased, nudging her in the side.

“So how do you know it was such a wonderful kiss?”

“Oh, I do not need to kiss another, I just know.”

“Tell me, what did it feel like?” Seraphina whispered. “I must know.”

Chloe sighed, her smile widening. “It was everything I had ever dreamed of and more. When his lips touched mine, I felt a surge of warmth and love. It was as if all the years of longing and heart ache had melted away in that moment. I knew, without a doubt, that I love him with all my heart.”

Seraphina squeezed Chloe’s arm affectionately. “And what of Anthony? Does he feel the same? Have you finally talked about your feelings at long last?”

Chloe’s expression grew thoughtful. “I believe he does. There was such intensity in his kiss, it was so powerful, it had to be real. But I suppose we do still have a lot to worry about, so even if I do ask him about his feelings, it will be hard for us to move forwards together.”

Seraphina’s brow furrowed with concern. “I suppose so. What are you worried about the most?”

Chloe sighed, her thoughts turning to the obstacles that loomed over their happiness. “There is my father’s disapproval, for one. He has never considered Anthony a suitable match for me, believing that I should marry someone of higher ranking. And then there is the Duke of Fladbury. His intentions are clear, and my father seems to favor his suit.”

“But your mother is on your side, is she not?”

“Yes, but I do not know how much difference that will make.”

Seraphina's expression softened with empathy. "Have you considered telling your father how you truly feel? Sometimes, parents can be swayed by the genuine emotions of their children."

"I have tried, but he remains unmoved," Chloe replied, a note of frustration in her voice. "He believes he knows what is best for me, and he can not see past his own ambitions. And I do not know if he ever will."

"That must be frustrating," Seraphina agreed. "But if you do not talk to him, then you will never know."

It was easier said than done, but Sera had a point. Chloe did not want to live a life of unhappiness, wondering what if, just because she was too scared to try.

Chloe nodded slowly, absorbing Seraphina's words. "You are right, Sera. I can not let fear dictate my future. I have to at least try to make Father understand. Or I will regret it forever."

Seraphina smiled warmly, squeezing her friend's hand. "That's the spirit, Chloe. And remember, you are not alone in this. You have me, and I am sure Anthony will stand by you as well. Of course, you will always have your mother."

Chloe's heart swelled at the thought of Anthony's unwavering support. She looked at Seraphina with gratitude.

"Thank you, Sera. I think I needed to hear that."

Sir Winston returned, barking happily with the stick in his mouth once again. Chloe laughed and took it from him, throwing it once more. As she watched the dog dash off, she felt a renewed sense of determination. She would talk to her father and fight for her love with Anthony. She would at least try.

Upon returning home, Chloe's moment of hope was shattered.

Is that...?

She strained her eyes, her heart sinking as she realized it was.

It was Lord Frampton.

He was leaving, his expression smug and self satisfied.

He bowed charmingly the moment he spotted her. "I have just had the most delightful meeting with your father."

"You... you have?" Chloe stammered.

"Indeed. Now I must bid you good day."

Her heart sank as she watched Lord Frampton's carriage roll away. The dark clouds that had briefly lifted returned, heavier than ever. What had he discussed with her father? What sort of devious plan was he concocting now? She took a deep breath, steeling herself as she entered the house. Her father was waiting for her in the drawing room, his expression stern and unyielding. Chloe knew this was not going to be a pleasant conversation.

Lord Swift "Chloe," he said, his voice tinged with both authority and frustration, "we need to talk."

Her footsteps echoed softly on the polished floors as she followed her father to the drawing room, each step heavy with trepidation. Her heart pounded in her chest. Her

father sat in his usual armchair, his posture rigid and his face a mask of stern determination. Her mother, seated beside him, looked equally grave, her eyes filled with unspoken worry.

“Chloe,” Lord Swift began, his voice carrying the weight of authority, “we need to have a serious discussion.”

Chloe swallowed hard, her mouth dry. “What is it, Father?” she asked, her voice trembling as she spoke.

Lord Swift exchanged a glance with his wife before continuing. “I have just had a very interesting meeting with Lord Frampton.”

Chloe felt sick to her stomach. She knew this already, but that did not make it any less terrifying a prospect.

“Lord Frampton has proposed, and I have given him my blessing.”

Oh no.

No, no, no...

The room seemed to spin around Chloe as the words sank in. Her worst fears had come true. She opened her mouth to protest, but her father raised a hand to silence her.

“You will marry him, Chloe. It is an excellent match, and it will secure our family’s future. Lord Frampton is a man of influence and wealth. I do not need to hear anything from you about this.”

Chloe’s heart felt like it was breaking into a million pieces. She turned to her mother,

seeking any sign of support or reprieve, but Lady Swift's face was etched with sadness, her eyes avoiding Chloe's desperate gaze.

She knew in that moment that it was far too late.

"But Anthony..."

Her father's face hardened. "There is no Anthony."

"We have been courting..."

Lord Swift's face turned red. "Enough!" his voice thundered, cutting through Chloe's protest like a knife. "You will not speak of him again. Anthony James is not suitable, and that is final."

Chloe's heart shattered further with each word. She could feel the tears welling up in her eyes, but she blinked them away, determined to stay strong. They were supposed to be in a fake courtship, to put an end to this, but they had hardly been given any time together. They had not had a chance to make it public, to stop Lord Frampton.

"Father, please, you can not force me into a loveless marriage," Chloe pleaded, her voice trembling. "I do not love Lord Frampton. I can not be happy with him."

Lord Swift's expression hardened. "Love is a luxury, Chloe, one that you can not afford. You will learn to be content. This is for the best."

Lady Swift's lips trembled, but she remained silent, her hands clasped tightly in her lap.

"Mother, please," Chloe implored one last time.

But of course, she got nothing back.

With a final, desperate plea, she turned back to her father.

“Father, if you force me in to this marriage, you will condemn me to a life of misery. Is that what you want for your daughter?”

Lord Swift’s expression softened for just a moment, but then he shook his head firmly. “This discussion is over, Chloe. You will marry Lord Frampton. It is decided. It has already been agreed upon.”

Chloe’s heart shattered. Without another word, she turned and fled the room, her tears finally spilling over as she raced to the sanctuary of her bedroom. Her world, so briefly filled with the promise of love and happiness, had come crashing down around her. She threw herself on to her bed, the sobs wracking her body with a force that left her breathless. How could her father do this? How could he be so cruel, so blind to her feelings? The thought of marrying Lord Frampton, a man she did not love and could never love, was unbearable. And Anthony... what would become of them now?

The kiss they had shared, the emotions it had stirred, had felt like the beginning of something beautiful. But now, it seemed like a cruel twist of fate.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:15 am

“How do I look?” Chloe asked as she prepared for the masquerade ball that was being held that night at the James residence, of all places. But perhaps that was perfect, because she could do what she needed to do.

“Hold on...” Rose assisted her with the finishing touches on her costume. “Let me just...”

Chloe took a deep breath, willing herself to stay calm. She needed tonight to go perfectly. Once Rose was done, Chloe stepped back, and admired her reflection in the full length mirror. The gown was a masterpiece of soft, pale blue silk, the bodice adorned with intricate silver embroidery that glimmered in the candlelight. The skirt fell in graceful folds, the hem brushing the floor as she moved, a whisper of elegance and refinement.

The gown was beautiful, yes, but it was also a reminder of the societal expectations she was bound to, the impending marriage to Lord Frampton that loomed over her like a dark cloud.

Rose handed Chloe her mask, a stunning creation of white satin painted with shimmering silver accents that evoked the gentle glow of moon light. Chloe’s heart fluttered as she secured it in place. The mask was a tribute to her favorite Greek Goddess, Selene, the Goddess of the Moon. It held special meaning for her and Anthony, a reminder of the plays they used to enact as children, the hours spent dreaming up grand adventures and imagining a world where they could always be together.

But she could not fully feel excited by this, no, with her heart so painfully heavy.

The thought of a life without Anthony, of being bound to a man she did not love, was almost intolerable. That was why she absolutely had to take action. She could not sit back and do nothing if she wanted her life to be her own.

Her heart raced at the thought of proposing to Anthony that they should elope to Gretna Green, so that they could be happy instead. It would be dramatic and scandalous, but that was not the most important thing to Chloe anymore. She needed happiness. She needed love.

“You look perfect,” Rose said to her. “Like a goddess yourself.”

“Thank you, Rose. You are too kind.” Chloe managed a small smile, but inside, her nerves were a tempest. “I should go downstairs. My parents will be expecting me.”

Rose nodded, with a supporting smile “I hope you have a wonderful evening, my lady.”

With a final deep breath, Chloe made her way down the grand staircase, each step echoing her anxiety.

“Chloe, darling, you look absolutely ravishing,” her mother said, her eyes sparkling with approval. “The mask is lovely and the gown... beautiful.”

“Thank you, Mother.” Chloe’s voice was steady, but her heart was racing. “Father.”

“Ah, there she is, the belle of the ball,” her father proclaimed, his tone oddly jovial. “Are you ready to make an entrance? It is a very important event tonight.”

Chloe swallowed hard and nodded. “I am ready.”

Lord Swift nodded with a self satisfied smile playing on his lips. Chloe could not help

but be completely unnerved by that. What did it mean? He had not warned her that he would announce the engagement tonight, but it seemed that he did not feel like he needed to warn her about anything anymore. That only meant she would need to act fast, to do what she could to avoid that.

The carriage ride to the James residence felt interminable. Lady Swift, trying to lighten the mood, chattered about the upcoming festivities, but her words fell flat, swallowed up by the oppressive atmosphere inside the carriage. No one else seemed to have anything to contribute to the conversation at all. Chloe stared out the window, her heart racing as they drew closer. She knew Anthony would be there, and hoped he would see her in her costume and understand the message she was trying to convey.

As the carriage pulled up to the James residence, the sound of lively music and laughter reached Chloe's ears. Her heart quickened with both anticipation and dread. Tonight's masquerade ball was not just another social event; it was a pivotal moment in her life. One that she absolutely needed to go right.

The grand house was alight with the glow of chandeliers, casting a warm and inviting light that belied the turmoil within her. Taking a deep breath, Chloe steeled herself. She stepped out of the carriage, her skirts swirling softly as she moved, and made her way inside, her heart pounding. The sounds of lively music and laughter filled the air, enveloping her in an almost surreal atmosphere. The opulent ballroom was a swirl of color and movement. One that almost made Chloe a little dizzy. Guests in elaborate costumes and masks danced and mingled, their laughter echoing off the high ceilings. The ballroom was a sight to behold, the walls adorned with shimmering draperies and the chandeliers casting a soft, gilded glow over the assembled guests. Leonora had outdone herself, creating an atmosphere of enchantment and mystery that perfectly suited the masquerade theme.

It was exciting, but Chloe had a lot on her mind. A lot that she needed to do. As she moved through the crowded ballroom, her eyes scanned the sea of masked faces,

searching for one in particular. She needed to find Seraphina, her confidante and the one person she could rely on to help her navigate the night's complexities. She needed an escape from her family, desperately. Especially with her father being more forceful than usual.

Chloe spotted Seraphina across the ballroom, her heart racing with relief. She navigated through the throng of dancing guests, her steps purposeful yet concealed beneath the elegance of her gown. Seraphina's eyes widened in delight as Chloe approached, her mask adorned with delicate feathers that fluttered with each movement.

"Chloe! You look absolutely breathtaking," Seraphina exclaimed, taking Chloe's hands in hers. "Like a vision from a dream."

Chloe managed a grateful smile, though her eyes betrayed the turmoil within. "Thank you, Sera. You look stunning as always."

Seraphina's brow furrowed slightly, sensing the tension in Chloe's demeanor. "What's troubling you, Chloe? You seem... different tonight."

Chloe glanced around nervously, ensuring they were out of ear shot from prying ears.

"Sera, I must tell you something." She swallowed hard, the reality of this settling down on her. "My father has accepted Lord Frampton's proposal."

Seraphina's eyes widened in shock, her hand flying to her mouth. "Oh, Chloe, no..." She pulled her friend into a comforting embrace, Chloe trembled against her.

And this was why she needed to leave. She had been left with no choice in the matter.

Am I ready for this? Truly ready?

Anthony stood before the mirror in his spacious bedroom, adjusting the collar of his crisp white shirt for what felt like the hundredth time. His reflection stared back at him, the anxiety etched into his features. The masquerade ball that his mother had been planning for far too long was here, and Anthony knew that it was time for him to finally be honest about all the things that he has spent too long keeping inside. Finally, his love for Chloe.

He no longer wanted their courtship to be fake. He wanted it to be their reality. Their future, together forever. His mother's words echoed in his mind, a gentle but firm reminder of what was at stake. Lady Leonora had always been supportive, but her recent advice had taken on a new urgency.

"You can not let fear dictate your actions, Anthony," she had repeated just that morning, her eyes full of the wisdom of her years. "Chloe is special, and if you love her, you must fight for her. Do not let her slip through your fingers because of old wounds and misplaced pride."

Anthony sighed deeply, running a hand through his neatly styled dark brown hair. His striking blue eyes, usually so confident and clear, were clouded with doubt. He had spent years trying to forget Chloe, to bury his feelings under the weight of responsibility and duty, so he did not cause trouble for her. But the moment he had agreed to the charade of a fake courtship, all those buried emotions had surged to the surface, impossible to ignore. As he fastened the buttons of his waist coat, his thoughts drifted to their shared past; the summers at their neighboring estates, the laughter, the secrets, the unspoken bond that had grown stronger with each passing year.

And then, the sudden and painful distance that had been forced upon them by her father's disapproval. Anthony had respected Lord Swift's wishes, believing that

Chloe deserved someone of higher rank, someone who could offer her the world. But the years had done little to diminish his love for her. If anything, they had only made it more profound. And now, he knew that she did not want someone of high rank. She had kissed him, which had to mean something, right?

With a final adjustment of his attire, Anthony took a deep breath and turned away from the mirror. He could no longer afford to let fear hold him back. Tonight, he would tell Chloe the truth, and he would fight for their future together. The weight of the secret he had kept for so long pressed heavily on his heart, but he knew it was time to set it free.

He could only hope that he did not have his dreams crushed. Because a life without Chloe was unfathomable. He could not even begin to imagine it. Nor did he want to. His heart was always going to belong to her.

Julian lounged comfortably in his private room at the prestigious St. Bradbury's Club, a self satisfied grin plastered on his face. The room, adorned with rich mahogany and velvet furnishings, exuded an air of opulence that perfectly matched his ambitions. His cousin, Lord Charles Hastings, sat opposite him, nursing a glass of brandy and watching Julian with a mixture of curiosity and admiration.

"You seem exceptionally pleased with yourself tonight, Julian," Charles remarked, swirling his drink thoughtfully. "Care to share the source of your delight?"

Julian's grin widened as he leaned back in his chair, stretching his long legs out before him. "Ah, Charles, it is not every day that one secures a bride with such impeccable timing and convenience. Lady Chloe Swift will soon be mine, and with her, the Swift family's considerable business connections."

Charles raised an eyebrow, his interest piqued. “Lady Chloe? The Earl of Hadleigh’s daughter? My goodness, Julian. How did you manage that?”

Julian laughed, a low, calculated sound. “It was surprisingly simple, really. The old fool, Lord Swift, is desperate to see his daughter become a duchess. His ambition blinded him to the true nature of our arrangement. He thinks he is securing his daughter’s future, but in reality, he is delivering his entire network of business connections into my hands.”

He was going to make everything right for Julian. Put him back on the right financial path.

But Charles did not need to hear about how Julian had struggled.

“Clever,” Charles acknowledged, raising his glass in a gesture of admiration. “And what does the lady herself think of this arrangement?”

Julian shrugged, a dismissive gesture that betrayed his lack of concern. “Lady Chloe’s opinions are of little consequence. She will do as her father wishes, and in time, she will come to accept her role as my duchess. Besides, she is a mere pawn in a much grander game. Are not all women when you really think about it?”

Charles chuckled, raising his glass to Julian’s. “To your cunning and to a future filled with endless business possibilities.”

The two gentlemen clinked their glasses together, the sound a triumphant note in the dimly lit room. Julian took a long sip of his brandy, savoring the warmth that spread through him. His mind raced with plans, each one more ambitious than the last. He was so pleased with what he had done, he did not even feel the need to attend the latest event of the Season, the masquerade ball held at the baron’s house was for those still looking for connections. Julian was far from that. Securing Chloe’s hand in

marriage was just the beginning. With her father's connections at his disposal, he would expand his influence, cementing his power within the highest circles of society. He would be back .

"You know," Julian continued, setting his glass down on the polished table, "once the marriage is formalized, the first order of business will be to secure an heir. A male heir, of course."

Charles nodded, understanding the significance. "Naturally. A duke must have an heir to ensure the continuity of his title and estates."

"Precisely," Julian agreed, a satisfied smirk playing on his lips. "Once Chloe provides me with a son, my lineage will be secured, and I can resume my life as I see fit. The responsibilities of marriage and the demands of fatherhood will be Chloe's concern, not mine. But I will provide help for her, of course."

Charles raised an eyebrow, his curiosity piqued. "And what of your... extra curricular activities? You are not planning to give those up, I assume?"

Julian chuckled, the sound low and sinister. "Hardly. Once an heir is secured, I shall be free to continue my affairs as before. Mistresses, dalliances... whatever I desire. The beauty of this arrangement is that it offers me the best of both worlds. Chloe will fulfill her duty, and I will enjoy my freedom."

Charles leaned back in his chair, clearly impressed by Julian's meticulous planning. "You have certainly thought of everything, Julian. But are you not worried about Lady Chloe discovering your intentions and possibly rebelling against this arrangement?"

Julian waved his hand dismissively. "Lady Chloe is a dutiful daughter, raised to obey her father's wishes. Even if she harbors any romantic notions or dreams of love, they

will soon be dashed. She will learn to accept her place and fulfill her role. Besides, the allure of becoming a duchess will outweigh any fleeting notions of defiance.”

“Still,” Charles mused, “a woman scorned can be a dangerous enemy. It might be wise to keep her somewhat content, at least on the surface.”

Julian’s smile turned cold. “Oh, I intend to be a perfectly courteous husband, as long as she behaves. Lady Chloe will have everything she could desire. Wealth, status, and the respect of society. She will want for nothing, and in return, she will give me an heir and maintain the facade of a perfect marriage.”

The door to their private room opened, and a club servant entered, carrying a tray with a decanter of fine port. He set it down with a deferential bow before quietly exiting. Julian poured himself a glass, his eyes gleaming with ambition.

“To the future,” he said, lifting his glass. “A future where I reign supreme in both business and society.”

Charles clinked his glass against Julian’s. “To your future, Lord Frampton. May it be as grand as you envision.”

As they drank, Julian’s mind continued to churn with plans. He envisioned himself at the pinnacle of power, with the Swift family’s resources bolstering his every move. The connections he would forge, the alliances he would build, all of it was within his grasp. Now he just needed to make those final moves. He would not only secure his financial stability at long last so he no longer had to worry about the issues that had been plaguing him of late, but also carve out a legacy that would be remembered for generations.

The masquerade ball was in full swing as Anthony entered the grand ballroom, the air alive with music and laughter. His eyes scanned the crowd, seeking the one person who mattered most. There might have been a lot of people in front of him, but he did not care about any of them. Only her. The sight of the elegantly dressed guests, their faces hidden behind ornate masks, did nothing to calm the storm of anticipation and nervousness within him. Then, amidst the ocean of colors and dancing, he spotted her.

Chloe .

Relief flooded him the moment his eyes captured her. No one else mattered but her. The soft, pale blue silk of her gown and the intricate silver embroidery caught his eye, transporting him back to their shared childhood memories. The outfit she wore was unmistakable, a beautiful tribute to Selene, the Goddess of the Moon. It was a reminder of the bond they had always shared. The fun that they had always had together. The fun that he wanted to continue having with her, forever.

Heart pounding, Anthony made his way through the crowd towards her, his steps quickening as he drew closer. When he reached her, he could hardly contain the emotion in his voice as he spoke, “Chloe, may I have this dance?”

She turned to him, her eyes lighting up with recognition and something else... hope, perhaps? “Of course, Anthony,” she replied softly, and as they took to the floor, the music swelling around them, Chloe looked up at him with a small smile playing on her lips.

“You recognized me in the outfit,” she remarked, her tone filled with a mixture of surprise and delight. “I was not sure that you would.”

Anthony, his eyes filled with warmth and longing, met her gaze. “There are many things about you that I will never forget,” he said, his voice gentle yet firm. “And our

shared memories are included.” The words carried the weight of his unspoken love, a love that had grown over the years and had become impossible to ignore.

They moved in perfect harmony, the memories of their childhood adventures dancing alongside them. Each step, each turn, felt like a reaffirmation of the connection they shared. Chloe’s presence, her scent, her touch... it all felt so right, so destined. Chloe’s smile widened, and a soft blush colored her cheeks.

“You have always remembered the smallest details, Anthony. It is one of the things I have always admired about you. Every single time I remember something from our past, you already have it, right there at the forefront of your mind.”

Anthony’s heart swelled at her words, his resolve strengthening. This was the moment he had been waiting for, the chance to finally tell her how he truly felt. He leaned in closer, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Chloe, there is something I must tell you. Something I have kept hidden for far too long.”

Her eyes widened slightly, her breath hitching in anticipation. “What is it, Anthony?”

Before he could speak, the music began to fade, signaling the end of the dance. Panic surged through him as he felt the moment slipping away. But he could not let it end like this. Not now.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:15 am

Chloe glided across the ballroom floor in Anthony's arms, their movements in perfect harmony. The strains of the waltz filled the air, and yet, the music could do little to soothe the ache in her heart. With each step, the weight of her impending betrothal to Lord Frampton pressed down on her soul, a relentless reminder of the despair that had consumed her since her father's cruel announcement.

Anthony's eyes, filled with a mixture of concern and unspoken love, met hers. Chloe knew she had to tell him the truth, to share the burden that had been weighing on her. She needed to let him know that much as he was the one for her, it might already be too late. The words trembled on her lips, her courage bolstered by the warmth of his embrace. She opened her mouth to speak, to confide in him the depth of her pain and the horror of her predicament...

But before she could utter a single word, their dance was abruptly cut short.

A clumsy guest, swaying unsteadily with a tray of drinks, stumbled into Anthony, sending a cascade of liquid splashing all over his finely tailored suit. The guest, notorious within the ton for his inebriated escapades, was none other than Lord Pembroke, a well known lush. Gasps of surprise echoed around the ballroom, and Chloe's heart sank as she watched the shock and embarrassment wash over Anthony's face.

"Good heavens, I am so sorry!" Lord Pembroke stammered, fumbling with the now empty tray.

Anthony's once immaculate attire was now soaked, the dark fabric clinging to his form in a way that truly looked very uncomfortable. Lord Pembroke, his face flushed

from drink and embarrassment, looked as though he was bracing himself for the inevitable confrontation. But Anthony, ever the gentleman, simply smiled kindly and shook his head.

“It is quite alright, Lord Pembroke,” he said, his voice calm and reassuring. “Accidents happen to the best of us.”

Chloe watched the exchange, her heart swelling with admiration for Anthony’s composure. While others might have taken offense and sought to escalate the situation, Anthony chose kindness over conflict. It was one of the many reasons she loved him. Lord Pembroke, taken aback by Anthony’s unexpected response, mumbled another apology.

“I... I am terribly sorry, truly,” he stammered, looking down at the mess he had caused. “I must be more careful.”

“No harm done,” Anthony assured him, patting Pembroke on the shoulder. “Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

Anthony turned to Chloe, offering her a reassuring smile. “Please excuse me, Chloe. I must clean up this mess. I will return to your side as soon as possible.”

Chloe forced a smile, though her heart ached with disappointment. “Of course, Anthony. Take your time.”

As Anthony hurriedly made his way out of the ballroom, Chloe felt a pang of loneliness wash over her. She moved to the edge of the room, finding solace in the shadows away from the prying eyes of the other guests. Her thoughts raced, the urgency to tell Anthony the truth gnawing at her insides. But how would he respond to her? Was she likely to receive the same kindness? Was that even what she wanted? Or did she want Anthony to fight for her? For them?

Anthony had barely finished changing when he felt an urgent need to return to the ballroom, the unfinished conversation with Chloe weighing heavily on his mind. He still needed to confess his love to her, he could not hold it back any longer, he just needed to find a moment to get it all out. The night had been fraught with interruptions, and he was determined not to let another moment pass without hearing what Chloe had to say.

As he made his way through the grand hall, the bright flickering glow of the terrace lights caught his eye. Through the open doors, he saw a solitary figure standing there, silhouetted against the night sky. The figure's posture was tense and familiar. It was Lord Swift, alone and seemingly deep in thought.

Anthony hesitated for a moment, almost torn between continuing on his journey to Chloe, and speaking with Lord Swift first. He knew that his words would not be well received, but he was a gentleman through and through, and wanted to do things right.

He stood still for a moment, going back and forth, but in the end, he knew what his mother would tell him to do, so that was the way he decided to go...

He took a deep breath and stepped out on to the terrace. As he approached Lord Swift, Anthony noticed that something was amiss. Something was so amiss that he could feel his pulse pounding against his rib cage. Lord Swift, who was usually so composed and in control, looked unusually pale, his hand clutching the railing for support. His face was etched with lines of pain, and his body seemed unsteady.

"Lord Swift?" Anthony called out, his voice tinged with concern. "Are you alright?"

Lord Swift turned towards him, but his eyes were unfocused, his response incoherent. "I... I do not..." he mumbled, the words slurring together in a jumbled mess.

Alarmed, Anthony quickened his pace. “Lord Swift, you do not look well. Here, let me help you...”

Before he could reach him, Lord Swift’s body convulsed, and he clutched his chest with a pained gasp. His knees buckled, and he collapsed to the ground, his face contorted in agony.

“Lord Swift!” Anthony shouted, dropping to his knees beside the older man . He fumbled for his pulse, his heart racing as he felt the faint, erratic beat beneath his fingers. “Help!” Anthony called out towards the ballroom. “Someone, please help!”

Panic gripped Anthony as he realized the severity of the situation. The terrace quickly filled with concerned on lookers, their faces pale with shock and worry. But no one could possibly be as worried as Anthony felt in that moment. Among them were Chloe and Lady Swift, their expressions mirroring the dread that Anthony felt.

“Anthony, what is happening?” Chloe’s voice trembled as she pushed through the gathering crowd, her eyes widening in horror as she saw her father on the ground.

“He collapsed,” Anthony replied, his voice urgent and strained. “We need a doctor immediately! Someone call for the doctor.”

Anthony took charge, his voice steady and commanding as he ordered the butler to send for the family physician. He and one of his foot men carefully lifted Lord Swift, carrying him to a private room to await medical attention. The last thing that Lord Swift needed was to be eyed by curious onlookers. His heart raced nervously. There was no telling what was going to happen here.

All he could be sure of was that it threw all of his and Chloe’s plans in to disarray. But that did not matter right now. Lord Swift did. Anthony sat by Lord Swift’s side, gripping the older man’s hand as the physician arrived and began his examination.

Chloe and Lady Swift hovered nearby, their worry palpable.

He wished that he could do more.

He wished that he could do anything .

Chloe's mind reeled with the thought of losing her father. Despite their often strained relationship, the idea of his absence left her feeling adrift and terrified. Her heart pounded in her chest, a frantic rhythm that echoed the chaos around her. The night had taken a dark turn, and she struggled to hold herself together.

Luckily, Anthony was by her side, his presence a steady rock in the midst of the turmoil. He spoke in calm, measured tones, offering words of comfort to both Chloe and her mother. His composure provided a much needed anchor, and Chloe clung to it, drawing strength from his unwavering support.

"Chloe, he is strong. He will pull through," Anthony said, his voice filled with quiet confidence. "You know that your father is strong, he is the strongest man that I have ever known."

Chloe nodded, though tears threatened to spill from her eyes. "Thank you, Anthony. For everything."

The wait seemed endless, each second stretching into an eternity. The James house, usually so lively with the sounds of conversation and laughter, was now cloaked in a heavy silence since all the other guests had thankfully gone home. There was no reason for anyone to remain at the ball while a disaster was unfolding. Chloe did not even want to think about what the ton might be saying about her family now.

The only noise was the faint rustling of servants moving with purpose, their faces etched with concern as they attempted to keep the house under control with everything going on around them. Finally, the physician arrived, his expression grave as he was led to Lord Swift's side. Chloe's heart leapt in to her throat as he examined her father, his movements methodical and deliberate. She held her breath, praying silently for a miracle.

Anthony stood beside her, his hand resting gently on her shoulder. "He is in good hands now, Chloe. The doctor will do everything he can."

Chloe squeezed her eyes shut, a tear slipping down her cheek. "I can not lose him, Anthony. No matter our differences, he is still my father."

Anthony's grip on her shoulder tightened slightly, a gesture of reassurance. "I know. And you will not lose him. Not tonight."

Minutes felt like hours as they waited. Her mother paced anxiously, her face pale with worry. Chloe reached out to her, taking her mother's hand in hers. They drew comfort from each other, their shared fear binding them closer. Finally, the physician rose up his face etched with lines of fatigue. He met their eyes, delivering his diagnosis with a calm, professional tone.

"Lord Swift has suffered a heart attack. It is fortunate that Lord Anthony acted so quickly. From what I have heard, his decisive action made all the difference."

A wave of relief washed over Chloe, mingled with gratitude. She turned to Anthony, her heart swelling with love and admiration.

"Thank you," she whispered, her voice choked with emotion. "You saved him."

Anthony's expression softened, his eyes reflecting the depth of his feelings. "I did

what anyone would have done.”

“No,” Chloe said, shaking her head. “You did what you always do. You were there when we needed you most.”

She reached for his hand, her fingers intertwining with his. The warmth of his touch grounded her, offering a sense of security amidst the uncertainty. Chloe drew strength from his steady presence, feeling a renewed sense of hope for the future.

Chloe’s fingers danced across the keys of the pianoforte, each note a desperate cry for solace. The haunting melody filled the music room, weaving through the air like a spectral presence. Sun light streamed through the large windows, casting a delicate light over the elegant space, but it did little to lift the heavy shadow that had settled over her heart.

The masquerade ball felt like a distant memory now, though it had been only a few days. The aftermath had been swift and severe. Her father’s sudden heart attack had thrown the household into chaos, his stern and unyielding presence now replaced by a fragile, ailing man confined to his bed. The doctors had warned that he needed rest and minimal stress, a command that had turned Chloe’s world on its axis. She closed her eyes, allowing the music to carry her away, her mind wandering back to that night.

Anthony’s eyes had been so full of something she dared not name... hope, perhaps even love. She had seen the words forming on his lips, only for them to be stolen by the abrupt end of the dance and the unwanted accident with Lord Pembroke.

Now, sitting alone in the music room, Chloe could still feel the ghost of that almost confession hanging in the air. It was a fleeting moment, but one that had stirred

something deep within her. She paused, her fingers hovering over the keys, as she replayed the scene in her mind.

But as she recalled that moment, she also thought about the news that she had to share with him. The news that her father had accepted a proposal to another man. And not just anyone. Lord Frampton. The melody grew softer, more melancholic, as her thoughts turned to her father. Despite their differences, despite the control he had exerted over her life, she loved him deeply. Seeing him so vulnerable had torn at her, bringing a new level of complexity to her feelings of duty and independence. How could she follow her heart when doing so might defy her father's wishes during his most fragile state?

It all felt so terribly wrong.

As she played, her thoughts drifted to the past few days, to the fear and uncertainty that had gripped her as she watched her father fight for his life. The announcement of her impending marriage to Lord Frampton had been put on hold, her father too weak to proceed with the drawing up of the marriage contracts.

Chloe knew she should feel relieved, but the guilt of keeping this secret from Anthony gnawed at her, adding to the burden she already carried. She had not told Anthony about the arrangement with Lord Frampton, fearing his reaction, fearing that it would shatter whatever fragile bond they were trying to rebuild. Her father's collapse had given her a reprieve, but it was a temporary one.

The shadow of the duke loomed over her, a constant reminder of the life she could be forced in to if she did not act soon. The notes she played shifted to a darker, more urgent tone, mirroring her inner turmoil. How could she explain to Anthony that, despite the fake courtship they had embarked on, her father had still intended to marry her off to Lord Frampton? The thought of being Lord Frampton's wife filled her with dread. His calculating eyes and cold demeanor promised a future devoid of

the warmth and love she craved.

Tears welled in Chloe's eyes as she tried to focus on the music, each note a reflection of her inner despair. The realization that she could be forced into a loveless marriage weighed heavily on her, suffocating her spirit. How could she face Anthony, knowing that her father's plans would destroy any chance they had of a future together?

Her father's sickness had prevented her from undertaking her plan, from running off to elope with Anthony.

Now she was not sure where that left her.

Chloe's fingers slowed on the keys, the music fading into a haunting silence. She sat motionless, the weight of her thoughts pressing down on her. The prospect of being bound to Lord Frampton filled her with dread, but the idea of defying her father in his weakened state was equally unbearable. The path forward seemed hopelessly tangled, each step fraught with peril. It really did feel like there was no way out.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:15 am

Anthony sat in the plush, dimly lit carriage, his fingers drumming anxiously against his thigh. The rhythmic clatter of hooves on cobble stones did little to soothe his racing thoughts. An urgent summons from Lord Swift had arrived at dawn, an unexpected and unwelcome jolt that had sent his mind spiraling with possibilities.

The early morning air was crisp and cool, but Anthony's stomach twisted with nerves, a tight knot of anxiety settling deep within him. He stared out of the window, the familiar streets of London passing by in a blur. The memory of his last confrontation with Lord Swift resurfaced, vivid and painful. The one before the heart attack that was. The Earl's cold dismissal and biting words had left a lasting mark, a reminder of the insurmountable obstacles that had always stood between him and Chloe.

Despite his best efforts to remain calm, a sense of dread gnawed at him, the prospect of facing Lord Swift's wrath once more looming large in his mind. Even if he had been summoned to the Swift household, he was not going to be able to shake off these nerves. Not until he knew what this was all about.

As the carriage turned the final corner, the imposing facade of the Swift residence came into view. Anthony took a deep breath, steeling himself for whatever awaited him inside. He could not afford to show weakness now; Chloe needed him to be strong, to stand firm against whatever challenge her father presented. This might be his last chance to present his cause, and to make Lord Swift see that he was worthwhile, and why he should have Chloe's hand in marriage.

The carriage came to a halt, and Anthony stepped out, his heart pounding in his chest. He straightened his coat and ascended the steps to the grand entrance, the weight of

expectation pressing heavily upon him. Before he could reach the door, his eyes were drawn to a figure storming down the stairs. It was Lord Frampton, his face a mask of fury. The duke nearly knocked Anthony over in his haste to reach his own awaiting carriage, his eyes flashing with barely contained rage as he brushed past him.

“Watch yourself, James,” Lord Frampton spat, his voice dripping with contempt. “This is far from over.”

Anthony barely had time to register the encounter before Lord Frampton disappeared in to his carriage, the door slamming shut behind him. The horses sped off, leaving Anthony standing there, bewildered and more anxious than ever. What was that about? Anthony composed himself, shaking off the unsettling encounter, and stepped in to the house. He was not going to get any answers standing outside the home. The butler greeted him with a somber nod and gestured for Anthony to follow. They walked through the familiar corridors, the tension in the air thick and suffocating.

“Lord James, this way,” the butler said, his voice low and formal.

He led Anthony to the parlor. Anthony’s heart pounded in his chest as he entered, his eyes immediately finding Lord Swift, who was seated near the fire place, his expression stern and unreadable.

“Take a seat, Anthony,” Lord Swift motioned to a sofa across from him.

Anthony complied, his mind racing with a thousand questions. He sat, trying to project calm confidence despite the anxiety churning inside him. Moments later, the door opened once again.

“Father, you summoned me?” Chloe asked, her voice trembling slightly.

“Yes, Chloe. Please, sit down,” Lord Swift replied, his tone giving nothing away.

Chloe moved to a chair beside Anthony, her eyes meeting his briefly, a silent exchange of concern passing between them. Was it time? Had their ruse been discovered at last? What on earth was going to happen now?

All of a sudden, Lord Swift cleared his throat, drawing everyone's attention back to him. The room fell silent, the air thick with anticipation. Chloe's father looked frail yet determined, his presence commanding despite his recent brush with death.

"I have something important to discuss," Lord Swift began, his voice gruff but sincere.

He turned to Anthony, and for a moment, the weight of his gaze felt like a physical burden. Anthony met his eyes, steeling himself for whatever was to come. He had faced many challenges in his life, but this moment felt like the most crucial of all.

"Anthony," Lord Swift said, his tone unexpectedly soft, "I owe you a debt. You could have left me on that terrace the night of the ball. You would have been well within your rights to do so after the way I have treated you over the years."

Anthony felt a flicker of surprise. This was not the confrontation he had anticipated. The memory of that night flashed before his eyes. He had acted on instinct, driven by a sense of duty and compassion, not expecting any acknowledgment or gratitude in return. That left him with very little to say. Chloe's eyes widened, her heart clearly racing as her father turned to her.

"Do you love him?" Lord Swift asked, his question direct and unflinching. His eyes searched her face, looking for the truth.

Chloe trembled, her voice barely above a whisper as she answered, "Yes."

Anthony's heart soared at her admission, a rush of hope and joy flooding through

him. The room seemed to hold its breath, the weight of her words resonating deeply within him. But as Lord Swift turned to him, asking the same question, he felt a flicker of uncertainty. What game was the Earl playing? What did he hope to gain from this line of questioning? Taking a deep breath, Anthony met Lord Swift's gaze, his voice steady and sure as he revealed the truth that had always lived in his heart.

"I have always loved Chloe," he said, the words a vow and a promise, a declaration of the unshakable bond that had always existed between them. "And I always will."

Lord Swift nodded slowly, a look of contemplation crossing his features. "Then it seems I have misjudged many things," he said, his voice tinged with regret. "I have spent so long trying to ensure that Chloe makes an advantageous match, that I failed to see what was right in front of me."

No one spoke. No one seemed to have any words. Lord Swift sighed, his expression weary but resolute.

"Anthony, if you truly love my daughter, then I can no longer stand in your way. I have seen the error of my ways, and I want Chloe to be happy. If being with you brings her that happiness, then so be it."

Chloe's eyes filled with tears. She reached for Anthony's hand, gripping it tightly as if to reassure herself that this moment was real.

"Father, thank you," Chloe whispered, her voice trembling with emotion. "Thank you for understanding."

Lord Swift sighed, his stern facade softening as he looked at his daughter. "I am sorry, Chloe. I thought I was doing what was best for you, but I see now that I was wrong. Your happiness is what matters most."

Anthony felt a surge of gratitude and respect for the man who had caused them so much pain but now seemed genuinely repentant.

“Thank you, Lord Swift,” he said, his voice sincere. “I promise you, I will do everything in my power to make Chloe happy.”

Lord Swift nodded, a hint of a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. “I believe you, Anthony. But there is something you both need to know.”

Anthony exchanged a worried glance with Chloe, bracing themselves for whatever revelation was about to come.

“I have been keeping a secret,” Lord Swift continued, his voice heavy with the weight of his confession. “A heart attack has given me a new perspective on life, and it has forced me to confront the mistakes of my past and the damage my actions have caused.”

“What do you mean, Father?”

He paused, taking a deep breath before continuing. “I was the one who told Anthony to stay away from you, Chloe. I thought that by keeping you apart, I was securing a better future for you. I was wrong. I said it years ago, I warned him, which I believe might be the reason that he left abruptly for his Grand Tour.”

“Father, why would you do that?” she asked, her voice choked with emotion as disbelief crossed her face.

“I thought I was protecting you,” Lord Swift replied, his eyes filled with regret. “I thought I was ensuring your future. But I see now that I was only causing you pain.”

He looked down, his hands trembling slightly as he continued. “I also had someone

look into Lord Frampton's business connections before going ahead with the marriage contracts. I discovered that the duke had been playing me. He lied about his wealth and connections. He is not the man he pretends to be."

Chloe's eyes widened in shock. "What do you mean?"

"Lord Frampton is deeply in debt," Lord Swift explained, his voice grim. "He has been using his title to deceive people, to make it seem like he is wealthy and powerful. But in reality, he is on the brink of financial ruin. I could not, in good conscience, allow you to marry him. It gave me a very good reason to end things before anything drastic needed to happen."

"It gave me a very good reason to end things before anything drastic needed to happen."

Did I really just hear that right?

Chloe clasped her hands tightly in her lap, her knuckles turning white with the effort to remain composed while her mind reeled with shock. Was she truly being set free from her betrothal to Lord Frampton? Did Anthony finally have her father's blessing? It all felt too much like a dream to be true.

As Lord Swift rose to his feet, giving Anthony and Chloe a moment alone, the air between them crackled with anticipation. They turned to each other, their eyes shining with love and hope, the years of separation and longing falling away in an instant.

"Anthony," Chloe whispered, her voice trembling with emotion. "Is this really happening? Are we truly free to be together?"

Anthony reached out, gently taking her hands in his. “Yes, Chloe. It is real. We have your father’s blessing, and we no longer need to hide our feelings.”

Chloe’s heart soared, her mind racing with a whirl wind of emotions. “I cannot believe it. After all these years, I thought we would never have this chance.”

Anthony took Chloe’s hand in his, his touch gentle and reverent as he poured out his heart to her. “Chloe, I have loved you from the moment we met. Leaving you was the hardest thing I have ever done, but I did it because I believed it was for your own good. I dreamed of a life by your side, but I buried those dreams, thinking they were impossible.”

Tears of joy and relief streamed down Chloe’s face as she listened to his words. Each word felt like a balm to the wounds of her heart, healing the years of separation and uncertainty.

“Anthony,” she choked out, her voice thick with emotion, “I never stopped loving you either. Every day without you was a day I felt incomplete. I tried to move on, but no one could ever take your place in my heart.”

Anthony brushed a tear from her cheek, his thumb lingering on her soft skin. “I promise you, Chloe, I will spend the rest of my life making up for the time we lost. We will build the life we have always dreamed of, together.”

Chloe’s breath hitched as she looked in to Anthony’s eyes, seeing the sincerity and depth of his love. “I want that more than anything, Anthony. I want to be with you, forever.”

He leaned in closer, his forehead resting against hers. “Then it’s settled. We will face whatever challenges come our way, together. Nothing and no one will ever keep us apart again.”

Anthony took her in his arms, his lips meeting hers in a sweet and tender kiss. It was a kiss filled with all the love, longing, and promises they had carried in their hearts for years. As they broke apart, their foreheads touching and their breath mingling, Anthony sank to one knee, his eyes never leaving Chloe's.

"Marry me," he whispered, his voice raw with emotion. "Be my wife, my partner, my everything. Let us build a life and family together."

Chloe felt her heart swell with overwhelming joy. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she looked at the man she had loved for so long. The man who was finally free to love her in return.

"Yes," she whispered, her voice choked with tears. "Yes, a thousand times yes."

She wanted nothing more.

This was like a dream come true for her, and now she was grateful that her dreams could finally become a reality.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:15 am

One month later...

Chloe stood at the altar, her heart racing with anticipation and joy. She wore a gown of delicate lace, the intricate patterns shimmering in the soft light of the chapel. Her eyes shone with love and happiness as she gazed at Anthony, who stood opposite her, looking every bit the dashing groom.

The room was filled with their closest family and friends, each face glowing with affection and support. The scent of fresh flowers filled the air, mingling with the faint, comforting aroma of the old wood and candles. Chloe's saw her mother look on with pride, her eyes misting with tears of joy. Her father, though still recovering, wore a contented smile, a silent blessing in his eyes.

Chloe had been dreading a wedding when she thought that she might have to marry Lord Lord Frampton Frampton, but this...This was everything. This truly was her dream come true.

As the officiant began the ceremony, Chloe felt a wave of serenity wash over her. She had been waiting for this moment, dreaming of it since she was a little girl. And now, standing here with Anthony, it felt as though all the pieces of her life had finally fallen in to place. Thank goodness she was sharing this moment with him , and not someone that she did not love.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to witness and celebrate the union of Lord Anthony James and Lady Chloe Swift in holy matrimony.” The officiant smiled at them both. “This is a day of great joy, a day when two hearts and lives become one. Marriage is a bond not to be entered in to lightly, but with reverence, love, and

commitment. It is a partnership built on mutual respect, trust, and understanding.”

Chloe smiled. Anthony matched her expression. A warmth spread through her whole body. The officiant continued, his voice filled with warmth. “Anthony and Chloe, today you are making a commitment to share your lives with each other. To stand together through life’s joys and sorrows, to support and uplift one another, and to cherish the love you have found. As you exchange your vows, remember that these words are more than just promises. They are the foundation upon which you will build your life together.”

Turning to Anthony, the officiant asked, “Anthony, do you take Chloe to be your lawfully wedded wife, to love and to cherish, in sickness and in health, for as long as you both shall live?”

Anthony’s eyes locked with Chloe’s, his voice just as firm and heart felt. “I do.”

“And do you, Chloe, take Anthony to be your lawfully wedded husband, to love and to cherish, in sickness and in health, for as long as you both shall live?” the officiant asked.

Chloe’s voice was steady and clear, filled with conviction and love. “I do,” she replied, her heart swelling with emotion.

“You may now exchange rings, symbols of your unending love and commitment,” the officiant said.

Anthony took Chloe’s hand, slipping the delicate gold ring on to her finger.

“With this ring, I thee wed,” he said, his voice a tender vow.

She loved the feel of the ring on her finger, and everything that it symbolized. She

finally felt like she was his . Chloe did the same, her hands steady as she placed the ring on Anthony's finger.

“With this ring, I thee wed,” she echoed, her heart full of love.

And now, he was hers too. Just as it was always meant to be.

The officiant smiled warmly. “By the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife.”

A collective sigh of happiness swept through the chapel, followed by the gentle murmur of approval from the gathered guests. Chloe's heart soared as she looked into Anthony's eyes, feeling an unbreakable bond solidify between them.

After the ceremony, Lady Swift hosted a lavish wedding breakfast at the Swift residence. The dining hall was filled with laughter and conversation, the clinking of glasses and the hum of happiness creating a beautiful symphony. The tables were adorned with exquisite floral arrangements, and the scent of roses mingled with the rich aromas of the feast.

It was lovely, and Chloe could not have been happier about it.

Eventually, as the music began to play, Anthony and Chloe took to the dance floor, their eyes locked on each other as they moved in perfect harmony. Their first dance as husband and wife. The room seemed to fade away, leaving only the two of them, their hearts beating in unison.

Anthony pulled Chloe closer, his voice a soft murmur in her ear. “I can not believe we are finally here, Chloe. It feels like a dream.”

Chloe smiled up at him, her eyes sparkling. “It is a dream come true, Anthony. I

never imagined we would be so happy.”

As they danced, Chloe felt the weight of the past lift from her shoulders. The years of longing and heart ache were behind them, replaced by a future filled with love and promise.

Chloe noticed Seraphina and Trevor at the edge of the room, caught up in the magic of the moment. Seraphina’s usual composed demeanor had softened, and she was laughing, her eyes sparkling as she talked with Trevor.

Trevor, usually so reserved, seemed more animated than Chloe had ever seen him. They moved together to the music, their steps gradually becoming more synchronized, their gazes frequently meeting with a shared warmth and understanding. Chloe nudged Anthony gently and nodded toward the pair.

“Look at Seraphina and Trevor,” she whispered. “Do you see what I see?”

Anthony glanced over and smiled, a knowing look in his eyes. “It seems they are finding their own bit of happiness tonight,” he replied. “Perhaps this wedding is inspiring more than just us.”

As the wedding breakfast drew to a close, the guests began to gather their things, their faces glowing with happiness and contentment. Anthony and Chloe stood by the door, bidding each guest farewell with heart felt gratitude and love.

“Thank you so much for coming,” Chloe said, hugging her friends and family, feeling the warmth and support from each of them.

Anthony shook hands and exchanged kind words with everyone, his heart full as he watched Chloe smile and laugh. Finally, as the last guest departed, Anthony turned to Chloe, his eyes filled with adoration.

“Ready to go, Mrs. James?” he asked, a playful glint in his eyes.

Chloe blushed, the sound of her new name sending a thrill through her. “Yes, Mr. James,” she replied, her voice tinged with excitement.

They made their way to the waiting carriage, where Anthony helped Chloe up the steps before climbing in himself. As the door closed behind them, the noise of the celebration faded, leaving them in a cocoon of quiet and intimacy. Anthony reached for Chloe’s hand, pulling her close.

“I can not believe we are finally married,” he whispered, his voice full of wonder.

Chloe smiled, her heart overflowing with love. “It is everything I have ever dreamed of and more,” she said, leaning in to kiss him.

Their lips met in a sweet, lingering kiss, a promise of the life they would build together. When they finally pulled apart, their foreheads rested on top of one another, and they sat in silence for a moment, simply savoring the closeness. The carriage started to move, and Chloe nestled into Anthony’s side, feeling a sense of peace and contentment she had never known before.

As they traveled toward their new home, Chloe’s mind wandered back to the sight of Seraphina and Trevor. She hoped with all her heart that her dear friend would find the same happiness she had found with Anthony. She had not thought of them as suiting one another, because she did not know Trevor as well as Anthony did, but seeing them together... it just felt right.

“Do you think Seraphina and Trevor will find their own happily ever after?” she asked softly, her thoughts spilling in to the quiet of the carriage.

Anthony smiled, his hand gently stroking her hair. “I believe they will,” he said.

“Love has a way of finding those who need it most.”

Chloe sighed happily, feeling the truth of his words. “Yes, it does,” she agreed.

Anthony looked thoughtful for a moment before continuing. “By the way, Chloe, I have heard some news about Lord Frampton. I do not know if you wish to hear it...”

Chloe’s eyebrows raised in curiosity. “Oh? What about him?”

“Well,” Anthony began, “it seems Lord Frampton is too arrogant to accept defeat. He has set his sights on a wealthy heiress, determined to regain his status and power. The money too, that I assume he missed out on when you did not wed. He is throwing himself in to the pursuit with all his charm and wit, hoping to win her heart and fortune.”

Chloe sighed, a mix of concern and resignation in her expression. “Lord Frampton never changes, does he? Always so focused on status and wealth. I am just grateful not to be a part of it any longer.”

Anthony nodded. “Yes, but I believe he is driven by more than just arrogance. There is a part of him that is deeply wounded, and he is trying to prove himself to the world, to show that he is not a gentleman to be trifled with.”

“I suppose we all have our battles,” Chloe said softly, resting her head against Anthony’s shoulder. “I just hope he does not hurt anyone in his quest.”

Anthony kissed the top of her head. “Let us hope he finds his way, just as we have found ours.”

The carriage continued its journey through the quiet evening, the rhythmic sound of the wheels on the road lulling them into a peaceful silence. Chloe felt a profound

sense of gratitude for the love she had found with Anthony, and she silently wished for happiness and fulfillment for Seraphina, Trevor, and even Lord Frampton. She no longer held any ill will against him. Not now that she had gotten everything that she wanted. As they approached their new home, Anthony squeezed Chloe's hand gently.

"We are here," he whispered.

Chloe looked out the window and saw the warm lights of their house glowing in the darkness, a welcoming beacon of their future together. Anthony helped her out of the carriage, and they walked hand in hand up the path, ready to embark on the next chapter of their lives.

As she climbed out of the carriage, Anthony led Chloe to the entrance of their new home, her heart fluttering with excitement. The house seemed to welcome them with open arms. It was a beautiful, sturdy structure, filled with the promise of countless memories yet to be made.

Anthony pushed open the door, and they stepped inside together, crossing the threshold as husband and wife. The interior was cozy and inviting, filled with elegant furnishings and personal touches that made Chloe smile. Especially the bouquet of her favorite flowers that were sitting on the table to greet her.

"This is our home," Anthony said softly, his eyes filled with love and pride. "A place where we can build our life together."

Chloe nodded, her heart swelling with emotion. "It is perfect, Anthony. Everything about it is perfect. Just as our life is going to be together."

This really was the start of her new life, and Chloe just knew that it was going to be a happy one. She could not wait for everything that was to come.

The End

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:15 am

In the quiet little village of Haverstock, Emma Taylor paced frantically across the worn floor of her modest room in the home of her father, Vicar John Taylor. At the age of three and ten her sister, Isabella, her junior by seven years, sat on her bed, watching her with her brow creased with deep thought. Isabella had initially come to tell her that it was time for tea. But when she saw Emma chewing her lip and pacing a track in her bedroom floor, she had flopped down onto Emma's bed, silently watching her.

"Emma, what troubles you?" Isabella finally asked, rising from the bed and putting gentle hands on her elder sister's shoulders to stop her ceaseless pacing.

Emma sighed heavily, looking her sister over. If not for the drastic difference in their ages, they could almost be mistaken for twins. They both had the same fair skin and rosy cheeks and the same brilliant blue eyes. The only difference was in their hair, with Emma's being a single shade of chestnut brown lighter than Isabella's. She and her sister were very close. But Emma wondered how she could ever place her own heavy burdens on a girl of just thirteen.

"Isabella," she said, biting her lip again. "This really isn't for you to concern yourself with."

Isabella put her hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes at Emma.

"Mother and Father spend enough time treating me like a child," she said. "Please, Sister. Do not do the same. I may be young, but I love you, and I wish to help you."

Emma sighed again. When they were younger, she had no fear of telling Isabella

anything. But now that she was twenty, her problems had far outgrown the bond of two young sisters. Still, she knew that Isabella was wise. And she needed to talk to someone before her thought threatened to swallow her whole.

“Father came to me this morning after breakfast,” she said, dropping her voice low to try to keep from being heard through the thin walls of the vicarage. “He said that a governess position has opened up at Sinclair Manor. The duke of Buckinghamshire seeks a governess for his ward, Lady Victoria, and Father said that he received an inquiry regarding my interest in the position.”

Isabella gasped softly, covering her mouth with her hands.

“His Grace has quite an enigmatic reputation,” she said. “Not much is known about him, but many people have their opinions.”

Emma nodded slowly.

“I’m aware,” she said. “He and his family were once devout members of the parish. But over the past couple of years, they have stopped attending services. There are many rumours as to why, but that isn’t my reservation.”

Isabella shook her head, her brows wrinkling in confusion.

“But I thought you wanted to find a life away from the vicarage,” she said.

Emma nodded again.

“I do,” she said. “I am uncertain if the position of a governess aligns with my expectations.”

In fact, that was not at all what she had in mind. She had wanted a life filled with

adventure and knowledge. Specifically, she had hoped to travel far outside of London and see what of the world she could learn wherever she ended up. She had often thought of teaching others, as well. But she had never considered confining herself to the life of a governess right in the heart of the London countryside.

Isabella slid her hands from Emma's shoulders and into her hands, giving her a warm smile.

"But perhaps, this could be the beginning of the things you truly want," she said.

Emma shrugged.

"I don't see how the position of governess near London could ever see me out of London," she said.

Isabella shook her head, still smiling.

"How will you know if you don't try?" she asked. "And anyway, isn't it better than staying here if you are unhappy?"

Emma sighed once more. Her sister had a point. It wasn't that she didn't cherish her family and her abode. And it certainly wasn't that she didn't hold a profound love for God. She simply believed that her divine purpose lay beyond the humble vicarage. However, she also held the conviction that it extended beyond the role of governess. Even for a prestigious, if mysterious, duke.

A knock on her door interrupted her thoughts, and her conversation with her sister. Isabella went to answer the door, and Mrs. Mary Taylor, a woman of quiet grace and infinite wisdom, entered with a gentle smile.

"Emma, my dear, forgive me of eavesdropping," she said. "I would like to speak with

you about what your father told you this morning.”

Isabella didn't need to be told that she was excused. She gave Emma a gentle pat on the back and silently left the room, closing the door behind her. Once she was gone, the vicar's wife led her eldest daughter over to her bed, sitting down and tugging Emma down beside her.

“I understand this is a momentous choice for you, my dear," she stated. "However, enlightenment and motivation hold great significance. Particularly for the youth. It is our duty as followers of God to utilize our connection with the Lord to assist as many individuals as we can, in any capacity possible.”

Emma nodded, chewing her lip once again.

“I understand, Mother," she said. "But that is the dilemma. We are expected to aid numerous individuals, not solely one.”

Mary Taylor patted her eldest daughter's hand gently.

“Occasionally, we must commence with one," she remarked. "We cannot aid the world in its entirety at once, my dear. We must initiate with one individual at a time.”

Emma thought it over. She supposed that both Isabella and her mother had a point. Perhaps, she could eventually find herself touching more lives and learning more new things. But why did she have to make such a decision so quickly? Why couldn't she have more time to think it over? She sighed, the weight of the decision settling on her shoulders.

“But what if I don't like it there?” she asked. “What if I don't get on with the Duke?” Or what if he doesn't like me? She added silently.

Her mother gave her a fond smile.

“And what if you do?” she asked.

The words were simple. But they were just deep enough to give Emma pause. She was still uncertain that such a decision was the right one for her life. She couldn’t believe it was her true calling. But perhaps, her mother was right yet again. What if she did enjoy her work there?

“I suppose he did inquire for me specifically,” she mused. She didn’t need to ask why. Being the eldest daughter of a vicar, she imagined that she would be a good choice for any noble family in London. She was educated by the church and raised with all the ideals of modesty and humility expected of young ladies in the ton. She even had some teaching experience with the children of the parish, hosting bible classes for young ones who were just beginning their journey within the church. She knew she would make a desirable candidate, indeed. But what about the other governesses who were experienced in the specific field, who were no doubt more in need of work than she was at that time?

Her mother nodded, clearly pleased that she seemed to be considering the idea.

“That’s right, dear,” she said. “And while I’m sure he didn’t just ask your father, I should think he would rather have the daughter of a vicar if he could manage it. You are a shining example of what a young lady should be. And with his charge being a girl herself, he would naturally want the best influence he could find.”

Emma exhaled through half closed lips, blowing a stray strand of her brown hair out of her face. She was still reluctant to embrace the idea of taking the job. But the more her mother spoke, the more sense she made. Perhaps, she was mistaking her calling for her own wishes for her life. Perhaps, she needed to take whatever opportunities came her way and see where they led her, instead of trying to lead them herself.

“Very well,” she said at last with one last heavy sigh. “I shall take the position.”

Her mother beamed at her, rising to her feet and once more pulling Emma to her side. She embraced her eldest daughter, rubbing her back soothingly.

“Indeed, there is my dear,” she murmured gently. “This shall prove to be a most splendid choice. Have faith in me, and have faith in the divine providence. You shall soon see.”

Emma nodded, giving her mother a weak smile. She wished she could be as certain as her mother was. Still, she had to admit that it was an odd thing to happen at random. Surely, God had some hand in the duke’s decision to invite her to apply for the governess position.

“I trust you, Mother,” she said.

Mrs. Taylor nodded, smiling proudly as she patted her daughter’s shoulder.

“Very good,” she said. “I’ll leave you to start packing. You’ll be leaving tomorrow morning. The duke will want to see you as soon as possible.”

Emma frowned.

“Won’t Father need to write to him to tell him that I’m coming?” she asked.

Her mother shook her head.

“The trip is only about a day and a half,” she said. “You would arrive just as soon as a letter would.”

Emma nodded slowly, feeling as though the breath had been knocked out of her. She

had resigned herself to taking the position. She hadn't expected to leave so soon. Her heart was heavy as her mother left the room to let her begin packing. She would miss her family. But she would miss Isabella most of all. Would she ever be allowed to visit her family? What if the duke was cruel and never let her leave Sinclair Manor? What if that was the last time she saw her parents and sister?

She folded her dresses, tucking them gingerly into her worn leather trunk. The vicarage had been her home her entire life, the familiar walls still echoing with the laughter she shared with her sister and the comforting presence of her parents. Now, the prospect of Sinclair Manor loomed before her like a sea beneath a cloudy sky. The sun could shine at any moment. Or the skies could open up and bring a storm carrying the wrath of all the heavens. She wanted to be excited. But all she could muster was a flood of anxiety and worry.

As Emma packed her treasured books, a collection amassed over years of yearning for worlds beyond Haverstock, she pondered her mother's words. God called his worshippers to all different callings. And her mother seemed to think that the job offer had been a divine prospect. But even as she tucked the last of her possessions into the trunk, she couldn't let go of the idea that her calling was somewhere other than a governess's position.

Once she finished packing, Emma went in search of her sister. She would endeavor to display fortitude as she conveyed to Isabella the news of her impending departure. However, as she traversed the vicarage, tears pricked her eyes. Embracing her role as governess to the duke was a responsibility she would shoulder without hesitation. Yet, if she were to depart at dawn, she could not do so without one final stay in her sister's chamber. She yearned for her last recollection of home to be a source of solace during moments of longing for her family.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:15 am

The grand chamber at Sinclair Manor was bathed in the soft glow of the fire dancing in the hearth. The flames were casting shadows upon the walls, reminding Alexander Sinclair of the lively scene of a ball, despite the gravity of the situation before him. The scent of lavender filled the air as Lady Madeline Sinclair, his widowed mother, reclined on the plush, canopied bed, her delicate features accentuated by the subdued fire light. Her eyes were closed, and Alexander held his breath, not wanting to wake her lest she be resting, as was rare for her those days.

He sat by her bedside, trying to keep the weight of his mother's illness from becoming too heavy. He was there to lift her spirits, after all. Not to burden her with his sorrow over her condition. The physician had told Alexander that his mother wasn't to suffer any stress, and it was his duty to ensure that she did not. That didn't make his own feelings any easier to handle, however. So, he simply sat with a smile plastered on his face, even as his heart broke as he watched the woman who had birthed him and cared for him his entire life wasted away before his eyes.

His heart also ached for his daughter. Little Victoria, who was only seven years old, didn't fully understand what was happening to her grandmother, whom she loved dearly. It pained Alexander to have to keep Victoria away from her grandmother. But with Victoria's mother having died shortly after giving birth, the dowager duchess was the closest thing she had to a mother. Victoria was a smart, but sensitive child. He didn't want her to witness what he witnessed as his mother deteriorated.

Am I doing the right thing? He wondered as he stared at his slumbering mother. Will Victoria resent me if she doesn't get to see her grandmother before she dies?

He sighed softly to himself. It was at times like that he felt the most lost without

Sarah, his late wife. He had loved her dearly, and they had been thrilled to be welcoming a child. His world would have collapsed after her death, had it not been for Victoria. She had been his saving grace, and she was his world. He would do anything to care for and protect her. But even with as much as he loved his daughter, he still often missed his wife. He saw Sarah in Victoria more each day, and his heart ached. And now, as he watched his mother weakening, he wondered how much more he had left to lose.

The death of his father had been hard on both him and his mother. Richard Sinclair, the preceding duke, had died from a sudden coronary episode the same year Sarah was born. Losing both his father and his wife in the same year had been trying, but his mother had been instrumental in helping him through the first few years of Victoria's life. Now that she was fading, Alexander had no idea what he would do. He knew he had the household staff. But he also knew that Victoria needed more love than that which money could buy from servants. Perhaps, even more than he could offer, even though he loved her with his entire being.

As Alexander brooded, the dowager duchess stirred. Alexander became alert, watching his mother's face as her eyelids fluttered rapidly for several seconds before her eyes popped open. Her eyes were unfocused and cloudy for a moment until they settled on him. Then, she offered him a weak smile, offering him a cold, fragile hand.

"How long have you been in here, darling?" she rasped.

Alexander cleared his throat, praying that his voice didn't betray his worries.

"Just about an hour," he said, patting her hand gently and trying not to wince as he felt how icy her skin was.

His mother shook her head, clearly using much of her strength to do so.

“You should be with Victoria,” she said, pausing to cough. “I will still be right here once she’s gone to bed.”

Alexander bit his lip to stifle his thought. That’s not guaranteed, Mother, he retorted silently.

“Victoria is having a picnic with her nursemaid,” he said. “She’s perfectly all right.”

The dowager looked at him, her eyes suddenly looking sharp and clear.

“There is something I wish to discuss with you,” she said.

Alexander’s eyebrows raised and he looked at his mother inquisitively.

“What is it, Mother?” he asked.

The dowager shifted herself in bed, seeming to regain some of her strength as she pushed herself up on the pillows. Alexander jumped up to help her, fluffing the pillows as the dowager laid back against them.

“I’ve taken the liberty of having Rosa pen a letter to the attorneys,” she said. “Victoria needs a governess, and I thought it best to secure one without troubling you.”

Alexander’s brows furrowed. His mother’s inclination for unilateral decisions often stirred a simmering annoyance within him. And it seemed as though even her illness was not slowing her penchant for making such decisions. She was even going so far as to recruit her lady’s maid to help her sneak around behind his back. Yet, he kept his countenance serene, knowing that her intentions were always borne of love.

“Mother,” he said, keeping his voice at an even, quiet tone. “While I appreciate your

concern for Victoria and her education, I do wish you'd consulted me on such matters."

The dowager looked up at him with a hint of apology in her eyes.

"Darling, there was no time to wait," she said. "Victoria is growing every day, and we cannot afford to delay her education."

A sigh escaped Alexander's lips, but he nodded in understanding. Duty, a constant companion to a man of his station, pressed upon him even within the walls of his mother's chambers. Especially when the matter at hand was involving his daughter. He knew his mother was right. And deep down, he supposed that he only felt guilty that he hadn't taken the time to see to the hiring of a governess for his daughter himself.

It was difficult, tending to his duties as a duke, being a single father to a young daughter and tending to an ailing mother. There never seemed to be enough hours in a day, and he always felt that he was failing someone when they needed him most, no matter how hard he tried.

As if sensing his internal struggle, Lady Madeline squeezed his hand.

"You are a good son, Alexander," she said, smiling softly. "And you are a wonderful father, as well as a dependable, reputable duke. I know you'll see to it that Victoria gets the best of everything in life. You will always be devoted to your duties. And as for me..." she trailed off, taking a ragged breath. "Darling, there is nothing more you can do for me. If it is my time, then so be it. You must focus on your sweet daughter."

He managed a faint smile, his thoughts drifting to the responsibilities that awaited him outside his mother's chambers. Yet, the impending duty was momentarily

overshadowed by the love he harbored for his mother. His heart ached each time they spoke of her impending passing.

He still wished to believe that she might yet live. But his mother seemed convinced that her time was almost at an end. He never confronted the thought outside her room. But each time she mentioned it, his emotions threatened to overwhelm him. As did all the responsibilities that would be his and his alone in her wake.

“Thank you for your kind words, Mother,” he said. “I should let you rest now. You need your strength if you are to recover.”

The dowager duchess scoffed gently, shaking her head. But instead of reminding Alexander of how sick she was, as she often did, she held onto his hand, keeping him in his seat.

“Before you go, I should mention one other thing,” she said, her voice suddenly sounding much more casual and less urgent. “Lady Caroline and her family will be joining the Season. They will be arriving shortly and I wish to host them here for some time.”

Alexander’s eyes narrowed. He loved his mother dearly. But the prospect of him remarrying and his mother’s matchmaking efforts had always been a point of contention between the two of them. She knew that Alexander had not even considered taking another wife since Sarah died. He didn’t feel that he would ever be ready for such an endeavor. And he certainly didn’t want to be pushed into it.

“Mother,” he said, keeping his tone measured. “I appreciate your efforts in securing a suitable match for me. However, as you know perfectly well, I am not inclined to rush into marriage.”

The dowager gave her son a pleading look. It would have been enough for Alexander

to do anything she asked if what she was asking wasn't the one thing he could never consider.

"Alexander, it's time to think of Victoria," she said. "I know that you loved Sarah. But she's gone, child. Victoria doesn't just need proper education. She needs a mother figure. You must try to put her needs above your own feelings. You are her father, and she is depending on you to do what is right for her."

A ripple of resistance coursed through him, but he chose his next words carefully.

"I am glad that you care so much for Victoria, Mother," he said. "But I shall seek and secure a bride at my own pace, and only if I should happen to choose to do so."

His mother's eyes dulled, and it was clear that she was disappointed. Alexander felt bad for defying her in her current state. Part of him wondered what the harm could be in granting her the wish she so desperately wanted him to fulfill. Even if he only spoke the words to placate her. But he couldn't be dishonest with her, even if she might pass the following day. It would break his heart for his last words to his mother to be an outright lie.

Instead, he rose, kissing his mother on the forehead. His heart lurched at how warm her skin was compared to her cold, clammy hands. She was feverish again, and he hoped that the servants who were tending to her could bring down her fever again.

"I must go check in on Victoria," he said. "We can talk more about this later."

The dowager nodded, and her mouth twitched like she wanted to say something more. But her eyelids were already drooping, and her grip on his hand had loosened. He held his breath, praying that she wasn't about to breathe her last. But a moment later, her breathing became steady and rhythmic, albeit a bit raspy, and her chest rose and fell in even motions. He sighed with relief, tiptoeing out of the room. He closed

the door, motioning for the maid who had waited outside for him to finish visiting with her to go tend to her. Then, he descended the stairs and headed for his study.

He had no intention of discussing marriage further with his mother. He did, however, need to see if there had been any correspondence in reply to his mother's inquiry regarding the governess. If he had any say in the matter, he would select the governess himself. And if he didn't, he would have no qualms about firing whomever had been hired if she turned out not to be what Victoria needed. After all, his mother wanted the best for her. And he intended to see that she got it, even if it defied his mother's wishes.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:15 am

“Oh, Sister, how I will miss you,” Isabella sobbed, flying into Emma’s arms as she loaded the last of her trunks into the waiting carriage.

Emma blinked back her tears as she embraced her sister. Leaving Isabella behind was the hardest part of her leaving. She had lain awake all night, thinking over everything she and her mother had discussed. But even if her new job did turn out to be a way she could make a difference and serve God, she knew that the pain of losing Isabella would make her perpetually homesick.

“I’ll miss you too, darling,” she whispered, choking back a sob of her own.

Isabella pulled away, her flushed cheeks streaked with tears.

“Promise to write to me every chance you get,” she said.

Emma laughed, wiping away a tear that had just begun to fall down Isabella’s face.

“I will write every single day, if I am able,” she said.

Isabella nodded, but she didn’t look convinced.

“I want to know all about the Duke of Buckinghamshire,” she said. “And I want to know that he treats you well.”

Emma couldn’t help giggling again.

“He will be my employer,” she said. “You make it sound like he is to be my

husband.”

Isabella shrugged, wiping her own face with her hands.

“I don’t care what he will be,” she said. “I just want to know if he treats you well.”

Emma smiled weakly at her sister’s quip, trying to keep her own apprehension at bay. She knew nothing about the duke, except that no one else in the ton knew much about him. There were rumors that swirled that he was a hermit, that he was cruel to his servants and that he had shut himself off from the world with various reasons as to why he would do such a thing. Emma wasn’t one for gossip, as she knew that everyone was a child of God and should be treated as such. And yet, she couldn’t help being afraid since she was about to go to work in the Duke’s employ.

“All will be well, Sister,” she finally said, kissing her sister on the cheek as the coachman called to her. “I will write to you about my arrival at Sinclair Manor as soon as I am able. I love you always.”

Isabella returned her kiss, reluctantly pulling away from her older sister.

“You’d better,” she said with a weak smile as she put her hands on her chest. “And I love you more, Sister.”

Emma nodded, waving one final goodbye to her younger sister. Then, she turned and boarded the waiting carriage, watching as Isabella waved to her until she and the vicarage were no longer in sight. Filled with apprehension and immediate homesickness, Emma faced forward in her seat, watching the road that was taking her from everything she had ever known to everything of which she was terrified. She hoped her mother was right. But she feared that her employment at Sinclair Manor would be the biggest mistake of her life.

Almost two days later, Emma's carriage pulled up the winding driveway to the imposing expanse of Sinclair Manor. The high gray walls cast long shadows over the grounds, giving the mansion an air of brooding and sinister secrets. All the black curtains were drawn closed, making them look as though the manor had a dozen cold, black eyes. It was a well-maintained mansion, to be sure. But its rigid coldness sent shivers down Emma's spine. She was suddenly envisioning a hunch-backed master with wrinkles lining a constant snarling expression and small black eyes that were as unyielding as the black-draped windows.

Don't be silly, she silently scolded herself as she walked up to the large gray front doors of the mansion. Even if he has a physical deformity, he deserves compassion, just as everyone else does. And it certainly doesn't mean that he is a cruel man. Stop letting your imagination run away with you.

But as she pulled on the black door knocker, she couldn't shake the image her mind had produced of her new employer. What if her sister was right to worry? What if he ended up being a harsh employer who made every day of her tenure miserable? What if he refused to allow her to leave if she felt uncomfortable or unsafe?

As she waited for the butler to answer the door, she fidgeted nervously with the long sleeves of her blue muslin dress. She felt sure she would be given a uniform, but her mother had advised her to take all of her own dresses, as well, should she be sent into town or given time off.

She didn't have as many dresses as a rich lady would. But she had been sure that her favorite dress, a pink, lightweight wool gown, had been packed carefully on top of her others. Part of her wished she was wearing it then. Perhaps, she would feel a little more confident when she met her employer for the very first time.

"You are here to inquire about the governess position, I presume?" the butler said,

suddenly standing before her.

Emma gasped, startled. She had been so lost in thought that she hadn't even heard the doors open. She blushed furiously as she tried to recover her senses, giving the butler a weak smile.

"Yes," she said, clearing the tremor from her voice. "My name is Emma Taylor. I'm the eldest daughter of Reverend John Taylor."

The butler bowed slightly before giving her a warm smile.

"I am Randall Travis, the Duke's butler," he said. He had kind brown eyes and laugh lines around the corners of his cleanly shaven mouth. Emma thought she would get on well with him. "I recall the Duke mentioning that he had petitioned to speak with you about the position. Please, come in. He's currently in his study, but Lady Victoria is in the parlour, drinking milk with the head housekeeper."

Emma fought the urge to chew on her lip. She recalled what her mother had said about how eager the duke likely would be to have the daughter of a vicar tutoring his child. It was a great deal of pressure for Emma, and she found she suddenly wanted to flee the manor and never look back.

"Thank you, Mr. Travis," she said instead, following the butler into the mansion's vast, albeit drab, entryway. The interior walls were as gray as those outside, and they were lined with portraits that Emma could only guess were ancestors and relatives of the reigning duke.

She could feel the eyes of each painted face watching her as she followed the butler through the halls, and she had to keep her own eyes to the ground. She knew she was only spooking herself because of her nerves. But it was taking all her concentration to remind herself of that. And the aristocratic world which was apparent all around her did little to calm her. It was all overwhelming, and she already could hardly wait to

retire for the evening.

“Here we are,” Mr. Travis said as he ushered Emma into a large, bright room. Right away, Emma noticed the stark contrast between the drab, strict walls of the mansion and the pale purple wallpaper and rich red furniture of the parlor. There were vases with pink roses on every table in the room, giving the room a sweet, welcoming smell. The fireplace was dark, given the warm weather. The window at the front of the room was open, allowing a gentle breeze. The silver chandelier above glowed brilliantly with more candles than Emma could count. And sitting on a small, purple cushioned bench, sat a young girl.

As soon as the child saw her enter, she sprang up from her seat and rushed over to Emma. She had the thickest, darkest brown hair Emma had ever seen, and it bounced up and down in shiny ringlets that were piled atop her head. Her green eyes sparkled with the innocence only a child could possess.

“Good day,” she said, dipping into a perfect elegant curtsy. “My name is Victoria Sinclair, the only daughter of the duke of Buckinghamshire. Are you my governess?”

Emma smiled brightly at the child’s directness and intelligence. She had never seen such a prim and proper young girl, and it contrasted with the childlike wonder that shone in her eyes. And yet, Emma thought it suited the girl, and she returned the curtsy.

“Yes, I am, Lady Victoria,” she said, hoping she had addressed her charge correctly. “My name is Miss Emma Taylor.”

The girl nodded matter-of-factly, as though she already knew all about Emma.

“I know,” she said. “Mrs. Hodges told me that Papa had written to the vicar of Buckinghamshire and requested to speak with his daughter about being my governess. How old are you?”

Emma giggled, once more surprised at how direct the child was.

“I am twenty years old,” she said with a warm smile.

Lady Victoria frowned, surveying Emma carefully.

“I thought governesses were supposed to be old,” she said. “But you’re very pretty. Do you have a husband?”

Emma laughed, shaking her head.

“No, sweetheart, I do not,” she said. The child was, indeed, every bit as curious as she had thought she was. And Emma could see another question forming in her eyes. But before the little girl could ask, there was a clicking of a tongue from the doorway.

“Lady Victoria, that is a bit forward of you, don’t you think?” a feminine voice called.

Emma turned to see a tall, thin woman with fiery red hair and deep brown eyes looking at the child with gentle admonishment. The woman was wearing a maid’s outfit, and she sashayed into the room carrying a small teapot.

“That’s all right,” Emma said, quickly coming to her young charge’s defense. “She meant no harm. And I don’t mind answering her questions.”

The woman looked at Emma as she sat down the teapot in front of Lady Victoria. She poured a small cup of steaming milk before returning to Emma and offering a curtsy of her own.

“She is a curious child,” she said. “But where are my manners? My name is Lily Hodges. I’m the head housekeeper here at the manor, and I have been helping the nursemaid look after Lady Victoria until a governess was hired.”

Emma returned the curtsy, just as she had with the little girl, offering a warm smile.

“I am Emma Taylor, the governess,” she said. “That is, should the duke choose to formally hire me.”

Mrs. Hodges laughed, a deep, hearty sound that didn’t quite fit her slender frame.

“You show great initiative to show up to discuss the position in person,” she said. “If he doesn’t hire you immediately, I’ll assume he’s gone mad.”

Emma smiled, though her nervousness returned. She couldn’t deny that part of her hoped he would decide to hire an older woman for the job so that she could return home. But after having met young Victoria, she found herself fascinated by the girl. Perhaps, if she were hired, she would find a love for the job after all.

As the two women and the little girl continued talking, Lady Victoria's insatiable thirst for knowledge became increasingly more evident. She bombarded Emma with questions about growing up in the vicarage, being so devout in the church and whether she had any experience with teaching. Emma told the girl about the lectures she gave to the young children during church services, as well as how she would go from home to home and read passages from the bible to comfort the poorer families in the village.

As the clock struck three o’clock, Mrs. Hodges took Lady Victoria by the hand.

“Come, milady,” she said. “We must be getting you dressed for dinner this evening.” She turned to Emma with a warm smile. “I can’t say for sure where the duke might be at this time. However, you will likely find him in his study. And if he is not, just fetch Mr. Travis and he will find the Duke for you, as I’m sure he will be eager to speak with you about the governess position.”

Emma nodded, swallowing. She hadn’t even secured the position yet, and she was

being left to her own devices in the grand mansion. Lady Victoria curtsied to her again, smiling sweetly up at her.

“Papa’s study is just down the hallway on the left-hand side of this hallway outside this door and three doors up on the right,” she said. “I do hope that Papa decides to hire you. I like you.”

With that, she turned and skipped toward the door. Mrs. Hodges shook her head indulgently, then followed the girl out of the room.

Emma took a deep breath and, once the housekeeper and the child were out of sight, she stepped out into the hall, heading in the direction that Lady Victoria had given her. Sure enough, she found the hall of which the girl spoke, so she turned and counted three doors on the right-hand side.

When she reached it, she saw that the study door was open, and she felt nervous once more. She took a deep breath, preparing to introduce herself to the duke and her potential new boss. But as she peeked into the room, she saw that it was empty. She stepped away quickly, knowing it was rude to enter the private space of a noble man or woman without their consent or their presence. She decided that she would try to find the butler. If she could find her way around the vast, grandiose Sinclair Manor.

She continued down the hall to the next open door. She could see immediately that it was a large library. There wasn’t a single wall that wasn’t lined with bookshelves, and there wasn’t a single shelf that wasn’t packed end to end with books. Awestricken, Emma gingerly entered the room, taken in by the splendor of the library. She herself was well read and had a deep love for books. Now, she was standing in a room full of more books than she could ever read in several lifetimes.

“May I help you?” a deep bass voice called from across the room.

With a start, Emma gasped, whipping her head around until she spotted a gentleman

wearing a rich crimson suit, whose deep blue eyes were studying her curiously. He had a tall, commanding stature, and even in a casual stance, he appeared regal and refined. Emma realized immediately that he must be the Duke and she blushed at having been caught wandering around his mansion.

“Forgive me, Your Grace,” she said, fumbling as she struggled to curtsy without tripping over her feet. “My name is Emma Taylor, and my father told me that you were seeking a governess.”

The duke’s face instantly brightened. He replaced the book, she just noticed he had been holding, back to the shelf and quickly crossed the room.

“You are Reverend Taylor’s daughter,” he surmised, bowing elegantly to her. “I had expected to hear word of your arrival before meeting you.”

Emma blushed, cursing her mother’s ambition.

“Forgive me,” she said again, trying not to be distracted by his regal features, which were more handsome the closer he came to her. “My parents thought it best that I present myself for the position in person, rather than wasting time on sending correspondence.”

The duke shook his head, his smile widening.

“Not at all, Miss Taylor,” he said. “You were the candidate I most hoped to hire. And you showing up to apply in person shows initiative. I commend such attributes, especially in people I seek to employ.”

Emma blushed again, searching for words. She couldn’t tell him that her parents had all but forced her to apply for the position. But nor could she truthfully tell him that she had been eager to speak with him about becoming governess for his young daughter. So, instead, she smiled and tried to look as confident and professional as

she could.

“I’m afraid that I don’t have an official resume,” she said. “But I do have experience with tutelage of the scripture, specifically teaching children to read using the bible. I myself enjoy reading and learning, and my mother educated me very well, both inside and outside of religious texts.”

The duke nodded, looking distracted. He was focused on her, but she couldn’t tell if he was paying attention to what she was saying. His smile was still polite, but his eyes sparkled with curiosity. Emma decided she might be a bit too forward, and that she should allow him to ask any questions he had for her.

“I am well aware that clergy and their children are typically well educated,” he said. His words were direct, but his tone was even, almost amiable. Yet his eyes seemed to be analyzing her in a way she couldn’t quite read. “As I said, you were the candidate with whom I had most hoped to speak about the position. In fact, I have already decided that I would like to hire you. If, that is, you are still interested in working for me, after having spoken with me.”

Emma blinked, surprised. She had, in fact, barely spoken to him. And in the short time she had been conversing with him, he had already stricken her as an enigma, as her sister had mentioned. It was difficult to read him, as his facial expressions seemed to convey more than one thought or feeling at once.

However, one impression she did not get from him was that he was the ogre that Isabella had feared he would be. That she had, regretfully, thought he would be. She couldn’t be sure how strict an employer he would be. But that mattered little to her. She would do her best to ensure that she put forth nothing but her best efforts as governess.

She realized that the duke was waiting for a response from her. She blushed, cursing herself for remaining silent for so long.

“I would be honoured to accept the position, Your Grace,” she said quickly.

The Duke smiled politely again, his eyes flickering through another array of emotions.

“Very good, Miss Taylor,” he said. “If you’ll just wait here, I shall fetch Mrs. Hodges and have her show you to your quarters. If you’ll excuse me.”

The duke bowed once again, stepping past her as she curtsied to her new employer. He truly was a puzzle, she thought as she waited for the housekeeper. And his daughter was a curious little sponge. Emma smiled softly as she thought back to her conversation with the child. But her smile faltered as she thought back to the duke’s faith in her status as a vicar’s daughter. Would she be adequate in her new role as governess?

She recalled how excited Lady Victoria had been to start working with her. Clearly, the child liked her. And she had to admit that she had taken an immediate liking to the girl, as well. It might be a rough first few days. But with such an instant rapport with her ward, along with her aspirations of providing the finest instruction for the young lady, she was confident that she could refine her skills and present her utmost efforts to Lady Victoria in due course.