



# The Beast of Barendale Manor

**Author:** *Julia Thorne*

**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Miss Evangeline Longford never dreamed her life would change so dramatically. Thrust into an arranged marriage with the reclusive Earl of Barendale, she finds herself mistress of a crumbling estate and wife to a gentleman shrouded in mystery. Armed with nothing but her kindness and determination, Evangeline sets out to uncover the gentleman behind the scars, both physical and emotional.

Lord Edmund Barstow, the Earl of Barendale, is a gentleman haunted by his past. Disfigured and embittered, he's retreated from society, his only focus the salvation of his failing estate. The arrival of his new bride threatens to shatter the walls he's so carefully built around his heart. As Evangeline's warmth begins to thaw his frozen exterior, Edmund must confront his deepest fears and learn to trust again.

As secrets unravel and dangers emerge, Edmund and Evangeline must navigate a path fraught with betrayal and deceit. Can their fragile bond withstand the forces threatening to tear them apart? Or will the ghosts of the past destroy their chance at happiness? No cheating, no cliffhangers, and a happily ever after full of romance.

**Total Pages (Source):** 15

# Page 1

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Tendrils of fog twisted past the windowpane as the clock struck eight in the evening. Edmund sat at his desk, wearily contemplating the paperwork before him.

His fingers trembled as he picked up the latest missive from Timmons, his man of affairs. Nothing about it made sense to him, and his continuing financial woes were throwing him into fits of despair.

Losing patience with the endless ream of papers, he stood up, walked to the fireplace, and stabbed at the flames. As the glowing logs tumbled into ash, his fingers unconsciously moved to the line of his collar. The length of his cravat was tight against his skin, heat building beneath it.

The tips of his fingers traced the familiar ridges of the scars on the surface, and he grimaced as he returned the poker to the stand.

Glaring into the flames only made images of his past more vivid. He reluctantly turned back to his desk but felt a spike of anxiety at the mounting troubles he was facing.

How have things become so dire?

He huffed a sigh, returning to his desk and re-reading the base of the most recent ledger. Timmons had sent him an extract from the bulk of the accounts for the maintenance of his country estate.

Barendale Manor was not small by any means, but the dwindling state of his affairs seemed excessive. He looked down the list of items for repair. Nothing appeared out

of the ordinary; even the cost on each line seemed reasonable.

Then how have the debts mounted to such a degree?

He longed to speak with Jonathan. His steward and confidant of many years had been a guiding rudder in all his recent decisions. He was one of the few people Edmund still associated with regularly, and he would go so far as to call the man his closest friend—though he would never tell Jonathan such a thing.

The gloom of the room about him felt oppressive, and the thick pea-soup of a fog that floated through the London streets did not help. Walking to the window, he could barely see a foot in front of him; the oil lamps casting a soft glow over all in their vicinity.

Edmund caught a glimpse of his reflection, the sight of the mottled skin on the right-hand side of his face only lowering his mood further. He unhooked the curtain and drew it across. If only he could ban windows as he had banned mirrors, he would not have to see how low he had fallen.

There was a sharp knock at the door as his butler entered. A strict, sensible man in his late fifties, Croft had been with Edmund for almost ten years. His rather severe expression didn't waver as he looked at his master. The man rarely smiled but was one of the best servants Edmund had ever had.

“There is a Lord Longford, Baron Longshire, to see you, my Lord,” he stated, one hand still resting on the door handle. “Shall I admit him?”

Edmund had completely forgotten about the appointment and nodded swiftly. As the butler retreated, he made his way to his desk, shuffling all the papers together and putting them to one side. He barely had time to do so before Lord Longford came in.

He was a lean man of indiscriminate age, perhaps in his late forties. Edmund had been impressed with him when they had been introduced through a mutual business acquaintance. The baron had an easiness about him that Edmund could never hope to emulate but also possessed a rather pompous expression, as though he were looking down his nose at you.

Edmund came out from behind his desk and shook the man's hand. Longford glanced about the room, squinting slightly at the lack of light, and gave him a faint smile.

Edmund indicated the seat before his desk and sat down opposite him. The other man settled neatly in the chair. He was perfectly put together, with a suitable grasp of modern fashions, but with a sense of withered glamour about him.

The Longfords were on the rise through the ranks of society, but they were far below enjoying Edmund's status and reputation as the Earl of Barendale. He almost envied them.

"Good evening, my Lord," Longford said eagerly. "Thank you again for entertaining the lateness of this meeting.

"Did you complete your business in town?" Edmund asked, his voice hoarse from lack of use.

"I did, my Lord, I thank you." Longford's eyes skimmed over the desk, and Edmund wished he had had time to place the accounts in a drawer. The man's beady gaze seemed to absorb everything in a matter of minutes. Edmund knew he could not move them now without rousing suspicion and simply hoped the man could not do arithmetic upside down.

"When we met, we discussed the potential leasing of your estate," Longford began, getting right to the point, which Edmund appreciated. "Are you still amenable to such

a deal?" The man's eyes were urgent in their intensity—this deal was important to him; that much was obvious.

"I am," Edmund replied. The baron seemed a little taken aback by his brevity, but if he was expecting a long-winded and extensive conversation, he would be disappointed. Edmund's days of lively discussion and labouring a point were over.

"Capital! I am most pleased to hear it," the baron exclaimed.

"Hunting, wasn't it?"

"In part, my Lord, yes. I hope to enjoy a good hunt on the edges of my own estate, but primarily, I will use the land to expand my tenant's holdings."

Edmund eyed him warily. The baron had sweat adhering to his brow and was clearly very eager for this deal to go ahead. He did not know much about the Longfords except that they were a family reaching for the top, and the baron clearly possessed a great deal of ambition.

Edmund knew Longford's prospects would be greatly increased by his patronage. The modest estate he planned to purchase adjacent to his home would at least mean Edmund was on good terms with his country neighbours.

Not that anyone ever visits me anymore.

"We discussed five hundred acres," he continued.

The baron's face heightened in colour, and he brushed his fingers over his hat awkwardly. Edmund clenched his jaw. Any hopes of an annual lease of a few thousand pounds were dashed. He had been a fool to hope.

“Three hundred, my Lord. I would be willing to increase it after the year is up, once I have assessed its profitability.”

Edmund sat back in his chair.

The baron seemed nervous now, anticipating a refusal. He was not to know that Edmund would take anything he could get. It was a burden to feel as though the crumbs of any financial aid were acceptable, but he had little choice.

The baron looked almost alarmed as he met his gaze. Edmund was aware of how intimidating he must appear, looming behind his desk, scars across his face in the dimly lit room. It was the main reason few people ever saw him these days. He hoped Longford was not one to gossip. It was tiresome hearing of his ghastly appearance through third hand information.

“Three hundred is acceptable,” he murmured.

“And my terms? I know you gave a generous offering when we spoke.”

Yes. Too generous by half now I come to be faced with it, but desperate times...

“An annual fixed fee of three hundred and twenty-five pounds, paid monthly...”

“Of course, my Lord. That would be quite suitable for the time being.”

The baron was certainly a high-flyer. Edmund could see in him the tenacity he used to have himself, the desire to drive forward and improve one's life. He could not even remember what that felt like now. The world was a dull, colourless place.

“We appear to have a deal.”

Edmund's gut clenched as the baron's eyes drifted again to the pile of papers beside him. Longford's gaze skimmed down the numbers to the bottom of the page and back up again.

"If I may, my Lord," he began, "I was surprised you would wish to lease the land for so little."

No one else wants to live beside a crippled beast.

"I have been considering it for some time," he muttered.

It was bold, not to say impertinent, for the baron to even mention his reasoning, but Edmund knew he could not conceal his situation forever. Even leasing the land had left a bitter taste in his mouth.

"I mean no offence, of course!" Longford stammered, his fingers clutching the brim of his hat rather tightly.

Edmund continued to stare at him, feeling the power balance in the room wax and wane as his companion tried to determine if he had offended him.

Leaning forward, Edmund glanced at the accounts papers himself and almost groaned as he saw the negative total written boldly at the base of the page. Even a child could have seen that things were not as they should be.

"I thank you, my Lord," he managed. "The Barendale Estate has met with some more difficult times of late, but I am sure things will improve as the season approaches." Annoyed with himself for revealing too much to a relative stranger, Edmund frowned as he watched Longford shift uncomfortably in his seat.

"Perhaps there is another solution, then, my Lord," Longford said suddenly, his eyes

sparkling with an idea that set Edmund's teeth on edge. "My eldest daughter Evangeline is just out in society. She is uncommonly beautiful, accomplished, and well-mannered. I have long been thinking of an advantageous match for her." He let the sentence hang in the air between them.

Edmund was utterly staggered at the man's daring. They had met on one occasion before this. Longford had seen his ghastly appearance and his lack of social interactions. What on earth could be wrong with his eldest child that he must pawn her off so easily?

"There is a substantial dowry connected to her intended marriage, almost ten thousand pounds in total," the baron continued, growing in confidence again as Edmund did not immediately refuse.

Suddenly nervous, Edmund's hand moved to the tight cravat around his neck; the scars across his palm and the back of his hand seemed almost deliberately emphasized by the firelight.

Lord Longford leaned forward, his eyes moving almost deliberately over Edmund's injuries.

"I believe it would be a mutually beneficial arrangement," the baron continued. "You would be able to secure the funds that would settle your issues with your estate. I myself would be greatly appreciative of your patronage and having the Longshire name linked with Barendale would be an honour for us all."

The man was becoming more obsequious by the second. He was now sweating profusely, more with excitement than uncertainty.

Edmund wanted to refuse outright. There could only be one explanation for this man wishing to marry off his daughter in such a way—she was disagreeable or not the



famed beauty he claimed.

His thoughts scattered as the pressures of his estate mounted at the back of his mind. Despite his best efforts to avoid it, his eyes skittered back to the papers on his desk. Things were worse than he could ever have imagined. The reports were damning on every front. He would be lucky to last the year if things continued as they were.

His mother's fortunes were linked to his own, ensconced as she was in Barendale Manor. He had a plethora of people to support, including his tenants and a number of exceedingly loyal servants who he wished to protect at all costs.

Longford was sitting upright in his chair, his lips smoothing over themselves obsessively, his tongue peeking out occasionally to moisten them. He reminded Edmund of a snake about to spring forward and sink its fangs into its prey.

Edmund's fingers clenched against the arms of his chair. Was he truly going to accept this man's offer so willingly?

With the annual leasing and the dowry, he would be a fool to refuse. Longford knew it; his whole body was tense with anticipation.

"Very well," Edmund whispered, dread swamping him as the words left his lips.

Longford stood, gripping his hand so tightly Edmund winced.

"I shall be in touch, my Lord. I have never been happier to have such an esteemed addition to our humble family."

With that, he stalked from the room.

As the door closed behind him, Edmund sank back into his chair and closed his eyes.

What have I allowed to happen?

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:35 am*

Evangeline Longford sat in her living room, trying not to laugh at her sister.

Matilda had her tongue caught between her teeth and a frown on her face as she attempted to stitch the embroidery she was holding. Evangeline tried not to wince as her sister put in a stitch that was much too wide and left some thread exposed at the back.

“Better,” she stated with a nod.

Matilda looked up at her irritably and lowered her sewing to her lap. “It is terrible, Evie. Don’t pretend.”

Evangeline sighed. Despite only two years of difference between them, she and her sister were remarkably different. Where Evangeline was accomplished in needlework, singing, and playing the pianoforte, her younger sister struggled with them all.

Matilda was extremely intelligent and, to her detriment, excelled at mathematics. Such abilities were not useful for a woman of her station, and as a result, their father’s full attention was on Evangeline and the marriage she might one day secure.

Matilda was rather cruelly cast aside. She was neither as pretty nor as dutiful as Evangeline and often spoke her mind, much to her father’s irritation. Their mother sat nearby in weary silence, a supportive and loving woman in her own way but passive when it came to their father’s wishes.

Lord Longford was pompous and self-important in everything he did. Evangeline did

not wish to think ill of her father, but she had never felt affection for him either. From the moment she turned eleven he had been schooling her in the art of wooing a husband. Everything she did was catered toward winning the most advantageous match possible. Matilda often joked about how fortunate it was that Evangeline was so pretty, as she could attract enough suitors for the both of them.

Evangeline sighed as she rested her own embroidery on her lap. Her future felt as though it had been laid out for her since before she was born. When she was very young, she had entertained the idea of falling deeply in love with the perfect man. Now a grown woman, with one season behind her, she was resigned to a loveless connection.

As her first season unfolded it had swiftly become clear, that her father would choose her partner for her based on his requirements, not her own.

What Evangeline wanted was largely irrelevant. Even the eligible men who admired her were systematically rejected by her father. The new season would be upon them soon, and she knew that her choices would slowly be stripped away from her as the months wore on.

“Is Caterina attending the Levison ball?” her mother asked suddenly. Harriet Longford sat in the corner of the room, a slight woman with copper-coloured hair and a thin smile.

“I believe she is in Bath for another few days and will miss the Levison’s ball.”

“Pity,” her mother muttered, “I need to speak with her mother about the tea she is holding. Do you know she has invited Violet Hemming? Insufferable woman that she is. I do not know why she is invited to anything these days.”

“Because she has an enormous fortune and a title,” Matilda remarked stoutly as she

popped a scone into her mouth. “She will want for nothing in life with those.”

“Matilda, do not speak with your mouth full, dearest,” her mother admonished softly.

Evangeline had heard her mother raise her voice only once in twenty years. She was a soft and quiet person, with a propensity to overthink what she said until she eventually said nothing at all.

All of them gasped in unison as the door to the drawing room burst open. The sudden rush of air made the fire hiss violently, and the back-draft dragged a quantity of smoke into the room.

“I have it!” her father exclaimed, striding into the room and slamming the door behind him.

The ladies exchanged startled glances as he came to stand before them in front of the fire, looking at them one by one, an elated expression on his face.

“What do you have, my dear?” her mother asked carefully. Evangeline and Lady Longford dutifully lowered their books and embroidery to pay full attention to the master of the house.

“A match!” her father stated plainly, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Her mother stiffened considerably, and Evangeline’s palms became clammy in her lap as she prayed she had misunderstood her father’s meaning.

“A match, my love?” Lady Longford asked. “Whatever do you mean?”

“I have found Evangeline a most advantageous partner. An earl, no less. The

marriage will herald great things for this family.”

Evangeline sat utterly still. The only movement for a few seconds was the crackle of the fire. Slowly, and with no sudden movements, Matilda’s hand slid into her own.

“That is wonderful,” Lady Longford attempted, her voice careful and quiet, as always. “Will you not tell us who it is?”

“The Earl of Barendale,” he replied triumphantly. His neck wobbled back and forth as he looked at them gleefully, his chin thrust forward in delight.

No one made a sound as Matilda’s hand clenched against Evangeline’s so tightly that she winced.

“The... the Earl of Barendale ?” her mother asked. “No, my dear, you are jesting with us.” She tittered and leaned away from him, her smile expectant in anticipation of the joke.

The baron frowned at her. “Of course, I am not jesting, my dear. Do you believe I would toy with our daughters in such a way?”

For the first time in her life, Evangeline saw her mother’s temper show itself. Her eyes hardened as she looked upon her husband. She rarely spoke against him; indeed, Evangeline could not recall her ever having done so. Now, she seemed moments away from fighting his every word.

“I have procured a special license,” her father continued, unaware of his wife’s ire. “It will allow the marriage to take place in a matter of days, and we shall be aligned with one of the most prestigious families in the country.”

Lady Longford shifted in her seat, her face white, her lips pursed in a hard line.

“The Earl of Barendale may be of noble stock, but we cannot ignore the rumours about his character,” she insisted, “his very being. ”

“Harriet, you know I do not hold with rumours such as those. I am surprised you entertain them.”

“But everyone has heard them!” Matilda said fiercely. “It is not a question of ignoring them; he is a horrendous individual. He hasn’t been seen in good society for years, known for his brutish temperament and that he has let his estate all but disintegrate. Not to mention, he is horribly disfigured from the dubious fire that killed his first wife. How on earth—”

“You will be silent,” her father snapped. Evangeline closed her eyes in despair as his angry gaze fell on Matilda. “No one has asked your opinion, Matilda, and I would keep your ill-informed and incorrect opinions to yourself. I have met with the earl. I am certain all this surmise and conjecture is vicious gossip by those who envy his status.”

“What status?” Matilda muttered under her breath, and her father’s eyes speared her with another furious glare.

Evangeline’s heart pounded in her chest, and she tried to keep her composure in the face of such hideous news. How could Papa do this to me? For years, she had done everything he had asked of her, playing the dutiful daughter in the hopes that he would find a match for her that they both found agreeable.

She knew of the earl’s reputation; few didn’t. There were rumours around his first wife’s death about the reclusive life he lived in Barendale Manor. He was said to be horribly scarred, disfigured—beastly. She had always expected her marriage might not be a love match, but this was beyond reproach.

“Does Evangeline not deserve happiness in her marriage?” Matilda protested. She had never been one to hold her tongue in the face of injustice.

“Who says she will be unhappy?” her father snapped. “A successful marriage takes work, whomever she marries. His title, fortune, and reputation will give her a good life and bring great prestige to this family. We will do very well to remember how privileged we are to be linked to such an esteemed member of society.”

Evangeline remained silent even as her mother renewed her objections to her father, urgently asking him to reconsider.

She gave an outward appearance of calm while her mind was an ocean swirling with dark, unnamed fears.

In a matter of minutes, her life had been turned upside down. This morning, she had awoken, her mind filled with thoughts of the coming season and of the potential marriage prospects in her close acquaintance.

Now, all of that had been cast aside for someone she had never even met. Her hands trembled as she imagined what her future might hold now—but even in all the hideous uncertainty, there was an irrepressible spark of intrigue.

She could not deny that there was something about the earl that had always fascinated her. The idea of a man shut away in his decaying mansion and never being seen by the world at large had a gothic romance about it.

I am drawn to him, she thought with dismay. We are the same after all, both of us trapped by our positions in life. Perhaps there is some hope left for us.

If she allowed herself to wallow in despair, she would go mad. She had to find a positive in this situation, or she would wither away completely—just as he had done.



“Evangeline!” her father said suddenly, pulling her out of her inner world and dragging her back to the present. “Are you not going to thank me? This is more than you could ever have hoped for.”

“Frederick,” her mother said impatiently. “Evangeline has many excellent prospects on the marriage mart.”

“And who are they?” Lord Longford challenged, fire in his words as he belittled his wife’s opinions. It was an old scene and one that Evangeline knew well.

“Thank you, Papa,” she said swiftly as Matilda’s fingers squeezed to the point of pain. “I am much obliged to you for your endeavours.”

“As well you might be. To think my daughter will be a countess!” he proclaimed, walking to the decanter and pouring himself some port. “We are destined for great things,” he said, raising his glass to a room where no one else was drinking.

Evangeline fought back tears as she attempted to remain composed despite the onslaught of emotions rushing through her.

I must be strong for my family. There are worse fates on this earth than marriage.

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Edmund entered the dining hall late and received a warning glance from his mother. Lady Viola Barstow was seated to the right of the head of the table, as was her wont: his cousin, Colin Barstow, on the left.

Edmund nodded to them and sat down.

How am I going to explain what I just agreed with Baron Longshire? He thought,

knowing full well that his mother was likely to be utterly incensed with him.

He gripped his knife and fork firmly, glad that at least they were returning to Barendale Manor soon. She was always happier in the country.

“I saw Lady Eggerton in town today,” Colin said cheerfully, swirling his red wine and catching Edmund’s eyes. “She is enormous.”

“Colin, that is not seemly language to use for a woman who is with child,” his mother protested, looking to Edmund as though he should be defending the lady’s honour.

“It is twins, my Lady; I can assure you, it is quite appropriate language.”

The dowager countess frowned at him all the same. Edmund could not even muster a smile; he picked at his food, conscious of their curious gazes but unable to think how to open the topic of his impending marriage.

But I must, he thought bitterly. If I do not tell them, they will hear it elsewhere, and that would be far worse.

As they finished their starters, which Edmund had barely touched, the main course of venison was brought out and Edmund felt sick to his stomach as he looked at it.

I should have argued with him. I should have refused. Why did I let him talk me into marriage of all things?

The thought of having a wife again was horrifying. It may have been three years since Adelaide’s death, but he was still far from ready. All he had thought about until now was what she might look like—what her character might be.

He had not even entertained what she might think of him. The idea was dreadful.

What woman would ever look at him as anything other than a hideous beast? But he could not retract it. The scandal would be enormous if he reneged on the engagement, and he did not need any more scandal in his life. He would not become the topic of yet more gossip.

At least a wedding was a positive thing for the weak-minded to talk of. They might be surprised anyone would have him, but it might keep away the vicious rumours that had circulated about Adelaide's death.

"I am to be married," he blurted out. The words escaped before his mind had fully comprehended what he was going to say. His mother's fork clattered to her plate. Colin, who had been swilling his wine in a contemplative sort of way, froze in place, staring at him as though he had entirely lost his senses.

Perhaps I have.

"I beg your pardon, Edmund," his mother said with a sharp laugh, "I believe I must have misheard you."

"I assure you, you have not misheard, Mama. I am to be married to Baron Longshire's eldest daughter, Evangeline Longford." His palms were sweating. His infernal collar felt as though it were throttling him.

He glanced at Colin. The man's perpetual smile was missing. In fact, Edmund could almost detect anger at the back of his eyes, but then the usual grin returned, and he raised his glass.

"Well, this is some cause for celebration," he said with an enthusiastic tone that sounded forced to Edmund's ears. I had no idea you were returning to the marriage mart, old boy. Well done, I must say."

His next act was to finish his wine. The glass had been almost full. Edmund frowned at him, but his mother's voice cut through the noise in his head.

"Dearest," she said gently. "However has this happened?"

I am too monstrous to love, of course, though she would never say so.

"Baron Longshire came to speak with me today about a business deal he wished to enter into. I am leasing some land to him."

Edmund chose his words carefully; his mother was unaware of the terrible state of his finances, and he wished to keep it that way.

"He spoke of his daughter," Edmund continued, "of his wish to marry her to a noble line." Edmund thought feverishly, trying to think of a good enough reason that he would ever have agreed to it.

"As you know the estate has been in some disrepair, of late. Her dowry is substantial, and they are a noble family. She is accomplished and beautiful, or so I am told. And it is time, Mama. I have been alone too long."

He knew that those words would clinch it for him. His mother's severe expression softened, and she took his hand. She was still pale with shock but managed a faint smile.

"Then I am happy for you," she said tenderly.

"Well done indeed," Colin said, irritating Edmund with a boisterous wink as he looked at him. "She is exceedingly beautiful. I saw her at a ball not four weeks ago. You are very fortunate in your wife, Edmund."

Nausea rose in his throat. He was trapping a beautiful young woman into a marriage with a man who she could never possibly want or find any redeeming qualities in. His throat was too tight. He couldn't breathe.

Somehow, he forced his way through the remainder of the meal, answering his mother's questions and trying to ignore the strange atmosphere from Colin.

After the supper was concluded, the two men made their way to the parlour. Edmund desperately wanted some time alone, but Colin was a good friend, and he owed him a brandy for everything he had done to help with the estate.

His hand shook as he poured them both a drink into two cut-glass tumblers. Colin approached, taking his glass, his smile firmly in place now.

Perhaps I imagined his feelings; it is not the first time I have projected my own discomfort onto another.

"I can hardly believe it. I am happy for you," Colin said, raising his glass. Edmund returned it, watching his cousin carefully.

Colin had a tell that did him no good in any card game: his right eye twitched whenever he was agitated, and Edmund saw it in him now. His little finger tapped incessantly against the glass as he drank deeply, almost finishing the brandy in a single mouthful. "So, what is she like, this Evangeline Longford?" Colin asked.

"I imagine you know more about her than I," Edmund replied. "You said you had met her."

"Seen her, that is not quite the same. We have not been formally introduced. She has only been out for one season, and I have been occupied with your estate for much of it."

Edmund was reminded again how much he owed his cousin, and he refilled his glass as they took a seat before the fire.

“She is accomplished, or so her father tells me,” Edmund added, attempting to find some positives in a bad situation. “I recall there is a younger sibling, not yet out. They are of good stock but not of an elite class.”

“And her father’s fortune?” Colin asked.

“Good enough to lease land from me at any rate. That will be another few hundred pounds for the coffers.”

“Did he outline the extent of the dowry?”

The questions were asked in a light tone but with an urgency beneath them that put Edmund on edge. It was understandable that Colin, who had been heavily involved in trying to get the estate back on its feet, would want to understand the terms of the marriage. However, he did not wish to discuss the details further. The questions seemed sordid and unnatural somehow."

“He did,” Edmund conceded. “I shall explain it another time when it is not so late.”

Colin raised his eyebrows at him, but at Edmund’s stern glare, he fell silent. They sat for some minutes with neither of them speaking, until finally Colin sighed. Edmund clenched his hand around his glass, anticipating another objection.

“I mean no offence, Edmund. You know how much I admire you and everything you have fought against. But is this not hasty? Who is this woman? Why should she suddenly be brought into your life when you have been battling to find an equilibrium for so long?”

Edmund made no answer, staring into the flames and wishing Colin would go to bed. He did not want to talk of Evangeline again. He was feeling more melancholic by the second.

“Have you considered all the implications of the match? We do not yet know whether the estate will return to solvency. You know that I have done everything I can to help and will continue to do so, but there are consequences to every action. A wife can be an expensive thing to own.”

Edmund kept his expression blank even as he revolted at the words.

Colin had never been married and did not understand the purity and happiness it could bring. The very thought that a man owned his wife ruffled Edmund’s feathers considerably. It was not an unknown concept that men saw women in such a manner—many did, in fact—but Edmund was not among their number.

Finishing his brandy, Colin appeared to recognize that Edmund was tired of talking. Slapping the handle of his chair, he laughed.

“Chin up, Edmund,” he said ruefully. “I am only looking out for you. I am sure all will turn out well. She will be the making of you, I have no doubt!”

Edmund bid him goodnight, and Colin left him to his thoughts. Edmund settled deeper into his chair, staring at the amber liquid in his glass.

A wife can be an expensive thing...

He scoffed at the idea—not as expensive as a failing estate.

He needed the dowry money, that was the truth of it. The idea ate at him, his thoughts turning to his bride-to-be. He wondered whether she would be able to tolerate his

appearance enough to spend any time with him. She was only twenty years old; he could only imagine what she must feel to be sold off like this.

He drained his glass. And what on earth is wrong with Colin?

He had never known the man so curious. From the time he heard of the marriage, he had seemed on edge and strange. But then, Edmund conceded, it would have been a great surprise to his mother and his cousin. He could hardly expect them not to ask questions.

He settled down in his chair, stretching out his feet, his mind wandering to what Evangeline might be thinking. Had her father told her yet? He could not bear to hope that she would be tolerable.

He glanced at the clock. It was almost midnight, and he knew if he fell asleep in his chair, Croft would wake him shortly. He was not of a mind to move—the large empty bed above him held no appeal for him. He closed his eyes, trying to banish the doubts creeping in on all sides.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:35 am*

Edmund stood rigidly to attention as his valet tied his cravat.

Thompson was meticulous, as ever, his hands steady and sure against Edmund's trembling skin. As the man moved away, Edmund caught a glimpse of his reflection in the mirror. His dark hair had been swept back from his face, the premature streaks of grey at the temples showing the pain he had endured in his life.

The mottled array of scars over the right-hand side of his face was all he could see. He had once been handsome, but no more. Now, his face reflected the old wounds that life had inflicted.

Disgusted, he turned away, reaching for his glass of brandy to steady his nerves. It was still early morning, but he had not been able to shake the anxiety he felt since waking. He could hear the clop of horses' hooves outside and the cry of a street urchin running through the streets.

How is the world continuing as though we are not all in turmoil?

He thought of his bride, wondering how she felt today. They had never even met.

This was madness.

There was a soft knock at the door, and as he bid him enter, Colin came into the room. He wore a dark coat and neat cravat, his buttonhole matching Edmund's. Colin had never been an overly handsome man, not as Edmund had been in his youth, but today, he looked rather smart.

Edmund nodded to him, and Colin ran his eyes over the glass of brandy with concern.

“Are you feeling alright, old chap? It is not even eleven.”

“Yes, thank you. It is medicinal. I often have something to settle my nerves of a morning,” he stated quickly. It was a lie, but Colin wasn’t to know that.

“Are you sure you want to go through with this?” Colin asked. It was the same rhetoric he had kept up all week. Edmund clenched his fists, biting his tongue to stop the sharp barb that threatened to escape.

“You, of all people, know that this marriage must take place,” he replied evenly. “We cannot afford to lose the dowry, and I have my tenants and my mother to think of. This will see us through to the end of the year until we can resolve the issue.”

Edmund drained his glass under his cousin’s watchful eye. He felt as though Colin was judging everything he did, and Edmund did not feel that the man had any right to do so. He had helped greatly with the estate and managed many things when Edmund had been recuperating after the fire. But those days were behind them. He was in full possession of his faculties now and intended to resolve the financial issues he faced once and for all.

“Shall we go down? The carriage awaits, as does your bride.”

Edmund nodded. He glanced at Thompson. His stoic valet bowed encouragingly, his dark eyes intelligent and calm. Edmund knew that his loyal staff would welcome the match. It would mean their security as much as anything, and Edmund wanted that, too.

“Let us be gone,” he muttered and pushed past Colin, his feet feeling leaden as he made his way down to the carriage.

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Evangeline watched her mother fuss with her dress for the final few minutes before they descended. The gown her father had procured for the occasion was understated and beautiful. It flowed when she walked, reminding her of a fairy's wings.

Her hair had been tied in intricate plaits all about her head and was covered by a lace bonnet that her mother could not help tweaking one last time. She looked at her reflection, her blue-green eyes stark against the white of her dress.

Evangeline glanced at her sister in the mirror, who gave her a brave smile. Matilda had been unusually quiet. Ever since her father announced that Evangeline would marry, it had signaled the end of many things—including her close relationship with her younger sister. Matilda was miserable that she was leaving her. Evangeline felt the same, although she could not show it. Her father had already grown exasperated with her sister's moping; he would not have tolerated it from both his daughters.

It will not do to fall apart today, she chided herself. I must be strong and do my duty to my family.

"How are you feeling, my dear?" her mother asked.

Evangeline pasted on a smile, nodding her head. "I am well, Mama. Will I do?" she asked, turning on the spot, expecting Matilda to brighten at the chance to compliment her dress. Her sister did not even manage to turn her head, her gaze on the street below.

"They are here," she said simply, her voice an unhappy monotone. Evangeline forced herself to stay put. She refused to run to the window like a schoolgirl, no matter how desperate she was to get a glimpse of her fiancée.

She could not believe that she was marrying a man who she had never even seen until today. The anger at her father, which had never fully subsided through the days leading up to the wedding, came back in full force. She saw it on her mother's face, too.

Lady Longford rarely spoke against her husband, but she rebelled in other ways.

Evangeline looked at Sarah, her wonderful lady's maid, who was finishing the packing of the final trunks for her journey. Inside, at the base, where they could not be seen, her mother had given her a multitude of fine literature and poetry.

Every now and again, Evangeline would sneak a book from her father's library, and her mother had quietly condoned the practice by never calling her out on it. Now that her eldest daughter was being sold to the highest bidder, Lady Longford had rebelled more viciously. A few nights before the wedding, her mother had snuck into Evangeline's room with no fewer than eight volumes for her to take to her new home.

Evangeline knew her father would not miss the poetry. He never read anything that did not further his business mindset, and poems were nonsense to him. She appreciated her mother's support more than she could say.

"Everything is ready, Miss Evangeline," Sarah said quietly, bobbing a curtsy and leaving the family alone. Evangeline knew it would also be an adjustment for Sarah in her new home—she would be leaving London for the first time in her life.

Evangeline held out her hand to Matilda, who came forward, looking as though she were being led to the gallows, not her wedding. Evangeline embraced her, feeling her sister stiffening in her arms. It pained her to know that her marriage would separate them, and where Evangeline's anger had shown against her father, it was nothing compared to Matilda's. Her sister was still irate and had spoken three words to him in the preceding week.

“You look exquisite, my dear. But we should go down,” her mother said hastily. “He has arrived.”

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Edmund entered the Longford’s townhouse, flanked by his mother and Colin. An austere-looking butler met them at the door and escorted them into the drawing room.

The house was elegantly proportioned and meticulously decorated. It was just the right side of extravagant without being ostentatious.

As Edmund entered the room, he felt the same pulse of fear at the number of people standing before him. It wasn’t the volume he might have expected at a ball, only a dozen or so, but he was under scrutiny here in a different way.

The butler bowed to a tall woman in a mauve gown who could only have been Evangeline’s mother. Like his own, she was exceedingly beautiful, with hair tied up high on her head, her smile polite and formal.

“You are most welcome, my Lord,” she said quickly, her eyes lingering on the scars across his face. Edmund did his best not to wince.

“My Lady, it is an honour to finally meet you,” he said, bowing to her as she curtsied. A smaller woman beside her, with blonde hair that fell loosely about her shoulders, was eyeing him with such a look of suspicion Edmund almost gaped at her.

“This is my youngest daughter, Miss Matilda Longford,” Lady Longford remarked, pushing her daughter slightly forward. Miss Matilda glared at him even more when her mother couldn’t observe her expression, and Edmund was so taken aback that he had to remind himself to bow.

My reputation precedes me, he thought helplessly. Miss Matilda believes her sister is marrying a murderous wretch.

Lord Longford came forward then, shaking hands with Colin and bowing low to the Dowager Countess. Edmund risked a glance at his mother, but her expression was carefully neutral. She looked about the room with interest, her hands clasped rather tightly in front of her.

Colin, on the other hand, was all easy smiles, as he often was in company. He charmed Lady Longford immediately and made her laugh, breaking the tension. Edmund had always envied Colin's happy disposition and calm demeanour—more so now than ever.

He wished he could be anywhere else but in this room. He felt as though he were slowly suffocating.

The drawing room had been set up with a few chairs for the ceremony. It should have felt strange that it was taking place in so small a room, but Edmund was glad of it. The thought of a church wedding and having all those people staring at him filled him with dread.

He walked up the makeshift aisle, shook hands with the vicar, and took his seat. Colin came to sit beside him.

He kept his head forwards so that the scarred parts of his face would be hidden from view from the majority of the company. He could not bear the staring. Most were too well bred to glare openly but many could not help themselves.

His heart thundered in his chest as he heard the hush fall over the room, announcing the arrival of the bride. Edmund tried to drag breath into his lungs, but nausea rose up his throat again, and he had to clear it to shake the feeling away.

God help me.

He stood up, feeling the weight of expectation and indecision almost overwhelm him, and then he turned around.

At the base of the aisle stood Baron Longshore, and on his arm was a fairy creature who could not possibly be his wife-to-be.

Edmund stared, utterly dumbfounded by the picture she presented. He had been mistaken. Lord Longford was not passing off his daughter because she was not beautiful—quite the contrary. Evangeline Longford was the prettiest woman he had ever seen.

Her honey-blond hair was tied beneath her bonnet, and the lace gown fell in lovely waves down her body. She had a curvaceous and beautiful figure, her eyes a green-blue colour that reminded him of a shallow ocean. Full lips, sharp features, and dazzling eyes—that was the picture she presented.

Her gaze was fixed at a point just above Edmund's shoulder, and he was glad of it. He was sure everything he felt was written across his face for all to see. The rest of the room faded to nothing. There was no sound, not a whisper of a breeze—all that existed for a small, shining moment was Evangeline.

And then her eyes looked at his face, moving across the scars for a splintered second, and Edmund felt the elation at her beauty wither and die as though it had never been.

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Evangeline had not known what to expect, but the piercing, brooding gaze that met hers was unlike anything she had ever seen.

The Earl of Barendale was no less intriguing in person. The scars were truly terrible and dominated a large portion of the right side of his face. They trailed beneath his cravat and began just below his right eye.

But the rest of his face was startling. He had been, and arguably still was, an exceedingly handsome man. His dark hair, streaked with white strands, contrasted with his gray eyes and tanned skin. His long nose, wider in the centre and tapering down to his firm, full mouth, framed his face perfectly.

She caught her breath at his expression when their eyes met. There was vulnerability there, a pain hidden beneath the surface that lurked at the back of his eyes. But as soon as it appeared it was wiped clean, with a serious and stoic mask that settled into place like a shroud.

She gripped her father's arm a little tighter as she continued up the aisle with slow, measured steps. It seemed mere seconds before she was standing before him.

Evangeline was not small by any means, but he was a head taller still. His back was strict and straight, and she could see premature lines around his mouth that spoke of the tension and pain he had seen since the death of his first wife.

As she looked up at him, uncertain what would be revealed next, something flickered over his expression. It looked akin to longing or perhaps regret, but once more, even as it appeared, it evaporated.

She turned to the vicar, feeling her hands trembling so violently that she clasped them in front of her to still the movement.

"Dearly beloved," the priest began, his voice ringing out across the room. Evidently, the man was not used to holding a service in such a small venue, for he spoke far too loudly, and Evangeline attempted not to wince as he proceeded through the opening



remarks.

Edmund was a solid wall of tension beside her. He did not move toward her until it was time to exchange the rings. Evangeline was too concerned by her trembling hands to concentrate fully on Edmund's reactions until she saw how much his were trembling too.

The 'beast' is not as brave as he appears, she thought with relief.

But when Edmund pushed the ring onto her finger, their skin brushed, and in an instant, he had jerked away as though scalded. Evangeline flinched in unconscious response, aware of the eyes of her family observing their every move. Edmund's throat worked as he swallowed convulsively and moved as far from her as he could without appearing rude.

She found it hard to gather herself following that reaction, even more fearful that perhaps he simply detested women and that her very presence was an insult to him.

However did father persuade him to marry me? She thought desperately. He clearly does not wish to be here. What kind of marriage will this be?

Her eyes found her sister and Matilda attempted an encouraging smile. It was ruined, however, by her gaze instantly fixing Edmund with a furious glare the moment she believed Evangeline wasn't looking.

As the ceremony finally ended, the cold ring of metal seemed to brand her finger as she realized that she was now a wife. Edmund offered her his arm. It was an automatic gesture at best, and Evangeline accepted it, looping her own through his, uncertain how to feel about what had passed between them.

They turned to the small group who had gathered to observe the wedding. Evangeline

could just imagine how they appeared—the image of propriety and good society. She was a countess now and had quite a different standing from when she entered the room.

But instead of basking in her newfound status, she was in turmoil. The stiff arm held against hers felt foreign and unwanted. Nothing about Lord Barstow's demeanour suggested he was in any way pleased with the marriage. She was left with a thousand questions and no one to answer them.

How am I ever to survive this marriage if the touch of my skin makes him flinch away in disgust?

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:35 am*

Edmund could not taste the food he was eating.

Despite the excellent wedding breakfast and sumptuous food available to him, he could barely eat anything. Every now and again, his gaze would wander to his bride— his wife— and he would taste bile in the back of his throat.

I should never have agreed to this, he thought wretchedly. How can I ever expect her to look at me with anything other than disgust?

Evangeline was conversing with Matilda. Edmund could imagine that if they had been alone, the two sisters would have spoken quite differently. In reality, their conversation seemed stilted and formal in the present company.

Evangeline was even more beautiful up close, with a demure and quiet quality he found captivating.

She had pale skin, complimented by the ornate gown. About her shoulders was an array of beading and lace that seemed to reflect the light. It truly was as though he were looking upon an angel or some sort of ethereal fairy.

He dragged his gaze away, uncomfortable with his overactive imagination and searching for something to distract himself. His scars felt as though they were burning again. It was as if he were back in the house, flames leaping in every direction as he searched frantically for Adelaide. There was a tightness about his mouth, a fluttering in his chest, and if he closed his eyes, he could hear the crackle of the house burning all around him.

He shifted slightly, turning his face toward the wall, feeling as though every eye in the room was examining his scarred visage with renewed interest. His mother was speaking to Lord Longford further down the table, and for once, he longed for her to be at his side. The dowager countess was not the easiest woman to live with, but her steady presence always calmed him.

Were the walls closing in? It certainly felt like it.

Green-blue eyes turned to him, and Edmund could not even muster a smile for his new wife. Evangeline had an intelligent gaze, and to his surprise, he saw no pity in her expression. She seemed to be observing him without judgment—a rare skill in the society in which they lived.

“Lord Barstow,” Edmund flinched as Evangeline’s mother leaned across the table to speak to him. “We are so honoured to have you join our family. We look forward to becoming neighbours and we enjoy having you as a son-in-law.”

Edmund could not read the lady easily. Her sharp features, so similar to those of her daughters, were settled in an expression of casual intrigue. The room around them was humming with quiet voices, and Edmund found it hard to focus on anything.

“Mm,” he managed, clearing his throat. “I, too, am pleased to join your family,” he said, his voice low and hoarse. Even he could hear the lack of sincerity in his words.

“Will you travel to Barendale Manor today?” Evangeline’s mother asked.

“Yes,” he replied and could not think of anything else to say.

After a short pause, Lady Longford gave a tight smile. “I imagine it will be a relief to be out of town for a few weeks and back in the country. I find the build-up to the season rather trying.”

“Indeed,” he sounded like a mechanical precision. “You must visit us.”

Her eyebrows rose, and Edmund flexed his toes in his shoes to stop himself from grimacing. The offer was not easily given. In truth, he did not want any visitors. He just wished to hide away from the world and for all this bother and gossip to dissipate into nothing.

He longed to sit in his library with a book and while away the days alone, without having to make excuses for his miserable countenance.

But that was not to be. He was now a husband again and had a duty to his wife. Colin was right—he had not thought this through.

As the guests began to depart, Edmund’s anxiety reduced a little, but he was conscious that he had participated in just three conversations since the wedding—two with his new in-laws and one with his mother. He was being abominably rude, and he wasn’t surprised when Evangeline looked at him as though he were an unpredictable ogre.

My reputation is maintained, Edmund thought bitterly. No doubt her sister will call the constabulary to try and rescue Evangeline from my clutches.

He knew he should try to be more agreeable but was unable to muster a smile. He could barely make eye contact with Evangeline.

Perhaps it was for the best. After all, he could not imagine any positive outcomes from the marriage. She was now trapped and unable to escape.

He made his way to the carriage, feeling as though not just the walls of the house, but the very sky above his head, was closing in to crush him.

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“Goodbye, Mama,” Evangeline said, hugging her mother tightly before letting her go. She was aware of her father hovering behind them. He did not deal with affection at the best of times, and today was no exception. Despite the fact that he was bidding his eldest daughter farewell for the final time that day, the time she was taking appeared to be grating on him.

Evangeline looked about her, amazed at the turn her life had taken. This had been her home, where she had grown into the woman she was today. She was surprised at how sad she felt to leave it.

She glanced at Edmund, who was standing behind her. The uninjured half of his face was on display, and she was reminded again of how handsome he was. His strict jaw and chiseled cheekbones gave him a regal look, but he did not meet her eyes. He had barely looked at her all day.

“Goodbye, Evie,” Matilda said beside her. She was valiantly holding back tears, and Evangeline was grateful for that. If her sister began crying, there would be no end to it.

“Goodbye,” she hugged her tightly, her arms gripping the familiar slim shoulders. “I shall write to you,” she whispered. “Every day.”

“If you need me, I will come to you,” Matilda said earnestly, just for her ears, and the two sisters drew apart. It was the worst farewell by far. Evangeline’s head throbbed as she looked into her sister’s blue eyes. She could not imagine a world where she did not see Matilda every morning. They were so close, and now they were to be separated by miles of countryside and barely able to see each other more than three times a year.

Evangeline felt hopeless and unhappy as her father stepped forward. His pompous face was set in a grim smile, and he nodded to her as though she had satisfactorily performed a task he had assigned to her.

“I am proud of you, my girl. Continue to make us proud. Our family will be the stronger for it.”

He did not embrace her, patting her shoulder awkwardly before turning to Edmund.

“I shall see to the matter of the dowry forthwith,” he said quietly, shaking the earl’s hand. Evangeline’s cheeks flamed, partly with embarrassment and partly with rage.

She felt like a prized stallion paraded before the discerning eyes of potential buyers. Nothing about this day had been anything like she had imagined. Evangeline had wanted her wedding to be a magical affair; even if she were not in love with her husband, she had thought at least she would be married in a church where all her friends could see her.

But no. She was in her own drawing room getting married. The same room her tutors had scolded her in about arithmetic. She had not exchanged more than two words with her new husband, and now she was leaving her family forever, all so that her father could make a name for himself.

Despite trying to hold it at bay, she felt truly resentful at that moment, and when she caught her mother’s eye, she knew that she shared her sentiments.

Evangeline had watched her parents' marriage throughout her life, and she knew there was no love between them. Her mother and father had married out of necessity, and they had not been happy even for a single day.

I would never have believed I would face the same fate, she thought despairingly.

As her father shook Edmund's hand again, the earl's jaw was tight, his eyes sharp and unkind as he nodded to him. Finally, he turned to Evangeline. He did not even look at her, offering her his arm just as he had after the wedding, and she had no choice but to take it.

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Edmund breathed a sigh of relief as he settled himself in his carriage. They were finally able to go to Barendale Manor. Although it was the bane of his existence as it fell apart around his ears, he did love the place. He was glad that he would soon be back in the wide English countryside again and out of the horrors of town and the many eyes of those around him.

Evangeline's maid would follow behind them with her belongings, and soon, she would be able to settle in the house herself. Edmund could only imagine what she must be thinking, and he did not want to dwell on it.

All I can do is to make her as comfortable as possible. I can reassure her that nothing is required of her and that she can live a free life as far as she is able.

He looked out of the window just before the carriage set off. Lord Longford had already gone back inside with Lady Longford, but Matilda stood on the steps. Now that she believed herself unobserved, the tears were flowing freely. She looked as though she was shaking with the force of her grief, and Edmund had to look away.

I am a selfish, fool to agree to this marriage. She is right to despise me; I despise myself.

His mother climbed into the carriage, the dowager countess sitting beside Evangeline. Those ocean-blue eyes were turned toward the window, stoically avoiding looking at her sister. Edmund would wager that she knew just how unhappy Matilda was at her



departure, and as he looked at her more closely, Evangeline's eyes were bright and sad.

As the carriage set off, Edmund could think of nothing to say. He had spent too long alone in the past three years to remember how to engage in small talk. What did one say to a woman one had just met? What did one say to one's wife?

He glanced at his mother, who was watching him pityingly and felt his anger rise again. He wished that his life had turned out differently. It seemed abominably unfair. He and Adelaide had been happy enough, and he had never found any difficulty in speaking to her freely.

What on earth did we use to say to one another? Should I tell Evangeline she looks well in her dress? What do women of twenty years of age wish to speak of?

"The weather has turned out rather well," his mother said brightly. "I think we shall have blue skies all the way to the manor. It is a very beautiful place, Evangeline; I believe you will like it."

Edmund noted that his mother did not call Evangeline "Lady Barstow" or "Countess" but used her Christian name immediately. It appeared that his mother was trying to put his bride at ease. He was grateful for it as he seemed incapable of forming a single sentence in her presence.

"How far is the manor?" Evangeline asked. Her soft, polite voice was pleasing to Edmund's ears. He could not imagine her ever losing her temper; she seemed so sensible and modest.

"I should think we will arrive there within two hours if the roads are suitable," his mother continued. "Wouldn't you say, Edmund?"

The dowager countess looked almost pleading as she met his gaze.

“Quite,” he managed. “About an hour and a half if we are lucky with London traffic.”

Evangeline turned back to the window. She did not look at him for several minutes, and Edmund was on edge and uncomfortable as the silence stretched between them.

“Your father tells me you play the piano and the harp,” his mother continued eventually. “We have a pianoforte in the manor. I am sure we can procure a harp for you if you so wish.”

At what cost? Edmund thought irritably.

“Oh, that is most kind, my Lady,” Evangeline said. “I do love to play the piano.”

“It’ll need tuning,” Edmund said gruffly, aware of the harsh quality of his voice. The last person who had played that piano was Adelaide.

He was surprised to find that the idea of Evangeline playing it did not bother him. He was more concerned that she would see the state of disrepair that the manor had reached.

Although he had tried his best to manage everything, his long recuperation and withdrawal from daily tasks had meant that his home was far more run down than it should have been. He was still picking up the pieces from the fire all these years later.

“Do you read, Evangeline?” his mother asked.

“I do. I adore reading,” she said enthusiastically, and her face suddenly became animated with excitement.

His mother looked at him imploringly, and Edmund cleared his throat.

“We have a library.” There was a long pause as the two women waited for him to continue. “It has many books.”

Evangeline’s expression fell, but after a few seconds, she forced a smile. “I am very pleased to hear it; I will make good use of it.”

“Mm,” Edmund hummed non-committally, and he heard his mother sigh.

This marriage is already a disaster.

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As they travelled through the rolling hills toward the manor, Evangeline noticed that Edmund began to relax. The stiff posture he had maintained for the first thirty minutes of their journey slowly softened, and as his mother engaged him in idle conversation, he began to speak a little more.

His answers were still clipped and monosyllabic, but she at least heard him utter more than a few words together. He still seemed extremely tense, though he had relaxed in his seat. His jaw was rigid, his hands fixed by his side. When he did move, it was to clench his fingers around his seat so firmly that she saw the whites of his knuckles.

The dowager countess was friendly to her, which was encouraging. As the new lady of the house, Evangeline knew their positions were likely to clash in the near future. She remembered a story from her friend Sylvia that when she had gone to her new estate after her marriage, her mother-in-law had forbidden her from changing anything in the house for three years.

Evangeline wondered whether Edmund’s mother was merely being polite or if she

genuinely wished to welcome her. She hoped it was the latter.

As she gazed out of the window at the landscape passing them by, she wondered what the house would be like. There had been many rumours that it had fallen to wrack and ruin after his first wife's death. She hoped they were not true. She had always longed to run a successful household and had been taught much of what she needed to know from a young age.

Although her mother's marriage was unhappy, Lady Longford had spared all the time she could to school her daughters in what would be expected of them once they were married. Evangeline was now very grateful for that tutelage. She felt that she was going to the manor with her eyes open and hoped that she would be able to do an admirable job in all of the tasks that were put to her.

"Have you been to Oxfordshire before?" the dowager asked.

"A few times. One of my acquaintances lives nearby, and my father's estate is not too far from Barendale. He was very grateful for the lease of your land, my Lord. He is most eager to come hunting in the near future."

Edmund only nodded.

Evangeline startled slightly as slim fingers slid across her own. The dowager countess gently took her hand from her lap and squeezed her palm as though in a show of solidarity. It was so unexpected that Evangeline felt the tears she had carefully kept at bay threaten to fall again.

She had not expected to find any affection in the lady, and to feel that she might be on her side was reassuring. Edmund's eyes flickered to the movement. His expression appeared briefly hopeful until he looked out of the carriage window again.

He always kept his right side away from her as though he did not wish for her to see his scars. Evangeline had expected to feel repulsed by them but felt nothing of the kind. He could have been the most handsome man on earth, but his dismissive and cold demeanour would have made him entirely undesirable.

If the man believed his scars were the worst thing about him, he was sorely mistaken.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:35 am*

A week after the wedding things had not improved.

Evangeline was at the breakfast table sitting in awkward silence. The dowager countess opposite her making polite conversation, but Edmund was largely ignoring them both, reading a letter over the top of his plate and not touching his food.

In the first few days after she had arrived, Evangeline and Edmund had only ever met at mealtimes. She had attempted on those occasions to make idle conversation with him, but it was of no use. Edmund would sit at the head of the table in silence, with a brooding expression on his face, and he would eat without conversing at all.

Evangeline had grown to dislike supper times, as the dowager countess preferred to eat smaller meals before bed and tended not to join them.

She quickly learned that Edmund's monosyllabic replies during the carriage ride were not unusual. In fact, it was almost impossible to get more than a "yes" or "indeed" out of him. She had, therefore, taken to saying nothing at all.

The one benefit of eating in relative silence was that it had allowed her to study him. She had discovered that he had a pleasant curl to his mouth when he was reading, and occasionally, she had seen a hint of a smile on his face.

His gray eyes were intense and direct, and when he looked at her, she felt as though she was the only person in the room. He had large hands and elegant fingers despite the scarring on one side. Evangeline had concluded that he was very interesting to look at. After all, she had had ample time to examine him of late.

“What about a ball?” the dowager countess said suddenly. Evangeline looked up from her plate of eggs in consternation as Lady Viola’s eyes alighted on her with excitement.

Edmund looked at his mother with an alarmingly angry expression. The dowager countess was not cowed by it, however, and cocked her head to one side as she contemplated her own suggestion.

“Would that not be a marvellous way to introduce Evangeline to your wider acquaintance?” she said enthusiastically.

At that point, some servants came to clear away the dishes, and there was a charged silence as they waited for them to depart. Edmund looked positively furious.

“What do you think, Edmund?” his mother asked happily.

“Such frivolity is unnecessary,” he said gruffly, placing the letter on the table and staring at his mother as though she had suggested he leap from the roof. “What would it be in aid of?”

Evangeline’s heart sank. The very notion that he should introduce her was evidently a foreign concept to her new husband. She wondered what he had done when Adelaide had been alive. She fantasized about an elaborate ball with the couple dancing in the centre, smiling and laughing with one another—impossibly happy and in love.

She picked up her teacup and silently sipped her tea.

“It is important to maintain our social standing, Edmund, and you cannot expect your wife to meet everyone individually. That could take months. She deserves to be presented as your new bride.”

“Mama,” Edmund said with exasperation. Evangeline hated the mask that slipped back into place as soon as he expressed any kind of feeling. She was desperate to know him, but he seemed determined to remain hidden from everyone but himself.

“Yes, Edmund,” the dowager continued patiently, “what possible objection could you have?”

There was a vein pulsing in Edmund’s temple, and he rubbed a hand over his forehead. “It is not that, I simply—”

“Because I would remind you that in three years, we have held no functions at all. You have told me repeatedly that you do not wish to be the stuff of gossip, and I promise you if you continue to hide away after you have just remarried, everyone will speak of it for years to come.”

She sat very straight in her chair, and with jerky, irritable movements, she picked up her teacup, sipping from it with a deep frown. However, when she looked over the rim at Evangeline, she gave a sly wink. Evangeline felt a jolt of joy at the sight. Lady Viola was bringing her into her confidence, and it was nice to feel that at least one member of the household was on her side—even if her husband appeared not to be.

“Mama, there are other things to consider,” Edmund continued. “The house is still in disrepair. We will be able to make reasonable changes by the autumn and perhaps then—”

“The autumn? Edmund, the season will be over by then. That is quite ridiculous. No, it must be soon if we are to hold one at all.”

She gave him a glare when he opened his mouth as though to protest further, and he closed it again, looking murderous. Edmund ground his teeth, his shoulders tense. Then, with a long sigh, he leaned back in his chair, looking altogether human as he



acquiesced to his mother's request.

"Fine," he bit out, "but I am not inviting the whole county."

"Whoever said anything about that?" she asked waspishly, but Edmund had already risen to his feet. He threw down his napkin, picked up the letter, and stalked out of the room.

It was only then that the stern facade faltered, and his mother looked regretful. She sighed and glanced at Evangeline who attempted to reassure her with a smile.

"Are you finished with breakfast?" the dowager asked.

"I am, thank you."

"Come, we shall repair to the morning room together. It is the brightest room in the house, and it will lift my spirits to look out onto the rose garden."

The two women rose as the shadows of servants detached themselves from the walls and came forward. Evangeline had met with the housekeeper and the butler that week, but she did not feel as though she had embraced her new duties as well as she might.

Both had been extremely pleasant to speak to, but they had also reassured her that everything in the house had a set routine, and it didn't seem that her interference was appreciated. She hated feeling useless and was determined to try again the following week.

As they entered the morning room, Lady Barstow closed the door behind her with a click, and they were alone. Evangeline wondered whether she might have done something wrong, or perhaps the lady would admonish her for not speaking up more

at mealtimes.

Instead, the lady indicated the striped settee before the fire, and Evangeline sat down. The dowager countess came to sit beside her with a heavy sigh, looking at her earnestly.

“You must not lose heart, my dear,” she said firmly. “I know that my son can be difficult to understand, but he is a good man.” She hesitated, looking at Evangeline out of the corner of her eye. “Do you know of what became of his first wife?”

Evangeline tensed but shook her head. “All I have heard are vicious rumours I do not believe.”

The dowager countess patted the back of her hand, looking relieved. “He is very fortunate in his wife, I think. Many would believe the rumours—indeed, many do.”

There was a long silence, and then Lady Barstow began speaking again.

“There was a terrible fire,” she said, looking into the flames in the hearth as though seeing it in her mind's eye. “Edmund woke late, and the ceilings were already thick with smoke. He ran from his room to Adelaide’s bed chamber, but the fire had already engulfed it. We still do not know what made the first spark, but he has always believed a candle in her room must have ignited. Her bed chamber was black with smoke.”

The lady sighed, letting go of Evangeline’s hand, and stood up, beginning to pace.

“Edmund was frantic. He barged through the door to her room, hoping that she had already escaped, but she was unconscious on the bed. He ran forward just as the flames leaped up all around him. The fire was vicious and angry, and he could not do much but lift Adelaide out of the room. Even that left him horribly burned. His skin

the next day was like nothing I have ever seen.”

She stopped as Evangeline held her breath.

“The scars on his face and neck were the physical consequence of what happened to him, but the internal consequences run far deeper. Edmund has always blamed himself for her death.”

Her eyes glistened with tears as she turned to Evangeline and returned to the settee.

“He withdrew from society completely. At first, it was because he was badly injured and recovering from the grief of losing his wife. But afterward, when the rumours and the vicious slander began, the cruelty he endured was beyond anything I have since witnessed.”

“I have lived a privileged life, Evangeline. You will know better than I how fickle society can be for the slightest misstep. I do not know who began the rumour that Edmund had set the fire himself, wishing to do away with Adelaide, but whoever it was ruined my son for many years since. He was devastated that anyone would believe that of him. Edmund was the darling of society when he was younger, you see. Handsome, clever, and rich, he wanted for nothing. He had endless friends, and everyone wished to share in his company.

“It was too cruel that so many turned their backs on him in such a way. It was a great shock to him to finally see the two faces that society possesses. If you are in favour, the world will bow to you, but one mistake—”

“And they turn away without a second thought,” Evangeline murmured. The two women looked at one another, and there was a world of understanding in their eyes.

“I beg you to be patient with him,” Lady Viola continued. “He is a kind and caring

man; he merely needs to remember who he used to be. I know he has barely spoken to you since the wedding, but it will come. He will remember who he is and realise how lucky he is to have you in his life.”

Evangeline wanted to trust that she was right, but she could not believe that Edmund would ever truly be grateful for her presence. He seemed uninterested in her existence, and she could not think of a time or an occasion when that would change.

“It is partly why I have insisted on the ball—he still has many friends in society but has lost touch with those who tried to maintain their acquaintance with him. You deserve to meet them and begin your marriage as a success. “The Dowager Countess smiled ruefully. “I was so worried that you might be very outspoken, very burdensome. But you are the opposite, and I mean that as nothing but a compliment. Your gentle manners and kindness will be what he needs. I know it. I am certain of it.”

Evangeline squeezed the dowager’s hand tightly, giving her a reassuring smile, trying to show on her face feelings she did not possess in her heart.

She is wrong, he will never want me. In fact, he openly seems to dislike me. All I can do is what she has asked.

But she had little hope that she would succeed.

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Edmund slammed through his study door, shoving it closed behind him with such force that it reverberated through the whole house.

A ball? Had the woman entirely lost her senses?

“No,” he spat to the room at large. “You have not been honest with your own mother, and therefore, she does not understand we cannot afford a ball!”

He slammed his palm into the mantelpiece, wincing at the pain and breathing heavily. As he stepped back from the hearth, his father’s familiar face looked down on him from the portrait above the fireplace.

The previous earl of Barendale had been a pillar of his local community, revered amongst everyone he knew. Edmund once prided himself on continuing his legacy, mingling with the highest echelons of society and regularly travelling to the local villages. His desk had positively overflowed with invitations to balls and dances and letters of thanks from his tenants.

Now it was empty.

He sighed, running a hand through his hair as Croft rapped on the door to admit Jonathan into the room. His steward bowed as he entered, the door closing behind him with a snap.

Edmund was immediately reminded why he had summoned the man, and his mood blackened even further.

“It is quite intolerable,” he barked, walking to his desk where the sheaves of papers lay. He had brought everything with him, including the account summaries from Timmons, and they were now outstretched across his desk. “I am not a foolish man, yet I can make no sense of anything.”

He looked up as Jonathan remained by the door, his hands placed carefully before him.

“Good morning, my Lord,” he said gently. “As you know, I have returned from

several days at your Yorkshire estate and wish to congratulate you on your wedding.”

Edmund stopped sifting over the documents in front of him and stood up, giving a great sigh. He ran a hand over his eyes and straightened his shirt sleeves before he forced his shoulders to relax.

“Good morning, Brown,” he said softly, giving a repentant smile. “My apologies, I am also intolerable, it would seem.”

Jonathan’s gentle chuckle only made Edmund feel worse. The man was eminently patient and had always given Edmund far more leeway than anyone else when his moods turned sour.

“Is all well with the countess?” Jonathan asked, coming into the room and standing before the desk. Despite the practicalities of his job, he was always perfectly turned out, his long brown hair tied behind his head in a neat ponytail and a loosened cravat around his neck.

Edmund hesitated before answering the question. In truth, to his shame, he had no notion of how Evangeline was. He was terrified to even speak to her, convinced she must be utterly miserable in a half-ruined house with an absent, monstrous husband for company.

“She is well,” he lied as Jonathan gave him a quizzical look.

“Have you had any rest at all since the wedding?” his steward asked.

“I do not need to rest. I need to get to the bottom of what is happening with my finances,” Edmund said, his ire returning in seconds as he picked up the papers and brandished them at Jonathan wildly. “Hundreds of pounds seem to have disappeared and there is a great deficit in the funds for the house repairs. Even with the dowry we

will still struggle to plug this gap. I cannot understand where it has come from.”

“May I, my Lord?” Jonathan held out his hand and took a seat opposite the desk.

Edmund collapsed back in his chair, feeling desperate and worried. He handed the summaries to Jonathan without much hope. Looking at everything over the last week had certainly informed him of where the problems lay, but he could not understand why they existed.

Jonathan’s brow furrowed as he read over the papers. He was a wiry, tall man with a thin, handsome face. When Edmund had first met him, he had worried that the man was malnourished, but he had since seen Jonathan on many occasions, and he consistently carried food with him. He seemed to be perpetually eating or speaking of his garden, where he grew all manner of vegetables.

His sharp, green eyes were scanning the document with interest as he leaned back in the chair. Edmund looked down at his own hands, that rested on piles and piles of bills, all of which had become a jumble in his mind. He clenched his right hand, examining the lattice of scars that ran across his fingers and down over his palm. He hated the sight of it.

“I have my own recommendations here, my Lord,” Jonathan said, pulling a thick envelope from his pocket and handing it over. “These are specific to the grounds and the money we would need to rejuvenate some of the areas that have fallen into disrepair. I wondered if you might wish to replace some of the rose bushes in the gardens.”

Edmund swallowed. The rose garden had been Adelaide’s pride and joy. He had not been able to go in there for years.

“It would certainly bring back some of the colour to that portion of your grounds and

is a lovely aspect from the drawing room,” Jonathan added.

Edmund nodded. “Perhaps. We shall see how things progress with the repairs. Thank you for this,” he said, holding up the envelope, and for the next few minutes, the two men read through the information before them.

After a short while, Jonathan sat back in his chair with a frown.

“You are right, my Lord, there is something odd about this.”

“How do you mean?” Edmund asked, leaning forward in his chair.

“It may be nothing; perhaps all the costs have increased, and we are merely seeing the pain of that, but my instinct says it could be something else. The first year this happened, we made arrangements to rectify some of the changes—”

“I do not think it is fair to say ‘we’ did anything. I was incapacitated and entirely useless.”

Jonathan was quiet and then levelled Edmund with a long stare. “My Lord, you had lost your wife and were badly injured. It is hardly surprising that you needed to recuperate.” Edmund scoffed, but Jonathan’s eyes remained fixed on his face. “You must not blame yourself, my Lord.”

“Well, I do,” Edmund snapped. “If I had paid more attention to things, perhaps we would not be in this mess.”

“That is what I am getting at, my Lord. The first year, we attempted to rectify the deficit, but the problem has got worse over the last two years, not better. True, we have had to spend more, particularly in the parts of the estate where we have suffered from poachers, but that should not create this kind of problem. I would like your



permission to investigate further. I shall share my findings with you as weekly reports.”

“Thank you, Brown, I would appreciate that. At least with the dowry, we have enough to fund the repairs to the house.”

“That is good news, my Lord. Will you restore the east wing?”

“I shall,” Edmund said with determination.

The idea of walking through those blackened halls again filled him with dread, but at the same time there was a part of him that finally felt ready to embark upon the task. He was not sure if it was partly due to Evangeline. He wanted her to be able to make her own mark on the house.

An idea formed in his mind as he contemplated the work that would need to be done, and he nodded to himself. Evangeline had sacrificed much to come and live with him, and perhaps as the new Countess, the east wing could be something he gave to her to mould in her image.

It is her money that means I am able to embark on these repairs. It is only right that she should have a say in how the house improves.

“Very good, my Lord,” Jonathan said, standing up and smoothing his coat as he did so. “I shall be sure you keep your apprised of everything I discover. Please do the same if there is anything you feel I should know.”

“Thank you, Brown, how was the Yorkshire estate?” His steward smiled; Edmund knew he loved visiting the lakes on his way up.

“Excellent, my Lord. The gardens are looking very beautiful, I am eager to mirror

them here.”

Edmund smiled. “And how is your vegetable garden?”

Jonathan chuckled. “I knew you only kept me on for my tomatoes.”

Edmund watched the warmth come into his friend’s eyes. “I do enjoy testing them for you. They are far better than the ones we buy from the market. I feel I am robbing you every time.”

“Perhaps I should charge you a few shillings for them,” Jonathan said with a wry smile.

“You should. I give you enough grief to warrant it. I hope you know how grateful I am for all your help.”

“I am happy to do it, my Lord. You know that.”

“I do. But I am grateful all the same.”

His steward left the room chuckling. Edmund returned to the mountain of papers on his desk, the anxiety returning as he looked at the endless numbers, scuttling like hundreds of black spiders across the pages.

Perhaps he had been given a reprieve with Longford’s money, but it would not solve anything if he could not ascertain the cause of his problems.

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Evangeline wandered the corridors of Barendale Manor, feeling out of place and at a loss for what to do with herself. The servants seemed to regard her with a mixture of

curiosity and wariness. She was painfully aware that Sarah was struggling with how the house was run, and her cheerful maid was yet to make a single friend amongst the staff.

Despite knowing a great deal about how to manage and run a house, Evangeline did not feel as though her ideas or thoughts were welcome. Many of the maids scuttled out of sight upon seeing her. She felt like a ghost in her own home.

As she walked down one of the long corridors, with high windows on her left and a marble floor beneath her feet, her eyes strayed to the gardens.

Some parts that were closer to the house had been maintained fairly well, but without proper investment in a fleet of ground staff it could not be maintained sufficiently.

As she walked to the final part of the corridor, entering a chequered gallery with beautiful tapestries all over the walls, she saw a doorway leading outside ahead of her.

She approached it and found it to be unlocked. The day outside was mild enough, if a little clammy, and she did not think she needed to trouble a servant to fetch her coat.

She ventured out into the cold morning, her feet crunching over the gravel as she walked through the meandering paths about the estate. Many had weeds growing through them and had fallen into disuse. She longed to see them restored to their former glory.

The plants were strung out, needing to be cut back to allow them to fully nourish themselves. She had often tended the roses at their country seat with her mother and she could immediately recognize that they were good specimens but had simply been ignored for too long.

She walked beneath the arch of the rose garden and saw a dozen or so roses in the beds. The walls that enclosed the gardens were dark and covered with ivy, but it had clearly been a beautiful place years before.

She approached one of the larger bushes that had crept out of the confines of the bed and entangled itself with its neighbour. Although neglected, there were many flowers in the vicinity, a riot of deep reds and pale pinks as the roses nodded their heads at her in the gentle breeze.

She lifted one of the rose heads to smell the bloom and was enveloped in a gentle scent that made her smile. She missed her mother and sister, and the smell brought them a little closer to her.

As she released the flower, the entangled stem dislodged from a larger part of the neighbouring bush, and suddenly, a whip-like line of thorns tugged itself free and landed viciously against her hand. She sucked in a breath letting out a small cry of pain even as she turned at the sound of thundering footsteps and saw Edmund charging toward her with a look like thunder.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:35 am*

Edmund had watched Evangeline walk into the gardens from his study window. As she had approached Adelaide's roses, he had felt an overwhelming urge to tell her never to go into the gardens again.

The only thing he could see amongst the rose bushes was Adelaide's smile and knowing glances as he asked her what kind of roses she would plant next. Watching Evangeline in the same space felt strange and unpleasant.

But as he had left the manor and followed her, he had seen the thorns strike at her hand and draw blood. The instant protectiveness that he felt was alarming in its intensity, and as she turned in surprise, he could not conjure the words of reproach he had intended to say.

Looking into those beautiful, wide eyes, he felt unable to say anything at all. Her right hand was streaked with blood, and Edmund pulled his handkerchief from his pocket, wrapping it around the wound immediately.

He only recognized that he was touching her when she sucked in a sharp breath. Her gaze turned soft as she looked at his fingers cradling her own. Even Edmund was surprised at the tenderness of the gesture and the powerful need he felt to protect her from harm.

The scent of the roses enveloped them, and Edmund gazed at Evangeline's radiant face in awe of her beauty. Evangeline had a quiet strength, a determination, and a drive that was very different from Adelaide's vivacity.

Their eyes locked and held as Edmund found that he could not pull away from her.

He watched the blood bloom in tiny dots all over his handkerchief. Evangeline's full lips were slightly parted, her eyelashes kissing her cheek as she looked down at her injury in apparent surprise.

Edmund's thumb gently brushed against the base of her palm, and Evangeline's breath trembled as it did so.

No sooner had it happened, however, than the spell was broken at the loud crunching of wheels across the driveway behind them. Immediately, Edmund felt his walls slam back into place, wondering how he could have allowed himself to act in such a manner. He had intended to tell Evangeline in no uncertain terms that the rose garden was off limits, yet he could not do it.

Turning, he saw Colin approaching them, having just stepped down from his carriage. He entered the rose garden with a wide grin that made Edmund's jaw clench in irritation.

"Good morning, Lord and Lady Barstow!" Colin called enthusiastically.

"Colin," Edmund managed, still feeling shaken at the spark that had ignited in the air between Evangeline and him. "To what do we owe the pleasure of your visit?"

Colin grinned. "I have come to stay!" he said, gripping Edmund's hand and shaking it vigorously. "I have been preoccupied by your troubles, my friend, and I wish to help," Colin continued in a low voice.

Edmund turned to Evangeline and bowed, throwing out an arm to show Colin into the house. He was glad of the distraction and could hardly refuse the man's help when his situation was so dire.

His mind was a whirlwind of worries and guilty imaginings, and he refused to believe

that the soft understanding in Evangeline's eyes had been anything but pity.

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Dinner that night was a stilted and unpleasant affair. After their encounter in the gardens Edmund was unsure how to act around Evangeline. The site of the scarring on the back of her hand made him shift uncomfortably in his seat. Anything that marred that perfect skin felt foreign to him. He wanted to fix it.

"And how do you like Barendale Manor, Lady Barstow?" Colin asked. He was rather far into his cups already, and Edmund was surprised at the volume of wine the man had drunk. He was acting strangely, but then, he was an odd man.

"I like it very much," Evangeline said in that slow, measured tone. "The grounds are beautiful."

Edmund chewed his food, keeping his eyes on the table. Does she think I acted oddly in the rose garden, I wonder?

"They used to be far grander," Colin said with a hiccough, "and we will be working to ensure they befit their new Countess."

Evangeline's eyes were wary of Colin, but she smiled at him, glancing uncertainly at Edmund, and he quickly looked down at his place.

Her hair was tied up in a beautiful bun today, with twisted ringlets on either side of her face. She looked elegant and untouchable in comparison to him. He imagined an artist's rendering of them all sitting at dinner. Colin would be the clown, and Evangeline the fairy, whilst he would sit at the top of the table, a dragon over his hoard of gold, breathing fire across the company.

“My favourite room is the library,” Evangeline continued, surprising him.

“Ah yes, Edmund is very fond of his books,” Colin said—it did not sound like a compliment.

“Are you, my Lord?” Evangeline asked, turning to Edmund, whose heart picked up speed as her eyes fell upon him.

“I do,” he replied shortly, taking a sip of his own wine. Evangeline was not deterred by his brevity, however, and continued with much enthusiasm, just as she had in the carriage.

“I am very fond of reading. My father disliked poetry and I was never permitted to read any, but my mother would purchase copies for me to read in private. I was most pleased to see you have almost all of Lord Byron’s works, my Lord. Your collection is very impressive. I have never had the pleasure of reading Wordsworth before. I adore Keats and Byron. I am excited to discover more.”

Edmund watched her bright eyes as she spoke of it. Her cheeks were beautifully flushed with enthusiasm. He was rather more partial to a book on history himself, but her excitement was contagious. He found himself fantasizing about a day when perhaps Evangeline might read a poem to him. Maybe they would sit together in the library, and she would lean against his legs as she read before the fire.

But she never will, a voice said at the back of his mind. Don’t be a fool.

Her beauty was so evident in that moment that Edmund sat back in his chair, hoping that the darkness would eclipse his face. The movement must have indicated a lack of interest to Evangeline, however, and soon, to Edmund’s dismay, she fell silent, and they were left with Colin’s inane chatter. When she eventually excused herself, Edmund felt guilt swamp him.



I simply do not know what to say to her; I am tongue-tied whenever she looks at me.

After supper, the two men moved to the study.

“What will you do with the majority of the money?” Colin asked, belching loudly as Edmund handed him a small measure of brandy. The man had had quite enough to drink already.

“I will use it for the repairs,” he replied.

“But ten thousand pounds is an enormous sum. Have you considered an investment? There is much to be said for increasing the money over time.”

“There is much to do.”

“Of course, old boy, but the entirety cannot be put on the estate’s restoration. I would be happy to enquire after some investments if you should wish me to. There is a great deal of money to be made in coal—I have heard of a man who bought a tiny little pile in Durham and has made his fortune. Of humble origins yet earning substantial sums, there is much to be gained from maintaining a keen ear to the ground.”

“I shall consider it,” he conceded, although his mind was elsewhere. He could not shake the image of Evangeline reading to him in the library. It was not until that moment that he had considered that he had a new wife. Someone who he might share his life with.

He had been pushing Evangeline as far from him as he could, and he was under no illusions that she would ever care for him. But friendship also bore affection, and when he thought of her intelligence and openness, he wondered whether they might ever grow close to one another in a different way.

“Think of what you could do to the east wing,” Colin insisted. “All of those rooms that have been shut up where the bulk of the fire began can be reopened. The roof can be repaired, and you will be able to have your manor back to how it was.”

With Evangeline’s money, Edmund thought anxiously. Spending every penny of her dowry on restoring Adelaide’s old rooms to their former glory.

“Not to mention the grounds and what you can do to the gardens. They have quite withered since I was here last. The summer is approaching us. It would be good to see flowers blooming out of the windows again, would it not?”

I wonder if Evangeline enjoys flowers. I did not expect to like seeing her walking among the roses.

“Edmund?”

“I shall consider it,” he said, and after that, his cousin fell silent for a long time.

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Evangeline sat before her dressing table and watched Sarah brush through her hair. She liked it when it was down and shimmering in the firelight.

Her bedchamber was very beautiful and just to her taste. It had been decorated in white and green with a magnificent four-poster bed and wide fireplace.

The crackle of the flames was a comfort, as Sarah hummed gently behind her. Evangeline stared at her reflection, noting the paleness of her skin. The early spring days were doing nothing for her complexion, and the clammy misty mornings had left her hands dry and unpleasant each time she woke.

The house had a strange atmosphere to it. Although she thought it very beautiful, the number of rooms that were closed to her and the east wing being entirely shut off made it feel cold and unwelcoming when she went in that direction.

“Was there any more discussion of the ball, my Lady?” Sarah asked softly. She was a quiet girl, and suited Evangeline very well. Neither of them had ever raised their voice in the other’s company, and Sarah was the most loyal person Evangeline had ever met.

Her lady’s maid had been quite concerned when they had first arrived and remained so at times. Sarah was not enamoured with Edmund and thought him snobbish.

“Edmund has agreed to it,” Evangeline replied. “Although, I am uncertain if it is what he really wants.”

“And what do you want, my Lady? It would certainly be a diverting activity for you. You cannot spend every day in the library.”

Evangeline gave her a knowing smile. “I would not mind that.”

Sarah chuckled. “Do you know what you might wear?”

“I believe I shall order a new dress. I wish to look elegant and uphold my title as countess.”

“You have never looked anything else, my Lady,” Sarah insisted, handing her the hairbrush as she finished combing through the long strands. “How is your hand?”

Evangeline looked down at the back of her hand, where long scratches had marred the skin. “It is healing, I am sure. It was nothing, really.”

Sarah nodded and busied herself with clearing away Evangeline's clothing from that day and turning down the bed. Evangeline remained where she was, lost in thought, looking down at her hand and thinking of the intensity she had seen in Edmund's eyes that afternoon.

It had been a strange moment. She had thought he was furious with her, charging toward her, looking quite frightening, his brooding, scarred face all the more stark in the daylight. Evangeline could not deny that a thrill had passed through her at the sight of him. He had a broad, strong figure and long legs that had effortlessly eaten up the distance between them.

Evangeline was ashamed to admit she had thought of other occasions when he might advance on her like that but with passion in his eyes instead of anger. She shook her head, trying to dispel the strange thought and moving her reflections to what had happened at dinner.

The main preoccupation she experienced that evening was Colin's presence. The man made her very uneasy, and she could not fathom why. He was all affable gentility when he was with them, and Edmund had invited him to stay, so they must have got on well enough. But it was the man's smile she did not like. She had observed him throughout the dinner, and he had been grinning and laughing all the way through, but it never reached his eyes.

Sometimes, when she had observed him without his knowledge, his gaze had seemed almost calculating. It was as though he were measuring every move he made carefully to achieve something, but she could not think what it was.

As she rose to get into bed there was a gentle knock at the door. Sarah turned to her, surprised, and Evangeline had a sudden jolt of fear mixed with excitement that Edmund had come to be with her. She knew a little of the marriage bed between a man and a woman, but so far, he had not even attempted to come to her rooms.

With her head a storm of uncertainties, she watched Sarah move to the door and open it. There was a hushed conversation, and then Sarah closed it again, turning to her with two books in her hand.

Sarah's eyes were bright with excitement as she approached.

"Lord Barstow has sent you two books of poetry, my Lady," she said with a grin. "Mr Croft just delivered them on the earl's instruction."

Evangeline's heart beat wildly as she looked at the books. They were both by William Wordsworth, the very poet she had mentioned at supper. Poems in Two Volumes and Lyrical Ballads. She looked at Sarah, who was still smiling and could not help returning it.

"I mentioned that I had not read his poetry yet and that I was looking forward to doing so."

"Well," Sarah said, her eyes softening a great deal, "perhaps he is not quite so pompous as I first thought, my Lady."

"Sarah," she admonished with a hiss, but the maid just chuckled.

"I shall leave you to your reading then, my Lady. Good night, and I hope you sleep soundly."

"Thank you, Sarah."

As she climbed into bed, the bedpan warming her toes, she placed one of the books on the side beneath the candelabra.

The light flickered over the leather-bound volume in her hand, and she traced the

names with her fingers. She was not sure what to make of it but was touched that he had paid attention to her comments at supper. He looked so disinterested most of the time that it was hard to know when he was listening and when he was not.

She nestled down into the thick covers, opened the book, and began to read, her mind conjuring images of Edmund as she did so. He had thought of her and sent her something that she would enjoy. She smiled to herself, feeling warmth bloom through her chest.

Perhaps he is not as indifferent as he seems.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:35 am*

The mist hung low to the ground, swirling around their horse's hooves as Edmund and Jonathan made their way through the lands of his estate.

The heavy thudding of the horse's footsteps was a comfort to Edmund's addled mind. He was shocked at how far things had fallen since his recuperation. He had not been aware that the estate had become so tired-looking. The recent harsh winter had caused a lot of problems that were only now becoming evident.

Jonathan cleared his throat. "The Bensons and some of the other tenants would benefit from the first of the repairs. There was significant damage in the recent storms to the roofs of several of the outbuildings in their farm and they have been struggling for some time. I have drawn up a list of those that should be tackled first."

Edmund's shoulders were aching. Everything in his life seemed to cause him tension these days. He did not like being seen as the earl who had let his estate turn to rack and ruin.

For so long, he had buried himself in the darkness of his home, never wishing to venture out to face reality. Now that he was beginning to look about him with fresh eyes, he was ashamed to see the state things were in.

"Very good, thank you," he murmured.

"Everything is manageable," Jonathan added kindly. "Nothing is beyond repair, my Lord. We will get it all turned about."

"I should not have neglected it."

“Do not be so harsh on yourself.”

“Perhaps I should be, Jonathan. Heaven knows I have allowed myself to wallow in grief for long enough.”

“Adelaide—”

“I do not only mean Adelaide. I mean my own grief. Unhappiness with my appearance, unwilling to see anyone in society for fear of them looking at me. The whispers I perceive at every turn. It is all my own doing and perhaps I ought to feel it.”

He trailed off, lost in thought and the horses continued. The sky above their heads was hazy with the faint wintry light and Edmund looked ahead of him at the murky hills beyond.

“I believe if we begin with the larger residences of your tenants—the most troublesome to begin with—things will improve quickly,” Jonathan said, seamlessly returning the topic of discussion to estate matters. “We cannot be seen to be favouring those with larger tracts of land as it will look as though we are prioritising the most profitable. I would propose a compromise, managing some of the repairs on the largest and smallest homes simultaneously. It would be more costly to begin with, but as the work is completed, the bulk will be done ahead of the winter.”

Edmund glanced at his friend. “How long have you been drawing up these plans?”

“Several months, my Lord, I had always hoped that your health would improve and that you would wish to return to the duties of your estate. If the countess is the reason for this marked increase in your attentions, I am most pleased by her presence. You seem a little lighter in spirits.”



Edmund was surprised to hear that. He had been mired in worries and fears of late, but he could not deny it was nice to have Evangeline in his home. Something about her steadiness and quiet elegance made him feel better about himself.

“My focus is on our boundaries and shoring up the fences that had been damaged in the storms. I have a good man in the village by the name of Henderson who I have assigned the work. He is of good stock and reliable. More expensive than others, but I prefer to know the work will be done properly; otherwise, it is just not worth it.”

“Thank you, Brown. I am in your debt.”

The thought of using Evangeline’s money to repair the estate still did not sit well with him. He wished to tell her of his plans. He would prefer that she had a say in what took place. Just as in the east wing, it felt as though having Evangeline’s blessing in what he wanted to do would somehow make the distribution of her dowry more reasonable.

I wish to have a partner again, whatever form that might mean. Perhaps I can dare to hope I have found one in her.

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The great hall was bustling with activity as Evangeline walked around the room, watching the servants prepare for the ball.

“I would say that we have enough centrepieces, would you agree Lady Viola?” she asked Edmund’s mother, who was walking beside her looking at the guest list.

The lady looked up with an assessing eye and counted the displays. They were large crystal vases that would be placed around the ballroom; she nodded with a warm smile.

“You have quite the eye; I must say, my dear; these centrepieces are exquisite.” She handed Evangeline the guest list. “I have circled a number of people we may not be able to accommodate. It is always difficult to choose those who one cannot invite. We do not wish to slight anyone, but, as Edmund so eloquently put it—we cannot invite the whole county.”

Evangeline looked at the list, and her lips thinned at one of the names that was circled.

“We can strike the Galbraiths off the list immediately; I cannot have Lord Galbraith in a room with my father. Last year, they almost came to blows at a ball. They disagree on everything. If he is not included, he will understand why, and it will not reflect badly on Edmund.” She handed back the list and caught Lady Viola’s eye. “Do you disagree?”

Lady Viola folded the list with a wry smile. “Not in the least. I must say, I...” but she trailed off, and Evangeline stopped, turning to her in concern.

“What is it?”

Lady Viola sighed. “It is not a very kind thing to admit, but I did not have high hopes when Edmund spoke of his arrangement with your father. I believed there must be something amiss when you were famed to be so very accomplished and so beautiful. I could not understand why you were not yet married. I assumed you might be a spoiled woman who did not care for anyone but yourself.” She swallowed awkwardly, taking Evangeline’s hand. “I have never been so happy to be wrong and to be able to pass the title of countess to a woman so worthy. You are a refreshing light after all this time in the darkness.”

Evangeline smiled, impossibly touched by her words, but her smile quickly faded.

She was well aware that something could go wrong at the ball and that they would be under intense scrutiny. She could well imagine why Edmund was so reluctant to hold it. Having been so absent from society for so long, a ball would be the last thing he wanted. Yet Evangeline was determined to make it a success—for her and for him.

Still, as she looked around the room at the bustling activity all about her, she could not help the anxiety that surged through her.

It has to be a success, but what if it is not?

“Lady Viola, would you excuse me for just a moment? I am a little hot. I might take a short walk somewhere cooler.”

“Of course, my dear, are you well?”

“Oh yes, but a bit of fresh air will do me good.”

Evangeline was gratified when the older woman was distracted by something across the room, and she was able to slip out without her offering to join her.

As the door closed behind her on the cobbled stones of the garden, Evangeline took a deep breath and began to walk slowly through the overgrown bushes all about her.

It was very cold outside, colder than she had expected, and she found herself quickly heading back indoors, already shivering violently without a shawl to cover her shoulders.

Finding herself in one of the many darkened corridors in the manor, she began to walk in a direction she had not been before. There were hundreds of portraits on the walls, looming Barstow ancestors looking down at her from all angles. Their eyes were judgmental and cruel, as though she were not welcome.

As she rounded a corner, she came upon a much larger portrait at the end of the corridor. It had once been lit from all sides by cut glass chandeliers, but they were now left unlit, and the painting had a showy quality that made her shiver.

It was undoubtedly of Lady Adelaide Barstow.

She was a striking woman with a beautiful face that looked out of the darkness of the painting like a beacon. Her eyes seemed to follow Evangeline as she approached, and her heart sank as she noted her confidence and grace.

Adelaide looked like the mistress of all she surveyed, effortlessly regal in her dark red dress, her arm swept out to the side on the back of an ornate chair, her posture immaculate.

Evangeline found that her own hand was unconsciously smoothing her dress, trying to ensure there was nothing in her appearance that was out of place. This woman was everything that Edmund had once wanted in the world. In Evangeline's mind, she had been the perfect countess, and everything she did herself would pale in comparison.

“Beautiful, isn't she?”

Evangeline jolted in shock at the voice from behind her. Colin Barstow was standing at the other end of the corridor, his voice echoing all around her.

As he came up to her, his gaze was sympathetic, and for some reason, that agitated her. She did not need his sympathy. There was nothing she could do about Edmund's past; all she could do was shape his future.

Colin's voice was low and conspiratorial in the quiet hallway. Evangeline was struck by how much she disliked the man. He had been nothing but friendly toward her, but something about his presence unnerved her.

“Adelaide was a wonderful countess,” he said softly. “Remarkable woman. Steady, dependable, and with an inherent grace about everything she did. I remember her laugh used to ring through the halls, often accompanied by Edmund’s, too. They were such a perfect pair.” He was standing with his hands held behind his back, his gaze focused on Adelaide’s face. “She was devoted to him, you know. Utterly devoted.”

Evangeline’s fears were only heightened by his words. She herself could not even attempt to be devoted to Edmund. How could she expect to grow to care for her husband if he never spent more than five minutes in a room with her?

Colin turned with a faint smile, and Evangeline forced herself to return it. She looked back at the portrait, feeling small in its presence. She could never measure up to a woman like that. She was too timid, too quiet. Adelaide sounded as though she had held the world in the palm of her hand before her death—and Edmund’s heart with it.

They stood together in awkward silence for a short time until Colin bowed to her and wandered away.

It was only when he had left her it occurred to Evangeline how very odd it was that he had felt the need to tell her any of it.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:35 am*

Once he had returned from his ride with Jonathan, Edmund had been bombarded with questions by the servants on the upcoming ball.

Feeling his temper rising at the constant questions and inevitable cost of it all, he had sequestered himself away in the library, hoping that he could find a few moments of peace.

The room was a gentle comfort. He always felt welcome amongst the musty shelves of leather-bound volumes. The fire crackled merrily in the grate, and although chilly, he rather liked the cold. Since Adelaide's death, he had preferred a colder house. He was always wary of candles in any form and grew nervous if he saw them placed close to curtains.

After her death, when he was well enough to move about, he had gone around the house, blowing them out one by one. It had taken the housekeeper complaining of the dark in every room for him to desist, but the sight of them still made him uneasy.

He sat in an armchair before the fire, ensconced in a history book about ancient Egypt. He was glad to be free of his ledgers. It seemed he had been buried in numbers and calculations for months.

The door creaked open, and Edmund closed his eyes, convinced that Croft had come to find him to ask him another question about the estate. Instead, it was Evangeline's head that came around the door, looking into the library as though she were a guilty child breaking into a sweet shop.

As soon as she laid eyes on Edmund she flinched as though unsure whether she was

welcome in his presence.

And why shouldn't she? He thought angrily. I have hardly made her feel welcome anywhere else in the house.

"My apologies, my Lord," Evangeline said, moving as though to leave again.

"Please, come in," Edmund said hurriedly, surprising himself at the invitation. "I do not want you to leave."

Evangeline gently entered the room, allowing the door to close softly behind her, while their gazes met and lingered. Evangeline's face had the same expression as his—a quiet calm. The library was a solitary place, somewhere to lose oneself in a story.

He sat back in his chair, forcing himself not to hide his hand or cover his face. The scarring seemed all the more apparent in the flickering, shadowy firelight.

"I am sorry," he managed eventually. Evangeline turned to him with a frown. "I have been absent a great deal this last week. I imagine this is not what you had hoped for our first few days of marriage."

I am sure you would have preferred a handsome man who was not hiding from the world.

Instead of agreeing with him or even accusing him of neglect, she took another step forward, and he indicated that she should sit in the seat opposite him.

She did so, smoothing her skirts over her knees and sitting very straight, looking about her. He could not take his eyes off her. She had an exquisite face, almost perfect in appearance, and he found himself drawn back time and again to those wide,

disarming eyes.

“What have you been occupied with, my Lord?”

“Please call me Edmund. We are married, after all.”

“What has had you so occupied, Edmund?”

“The estate, for one. I had a meeting with my steward today, and I have been seeing to my accounts and writing many letters to my solicitors.” He sighed. “I know I have not been present, and we have not spoken a great deal.” He rubbed his hands on his knees, noting that they were clammy as his nerves returned. He simply did not know what to say to her. “How do you like Barendale?”

Her eyelashes fluttered a little, and a faint smile touched her face. “Very well indeed,” she replied. “I have been busy with the dowager countess for much of today preparing for the ball.”

Edmund clearly did not school his expression well enough, and she nodded as though her suspicions had been confirmed.

“You would prefer we did not hold a ball?”

Edmund leaned back in his chair, pursing his lips thoughtfully.

“I am not opposed to balls in general, but I would have preferred a little more time after the wedding before we held it. However, I am conscious this is to welcome you as my new bride, and delaying things would hardly be conducive to that.” She gave a light tinkling laugh, and he looked at her in astonishment. “What is funny?”

“Nothing. It is just that this is the most I have heard you speak since I arrived here. I



had wondered whether you objected to full sentences with more than five words in them.”

Her face was all amusement and Edmund found that his own lips twitched at her teasing. He was not accustomed to the feeling, and in that moment, it was as though something awakened in him that had been long dormant.

“Any sentence that employs more than twenty words is unnecessary,” he said, and warmth bloomed through his chest as she laughed again. She was even more stunning when she smiled, and there was a kindness and gentleness about her manner that instantly charmed him.

“I quite agree, my Lord, words can be most unnecessary.”

“I believe this library would disagree with you,” he said good-naturedly as her eyes ran over the shelves again.

“Thank you for the poems. I think I have fallen in love with William Wordsworth.”

“I do not blame you. He is exquisite. Rivalled only by Shakespeare in my view.”

Her eyes lit up instantly. “Which is your favourite?”

“Sonnet or play?”

“Play,” she said after thinking about it for a little while.

“Othello.”

“Oh! It is mine, too. Othello or King Lear. My father took me to a production of Othello last year and I declare I did not stop crying for a full week.”

Edmund was aware that he was smiling. He could not remember the last time he had smiled so easily.

“I have never seen it performed,” he said casually, purely to see her reaction, and Evangeline did not disappoint.

“Oh, we must go! It is one of the most wonderful plays to see on stage.”

“I have not been to the theatre for years.”

Her smile faltered a fraction, and the animation in her eyes dimmed.

“I hope you know I would never wish to bring you painful memories. If it is something you did with Adelaide, I would never presume to take her place in your affections.”

Edmund frowned at her. He had not expected her to bring up his first wife so easily, but now that she had, he was glad of it. It was brave, he realized, for her to mention it to him so early in the acquaintance. It was as though the shroud that had surrounded them lifted a little.

“Thank you, Evangeline. But in fact, Adelaide hated the theatre. We had many discussions about the plays I attended alone. People were talking, you see, as people always do.”

“Well then, I would love to go to the theatre with you. We should see when they next have a production.”

Edmund found himself very keen on the idea. “You would not mind being seen with the Beast of Barendale?” he asked, finally broaching the other unsavoury subject between them.

Might as well get it all out in the open.

Evangeline sat back in her chair, leveling him with a long stare, and Edmund found himself quite unmanned by it.

“You mean, would I wish to be seen in public with my husband? Yes, I would. And there are no beasts behind these walls. Just men who speak in short sentences.”

The bark of laughter that her comment prompted in him surprised them both. In fact, Edmund could not recall when he had smiled so much. He certainly couldn't remember the last time he had laughed.

Evangeline seemed disinclined to leave now that they had settled down together. As the afternoon sun moved across the room and the shadows grew longer all about them, their conversation ebbed and flowed quite naturally.

He found that she had a sharp wit that he had not seen any sign of around her family. She was a fiercely intelligent woman, and the discussion of their favourite books showed that she was almost as well-read as he was. He would wager she had read nearly the entire literary section of his library already, and he liked the idea of stocking the shelves with new volumes just for her.

As the bell rang for dinner, Edmund looked at the time in shocked astonishment. They had been speaking for hours without pausing for breath. He had found her company so enjoyable, in fact, that all the worries and doubts of the past few days had been firmly held at bay by her lively conversation.

If I can hope for nothing more, I hope we can be friends in this marriage, if not lovers.

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As they rose from their chairs, Evangeline felt lighter in herself than she had in days. This was not the brooding, angry man she had grown used to over the past week. She had finally seen the true face beneath the scars, a man who enjoyed debates, who loved Shakespeare and studied history and philosophy whenever he had the chance.

She had also seen him smile. Edmund had a wonderful smile, it lit up his whole countenance, and despite the scars marring one side of his face, it gave him a schoolboy charm. She wanted to make him smile every day now that she had seen it, and the joy of hearing him laugh had been a truly all-consuming thing.

They moved toward the library door, both walking slowly as though they were reluctant to break the spell that had been cast upon them. Their time in the library had been the happiest that Evangeline had spent in the manor. There was a warmth between them now, and Edmund's scowling visage had relaxed to a gentle, open expression that she adored.

As she opened the door, she jumped back when she found someone on the other side. Colin was standing before her, with his hand raised as though to knock, but it seemed a strange gesture, as though he had just adopted it when the door had opened.

"My apologies, Countess; I did not mean to startle you." He gave her the same wide grin that did not reach his eyes, and Evangeline struggled to return it, glancing at Edmund. She was never sure how to act around his cousin.

Colin proceeded to step into the room, manoeuvring himself between Evangeline and Edmund and placing a hand on Edmund's shoulder. Colin bowed his head, speaking in low, hushed tones that excluded Evangeline from the conversation entirely.

"I had intended to speak to you of the most recent report from Timmons..." he said, but the rest of the words were lost as he lowered his voice yet further.

Colin's free hand began gesticulating wildly. Evangeline was forced to take a step away from them to prevent his hand from colliding with her. The easiness of Edmund's manner had now disappeared, his back stiffening, the familiar tension returning to his jaw. It was as though Colin's presence had shattered the fragile connection they had forged over their time together, and Evangeline was left feeling terribly alone.

As Colin continued to speak to Edmund, she excused herself quietly and made to leave the room.

"Ah, Countess!" Colin said suddenly, turning as though only just noticing she was still present. "I had not meant to make you depart."

Evangeline gave him a tight smile, uncertain what else he had intended, but remained where she was. Edmund's gray eyes were watching her warily.

"How are the preparations for the ball going?" Colin inquired, and his interest seemed genuine.

"Very well, I believe we have finalized the guest list, and the Dowager Countess and I felt that a black-and-white theme might be diverting. It suits the end of the winter months and is always popular with the ladies in society."

"Capital!" Colin said with the same obsequious smile, but his attention was now on Edmund. As Evangeline spoke of the ball, Edmund's shoulders tensed considerably, and Colin appeared to observe it with some satisfaction.

When no other questions were asked, Evangeline left the library, feeling torn. She was unsure whether she was reading into Colin's behaviour or whether the strange disquiet she felt in his presence was to be trusted.

As she walked down the dark corridor away from the library, she heard the animated lilting style of Colin's voice echoing behind her and the shorter, staccato responses from Edmund.

Yet, when he was with me, we spoke for hours as though we had known one another for years.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:35 am*

The day of the ball was upon them, and the manor was alive with activity. The ballroom was in the main portion of the house where the fire had not taken hold, and all routes to the east wing had been closed to prevent any guests from wandering about or searching for scandal amidst the damage.

Edmund was still wary of gossip. He would never have chosen to hold a ball until the repairs had been completed, but having seen Evangeline's excitement in the preceding days and the tentative strand of connection forming between them, he had tried to be supportive.

He was pacing in his study, the burden of so many years away from society weighing heavily on his shoulders. There was a single mirror in this room that had remained since his father's days. It was speckled by time and tarnished, but he could still see his reflection in it every time he turned about.

He must have adjusted his cravat ten times already, and every time he looked at it, it seemed crooked.

He could not think that the ball would be a success. His mother and Evangeline were excited to welcome the guests, but, for Edmund, he dreaded every moment of it.

Not only would he have to endure the constant staring, but he knew the gossip would only multiply as they scrutinized every aspect of his new life.

The east wing was hidden from view from the main drive up to the house, so at least he was spared the pitying glances of those who might comment on the damage.

Edmund ran a hand through his hair, wishing that he had thought of an excuse. Perhaps he could feign an illness and hide away in the library until it was all over.

He wanted to repeat that wonderful afternoon when he had sat with Evangeline for hours, just speaking about their likes and dislikes. He had been mesmerized by her and ever since then, every time they had been around one another, the conversation had come a little easier.

Even Colin, who had dominated discussions at dinner had occasionally fallen silent as they had spoken on a subject they were both interested in.

That happened often, much to Edmund's delight. They appeared to share taste in a great many things. He had ordered several more volumes of poetry so that she might always have something to enjoy in the sprawling madness of his estate.

Even as the hours ticked by and the dreaded event neared, a small part of him was excited to see Evangeline. He had not expected to feel that way, but now there was a bubble of hope in his breast whenever he thought of her. He wanted to make her happy.

He turned again to the mirror and stopped before it, allowing himself a long and rare look at the man beneath the scars.

What does Evangeline see? He wondered. And how do I capture that man who she believes is worthy and bring him to the surface?

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Evangeline stood at the top of the stairs and tried not to faint.

She had never been so nervous. Her first ball at twenty years of age, and she had



organized everything, right down to the recipe for the punch.

Edmund's mother had been incredibly supportive but had allowed her free reign to do as she saw fit. It was a courtesy she greatly appreciated, particularly when she was aware that everything she did would be compared to the previous countess.

Evangeline didn't know if Adelaide had held many balls in her short life. If she had, Evangeline hoped that this one would complement or equal them—she had no wish to outshine a woman who had tragically died in her prime.

As she descended the stairs, her dress tinkled merrily. There were so many beads about the base that she sparkled whenever she walked. The dress was pure white muslin and the finest gown she had ever owned, with the outlines of roses sewn across the fabric and crystals in the sleeves.

As she reached the last few steps, a door opened down the corridor, and Edmund emerged, walking swiftly toward the ballroom. He saw her at the last minute and stopped in his tracks, his mouth open in amazement.

Evangeline had never seen him look better. With his strict black evening coat and cravat arranged just so, he was a picture of the perfect gentleman. She did not even see his scars, just the handsome man beneath them.

She smiled at him, and he returned it with that rare, secret smile she was coming to see was reserved for her alone.

“You look beautiful,” Edmund said suddenly, and Evangeline felt her cheeks blush furiously at the compliment.

“Thank you,” she said, approaching him as he offered her his arm. “You present yourself quite elegantly, I must say.”

He only nodded at that and walked them toward the ballroom as the guests began to arrive. She wished she could convince him how handsome he was, but she knew it was a wasted effort. To him, he would always be the Beast of Barendale; such cruel names tended to stick in one's mind forever.

I shall just have to show him how wrong he is, she thought with determination.

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As the guests began to arrive, Edmund's discomfort mounted. He felt like a curiosity at a circus being stared at through the bars of a cage he had built himself.

Many men shook his hand, their eyes lingering on his face. The younger women in the crowd were far less subtle about their obvious scrutiny.

Have you heard he has not left the house in almost three years? ... Are you aware his wife died in a fire in this very house? ... He tried to save her but was horribly burned...

Edmund felt faintly sick. Snippets of real and imaginary conversations circled around his mind as he attempted not to run from the room. He managed to stand in the entryway welcoming everyone as was his duty, but he could not smile and fawn as other hosts often did.

His mother hovered close by, keeping a careful watch on him, but he was grateful that she was allowing Evangeline to shine.

She needs no help with that.

Evangeline looked breathtaking. When he saw her descending the stairs, he was utterly lost for words by her radiant beauty. She was the picture of the perfect hostess,

the countess that everyone deserved, and she played the part to perfection. Standing with her on his arm, he felt even more damaged and broken.

How could anyone not compare us? How could anyone not pity her?

A gentle hand rested on his forearm during a break in the guests and he looked down at Evangeline as she smiled up at him.

“Are you alright?” she asked gently. There was no pity in her eyes. “I can imagine this is a great deal to process when you have been away from society for so long. You are being an excellent host.”

His chest swelled at the compliment, but there was a flicker of uncertainty in Evangeline’s eyes that he could not place.

“Thank you, you are right. I am unaccustomed to so many people in these halls.”

“Did you ever hold balls in the past?” she asked. Her questions about his time with Adelaide were always respectful, as though she were gently curious but not prying. He appreciated it more than he could say.

“A few. Not too many. Adelaide was always more willing to organize them than I was. It’s a lot of fuss,” he said honestly.

“I suppose it is,” she said, “but I am very pleased to be here with you.”

She shook hands with an elderly couple named Montague, who were quite the most boring of Edmund’s distant acquaintances.

“Bad weather for a ball,” muttered Lord Montague as he ambled into the room. “Looks like rain.”

Edmund could only glance at Evangeline, who was smiling after him, utterly unfazed.

“The only way one can be seen in society is to stand within it,” she continued, watching the mingling guests. “That is the plague of our world. In my first season, I did not feel like myself. We have a persona here and a different one in the privacy of our homes. You are not alone in that by any means.”

Edmund contemplated her words carefully, considering their basis and finding that he agreed with her. Perhaps that was the secret—hiding a piece of yourself from others so that you knew who you really were away from prying eyes. He rather liked the idea.

Evangeline’s whole body stiffened, and she squeezed his arm all the tighter as her sister Matilda all but ran through the door and into Evangeline’s arms. Her parents followed rather more sedately. Her mother wore a beautiful white gown with a train at the back and Lord Longford looked every bit the baron he aspired to be.

Matilda was glowing with excitement as she stood back and gushed over her sister’s gown. There were three or four words spoken together that made up a sentence about lace that Edmund did not understand at all.

Matilda’s gaze finally fell on him, and the curtsy she performed looked forced at best. Edmund knew he had been impossibly rude the last time he had seen the poor girl and could well imagine what she thought of him. He was desperate for her to like him and managed to paste on a smile as she eyed him suspiciously.

“Matilda,” her sister admonished softly.

“Good evening, Miss Matilda,” Edmund said quickly. You look very well. I am glad you could come to our little gathering,” he said as warmly as he could. Matilda looked at her sister and then back at him.

“Is it true that you have twelve horses?” Matilda asked, and her mother leaned forward and whispered something harshly in her ear. Edmund was smiling again. Matilda reminded him of Evangeline.

“It is true. Why did you wish to ride one?”

Matilda’s eyes lit up. “Could I?”

“On one condition,” Edmund replied, and Matilda nodded. “My horses are very sensitive creatures. If you were to ride one on a single day, they would be quite heartbroken were you to leave immediately. You would need to visit for at least a week to make it fair to them.”

Matilda’s eyes lit up, and Edmund was dismayed to see tears pool at the back of them as she glanced at her sister again.

“Could I really come and stay with you?” she asked Evangeline, looking in awe at her surroundings.

Edmund glanced at Lord Longford. He was unsurprised to see the sour expression on the man’s face. Clearly, the baron did not approve of Matilda coming to stay with them.

He cannot marry her off if she is out of his sight, after all. Edmund thought bitterly.

“You are welcome any time, Miss Matilda,” he added firmly.

As her family moved away, Evangeline looked up at him with a beaming smile.

“If you allow her to partake of your cook’s excellent breakfast and ride your horses, she might never leave.”

“Would that please you?” he asked.

“More than I can say, but Matilda must make her own way in the world. I only hope she does not live too far away in the future.”

As their final guests arrived, Edmund led his wife into the ballroom, which had been beautifully decorated in gold and white. The ladies in their white gowns complimented everything perfectly and almost seemed to mirror the chequered floor beneath their feet.

Evangeline was soon called away by his mother to answer a question of one of the other ladies and he stood at the edge of the room watching her happily. She was a natural hostess and mingled with everyone seamlessly.

Relief threatened to overwhelm him as he realized how much he had worried about how she would be received. He should not have wasted his time—she was the belle of the ball, and he had never felt prouder to have her on his arm.

As he stood watching her, Colin approached him, looking very smart in his formal evening wear. He held a glass of champagne in each hand and saluted him, handing him one as the two men settled into the side of the ballroom, watching the crowds mingling.

“It is a triumph!” Colin said cordially as he sipped his drink. “How do you feel about all of this, given the situation with your accounts?”

Edmund glanced at him irritably. Is now the time to speak of the finances? I am trying to enjoy myself.

“It is a necessity,” he said coldly, “to ensure Evangeline feels welcome.”

“Oh, of course, I merely mean that she appears to have spared no expense. She is not privy to your financial woes, I assume?”

Edmund disliked both the tone and topic of the conversation and his chest tightened at the reminder of the endless ledgers on his desk.

“Evangeline has made all of the decisions, as you say, and she has given me a list of everything that has been paid for. Indeed, I am rather impressed she has not spent more, given the opulence of what is on display. She is a gifted hostess.”

Colin said nothing, sipping his champagne for a little longer as the next set was about to begin.

“Did you have a chance to review the documents I left for you?” he asked suddenly.

Edmund glanced at him. “I did not have a chance, no.”

“They are most illuminating. I believe they may shed some light on why the accounts have been so troublesome these last few months.”

Edmund turned to him, a spark of excitement igniting between them. “Are you sure?”

“I am. I have found something that I think you will be most interested in.” Colin finished his champagne, handing it to a passing servant. “We could review it now if you have time. I know you may be needed eventually, but Evangeline clearly has everything in hand.”

Edmund looked at the ballroom and at Evangeline’s effervescent figure on the other side speaking to a group of women all a flutter with how exquisite the room looked. She did not need him, and, in truth, he would rather be in the seclusion of his study than standing here amongst all these gawping guests. Even now, he could feel the

curious glances from all sides.

Colin's hand was on his arm before he could decide what he wanted to do, and he allowed himself to be led away.

Evangeline will not miss me for a few minutes.

“Edmund!”

He turned as his mother moved toward them through the crowd, a white feather in her hair flowing behind her like a beacon.

His mother glanced at Colin irritably and at the hand that was still on Edmund's forearm.

“You are not leaving, surely; the Waltz is about to begin! Do you not wish to dance with your wife?”

Edmund hesitated. Colin's jaw clenched with apparent irritation, but he gave the dowager countess a tight smile, and Edmund was lost in indecision.

A dance in the centre of the room with all eyes on me?

He could not think of anything worse. But as he looked at Evangeline, she was the most radiant woman he had ever seen, and without conscious thought, he began to move toward her.

“Perhaps you are right, Mama,” he said quickly and approached Evangeline across the open floor where the other couples were gathering. The opportunity to hold her in his arms was not one he could pass up.



The group of women Evangeline was speaking to fell suddenly silent as he approached. Some of them were wide-eyed and staring openly at his scar, but he kept his gaze fixed on those ocean-blue orbs.

“If you are not indisposed, would you do me the honour of dancing with me?” he asked. He offered his left hand, the scars obvious and stark against her pure white skin, but Evangeline’s eyes were alight with joy, and he would not have rescinded the offer for anything.

She gave a nod, and they moved into the centre of the dance floor. Edmund was acutely aware of the eyes following them, but he focused on his wife as she gazed up at him.

As the music began, Edmund found himself lost in the dance. Her beautiful form complimented his to perfection as they moved in total synchrony about the floor. He felt a sharp thrill to hold her against him, his hand upon her waist.

As the dance continued, the weight of societal expectations and all the darkness in his past faded away until no one else was in the room—there was no longer a Beast of Barendale Manor—there was only Edmund and Evangeline.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:35 am*

Evangeline attempted to keep her expression neutral, but it was a hard thing to achieve.

The dance had lit something up within her, and watching Edmund now, he seemed like an utterly different man. As they moved about the floor in the circling, sweeping elegance of the waltz, it was as though they were one body, not separated by anything at all.

She felt connected to him in a way she had never experienced before, a light sparking between them like a candle in the dark.

But as soon as the music ended, she became aware of the many eyes upon them and the whispering filling the air. She could not help but glance at the crowd, and as she did so, Edmund became aware of them, too.

He stiffened immediately, a telltale hand coming up to touch his collar. His face twisted as he tried to hide his scars from the room. The easy gentleness of his touch disappeared as he stepped swiftly back, bowing to her uncomfortably and walking away to hide in the shadows.

She was breathless and confused, but as hostess she could not risk showing her feelings to the crowd. She pasted on a smile and left the floor.

Ensuring her head was held high she had kept her composure admirably until she passed a group of women to her right and overheard a snippet of their conversation.

“Do you think they are not friendly with one another? One can hardly be surprised.

She is so young, and the earl so marked by life.”

She almost turned to confront them but knew she would never risk the scandal. If she were to turn on her guests, it would be the last ball she ever hosted at the manor.

Relief rushed through her as Edmund’s mother approached her in the crowd. They reached for one another, and Lady Viola led her to the refreshment table. Evangeline distracted herself by ordering a glass of punch and trying to calm her hammering heartbeat.

“You are a beautiful couple about the floor, I must admit,” the dowager countess stated with a gentle smile.

“Thank you, my lady, he is an excellent dancer,” Evangeline managed.

“Edmund always was. I have missed watching him.”

Evangeline’s gut clenched as she thought of what that implied. He used to dance with Adelaide. She kept the smile on her face, sipping her punch and watching Edmund across the room. He was flushed and standing beside Colin again, the other man speaking urgently to him, their heads bowed together.

Evangeline glanced across the room at her father and mother. Lord and Lady Longford stood beside one another, the very picture of propriety, but she could see the hard line around her mother’s mouth. She looked about for Matilda and was pleased to see she was dancing. Her partner was a heavy-set man who lacked the grace Edmund possessed upon the floor, but he was smiling cheerfully down at her sister.

Matilda looked happy, which was more than could be said for Evangeline’s father. He watched their movements like a hawk, his fist gripping his glass so tightly he

might snap the stem.

She longed for her sister to break out of the mould that her father had forced them both into. Evangeline hoped, with her own successful marriage, that her sister would be allowed to choose someone she cared for when her turn came, rather than have a match thrust upon her.

Is my marriage successful? She wondered. It does not seem to be tonight. I am on the other side of the room to my husband, and he has barely spoken to anyone.

With a heavy sigh, she smiled at the Dowager Countess and returned to her guests. No one would leave this ball without acknowledging her impeccable taste and decorum—that, at least, she could guarantee.

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Edmund found himself cornered by the Montagues later in the evening. They were a pedantic couple, always finding fault in everything about them, including each other.

“We were most surprised by your choice of bride, my Lord,” Lady Montague said. In her aged years, any sense of propriety was leaving her, and she tended to speak her mind rather boldly.

“Indeed,” Edmund replied, hardly listening to her.

“She is not of the rank that I would have expected for an earl.”

“Her father is a baron,” Edmund said through clenched teeth, trying to remain calm.

“And Evangeline is one of the most accomplished women in society.”

“Elizabeth Wirral plays the pianoforte far better than her. I heard her at a concert last

evening, and it was remarkable.”

“Elizabeth Wirral’s father is a baronet ,” Edmund stated firmly, seeing Lady Montague’s eyes widen in affronted outrage. He knew it was unwise to speak so, but he would not hear a word against Evangeline—not tonight.

She was ethereal as he watched her. Moving around the room just as she had at their wedding, as though she were a fairy distributing magic wherever she went. Each group she passed would be laughing when she left them. She had a natural way with people and a wide, happy smile that he was becoming addicted to.

“How does the new countess like the manor?” Lord Montague asked rather pompously. “I hear you are renovating now that you have her dowry.”

This was beyond reproach at this point, and Edmund gave him a withering glare. They both scuttled away back into the gossiping crowd. He knew he would have done himself no favours by treating them impolitely, but he had scant regard for demeaning himself in the presence of rude and uncouth individuals among his acquaintances.

He watched the Montague’s whispering together a few feet away and straightened his coat, looking across the floor to some of his acquaintances who he had not spoken to in a long while.

He avoided Colin, who was intent on dragging him from the room to look at his ledgers, and decided that, for one night at least, he would be the dutiful host. His wife deserved it after all the work she had done, and it was the least he could do.

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As the night drew to a close, tiredness dragged at Evangeline’s eyes, and she felt

utterly exhausted. Matilda pushed through the crowd toward her, and she knew that her parents would be leaving soon.

They embraced fiercely and Matilda held onto her so tightly Evangeline could not help but laugh.

“Did Lord Barstow mean it?” Matilda asked.

“Of course, you are welcome to come and stay with us any time you wish.”

Matilda grinned, but then she looked behind her, and when she turned back to Evangeline, her expression was grave.

“Are you happy here?” she asked earnestly, gripping Evangeline’s hands in hers. “You know I would ride all night and take you back to London if he was mistreating you.”

Evangeline’s eyes grew wide as she stared at her sister. “Mistreating me?”

“There are some dreadful rumours,” Matilda whispered, “people are saying awful things about what happened to his first wife and—”

“Matilda, listen to me; all of that is a lie. He saved her from the fire, but she died from her injuries. Edmund is a good man; he would never harm me. Never.”

Matilda nodded as their parents came up behind her in the crowd. Evangeline hugged her mother and gave her father a perfunctory kiss on the cheek, watching them leave the ballroom with a strange sense of relief. Their presence reminded her of an old life, and if she tried to cling to it forever, she would drive herself mad.

Looking at the edges of the room as the guests mingled and the final dance of the

evening began, she glanced at the terrace, desperate for some fresh air from the heat of the ballroom. Seeing that she was not needed elsewhere, she made her way slowly through the room, quietly congratulating herself on an excellent evening.

The ball had been a triumph, though she said it herself, and she was proud of all that she had achieved.

She opened the terrace door and slipped outside into the darkness of the night, feeling the chill about her shoulders and breathing in the scent of roses in the air. The moon was full in the sky, bathing everything in a silvery light.

Looking to her right, she was surprised to see a figure before her, silhouetted against the backdrop of the estate. She was even more surprised when it turned to reveal Edmund.

She had lost track of him in the crowds and had rather thought he had gone away to hide in his study. But he was still here, trying to support her, even when it was clear he hated having to socialize with so many people.

As the breeze picked up, stirring her hair about her face, she looked up at him, and their gazes met. His gray eyes were twinkling like stars in the inky darkness about them. The heavy curtains that partially obscured the light from the ballroom did little to illuminate them both.

The lilting music of the last dance of the evening permeated the thin windows behind them, and Evangeline had the absurd thought that they might dance together here, alone beneath the moonlight.

Edmund moved toward her, and for a moment, she thought that her fantasy was coming true, but instead, he removed his coat and placed it about her shoulders. It was only then that she realized she was shivering violently from the cold.

He pulled the lapels around her shoulders, and suddenly, there were mere inches between them. Those sparkling eyes looked down at her with a strange expression on his face.

He was such a puzzle to her. There was one man who she had met at their wedding, gruff and quiet and never wishing to speak more than a few words together. And then there was the man in the library, who caught her breath when she thought of his smiles, who looked at her as he was doing now, with such a sense of longing she felt the breath catch in her throat.

His hands remained beneath her chin, holding the lapels of his coat together and she could feel the transferred warmth from his body as it settled over her shoulders.

For a suspended moment, all she could hear was the music from the ballroom, as though it were a song played just for them. The soft moonlight illuminated the left side of Edmund's face, and she thought for a few seconds that he looked like the man he had once been, impossibly handsome and undamaged.

They stared at each other, and she was unsure which of them moved first, but suddenly, they had leaned into one another, and Edmund's hands had tightened about her. She was pulled toward him, inexorably forward, and then, like a dream, their lips touched and came together in a wonderful, secret kiss that she could hardly believe was happening.

He pulled back a little as though to gauge her reaction. When she did not look away, he leaned in and kissed her again, his lips slightly parted, his hands coming to rest on her shoulders, pressing against her as she experienced the clean taste of him for the first time.

But almost as soon as it began, Edmund pulled away, a haunted look coming over his eyes as his gaze shifted behind her. Her heart sank as she recognized where he was



looking—at the charred walls of the east wing that loomed behind them in the shadows.

Edmund looked back at her; his eyes filled with grief.

“My apologies, Evangeline, I should bid you goodnight.”

He turned and walked swiftly back into the ballroom, closing the door gently behind him. Evangeline stood in the darkness, staring after him in confusion, his jacket still about her shoulders, the warmth from his body fading as the cold seeped into her skin.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:35 am*

Three days later, Evangeline stood in the empty ballroom, looking out on the terrace. Her fingers ran idly along the intricate patterns in the curtains, trying to make sense of all that had happened.

The house had been eerily quiet since the ball. One happy consequence had been that the servants and the housekeeper were much warmer to Evangeline now. She had taken the time to thank them all personally for the work they had put into the event, and the housekeeper had already spoken to her about planning the next one.

But there was one member of the household who was conspicuously absent.

Every time her mind wandered to the ball, it would alight on one event and one event only, and that was the kiss they had shared. It had been wonderful until Edmund had pulled away, his eyes clouding, his mouth morphing into a grim line.

Evangeline did not know what to think. To her, it had been the most wonderful thing imaginable, but perhaps simply kissing another woman reminded him too much of Adelaide.

Maybe he will never want me that way.

He had not attempted to approach her in the evenings or been anywhere near her rooms at night. She felt that perhaps he simply did not desire her, and she was destined to wander the halls of the huge house with nothing but ghosts for company.

There was a clinking sound behind her as Sarah entered with the tea. The maid was all smiles, as always.

“Will you take tea here, my Lady?” Sarah asked, and Evangeline could only laugh. The ballroom was enormous and empty, and there was nowhere for her to sit.

“No, I am sorry. Thank you for bringing it to me, I will go to the drawing room. It is too cold in here.”

She followed Sarah out of the room and back to the drawing room, where there was a roaring fire. Evangeline settled down on the chaise as Sarah poured the tea. Her maid continually glanced up at her as though unsure whether to speak, and Evangeline frowned at her.

“What is it, Sarah?”

“Oh nothing, My Lady.”

“Sarah, we have spoken of this. I want you to speak your mind.”

Sarah handed her the cup and saucer and placed some biscuits on a plate before standing and removing the tray, placing it under her arm. Her eyes scanned the room fitfully before she spoke.

“I don’t wish to upset you, my Lady.”

“You will not upset me unless you do not tell me what troubles you.”

“The servants have been talking,” Sarah said. Evangeline took a sip of her tea, trying to calm the nerves that erupted in her stomach.

“Oh yes? And what is it that they are saying this time?”

“That his Lordship has been absent a great deal. More than he usually is since the

ball. They wonder if he was insulted by one of the guests or has taken ill.” Sarah moved the tray to her other arm and looked at Evangeline apologetically. “I don’t speak of such things, my Lady, but I hear them often.”

“I am grateful to you for that, Sarah. Thank you for telling me. His lordship is merely busy with his papers. He will be back amongst us all very soon.”

Sarah nodded her head and smiled her reassuring smile again before she left the room. As soon as she was gone, Evangeline placed her teacup on the table and stared into the fire, feeling lost. Edmund had not joined her for any meals since the ball. If they saw each other at all, it was usually at the end of a corridor, and he would barely acknowledge her presence before walking in the other direction.

He does not wish to be around me, even after I thought that something was growing between us.

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Edmund sat in his study, his desk littered with the accounts and reports from Timmons. He had been staring at the numbers on the page for so long that they had ceased to make any sense at all.

He had hardly been able to concentrate for three days together since the ball. Memories of the kiss floated through his mind at inconvenient times. Sometimes, he would be reading through a list of equipment that Jonathan had on order, and the thought of Evangeline’s lips would come into his head, and then he could not concentrate on anything.

The way she had melted against him had thrilled him at the time, but now, in the cold light of day, he thought that it was more likely a gesture out of pity. Perhaps she felt obliged to return the kiss because they were married now. Surely, she was revolted by

his scars; anyone would be.

Or it could be much worse. Perhaps she did not feel that she could refuse me.

That was not a pleasant thought. He was stirred from his melancholy by a knock at the door and as he bid them enter Jonathan came into the room looking grave.

“Are you ready, my Lord?” he asked as Edmund scowled at the interruption.

“Ready? What for?” he asked in surprise.

“Timmons will be here within the hour; we are to discuss the accounts with him. Have you discovered so much as a trace of them?”

“Three days, and I am none the wiser. Every time I review them, they have changed and are worse than they were before. Nothing is joined up, and everything is disordered. I do not know how any man manages his accounts this way.”

Jonathan’s expression was grim. “There has been talk amongst the servants, my Lord, that you have barely been seen. Have you spent all your time in this room? You will go mad if you do not rest yourself.”

“I am already mad. I have been mad for three years with this insanity of a life I lead,” Edmund spat. “I shall do as I please and spend my time where I feel it is best used!”

He picked up his papers, staring at them unseeingly until he heard the click of the door as Jonathan took his leave. He sighed, throwing them down again and walking to the fire, poking viciously at the logs and wishing he could settle his mind on one task at a time.

But Evangeline consumed every thought in his head. He could not sleep or eat. He

could not bear to see her, and yet each time he caught a glimpse, he felt like his soul was alight again. She had awoken something in him that would not return to slumber.

But it was absurd to think anyone so clever, beautiful, and accomplished could want a monster like him. He had been living a half-life for too long to come back to the world of the living.

She probably regrets the kiss. She likely regrets the marriage.

He leaned against the mantelpiece in despair, wishing for a solution that would never come.

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Evangeline sat in the library, trying to read through her tears. She had been concentrating on the same page of a book for many minutes together and had not absorbed a single word.

She had been replaying every interaction with Edmund since the ball. Trying to work out whether he regretted what had happened between them. But every time she saw him, his actions only confirmed her suspicions rather than allaying them. The worst thought was that she had somehow offended him.

Perhaps he found me terribly forward and was disgusted by the kiss.

She threw down the book in exasperation and stared at the inky blackness outside, wondering whether she should go into the grounds to clear her head. Just as she thought that, however, the door to the library opened, and she sat up in excitement, wondering if Edmund had come to see her. But it was his mother.

The dowager countess entered the room, instantly noticing that Evangeline was upset,

and came to sit opposite her. It was painfully reminiscent of the time she had spent in the library with Edmund, and Evangeline felt a jolt of despair that they would never recapture that easy camaraderie between them.

“What is it, my dear?” the dowager asked, resting a hand on Evangeline’s knee.

Evangeline sighed, unsure whether to confess the truth to someone so close to Edmund. But she had little choice; the whole house must know they were at odds by now, and his mother was not a stupid woman.

“I am concerned that Edmund has hardly been seen since the ball. I knew that it was not something he would have wanted to host if he had the choice, but I went ahead with it anyway. Perhaps that was a mistake.”

“You have not seen him?”

“Not for any significant time, no. Not for three days.”

Lady Viola frowned, leaning back in her chair and watching Evangeline with a knowing smile.

“You know my late husband was just the same.”

Evangeline looked up at her, intrigued. “How so?”

“Never knew how to speak to me. I swear the man spoke three words throughout our first year of marriage. “Yes, Viola,” and “No”.”

Evangeline could not help chuckling at that, and the Dowager Countess smiled at her fondly.

“Edmund has never been an affectionate man. Brisk, some called him. It takes a while for him to relax around his acquaintances, but he has been remarkably forward with you, even in so short a time. I would not lose hope, my dear. Once someone has experienced a tragedy like Edmund has, the scars run deeper than those on the surface. I believe he cares for you,” Lady Viola continued, “and it will come out in time. He knows how lucky he is; he just needs to give himself permission to deserve you.”

Evangeline looked up at her. “Why ever would he not deserve me?”

“Ah,” the Dowager Countess said sadly, her eyes watching the dancing flames beside them. “Only Edmund can answer that question, my dear.”

It was not long before Lady Viola left her to her thoughts, and Evangeline attempted to read her book again to no avail. After almost an hour of wayward thinking and puzzled thoughts that spun around her head like a whirlwind, she decided the only way she would bring Edmund out of his shell was to try to speak to him.

Therefore, although it was late in the evening, she made her way to his study. She was determined to clear the air. If what his mother said was true, she could not fathom why anyone would believe themselves unworthy of love. If it was merely the scars on his face that had convinced him of it, she would soon prove him wrong. She could not care less about his physical appearance; it was his heart that mattered to her.

She reached the study door and raised a hand to knock before pausing as she heard rumbling voices coming from within.

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Colin was perched on the edge of Edmund’s desk, holding the brandy glass loosely in



his fingers. Edmund was aware that the man was becoming overly familiar with him, but he was also aware that he had drunk far too much himself.

Is this the third glass of brandy or the fourth? He mused, taking a healthy swallow and telling himself it would be the last of the evening.

“Will you not explain to me what has led you to be so secluded? You are not yourself.” Colin slurred a little as he spoke, and Edmund could feel his tongue loosening with the brandy.

Colin was his cousin and his friend. Who could he trust if not him?

“I kissed her,” he blurted out. “Evangeline, at the ball.”

Colin’s eyes widened, and a flicker of reproach passed across his face before he masked it as he stood and went to stand beside the fireplace. He raised his hand and rested it against the mantel.

“I see. And why has that led you to hide yourself in your room? She is your wife. Did the lady reject you?”

“No. No. I believe she... I do not know. I am uncertain of her feelings. I am uncertain of my feelings.”

Colin’s eyes softened, and he took a sip of his own brandy, his body rather less unsteady than it had been.

“My dear fellow, you are not the first man who has struggled to feel affection for his wife in an arranged marriage. And a second wife at that. Do not blame yourself for not wanting the girl. She is a means to an end. Her father knew that when he offered her. The dowry will save the estate, and she will live a comfortable life. Perhaps your

feelings for her at the ball were misguided memories of your love for Adelaide. You have been alone a long time, Edmund. It is not your fault that you crave companionship of some kind.”

Colin walked back to the desk, leaning his hip against it.

“It is rare that two people find a connection as pure and great as you had with Adelaide. You cannot expect to find it again so soon.”

Edmund was unsure how to feel at those words. He had an overwhelming urge to protest and tell Colin that he was wrong—that he believed that was just what he had found with Evangeline. But he said nothing, staring at the cut glass and the amber liquid in his palm and wishing life were simpler again.

“Evangeline is only twenty years old,” Colin continued. “She knows nothing of the world. She likely confuses duty with genuine feelings of affection. And that is no one’s fault. It is an unfortunate consequence of the circumstances you find yourself in.” Colin leaned over the desk, brandy heavy on his breath. “You must not bully yourself into believing this is all your doing, Edmund, but it would be cruel to encourage her. Better to leave the girl be and allow her to recognise your indifference in her own way.”

Edmund stared ahead of him, the doubts that had crowded his mind for so long finally overtaking everything else. For a shining moment, Edmund had believed that perhaps, in the deepest part of his heart, she might truly care for him. But, of course, Colin was right.

What woman would ever want him in that way? He had been lucky to find Adelaide early in their lives when they had been happy together, young and naive as they were. But now, locked away in his dark tower, with his disfigured face, of course his young wife had confused duty with affection.

He pictured Evangeline's radiant smile, but now, in his mind's eye, it seemed tainted and twisted, as though it had never been real.

He poured himself another brandy. The right side of his face hot, as though it were burning all over again.

Evangeline would never want him, and he would not be so foolish as to approach her again.

He sank down in his chair as Colin finished his brandy and bid him goodnight, leaving him in a turmoil of regret and self-doubt.

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Her hand was still raised against the door as though to knock, but Evangeline had been standing silently in frozen horror for several minutes together.

As she heard Colin bid Edmund goodnight, she hurried away, fighting back tears. She had not been able to hear everything that they had discussed but she had understood the underlying themes well enough.

She had embarrassed herself with her forward affections toward Edmund. Affection he did not want or seek. He still loved Adelaide and had no interest in another wife.

A business transaction that's what Colin had called the marriage. She felt bile rise in her throat.

Stumbling through the door to her room, she was confronted by Sarah, who was alarmed and upset by her tearful appearance and helped her to sit by the fire.

Her maid asked her repeatedly what was wrong, but Evangeline merely said that she

was tired and needed to get to bed as soon as possible.

Sarah obviously did not believe her, but she helped her undress and get into her nightgown, nonetheless.

“Are you sure there is nothing I can do for you, my Lady?” she asked, her round face all polite concern.

“No. I simply need to sleep. Thank you, Sarah. You may go.”

With one final look behind her, Sarah left her alone, and Evangeline flopped back into the bed, heaving a great sigh and finally letting the tears fall in earnest.

All this time, she had believed that Edmund was a good man beneath it all. That he was merely misunderstood. But now, she was not so sure. The man in the study had been hiding away from a life that had been forced upon him. She closed her eyes in horror as she thought of what that kiss must have meant to him. He had arranged the convenience of a large dowry, and now his wife was expecting him to care for her.

She rolled onto her side, clutching her pillow beneath her, fighting against the painful ache in her chest.

The kiss had been a mistake. She knew that now. She had been utterly foolish and naive, just as Colin had said.

It was a cruel truth to acknowledge that her husband had no true feelings for her, even as she had felt her own blossoming in her heart.

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:35 am*

Evangeline found the Dowager Countess in the conservatory the following morning. The room was bathed in light and looked out onto a part of the gardens that seemed in a better state than the rest of the overgrown grounds.

Many of the trees were evergreen, needing little maintenance, and the gardener had cleared the paths of weeds. Some of the flowers were in bloom, and it made Evangeline's mood darken as she took in the riot of colour. Nothing in the world seemed beautiful to her today.

The Dowager Countess sat on a small armchair in the corner of the room, doing her embroidery. As Evangeline entered, she looked up.

“Whatever it is, my dear, you look terribly pale.”

Evangeline had little choice but to confide in her. She had no one else to talk to of such things and was painfully aware that the Dowager Countess knew Edmund far better than she ever would.

“I overheard Edmund and his cousin speaking last evening,” she said as she sat down. Lady Viola placed her sewing beside her and looked at her gravely.

“Why do I not feel that it was a good conversation?”

“Colin was adamant that Edmund only had feelings for me as some kind of misplaced affection for Adelaide. Edmund is uncertain of what he truly feels for me,” she sighed. “I believed we had been growing closer, but every time we take a step forward, it is followed by three steps back. I would never wish to replace Adelaide in

his affections; we are two separate women, but it all feels rather hopeless.”

The dowager sat forward on her seat and took Evangeline’s hands.

“What I said before remains true. You must not lose hope. I do not know what business Colin has of advising Edmund on his affairs,” she said with a sour expression. Evangeline felt that perhaps the Dowager Countess did not like Colin either. “However, if I may speak a little of Adelaide, it may help.”

Evangeline frowned. “I do not wish to pry into a time I was not present for. She died prematurely, and her existence is an important part of Edmund’s life.”

The lady’s eyes were warm, and she gave a genuine, wide smile that somewhat put Evangeline’s heart at ease.

“I always knew you were a gentle creature. You are right. Adelaide was part of Edmund’s life, and they loved one another for their part. But she was not perfect. She would often speak to Edmund in a manner I did not feel was entirely fair, and she was not half the hostess you are becoming. She had many fine qualities, and Edmund cared for her dearly, but there was always fire in their time together that did not suit Edmund’s gentle soul. I feel, and have always felt since meeting you, that you suit better together. You are a gentle spirit, Evangeline. Never lose that. And never lose faith. The only person who can tell you how he truly feels is Edmund. Colin is not privy to his private thoughts, and conversations overheard are often misunderstood.”

Evangeline tried to smile, but it was a false feeling.

It was reassuring to know that Adelaide had not been the perfect ideal she had conjured in her head, but Evangeline herself was not perfect either. No one was.

She still was none the wiser about Edmund’s actions. He had kissed her that night

with all the passion of a man who cared for her, and yet he had pulled away as though burned by her skin.

She sighed. “Thank you, my Lady. We will have to wait and see how things progress.”

“You are so early in your marriage, my dear. These things take time.”

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Timmons looked haggard when he entered Edmund’s study. His man of affairs had been sending weekly reports and bemoaning the troubles in the estate for weeks, and the toll had been telling on him.

Colin sat beside the desk, glaring at the man as though it were all his doing. Timmon’s hands trembled as he handed Edmund the papers, and his watery eyes were glassy and uncertain.

He was a portly man with a reddish complexion to his skin, and Edmund found it hard to swallow looking at his cravat. It was tied so tightly that he wondered how the man could breathe.

“These are the accounts for the tenant cottages, my Lord, and what must be prioritized.”

Edmund looked over the numbers in confusion. Jonathan himself had been clear about the costs involved, yet these were nearly double what he had expected. He read over them and passed them to Colin, who tutted under his breath as he saw the figure at the bottom.

“And have you been able to ascertain where the gap in the funding for the land has

originated from?" Edmund asked.

One of the main issues Edmund had been contending with was how three thousand pounds had somehow been 'lost' when it should have been kept aside to rectify issues with the boundary fences. The patches Jonathan had been working on with a man in the village would suffice for now, but they were not a long-term solution.

How did three thousand pounds simply vanish into thin air?

"I have not, my Lord," Timmons said, glancing at Colin. "We have reviewed the estate finances going back over eighteen months, and everything is as it should be. I believe it is merely an increased cost in labour and resources that has caused the deficit."

Edmund sighed in exasperation. "But then, where has the money gone? I have reviewed the accounts myself, and there is nothing so large that it would warrant that much of a reduction."

Colin cleared his throat. "Were you reviewing only the larger sums, my Lord? Often, the more minor expenses chip away at things over time."

"I am well aware of that, Colin, thank you. I have reviewed everything, and it still comes up short. This is not a few shillings we are speaking of. It is an enormous sum to simply be unable to account for."

"You are in a fortunate position in your marriage, my Lord," Timmons added with a shake of his head. "Without the dowry, it could be that we would have to face financial ruin before the year is out."

Edmund stared at him in astonishment, unable to believe that things had spiraled so far out of his control. He knew he had been neglectful in his recuperation, but Colin



had supported him throughout that time, as had Timmons. Jonathan was the one who had brought the financial issues to his attention. Am I foolish to trust anyone?

As Colin asked Timmons to go over his findings again, Edmund grew increasingly frustrated. Jonathan's calculations were far more reasonable, and he had set them out in a way that Edmund found much easier to interpret.

Timmons had a habit of making corrections across the documents and adding addenda to every page. This meant that he was constantly flipping back and forth between different reports. It made it almost impossible to keep track of anything.

Something is amiss here, he thought suddenly. Someone is not being truthful.

He narrowed his eyes at Timmons, who was now sweating profusely. He dabbed at his forehead with a handkerchief, and Edmund did not let up on his questioning for the remainder of the meeting.

The conclusion of the discussion was that Timmons would go over it all again and produce a new report with fresh findings that stretched back over the last twelve months.

It was a burdensome task, but Edmund had reached the end of his tether. The rather puce skin about the man's face was pale by the end of their discussion, and Edmund had no sympathy for the man. He seemed to be very good at reassurance, and complaining about everyone else's mistakes, but did not take any of the blame upon himself.

"I shall show you out," Colin said stiffly, and Timmons could not follow him out of the room quickly enough.

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Evangeline walked down the wide corridors of the estate, looking for the place she had found before that held Adelaide's portrait. Something about it made her want to look upon it again as though the lady might hold answers to the enigma of her husband.

As she kept walking, searching for the specific passageway that she knew would lead her in the right direction, she heard voices coming from one of the side rooms that she had believed to be locked.

Curious, she moved forward and found the door was slightly ajar. She recognized Colin's voice at once and then the reply from a much gruffer voice than Edmund's.

"You are making this increasingly difficult, Timmons," Colin was saying, and the harsh quality of his voice surprised her. She had never heard him speak in such tones before. "If we do not act sensibly in this then Edmund will begin to suspect. There is too much riding on his belief in me, and today, he was beginning to suspect you."

"But I have done everything you have asked of me," came the desperate response from the other man.

"How have you been so careless as to remove three thousand pounds from a single budget? This is what I have been telling you all along. You must take what will not be missed."

Evangeline stiffened. Colin's movements were agitated and violent. Timmons cringed every time his hand moved toward him.

"A few pounds here and there from every quarter. That is how we will eventually ruin him. With his blasted wife in the picture, I have enough to contend with without supervising everything you do. The fire was one thing that should have caused far more damage than it did, and we have been fighting a battle with Edmund's steward

since that day.”

Evangeline’s spine was rigid as she listened to Colin’s words in disbelief. A chill skittered across her skin.

“Need I remind you that you are profiting very well from this? If you wish to keep your position when I am the earl, you had better convince him that this is all Jonathan’s doing.”

Evangeline felt cold at the calculating and emotionless way Colin spoke of his deception. He had spoken of the fire, too—surely, he had not been responsible for that?

But even as Evangeline tried to dissuade herself of such a horrendous thought, she recalled how false Colin had seemed from the beginning. He had been ‘assisting’ with the estate for some time. With Edmund incapacitated, it would have given him every opportunity to sabotage the estate if he wanted to.

Without Edmund, Colin would be next in line...

Evangeline was suddenly struck by the terrible truth of what she had heard. She, too, was a threat to Colin if he desired the title. With a new wife, Edmund might have an heir, and then Colin would never inherit.

She sucked in a sharp gasp of air and leaped back in fear as the door jerked open, and Colin’s true face was revealed to her. His eyes were dark and angry, his mouth set into a cruel line.

“It is impolite to listen at doorways, my Lady,” he said as he gripped her arm in a vice and pulled her roughly into the room.

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Colin's fingers were painful as they dug into the flesh of her arm. He dragged her into the room as Timmons looked on. Edmund's man of affairs was a weak man and listless. It was no wonder had had been manipulated by Colin for years.

Evangeline had little hope that he would help her now. She stared into Colin's angry expression and looked about the room for any way to escape.

"You will say nothing of this to Edmund, do you hear me?" Colin spat. "You have known him for a matter of weeks, and I have been waiting for this my entire life. If you don't want to meet the same end as Adelaide, you will keep your mouth shut."

"Then you did start the fire," Evangeline breathed, horrified.

"I had not intended for anyone to be hurt. It spread more rapidly than I planned, and by then, it was too late. I had certainly never intended to hurt Adelaide, but her death has led to a better future for me. I must thank you; your dowry will be most useful."

Evangeline pulled at her arm, but he had a grip of iron. "You have betrayed your cousin, all for a title?" she demanded.

There was a dangerous light in Colin's eyes now; he looked almost mad with it. He stared down at her as though he was considering how to do away with her that very minute.

"A title which should have been mine . I would have revolutionized this estate. Edmund is weak. He allowed his grief and his melancholy to lead this place to ruin."

Evangeline tugged at her arm again. Timmons was a passive force in her peripheral vision, staring at them uselessly as he allowed Colin to do what he liked.

“ You are the one who has led this estate to ruin,” she snapped. “How could he manage things if you were stealing from him for all these years?”

Colin scoffed. “It is money that should have been mine,” she winced as his fingers tightened around her arm. “Edmund was always the perfect son. He could never put a foot wrong! When my father died, I was supposed to be treated like his brother, but the late earl never gave me a penny. I had to scrimp and save, mired in my father’s debts, living like a pauper when Edmund had everything handed to him on a silver platter. I have spent years ingratiating myself with him. And for what? Only to have it all snatched away by a simpering nobody.”

He was leaning into her now, his other hand coming up to grip her fiercely. She held her head high; she would not be intimidated by a man like him. But the silence in the halls around them was becoming oppressive; she knew that he could hurt her if he chose to.

Timmons was backing away from them, looking for a place to run.

“You are the reason my hopes have been dashed to pieces,” Colin snarled. “Your dowry will pay for all of the repairs to this house, but now Edmund has a new lease of life with his perfect new wife. I should just do away with you, too, and then I am sure he will wither to nothing.”

And at those words the door beside them was pushed back on its hinges and Edmund was revealed standing in the doorway, his eyes wild, his teeth bared as he stared at Colin with a look of rage and betrayal Evangeline would never forget.

For a broken moment, Evangeline’s eyes met Edmund’s, and the fear in them erased

all her doubts in an instant.

His scarred hand clenched at his side, and he set his jaw. Time seemed to stand still as all the affection she had seen in him before returned, and he looked at her with the kind of care and love she had yearned for.

Then his gaze fixed on Colin, and any affection drained away, replaced by abject fury.

Colin, too, had been frozen in place, but now he knew his schemes had been uncovered. He shoved Evangeline from him, lifting her and throwing her against the room. She fell awkwardly to the floor with a cry of pain and could only watch as Colin lunged at Edmund with a growl.

Colin was well-built but not as tall as his cousin. The two men grappled with one another, grunting angrily as Edmund laid a solid punch to his jaw. The strength hidden in his big body was now on full display as he wrestled against Colin's wild movements.

Edmund was poised and calm as he countered every blow from Colin with one of his own. His cousin was panicked and erratic, and Edmund was by far the superior fighter, knocking the wind out of him with a thundering fist to his stomach.

"You should have died in that fire!" Colin screamed, and for a second, Edmund faltered, the same haunted look coming into his eyes.

Colin seized the advantage, and Evangeline's stomach dropped as he forced his hands around Edmund's neck. Edmund's hands came up to try and drag his wrists away, but Colin's fury had given him strength he had not possessed before, and suddenly, the tables had turned.

Evangeline knew she would have to act. She pulled herself to her feet, looking around for anything she could use as a weapon, when her eyes alighted on a candelabra on a table further along the wall.

She seized the opportunity, grasped the candelabra, and hurried towards the two men. With a swift motion, she swung it to distract them, aiming for Colin, who had been holding Edmund. Colin stumbled back, surprised, his hands instinctively moving to the back of his head as he sought to steady himself.

The sound of thundering feet came from the corridor, and a multitude of servants ran inside, staring about them wildly in consternation. Colin lurched at Edmund again, but the butler, Croft, and a burly footman restrained him effortlessly, forcing him to the floor.

Edmund rubbed at his scarred throat, clearing it a few times, but seemed unharmed. His eyes alighted on Evangeline in silent thanks as he walked to her. It seemed he was about to embrace her when Timmons stepped forward.

His lip trembled, and he looked terribly afraid, but he stared down at Colin with pure contempt before turning to Edmund.

“My Lord, I have no illusions that you will keep me on after this. I have allowed myself to be manipulated by this man for years. He learned of my own debts and offered to settle them for me two years ago. I agreed. I was desperate and had a young family. Since that day, he has held the money he gave me over my head and forced me to be complicit in his plan. My fears of debtor’s prison and the pain it would cause my family left me no choice.” Timmons swallowed and stepped back under Edmund’s dark gaze.

“I know I have made many mistakes, and I have betrayed you in the worst way, but believe me, my Lord, I had no knowledge that he was responsible for the fire. I never

intended to hurt you or her ladyship, and I will do everything I can to make this right.”

Edmund’s gaze was fixed on Colin. The betrayal in his eyes was almost unbearable to see. As a man who had been through so much already it was a cruel twist of fate to be betrayed by none other than his own cousin. Evangeline could not imagine what he must be going through.

“Restrain this man,” Edmund snapped, and two more footmen gripped Timmons’ arms as he collapsed into sobs.

“You have been handed everything your whole life,” Colin screeched at Edmund as Croft dug his fingers into the man’s shoulder. “I would have been revered as the Earl of Barendale, but you were too proud, too conceited to ever give me a penny!”

“And now you have nothing. You are nothing,” Edmund said darkly. “And I will never have you darken my door again as long as I live.”

He was quivering with anger, and Evangeline stepped up to him, laying a gentle hand on his arm.

For the longest time his gaze remained on Colin, the sorrow and anger in it never abating. But finally, he turned to her, and the look faded almost instantly, replaced by one of understanding and joy.

In the depths of his eyes, Evangeline thought she detected a glimmer of the same emotion she felt in her own heart. She held her breath as he gifted her with one of the secret smiles he reserved for her alone.



## Page 14

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Edmund stood at his study window, his hands clasped behind his back., his mind in a turmoil of grief and rage.

After Colin's arrest, the house had fallen into an atmosphere of fear and disquiet.

Edmund was still reeling from the truth. He had yet to decide what to do with Timmons. Edmund found it hard to blame a man for succumbing to Colin's manipulations—he was guilty of that himself.

He felt like a fool. The depth of his cousin's betrayal bit down to the bone.

It had all been so clear in hindsight. Colin's strange moods in recent months, particularly after Evangeline had arrived at Barendale, now spoke of an underlying unease in the man. His cousin's happiness and cheerful mood had diminished considerably after the wedding, and a darker side of him had been revealed. Now Edmund knew why.

He could not reconcile the cousin he had known since infancy with the man who had set his house alight. Colin had killed Adelaide. The idea was hideous to contemplate. He pushed it away, unable to give space to it in his mind.

There was a gentle knock at the door.

“Enter,” he called, expecting his mother. But when Evangeline came into the room, his heart began pounding in his chest.

If seeing Colin's wrath toward her had taught him anything, it was that he had to tell

her the truth, for better or worse, or their marriage would be a failure before it began.

Evangeline's beautiful face was filled with concern. She walked into the room, watching him warily, and Edmund was reminded again of how brave she had been. Without her, Colin might have succeeded in his bid for the title. The idea did not bear thinking about.

"I came to see how you are faring," she said in her gentle voice. He remembered how Colin had thrown her across the room as though she was worthless, and his fists clenched behind his back.

"Are you injured?" he asked.

"No," she said simply. "A little bruised, perhaps, but nothing that a little rest won't fix. I am so sorry that this has happened, Edmund. I cannot imagine what you must be feeling."

"I am a fool," he replied.

"No. You could not have known what Colin was—"

"Not about Colin," he said firmly, coming around his desk and standing before her. "I have been a fool for far more reasons than I can count, and today's events have made it all the more clear to me." He sighed, turning away and walking to the fireplace, beginning to pace before it, finally releasing the banked-up emotions that he had held back for so long.

"I have blamed myself for Adelaide's death for three long years. I never fully forgave myself for not being able to save her. It was the smoke that killed her, not the fire. She had inhaled too much and never regained consciousness. I always felt that if I had been a better husband to her or been stronger, I would have been able to save

her.”

He rubbed a hand over his face. Evangeline was very still, letting him speak, patient and calm.

“After I was injured, I did not believe that any woman would ever want me again. It seemed absurd that anyone could. The brief time I spent in society after I had been scarred was appalling. I had been a handsome man in my youth, and you know how vicious the gossips can be in that world. Many were sympathetic, but it felt as though many more were reveling in my disgrace. I do not know who began the rumours about Adelaide’s death, but it broke me.

“I did not understand how people I had known for so long could all turn against me in so short a time. It was a bitter lesson, and instead of facing them and learning who my true friends were, I turned my back on them all. At least then, I would not have to deal with the pain of their derision.”

Running a hand through his hair, he glanced at Evangeline. Her beautiful blue eyes were following him back and forth across the room, and the sight of her beauty only strengthened his resolve.

“I believed being alone was easier than allowing anyone to get close to me. You have changed all that. I did not expect it. When I first met your father, I am ashamed to say I only thought of the benefits to my estate. My tenants are important to me, and heaven knows I would not have survived the last few years without my staff. I wanted to be the earl they deserved, and I did not think much about who I would be marrying. Then I saw you for the first time, and I felt deep shame for tying you to a broken wreck for the remainder of your life.

Evangeline stepped forward, stopping him as she reached a hand to his face and laid her fingers against the scars. Her eyes were brimming with tears, and as she looked

up at him, he recognized the care and affection he had come to know from her.

“You are not a wreck. You are a man like any other. Your scars are proof of how much you were loved, nothing more. When we married, I believed you were disinterested in me, that you wished above all else that I could be your Adelaide.”

Edmund opened his mouth to make a violent protest, but she stayed him gently.

“I know that she will always be a part of your life, but I hope we can forge our own together. I do not care that you are scarred; you are still a handsome man to me and always will be. I have seen the love you possess for those you care for, and I am just so sorry you have had your trust betrayed so terribly by your cousin. He is not the measure of this world, Edmund. Those who truly love you are.”

“I want to forge a life with you, too,” Edmund said desperately. “Adelaide is my past, and I have laid her to rest. You are my future. I believe that knowing you has begun to heal the wounds I have carried for many years. Even having your presence in this house has changed me beyond all recognition. I love you, Evangeline, and I know that it will only grow as we come to know one another. I want you to shape our lives and shape this house in your image. I wish for you to be my partner and for us to share everything together.”

“If my dowry can restore your estate and this beautiful home to its former glory, then I would welcome it. We are a partnership, Edmund, and I will be beside you in all things.”

Edmund’s heart was overflowing with love and happiness as she took his hands in hers, and he finally bent his head to hers. This kiss was different from the first. He felt no guilt and knew no shame; it was simply a loving bond that transcended all the pain and unhappiness he had suffered.

Evangeline's lips were soft and gentle, and he wrapped his arms around her body and pulled her to him. They kissed for what felt like an eternity in the quiet of their home, the fire crackling behind them.

Edmund felt like he had been reborn, and when Evangeline pulled back with a happy smile, he knew she felt the same.

"I will never let fear and doubt stand between us again. From now on, we are together, as we should have been from the start."

"I love you," Evangeline said with a dazzling smile as he leaned down to kiss her again.

Eighteen months later...

Baby Felicity fussed in Evangeline's arms as they stood beside the baptismal font with their families.

Edmund's eyes twinkled at his daughter as he placed his little finger beside her hand, and she gripped it tightly. Evangeline chuckled as the baby cooed at her father. She adored him almost as much as her mother did.

Evangeline turned to look at her parents, who were on the other side of the font. Lord and Lady Longford were watching their granddaughter with deep affection. Matilda stood beside them, her eyes sparkling with joy as she discreetly held Jonathan's hand.

The betrothal between Matilda and Edmund's steward had been a source of unexpected joy to Evangeline and Edmund. The earl had been as good as his word and invited Matilda to stay with them after the restorations of the manor had begun in earnest. A month turned into two, and during that time, Evangeline saw how Jonathan admired her sister. He never approached her, believing that it was not his place with their difference in standing, but Matilda had taken the matter into her own hands—as was her wont.

She had done exactly as Evangeline had hoped she might. Matilda had gone against her father's strict wishes and chosen love over status.

Jonathan was a good man who had worked tirelessly to undo all the pain Colin had caused over the years. They deserved every happiness, and Evangeline was thrilled for them. She knew her father would never be content with the match, but she and

Edmund agreed Mr. and Mrs. Jonathan Brown would receive all the acceptance and love they could ever need at Barendale Manor.

Felicity gave a small cry as Evangeline shifted her in her grip and looked up at her husband. It was rare that he ever touched his scars now. He had finally accepted them and was no longer ashamed of what they represented.

His hand came to rest on the small of her back as the vicar began the service. The baby kept her tiny hand wrapped around her father's finger throughout, even as the water was poured over her head and a cross of oil marked upon her forehead.

Evangeline had never been happier than in that moment, sharing this wonderful day with the people she loved most in the world.

It was high summer as they left the church on the edge of Edmund's estate. Everything was flourishing around them, and Barendale Manor had been restored to its former glory after painstaking months of toil. Edmund had invited Evangeline to manage all the repairs in the east wing and it had become her favourite part of the house.

Now that Colin was not around to siphon money from the estate, the financial woes Edmund had struggled with were over. He was a different man from the brooding gentleman she had married. There was a bounce in his step every day and now he smiled often.

It was not just the house that had been restored. They had held many more balls at the estate since their first, and Edmund's reputation was growing again. The Barstows were now known for their joyful soirees, and they entertained guests often. Now, back to his full health, Edmund was spending more time in the local community and was as well-respected and loved as he deserved to be.

Matilda and Jonathan had chosen to remain close by, which meant that Evangeline

could see her beloved sister whenever she wished. She could not wait for their children to play together on the Barendale estate.

Colin Barstow had been put on trial for his crimes and would face the consequences of his cruelty. Even in the dock, he had shown no remorse, insisting his actions were justified. Edmund had washed his hand of him completely.

Timmons had been dismissed, and all his duties were handed to Jonathan. The troubles of their past were well and truly behind them.

Evangeline walked beside her husband as they made their way back to the manor; Felicity held in her arms as they looked out on their thriving lands.

“It is such a beautiful day,” she said happily.

“It is,” Edmund said, looking down at them both.

“My love, you are looking at me, not at the view.”

Edmund laughed merrily. “I suppose I am,” he said with a beautiful smile.

He bent his head, capturing her lips with his own as they stood in the glorious sunshine, basking in the wonder of another perfect day.

THE END