



# The Beast of Lindenhall Estate (Deals of Marriage #5)

**Author:** *Martha Barwood*

**Category:** Historical

**Description:** She was an adventurous lady. He was a beast who loved music but hasn't played since her mother's death because music evokes painful memories of loss. When fate forces them together, will their melody strike the perfect chord?

Lady Cassandra Grantham longs to escape the stuffy constraints of London's high society. Her free spirit yearns to explore life's adventures unencumbered by societal expectations. But a twist of misfortune leaves her reputation at risk and bound to the notorious Beast of Lindenhall in a hasty union.

Malcom Locksley, The Duke of Lindenhall, buries his grief behind a stoic facade after inheriting his title under grim circumstances. Haunted by past demons, he retreats from society's scrutiny to his country estate. But duty soon compels him back to London's glitzy ballrooms, where a fleeting encounter with an unconventional lady ensnares him in scandalous gossip.

Thrust together by circumstance, Cassandra sets out to uncover more lies beneath her new husband's brooding exterior than London society suspects. As she gently chips away at his staunch barriers, she discovers a creative soul still yearns to sing its melody despite past pain. Their unlikely bond deepens through their shared love of music. But when harmony seems within reach, their fragile trust faces a jarring note that threatens to shatter everything.

Will this Beauty finally see beyond her mysterious Beast's stoic facade? Can two lost souls discover that their imperfect melodies, when united, strike that elusive perfect chord?

**Total Pages (Source):** 26

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:08 am*

Cassandra and Malcom

One afternoon in late February, and Lady Cassandra Granshire, aged nineteen, was sitting in the drawing room with her mother and father. She was subtly tapping her foot in time as her younger sister Margaret skillfully played one of Beethoven's beautiful sonatas on the pianoforte. The notes floated through the air as Cassandra watched her sister's fingers dance elegantly across the keys, a tinge of wistfulness in her gaze. She herself had a moderate talent at the instrument, but Margaret's innate artistry when sitting at the keyboard often made her own efforts feel clumsy in comparison.

"Oh, very good, darling!" cried their mother, Lady Caroline Granshire, clapping her hands and bestowing a beaming smile on her youngest daughter despite the tear of emotion in her eye. Margaret, just sixteen and on the verge of her come out, was seated at the pianoforte in the corner of the drawing room, her round, dimpled cheeks flushed with pleasure.

"Thank you, Mama," she replied with a demure nod. To Cassandra, she appeared to expect nothing less as her due.

"She really is rather a prodigy," Lord Granshire, the girls' father happily agreed, his craggy, handsome, bewhiskered face split into a satisfied grin. "I don't know where she gets her talent from because it's certainly not from my side of the family. Tone deaf, the lot of us Granshires. Yet our little Maggie always manages to move me whether she plays a funeral march or a country jig. Well played, Maggie!"

"Thank you, Papa, that is very kind of you, but would you please not call me

Maggie? I am nearly at my come out, and I wish to be seen as sophisticated young lady, not a little girl, thank you,” Margaret said, frowning slightly at her father.

“Oh dear, silly old papa, eh? I’ll try to remember, though it is hard to think of my little Maggie as being so grown up,” the jovial marquess said, looking sheepish.

“Papa!” Margaret huffed, closing the piano. Papa appeared suitably chastened .

“Well, I was not such a bad player in my youth if you recall, dear,” his wife suddenly reminded him. “And my mother was an excellent player too. That must be where she gets her musical talent from. But to be sure, Margaret exceeds us all in skill,” she added, dabbing her eyes with a small handkerchief. “Every note she plays seems to touch one’s heart.”

“Yes, that really was beautiful, Maggi—I mean, Margaret,” Cassandra said at last, sending her sister a smile of approval and a smattering of applause. “You must have practiced very hard.”

“Oh, not really,” Maggie said, casually dismissive. “Once I start playing, I just seem to feel the tune inside me.”

Envy, as Cassandra well knew, was one of the seven deadly sins. Nevertheless, with Maggie’s disclaimer and all the praise being heaped upon her, lauding her musical skill, she felt an undeniable twinge of that ugly emotion in her heart, accompanied by a sense of guilt. She loved Maggie and sincerely admired her sister’s musical abilities on the pianoforte. She was proud of her, and she did not want to be a bad sister.

However, it did seem unfair that while Maggie’s talents should so often draw praise and attention from their parents, her own talent and interest in singing was largely ignored and labeled a mere pastime. Maggie’s talent was nurtured by the hire of specially selected music teachers, but Cassandra’s appeal for a singing teacher had

been laughed off. And now that Maggie's come out ball was imminent, Cassandra knew her sister would be getting even more of her fair share of the limelight than ever.

She was in her sister's shadow, and the little twinge of envy refused to budge.

The following Friday was the first of March, when the London Season, which had languidly begun to roll out in January, got into its social stride. The day had been deemed by the Marquess and Marchioness of Granshire as perfect for throwing a ball to celebrate their youngest daughter's official entry into society.

The frenzy of preparations for the ball, the arranging the catering, the wine, the décor of the ballroom, the music, the obtaining of the many boxes of beeswax candles for the chandeliers, not to mention the interminable shopping trips into town for dress fittings and the like for the ladies of the house, had built to a fever pitch by the Friday night of the ball. The crème de la crème of English society would be attending, and Lady Granshire was insistent that everything had to be just so.

Having finished her toilette with the help of her lady's maid Anna, and being satisfied with her appearance, Cassandra finally stepped out of her chamber. As she made her way along the hallway to see if her mother and Maggie were ready, the very air seemed to thrum with pent-up excitement and expectation. Maggie's chamber door was ajar. Hearing voices, Cassandra paused outside before peeping through the crack to see inside. Maggie was standing in front of the long looking glass.

"You look a picture, Milady," said Doreen, one of the two lady's maids who were fussing over Maggie, who was looking every inch the fresh, young debutante in her high-waisted, puffed-sleeved dress of pale satin. It was prettily set off by its pink sash, and the trimming of rich braid made from tiny seed pearls shone in the lamplight. The pearls matched perfectly with Maggie's earrings, choker, and pair of bracelets, as well as the hairpins securing her mass of fair curls atop her head in an

elegant style. “But let me just adjust the bow at the back again to make sure it’s straight,” the maid added.

“Thank you, Doreen, it is very important to get every detail right,” Maggie told her, her face deadly serious as the maid went about her task.

Cassandra knew that getting such small details ‘right’ was what her sister cared about almost more than anything else. She wondered why she was not more like the neat and obedient Maggie, who appeared to thrive on the strict social rules of the Ton which Cassandra found both restrictive and ridiculous. Maggie did not share her craving for experience and adventure, being much more traditional in her tastes. But Cassandra was determined to be supportive of Maggie, as was her duty. It was her big night, after all.

She continued to watch unseen while the other maid, Milly, held up two tiny crystal flasks of perfume for Maggie’s inspection.

“Which shall it be, Milady?” she asked with a smile. “Rose and geranium or gardenia. The gardenia is lovely,” she added, taking a gentle sniff before offering the vials up to Maggie’s delicate nostrils .

“My, it surely is,” Maggie agreed, smelling the vial. “I have not worn it before, but I think it is a little more grown up. I shall wear the gardenia.”

“A wise choice, Milady,” Milly replied, putting one vial aside and opening the other. “Now, hold still a moment, I must not get this on your dress, for it will never come out.” She carefully dabbed the scent behind Maggie’s ears and wrists with the glass stopper before putting a few drops on her hair.

“There,” Milly said at last as both maids stood back to admire their handiwork. “You shall be the belle of the ball, Milady!”

“Aye, all the gentlemen will be staring at you, Milady,” Doreen added with a mischievous air.

“Well, one hopes to make a good impression at one’s debut,” Maggie said excitedly, admiring her appearance in the glass. “However, as Mama says, the Season is a serious business, and I would still like to attract a suitor by the end of it if I can. I do not want to be like my sister, still single and starting my second Season. Since it is such bad form for a younger sister to be wed before her elder, I fear that if she does not find one soon, I shall never be able to marry. Sometimes, I think she is doing it on purpose to vex me.”

“Why, I am sure that is not the case, Milady,” Milly said, gaining a vehement nod of agreement from Doreen. “Lady Cassie would never do such a thing, I am sure. She wants only the best for you.”

“Perhaps this will be her lucky year too,” Doreen suggested. “Just think, Milady, we could be looking forward to having two weddings at the end of the Season!”

“Oh, Lord, that would be even worse,” Maggie opined. “I should like my wedding to be the best of the year. I would not wish to be overshadowed by having to share the limelight.”

Cassandra stifled a gasp. Maggie had voiced her concerns about her still being single many times to her face, as had their mother. Maggie genuinely feared her marriage prospects would suffer from Cassandra’s failure to find a suitor last Season. Nevertheless, to hear her sister gossiping about it with the maids was hurtful. Did none of them think she had her own dreams for romance? Was it her fault if Mr. Right—who would be a passionate lover of music like her, of course—had not yet shown his face and bedazzled her as she wished to be bedazzled?

But she put her hurt feelings aside, remembering her duty to Maggie as her older

sister on this important night. Taking a deep breath and plastering a smile on her face, she pushed open the door and stepped into the room.

“My you do look lovely, Sister,” she said, noticing the slightly guilty looks on the girls’ faces as she entered. “That dress fits perfectly. You are bound to attract much favorable attention and make a good impression.”

“Thank you, Sister. You look very pretty too,” Maggie replied, giving Cassandra a small smile. Their mother came in then. Clad in purple silk, long feathers in her hair, she bustled over to Maggie, wreathed in smiles, ignoring Cassandra.

“Oh, Margaret, you look very pretty indeed,” she gushed. “Was I not correct about that pearl beading? I must say, you do your father and I much credit. We are so proud of you. Now, the guests have begun arriving already. We shall greet them, and I shall send up a footman to tell you when to make your grand entrance on the staircase.”

“Very well, Mama. I am ready, I think,” Maggie said animatedly, clearly looking forward to making an impact on the Ton .

“Can I wait with her, Mama? I can escort her down the stairs,” Cassandra offered, keen to escape greeting duties. Her mother turned a frown on her.

“No, of course not, Cassie. You are required downstairs, to help greet the guests as they come in. Come along,” she said in no uncertain terms, hurrying from the room.

Cassandra knew it was no good arguing. “I shall see you shortly, Maggie. I am sure your entrance will be a great success,” she assured her sister before trotting after Lady Granshire.

“Now, remember, dear, this is your second Season,” her mother said as they headed for the main landing. As she sighed internally, over the bannister, Cassandra could

now see her father greeting the first of the guests as the butler sent them through. There was a low hum of conversation and music playing in the background from the small orchestra stationed in the ballroom. “Remember your duties. Help your sister to make good introductions tonight, and while you’re at it, find yourself a suitor whom your father and I can approve of, by the end of the Season, please. Now, keep in mind what I have told you before. Gentlemen like a lady to be agreeable, not contrary and argumentative and full of her own opinions. This is Margaret’s night, so allow her to enjoy the attention and do nothing to spoil it for her by being too outspoken or making a spectacle of yourself. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mama, I understand,” Cassandra said, a little hurt to be thought of as so potentially selfish. “But you know, I want Maggie to have a wonderful time too, one she will remember forever.”

“Good, because Papa and I are relying on you to do your bit in making sure Margaret meets the right people. Now, come along, we must join your father on greeting duties,” she finished, leading Cassandra over to where the Marquess was standing, shaking the hands of the elderly Lord and Lady Carlisle and their extensive retinue. She gave the couple a deep and respectful curtsy, earning a rare smile of approval from Lady Carlisle.

Greeting duties were interrupted when the majority of the guests had arrived. Lady Granshire stood halfway up the staircase and rang a spoon against a crystal tumbler to alert the gathering to her daughter’s imminent entrance. Cassandra and the guests watched from below as the maidenly vision that was Maggie appeared at the top of the stairs. There were gasps of admiration and applause as Maggie, who did indeed look the picture of radiant feminine beauty, tripped smoothly down the stairs in what Cassandra knew was a well-practiced motion. She was received with much apparent admiration and soon disappeared into the ballroom, swallowed up by an adoring crowd.



Cassandra followed, making her way through the gathered guests, ready to attend Maggie and ensure she met only the right wealthy, eligible young bachelors in the room. It was galling to think that little Maggie was now all grown up and formally a member of High Society, which Cassandra looked upon with derision for the limited opportunities it provided for more intrepid young ladies like herself.

She soon joined Maggie at their mother's side, ready to be the dutiful sister. She was amused by the procession of young men waiting to be introduced to Maggie before fawning at her feet and frantically scribbling their names on her dance card at the first available opening. Since they could hardly ignore Cassandra without being found outright rude, she found her own dance card quickly filling up too.

"I hope you do not intend to steal any of my possible suitors," Maggie whispered to her in a quieter moment. "You should be looking at the older gentlemen, should you not? They are more suitable for your age group."

"Maggie! You are the limit sometimes. Of course, I am not going to steal your suitors! And I'll remind you that I am only nineteen. That is hardly at death's door," Cassandra defended herself, annoyed, at the pressure her sister did not seem to realize she was putting her under, as well as amused.

"Well, if you have to dance with them, the least you can do is talk about me and say what an accomplished young lady I am," Maggie said.

"Oh, I will, you can be sure of that," Cassandra promised, her ironic tone flying right over Maggie's head.

"And when you speak of me, please refer to me as Margaret."

"Oh, all right. If it pleases you, Milady," Cassandra said, bobbing a mock curtsy. She noticed the edges of Maggie's lips curling upward. She added, "But whatever you do,

do not laugh. The consequences could be disastrous. People could see that the prim and proper Lady Margaret is really a laughing little imp.”

Maggie burst out into tinkling laughter, immediately covering her mouth to stifle it. “Stop teasing me, Cassie. We must both be on our best behaviour,” she said when she had stopped giggling. “When we read about tonight in the gossip columns, I want my debut to be deemed a great success by all of London, and you must be a part of that.”

Cassandra had no time to think on Maggie’s words because at that moment, their father got up on the podium by the orchestra and declared the dance floor officially open.

“And the first dance is to be a cotillion,” he announced to general excitement. The orchestra struck up the stately melody that would see couples, arms linked, parading around the room decorously, all in a line, to the rhythm of a familiar tune.

A smiling Maggie was soon whisked away onto the floor by her scheduled dance partner. Cassandra’s first partner came to claim her, and she found herself arm in arm with young Lord Gregory Fontane, Viscount Wilmersedale, measuring out the well-worn steps of the cotillion. Disappointingly, despite his youthful good looks and dancing ability, the Lord’s main topic of conversation was his new silk waistcoat and the staggering sum it had cost him. Cassandra enjoyed the dance yet felt she came away from it better informed on that subject than she ever needed to be.

Now the dancing was in full swing, Cassandra soon realized that Maggie did not need her attentions. It seemed unlikely her sister would be leaving the dance floor any time soon. Their parents were engaged deep in conversation with Lord Castlerey and his wife, their good friends. Seeing the chance for a little independent exploration, Cassie looked around for a glimpse of her best friend, Lady Diana Melville.

She had greeted Diana and her parents at the door earlier, but the two girls had been

unable to talk privately and had agreed to meet later on. Cassandra spotted Diana standing with her parents, who were chatting to an elderly couple. Diana was casting about the room as if looking for someone. Hoping it was her, Cassandra gave her a little wave and quickly caught her friend's eye. Pleased to see Diana's face light up, Cassandra smiled and hurried over to join her.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:08 am*

Diana detached herself from her parents, coming to meet Cassandra. The two girls embraced each other and exchanged affectionate pecks on the cheek.

“Oh, Cassie, I’m so glad to see you!” Diana cried, her lovely pale blue eyes wide as she looked at Cassandra fondly.

“Not as glad as I am to see you. It’s been so boring without you to talk to, Di. How was Italy?” Cassandra asked. Diana had only recently returned from a three-week tour of Rome with her parents, and this was the first time the friends had seen each other in nearly a month.

“Oh, you know, eternal,” Diana replied with a small laugh. “Very monumental. But of course, the art is heavenly. I wish you could have been there with me to see some of it.”

“Oh, so do I, you fortunate soul. I am quite jealous. But trying to talk my parents into leaving the country is a waste of time. The Continent is full of foreigners, so Papa says, though I would have thought that is rather the point. Travel is supposed to broaden the mind, is it not?”

“Indeed, I must admit my horizons have been expanded,” Diana confirmed.

“The statues in that direction do not leave much to the imagination.”

“Diana! How scandalous!” Cassandra exclaimed with a giggle, though she could feel her cheeks flushing with embarrassment.

“Well, maybe it is, but even so, I’m awfully glad to be home. I missed our talks so much.” She cast a smile about the room. “Just think, Cassie, it is Maggie’s come out ball. Can you believe it?”

“Hardly,” Cassandra admitted. “It seems like only yesterday I was reading her bedtime stories and feeding her porridge. Now look at her.” They stood back to admire the belle of the ball, who was in between dances and now standing at the center of a knot of admirers, all doing their best to make her smile and laugh.

“She looks happy,” Diana observed.

“Well, she would. She’s the center of attention, and there’s nothing she likes more than that, bless her,” Cassandra replied a little drily. “Look at them, all hanging on her every word.”

“Her debut is a wonderful success, I think. She is really radiant tonight,” Diana replied.

Cassandra tried to put her petty envy aside and smiled, genuinely pleased for Maggie’s success. “Now, that will make her happy indeed.” She paused for a moment before adding a little bitterly, “All I need to do to set the seal on her happiness is to find a suitor this Season and marry him.”

“To leave the field clear for her,” Diana said knowingly. “And have you had any luck with that while I’ve been away?”

Cassandra shook her head. “Not really. I have not met any gentleman of any note at all, only some of the same old faces from last year. And sadly, they have not grown any more interesting in the meantime either. I admit, I am skeptical of my chances of finding Mr. Right among this lot.” She gestured with her eyes to the buzzing throng. The room was growing hot and stuffy by now, and the dance floor was heaving with

half inebriated, excited couples engaging in a lively country dance.

The girls decided to go and get a drink. Once they had a glass of fruit punch each, they stood talking near the refreshment table.

“Well, the Collins’ ball is next week. I hear Lady Madeleine has imported French champagne and several varieties of Swiss chocolate just for the occasion. It will be such fun!” Diana said with obvious excitement. “There will be a lot more people there . . . and a lot more eligible men.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” Cassandra agreed with a sigh. “But I do not think I can ever really enjoy anything this Season when I know how much pressure is on me to find a suitor. I mean, why must I marry at all? I do not wish to marry just anyone because my parents and my sister and society say so. Unless I fall in love, of course. And I see scant opportunity for that happening.”

“My, you sound a little jaded for your years, my dear. However one likes it, that is the way of the Ton . The rich and powerful stick together,” Diana remarked. “Wait until the Collins’ ball. I am certain you will meet some wonderful, amusing, educated gentlemen there who will turn your head.”

“Hmm, maybe you are right, Di, but I have not yet found a single gentleman of our acquaintance who cherishes the same passion for music as I do. Most prefer talking about their horses, betting, or the latest fashion in side-whiskers. I simply cannot marry anyone who does not love music!”

“Of course you cannot. And why should you?” Diana asked. “But I promise you, there will be many more opportunities to meet interesting people at the Collins’ ball. There will be artists, and poets, and soldiers, and even the Prince Regent might show his face, so they say.”

“Well, I have seen him several times already, and he is not very interesting,” Cassandra said with small enthusiasm, recalling the over-dressed, over-fed, and not to mention scandalous Prince George.

“Oh, Cassie! How contrary you are at times. Well, if that does not catch your fancy, what about this?! The rumor mill says that Lady Madeleine’s cousin, the famous recluse, the so-called Beast of Lindenhall, is going to be attending this year,” she gushed excitedly.

“Is he?” Cassandra said, her interest genuinely piqued this time. “Now, him I would like to see. But I’ve never understood why they call the poor man the Beast of Lindenhall. It is very unfortunate. Has he ever eaten anyone?” she asked with a straight face.

Diana laughed. “Not that I know of, but there is always a first time, so we had better be careful. He is called that because, as I said, he is a recluse. He hardly ever comes up to town and, so Mother says, never attends the Season. You can imagine how she and the other mamas feel about that—a young, hugely rich duke, reputedly handsome, having the nerve to withhold himself from the marriage market. It is a great crime in her eyes.”

“How strange. I suppose he just does not like all the falseness and gossip that drives the Ton , with all its silly rules. I can sympathise with that. But, I must admit, he sounds awfully intriguing. I wonder if we shall meet him at the ball.” With her love of mystery, she found the notion quite thrilling.

“We very well might, but we shan’t know because, have you forgotten, it is a masked ball?” Diana reminded her.

“Oh, of course.” Cassandra’s excitement faded somewhat.

“That is the best thing about it. A masked ball is always steeped in intrigue and mystery. One can dress in a lavish costume of one’s choice and wear an elegant mask to hide one’s identity and increase one’s mystique. You will not know who that dashing man is whirling you about the floor to the latest waltz, and he will not know you. But you may make a connection, perhaps a shared passion for music, for a few magical hours. The usual rules hardly apply.” Diana spoke with girlish enthusiasm, her eyes sparkling. “Does that not appeal to a lover of intrigue such as yourself?”

“Of course, I would not miss it for the world,” Cassandra replied, a little more able to share in Diana’s excitement now she knew a genuine curiosity would be attending the ball, one of the most important events of the Season. “Mama is thrilled about going,” she added. “She claims it will be filled to the brim with suitable suitors.”

“Indeed it will, but how will we know who they are if they are in disguise?”

“Equally, how will they know us?” Cassandra mused, finally seeing a rare opportunity for fun with no strings attached.

“So, are you looking forward to it?”

“Yes, I am now. In fact, I even have my costume and mask ready. I am going as a lyre bird. The mask is covered in feathers, and the colors are quite beautiful,” Cassandra explained.

“How lovely. Did you choose it yourself?”

“Um, not exactly,” Cassandra told her. “Mama offered Maggie and I a choice of two, a dove and a lyre bird.”

“And you allowed Maggie to pick first, of course,” Diana said, smiling as she drank the last of her punch and put the glass aside.



“Yes, but I did not mind. The dove mask suits her better, and I’m perfectly happy being the lyre bird, really,” Cassandra told her before finishing her own punch.

“I’m sure,” Diana replied wryly. “Well, lyre birds are very beautiful too. I’m going as a mermaid. The mask is quite pretty, with silver sequins, and my gown is turquoise, which I am very pleased with, for it will look well with my hair.”

“It will indeed,” Cassandra agreed, eyeing her friend’s thick auburn hair a little enviously. “You shall make a very mysterious and alluring mermaid and enthrall all the gentlemen, I have no doubt.”

“Just so long as they do not make jokes about me smelling of fish,” Diana said, making them both burst out laughing.

The girls discussed the upcoming ball for a while longer and otherwise caught up on each other’s news. But when a new dance was called, both were claimed by their respective dance partners and went off to the floor to take their positions for the waltz. Cassandra thought the waltz was the most romantic dance ever invented, and she looked forward to being swept across the floor by her partner, the nice but slightly socially awkward Lord Jasper Twelvetrees. Unfortunately, the young lord, in his enthusiasm, only succeeded in crushing her toes several times with his large feet.

She made it through to the end out of sheer pride, but then she was forced to beg exhaustion and retire to a chair, temporarily wounded. Diana soon joined her.

“I thought you might need this,” she said, holding out one of the two long glasses of iced fruit punch she was holding.

“Oh, you are a positive saint, Di,” Cassandra told her gratefully, taking the glass and having a few long sips. “That is nectar. Do you think anyone would notice if I stuck my poor sore toes in it?” she joked before asking, “How was your dance?”

“Oh, the dance was all right, but my partner was a little . . . mechanical in his movements.”

“Drummed into him by a frustrated dance master, I expect. One, two, three, and so on.”

“Exactly,” Diana agreed. “Rather wooden. But it is a very nice party. Maggie looks as though she has ascended to heaven. I do not think she has taken a single break from the dance floor.”

Cassandra looked across to the dance floor, just catching a glimpse of Maggie as she whirled by in a gentleman’s arms. Her smile was radiant, just as Diana had said.

It is right that she should have a lovely time and get her way. It is her come out ball! I have no right to envy her. It is not her fault that she is so good at playing the pianoforte and everyone pays her so much attention. But how can I ever hope for anyone to notice my talent and assist me in developing it when Maggie is always the one in the limelight?

\*\*\*

At around the same time that evening, only a few streets away from the Granshire mansion, an unadorned black coach emblazoned with the Lindenhall crest was pulling up outside the Duke of Lindenhall’s stately but empty—except for the squad of servants he had sent ahead—Mayfair townhouse. Two liveried footmen leaped from the back of the carriage and hurried to let down the steps and open the carriage door, so their employer could disembark in perfect comfort and safety. Neither servant wished to risk the wrath of the so-called “Beast of Lindenhall.”

The Duke made an imposing figure as he first filled the doorway of the carriage and then trod with his high-top leather riding boots deliberately down the steps. The

gravel crunched beneath the feet of his tall, broad-shouldered figure. The flickering streetlamps casting shadows across his dark, somewhat angular features.

The footmen scurried back to fetch down from the carriage roof the small amount of baggage the Duke had brought with him. They had no idea of the conflicting emotions filling their master as he stood for a few moments, his silver-topped cane pressing into the ground, staring up at the granite facade before him with a dour expression.

Beneath his greatcoat, Malcom Locksley shivered involuntarily at the sight of his old family home. To his eyes, the place was as welcoming as a tomb, brimming with echoes and phantoms of a lost past. On the rare occasions he came to town, when he was compelled to attend to estate business, he keenly felt the shadowy memories that seemed to linger around every corner, troubling memories he could never quite outrun. His heart clenched painfully, but he forced down the grief and anger threatening to overwhelm him.

Compose yourself.

With a grunt of scorn at what he regarded as his own weakness, he swept off his hat, revealing a tumble of dark curls, and mounted the porch steps. Before he had reached the top, the doors swung open. Golden light spilled out from an impressive, marble-floored vestibule.

“Good evening, Your Grace. The servants are all here to greet you,” the butler said, bowing low before gesturing to the rows of smiling, expectant faces behind him.

“Thank you, Carlton,” Malcom said with a cursory nod. “That will not be necessary. You are all dismissed.” He made a shooing gesture at the servants with his hand before turning to an inscrutable Carlton.

“Very good, Your Grace,” the butler acknowledged. He took Malcom’s stick, hat, coat and scarf, and handed them to a lingering footman to deal with.

“Is the place all heated and aired as I instructed?” Malcom asked as he strode off towards his study, with Carlton at his heels.

“Yes, Your Grace, just as you said. I took the liberty of filling the drinks cabinet in your study, and in the drawing room, and the library just in case.”

“Very good. I’ll have a whiskey,” Malcom said, entering his study. A good fire was blazing in the hearth, and the room was pleasantly warm. He threw himself into one of the nearby winged armchairs and gave a deep sigh.

“Certainly, Your Grace.” With a respectful nod, Carlton went to fetch the whiskey, having the good judgment to bring the bottle along with him when he returned. He placed the glass and bottle on a side table within his master’s handy reach and poured him a generous measure.

“Thanks, Carlton,” Malcom said, accepting the drink and swallowing the dram in one go.

“Is everything satisfactory, Your Grace? Will you be dining in this evening?”

“No, everything is not satisfactory, Carlton. But I am not speaking about the house, and I do not wish to discuss it with you. I expect my cousin Viscount Lavington shortly. We shall dine in here as soon as the meal is ready. That is all for now.”

“Very good, Your Grace.” Carlton bowed and made a smooth exit. Malcom was grateful to the man, for Carlton made his own life much easier than it had been during his early years of taking on the dukedom, aged only twenty. Then, he had struggled daily to come to grips with the bewildering mess that was left for him to untangle

after losing everything he held dear so suddenly. Somehow, despite a frequent wish to the contrary, his sense of duty meant he continued to exist.

In truth, it had been his Cousin Madeleine who had found Carlton and suggested Malcom employ him as a butler cum secretary almost five years now, and Malcom appreciated his talents more by the day. The man was adept at dealing with people of all kinds, in a number of guises, on Malcom's behalf. For if there was one thing Malcom Locksley hated, it was having to contend with other people.

The thought of it wrought another deep sigh from him, and he poured himself another whiskey as he stared into the fire, waiting for one of his only remaining friends, Terrence Crawford, to arrive and prevent the gathering shadows of memory from engulfing him.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:08 am*

“The lamb is very good,” Terrence remarked, popping another morsel of the roast meat into his mouth and chewing appreciatively.

“I suppose it is,” Malcom murmured, pushing food around his plate with little appetite.

“You’ve hardly eaten anything. At least try the roast potatoes, old chap. They really are tasty.”

“I’m just not hungry,” Malcom replied, but he relented enough to appease Terrence by eating a small piece of the lamb. It tasted like ashes in his mouth. He quickly swallowed it and washed it down with some claret.

“That’s better,” his friend said approvingly, tucking into another potato with gusto. “Now, tell me, why so gloomy, Mal? You’re as cheerful as a wet day in winter. I mean, you’re not exactly a barrel of laughs at the best of times, but I’ve seldom seen you this sombre.”

“You know how I hate being in town. All the prying eyes and wagging tongues. And this house doesn’t improve my mood,” Malcom admitted, feeling a little guilty at being such a poor host.

“So, why on earth did you agree to come?” Terrence asked. “And as to this house,” he added, pausing to glance around the luxurious, lamplit study, “you can always come and stay at my place. No bad memories there.”

“Mmm, thank you. I might take you up on that,” Malcom said, grateful to Terrence

for his continued friendship. Most of his old friends had fallen away over the last six years, driven away by his increasingly dark, antisocial demeanor. “But the place stands empty for much of the year, and I feel I ought at least to visit from time to time, make sure everything is in order. It’s what my parents would expect.” He drank some more claret to drown the thought.

“You still haven’t told me what Madeleine said to get you to agree to come up,” Terrence persisted, helping himself to more gravy.

“The Collins’ ball,” Malcom said simply, knowing Terrence would understand.

“Ah! Of course. Let me guess what she said.” He put down his fork and, adopting a high falsetto, comically mimicked their cousin. “‘Malcom, you owe it to your parents’ memory to attend this year. You have snubbed my invitations the last six years, and I refuse to put up with it any longer. It is the Collins ball, for goodness sake, held in honour of your parents’ memory, your own dear mother and father. It is embarrassing having to explain each time why you are absent. I absolutely insist you attend this year. Why, even the Prince Regent himself is expected to attend.’” He laughed at his own wit.

“You have her to a tee,” Malcom had to admit, quirking his lips in the ghost of a smile.

“Am I right?”

“Almost word for word.”

“But why this year when you have withstood her pleas so staunchly before?” Terrence asked, his twinkling eyes full of curiosity as he gazed across at Malcom.

Malcom shrugged. “She barged into my study and refused to leave until I agreed to

attend,” he explained.

“Yes, she does that sort of thing, doesn’t she? She dislikes not getting her own way. Like it since childhood, if you recall.”

“Hmm. So . . . here I am. Reluctantly.”

“Well, never mind, old man. I’m going to the ball as well. We can go together.”

“You and me and about a thousand other people,” Malcom said with distaste.

“Well, there is that,” Terrence admitted, well acquainted with Malcom’s dislike of the Ton and attending the Season’s social events.

“And as my mother’s only son, I fear I shall have to put up with a lot of the usual nonsense. The gossips will be out in force, no doubt.”

Terrence laughed. “You sound as if you’re about to be thrown into a pit of poisonous snakes. But you’re right, old fellow. Everyone will want to catch a glimpse of the famous Beast of Lindenhall. Grrrrr.” He pantomimed a menacing snarl.

“Oh, don’t you start,” Malcom said without any real rancor. “I know what they call me behind my back. But since I have no respect for their opinions, I really do not care.”

Much to his relief, however, they were interrupted by a brisk knock at the door.

“Come in,” he said, unsurprised when Carlton appeared in the doorway with a bow.

“What is it, Carlton?” he asked, grateful for the interruption.

“I apologise for disturbing you, Your Grace, My Lord, but Lady Collins is here and



asking to see you,” Carlton said.

Malcom threw his napkin down in a sudden rage.

“What is she doing here?” he said through gritted teeth. “She knows I hate it when she arrives unannounced like this.”

“You’d better let her in old man, or you’ll never hear the last of it,” Terrence told him.

“But what does she want? I’ve agreed to go to her blasted ball. Isn’t that enough?”

“Clearly not.” Terrence turned to Carlton. “Is she alone, Carlton?”

“She is, My Lord.”

“Best let her in then,” he told the butler, while Malcom rose from his seat, wanting to escape but knowing it was hopeless.

“Let her in, Carlton,” he ground out, trying to steel himself for yet another demand on his time and privacy from his cousin.

She swept into the room in her ballgown, a bejeweled vision in primrose silk, clearly on her way to some party.

“Boys! So, here you are, hiding away in this gloomy study,” she cried brightly, peeling off her gloves. “Oooh, is that claret?”

“Yes, it is.” Mindful of his manners despite the unwelcome intrusion, Malcom pulled out a chair for her at the table and poured her a drink.

“Thank you, dear. I am so glad to find you in residence, and with Terrence too,” she declared, setting down her gloves before taking a sip of the wine. “Mmm, very nice.” She beamed at them both as Malcom resumed his seat with an air of desolation.

“To what do we owe this unexpected pleasure, dear cousin?” Terrence asked gaily to Malcom’s secret annoyance. Do not encourage her!

“Well, I am just on my way to Lord and Lady Pargeter’s musicale, and I thought I would drive by the house and see if you were here, Malcom. I admit I was worried you would try to find an excuse for not coming to the ball and stay lurking out in the country. But here you are! ”

“Yes, here I am,” he repeated hollowly. “So, now you know, you can be on your way.”

“And you are coming to the ball?” she asked, her lovely blue eyes fixed on him, concealing the steel inside.

“Let me assure you, cousin, Malcom and I shall be attending together,” Terrence put in. “You can rely on me to make sure he gets there in one piece.”

Madeleine smiled, and even Malcom had to admit she was still a very beautiful woman. She had lost her much older husband in her early thirties, inheriting a substantial fortune. With no children and no apparent inclination to remarry, over the years, Madeleine had become quite the merry widow, building a reputation as a patron of the arts, famous for her exquisite good taste and glittering social gatherings. Though he resented her interference in his life, he cared deeply for her just the same, just as he knew she cared for him. Like Terrence, she was one of the few people who still bothered with him.

“But will he behave when he gets there?” she asked, taking another sip of her claret.

“I am civilised enough to understand the necessity of proper etiquette habits, if that is your concern,” Malcom replied with a touch of wit.

She laughed a tinkling laugh. “You know exactly what I mean, Malcom. You will be the center of attention, apart from myself, of course, and Terrence here. I trust that you will honour your parents’ memory in a manner befitting their stature. All the single ladies will be after two such eligible gentlemen as yourselves, and you will be required to dance and entertain them as well as be polite to the other guests.”

“I know,” Malcom replied with the air of a man on the way to the gallows. The thought was nauseating. He shot Terrence a warning look, anxious that he should not tell Madeleine anything about what they had been discussing before her arrival. He was not reassured at all by the wink he received in return.

“We are both gentlemen, Maddy, I think we can be relied upon to behave correctly,” Terrence said.

“You, I can rely on, Terrence,” Madeline said before turning a hard gaze on Malcom that seemed to bore into him. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat as she went on, “But this recluse has shunned such fine company for many years now, and I fear his social skills may be, shall we say, a little rusty.”

Malcom bristled at that, though he knew there could be some truth to the accusation.

“Am I not doing as you wish, Madeleine? I am here in London, just as you wanted, and I have agreed to attend your wretched ball. Do you have to come here and torment me as well?” he asked, despising the plaintive note in his voice.

“You see, that is exactly the sort of attitude that worries me. You dare to call the event held in your own parents’ honour ‘wretched’? How can I be sure you will comport yourself as befits a gentleman who is a member of my family?”

“My manners have not entirely deserted me,” he protested. “I am not going to be rude to anyone, rest assured.”

“You will not hide away in the billiard room as soon as you arrive?”

He sighed, for he had planned on doing exactly that. “I promise I will not.”

“You will be sociable and dance with the young ladies?”

“Yes, I will.” Oh, God! What am I saying?

She smiled beatifically. “Very good. I have your word as a gentleman?”

“You have my word.” That rankled his sensibilities.

“Excellent. Well, it seems I have got what I came for. Unless you wish to accompany me to the Pargeter’s, I shall leave you two to your gloomy, bachelor evening.”

“We are quite happy with the gloom, cousin,” Terrence said. “And who knows, after attending the ball, we may not be bachelors much longer.”

Madeline rose and clapped her hands like a pleased child. “Wonderful, though I admit I am skeptical on that score when it comes to Malcom.” She quickly drank the remaining claret and pulled on her gloves before adding, “Still, we can but hope. And remember, it is a masquerade ball, so you will need your masks and costumes.”

“We are aware, cousin,” Terrence assured her as she headed for the door, giving them a cheery little wave. Terrence leapt up and opened it for her.

“Good night then, my dears. I shall see you on Saturday, bright and early.” She swanned out through the door, and Terrence closed it behind her, accompanied by a

deep sigh from Malcom. He put his elbows on the table and his head in his hands.

“What have I let myself in for?” he asked mournfully as Terrence resumed his seat.

After pudding, which only Terrence partook of, Malcom was persuaded by his cousin to repair to the billiard room for a few games.

“The beauty of it being a masquerade ball is the anonymity,” Terrence said, lining up a shot. “You’ll be wearing a mask and a costume. None of those ladies Madeleine is threatening you with will know who you are. And if they don’t know your identity, how can they gossip about you or pursue you?” He took his shot, and with a loud crack, the white ball collided with the blue, sending it straight into the pocket.

Malcom eyed the remaining balls, figuring out his next shot. He was already resigned to losing. Because he chose to live such a reclusive life in the country, Terrence got much more practice than he did. He positioned himself to pot the green.

“I suppose you’re right,” he conceded, looking down the cue. “One brief anonymous appearance can’t draw too much attention.” He took his shot . . . and missed.

“Bad luck, old chap,” Terrence sympathized, but Malcom did not miss the smirk on his cousin’s face that signaled his satisfaction at wringing the admission from him, and at the missed shot.

He ran his hand through his hair distractedly, wondering for the hundredth time what on earth he had let himself in for.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:08 am*

“Oh, Bravo, Lady Margaret, I have never witnessed such skill on the piano forte!” declared the young Earl of Barclay, applauding rapturously, along with Cassandra’s parents and Cassandra herself. The Earl was seated with the Granshires in their spacious drawing room, being the latest of the four gentlemen callers that morning who had come to pay homage to the fresh-faced debutante.

“Thank you, My Lord,” Maggie told him, giving him the same sweet smile she had bestowed on all her would-be suitors so far.

“I assure you, that was the loveliest rendition of . . . er . . . that tune I have ever heard. You are a veritable virtuoso,” the Earl gushed, his bright gaze fixed on Maggie, whose cheeks flushed a flattering shade of pink.

“Yes, beautifully played, as always dear,” Cassandra added to the general approbation being heaped on Maggie’s musical abilities. The expertly played melody had briefly transported her, it was true. However, she nonetheless felt the usual twinge of envy at the attention her sister’s superior keyboard skills always seemed to elicit from any audience.

She bent her head to her embroidery once more, hiding the blush of shame that came with knowing how the green-eyed monster had dogged her since the day following Maggie’s come out ball, after which a seemingly endless stream of titled admirers had been calling in hopes of winning Maggie’s heart. Each time, her parents insisted that a radiant Maggie show off her musical prowess. It was all becoming quite wearing, not to say frustrating. Only yesterday, she had tackled her mother again on the subject of hiring a singing teacher for her.

“Do not be silly, dear. Have Papa and I not already told you a thousand times, anybody may sing? Granted, you have a pleasant voice, but it hardly warrants the expense of hiring a teacher. If you want to make an impression like your sister then practice your piano, that is my advice,” Lady Granshire brushed her off.

“That is unfair, Mama,” Cassandra had protested in disappointment. “I am as passionate about music as Maggie, but my talent lies in singing, not in playing a musical instrument. Besides, I could never outshine Maggie if I practiced the piano for a million years.” She glanced down at her recalcitrant hands regretfully.

“Exactly, my dear. I understand that it is a difficult time for you, what with Maggie’s come out being hailed such a resounding success in all the papers. You are bound to feel a little overshadowed by all the attention she is getting. But try not to be selfish and be content with what talents you have got. You must accept that you are not as accomplished musically as Maggie. However, you are passable on the piano and are not bad at sketching a likeness, although your embroidery could certainly do with improving,” Lady Granshire had said, glancing askance at Cassandra’s current effort with her needle. “Concentrate on perfecting those, and you will soon find a suitor, I am sure.”

“But Mama—”

“Hush now, child. You can practice your singing as often as you like, but as to hiring a tutor, that answer is no.” And that had been the end of the discussion.

“Cassandra?” her mother’s voice pierced her reverie, bringing her back to the drawing room.

“Yes, Mama?” she said, giving herself a mental shake.

“The Earl is leaving now,” Lady Granshire said. Indeed, the young Earl was on his

feet and looking at her questioningly, as was everybody else. Feeling her cheeks growing hot, she stood up at once and curtsied.

“Forgive me, My Lord, I was momentarily swept away by the music. I bid you good day,” she told him.

“I quite understand, Lady Cassandra. I too was very moved by your sister’s playing,” he said with a polite smile and bow. “I wish you good day.” With that, the Earl finally took his leave. Maggie came to sit next to her.

“Cassie, you really must pay more attention,” she gently chided. “You shall put my suitors off if you keep woolgathering while they are speaking to you.”

Cassandra sighed and cast her embroidery aside. “I am sorry, Maggie. Your playing always sends me into a dream, I’m afraid. I cannot help it,” she fibbed, feeling a little guilty when Maggie smiled and patted her hand, falling for it hook, line, and sinker.

“I understand, but really, do try to pay attention in future. I do not want any of the gentlemen to think my sister is a simpleton or deaf.”

“Pardon?” Cassandra said, her quicksilver wit making her cup her ear and feign deafness.

“I said—” Maggie began, her face serious.

“I heard you, you simpleton. I was jesting,” Cassandra told her with a grin, squashing the envy she felt for Maggie and recalling how much she loved her. Her effort was justified when Maggie let out one of her childish giggles.

“You beast!” she cried, batting playfully at Cassandra’s arm. “You are so quick, I cannot tell when you are joking,” she admitted.



“Would that my wit were as sharp as your deft fingers on the pianoforte, dear sister,” Cassandra said, as she proceeded to elicit gales of laughter from Maggie by gently tickling her ribs as if she were playing a melodic tune.

“Stop that at once, Cassandra!” Lady Granshire chided, frowning at her. “try to act with some decorum, will you?”

“Sorry, Mama,” Cassandra sighed, stopping tormenting her sister.

It had been a somewhat trying week for Cassandra. Her musical hopes and ambitions had been crushed once again, and so she was cheered when Diana arrived later that day. Diana’s parents would not be returning from a short stay with some relatives in Somerset and would likely be late to the Collins ball. Consequently, much to the girls’ delight, it had been arranged that Diana would stay overnight with the Granshires. They would all travel to the ball together the following evening and meet up with her parents later in the evening.

“Shall we go up to my chamber and try our masks on?” Cassandra asked her friend after dinner.

“Oh, yes, that will be so much fun!” Diana agreed, so they went upstairs and fished out their costumes for the ball.

“Oh, your mask is so pretty,” Cassandra exclaimed, admiring the glittering, silvery-blue-green sequins adorning Diana’s mask. “Look how it catches the light. You make a charming mermaid.”

“And you make a charming lyre bird,” Diana assured her, helping Cassandra to arrange the long feathers that earned the bird its name. “The black and blue colors are iridescent and suit you so well, Cassie.” They posed together before the looking glass, giggling at their reflections.

“Do we look mysterious enough, do you think?” Cassandra asked.

“Oh, deeply mysterious and intriguing, to be sure,” Diana answered. “I can hardly wait to be swimming through the throng of other guests. No doubt there will be a large menagerie of both real and mythical characters on display. Oh, I forgot to say,” she added, her eyes sparkling, “that Lady Madeleine has had her gardens redesigned and made into quite a feature for the occasion, with coloured illuminations and statues and fountains and the like. It is supposed to be quite spectacular.”

“How fascinating. We must be sure to see it,” Cassandra said, mildly intrigued. “I need something to cheer me up after all the fussing over Maggie this past week, with her army of would-be suitors. This ball promises to be the most entertaining thing that has happened so far this Season, and Mama and Papa can hardly expect me to find a suitor when everyone will be in disguise. It is the perfect excuse to enjoy myself without them breathing down my neck all the time.” The idea pleased her immensely, for she longed to escape the pressure upon her to find a suitor, even if just for one night.

“Well, it certainly seems that way on the surface, but I have learned that despite people’s disguises, the night will be full of secret assignations and lovers’ trysts being made between couples who wish to be together,” Diana assured her excitedly. “It is so romantic, and I do so wish to be a part of that. It would be wonderful to meet a gentleman I like enough to spend the rest of my life with,” she mused with a dreamy expression.

“I wish I could share in your enthusiasm for finding a husband, Di,” Cassandra said with a hint of sadness. “I just cannot seem to get excited at the prospect of being married this Season, unless it is a love match, of course. And however much I wish for it, I feel certain that is not going to happen.” She sighed and summoned a smile, not wishing to let down her friend by being gloomy. “But this time, I shall be happy to just enjoy the freedom and adventure of being anonymous, hidden behind my

mask.”

\*\* \*

“So, my dear chap, how has your day been so far?” Terrence asked Malcom when his cousin joined him in their favorite snug in the back of Wildman’s Coffee House on Bedford Street. Malcom saw his cousin was already halfway through a cup of coffee.

“Awful. In fact, the whole week has been objectionable. Just a series of tedious business meetings, one after the other,” Malcom grumbled, settling into his seat and summoning a waiter with a single glance. He paused briefly to take in the packed, low-ceilinged room, over which a thick pall of smoke hung like a storm cloud. The buzz of conversation and rustle of newspapers filled the air, as did the earthy yet pleasant smell of ground coffee. “I feel exhausted by London already. I wish I could just go home and forget this blasted ball tonight.”

“No such luck old man,” Terrence told him, taking out his cigarette case and offering Malcom a smoke. He shook his head, so Terrence went ahead and lit up, contributing to the fug overhead.

“There is little enough air in here as it is,” Malcom complained, taking up his cup and blowing across the steaming black liquid to cool it before taking a few mouthfuls of the bitter brew. “I shall need a bucket of this stuff if I am to stay awake this evening,” he added.

“Then you’d best make sure you do, else Madeleine will be after you, and you do not want that,” Terrence said mildly, puffing on his cigarette. “How did your business meetings go, by the way? Everything shipshape with the Locksley coffers? Cash piling up nicely, is it?”

“I cannot complain,” Malcom said with a shrug.

“But you will.”

Malcom had to smile, briefly. “It is just that the weight of duty feels heavier on my shoulders with each passing year, Terrence. It is indeed a great honour to hold the title of a duke, but the continual effort required to manage all of one’s responsibilities can be truly draining. In all honesty, I’d rather be—”

“Back in the country, at Lindenhall Manor, hidden away in your study in peace and solitude. I know,” Terrence filled in.

“I know you are mocking me, but that is how I feel. London, well, as I say, it exhausts me. The incessant demands to meet people, to act in particular ways, to attend ridiculous social events and pretend one is enjoying oneself. ”

“Oh, the sheer human suffering involved is immense, I know,” his cousin said wryly.

“It is all right for you,” Malcom replied, frowning. “You are a regular social butterfly. You love all the nonsense. I know it is hard for you to understand how just being here brings back such painful memories for me. I think I would rather go to war.”

“I may mock you, Malcom, but with the best of intentions. And I think I do have some understanding of how you feel when you speak of painful memories. That is why I am still putting up with you when everybody else has abandoned you. Apart from Maddy, of course.” Terrence stubbed out his cigarette and drank his remaining coffee before signaling for another to be brought.

“I know I am a trial, Terrence, and I am very grateful that you still tolerate me. You are a true friend despite your appalling sense of humor. I use the term humor loosely,” Malcom told him, meaning every word. “Now,” he added, keen to move the focus of the conversation from himself to his cousin. “ How have things been with you since we last spoke?” He was amazed to see his cousin assume a dreamy

expression.

“Oh, only something life-changing,” Terrence said, smiling.

“Life-changing? In what way?” Malcom asked curiously, sipping his coffee.

“I thought you would never ask,” Terrence replied, leaning his elbows on the table and looking animated. I was at Lady Corsham’s ball the other night, and I happened to meet the most enchanting young lady.”

“Oh?” Malcom said, a little skeptical since Terrence fell in love at least twice every Season.

“Yes, she is utterly charming. I feel I may have met my soulmate at last after a lifetime spent adrift in a sea of shallow flirtations,” Terrence mused.

“What a lot of hogwash you do speak sometimes,” Malcom scoffed. “Soulmate? I do not believe there is any such thing.”

Terrence sat up, ready to defend himself. “Good Lord, man, your cynicism is quite chilling. How terrible it must be to live in your dark world, bereft of all joy and romance. I am glad to have a heart that seeks the happiness only love between a man and a woman can bring. Carry on like this, and I shall not invite you to the wedding.”

“Only naïve fools dare indulge in such fantastical notions of fairytale bonds of love. Soulmate, pah!” Malcom scoffed.

“Well, I am proud to be such a fool, in that case.” Terrence looked at him through narrowed eyes and smiled. “We shall see what occurs at the Collins ball tonight, shall we? Perchance you may meet a lady there who has the ability to melt that icebound heart of yours. Your future wife even. Then you might change your tune, cousin.”

“The chances of that happening are slim to none,” Malcom assured him confidently as his second coffee arrived.

“In that case, you won’t mind having a little wager with me on the matter.” Terrence said, a challenge in his eyes. “Fifty pounds says you meet your future wife tonight.”

“You know I don’t usually indulge in such childish behaviour,” Malcom replied drily. “But on this occasion, I shall make an exception, for I am absolutely certain that I shall be proved right. That fifty pounds shall pay for a nice dinner for us.”

\*\*\*

A few hours later and the Collins masquerade ball was in full swing. Cassandra, still puffing beneath her mask from her last dance—an energetic country reel—snatched a flute of champagne from the tray of a passing footman. She sipped at it gratefully, the bubbles tickling her nose.

The bubbles are more exciting than any of my dance partners tonight, she reflected with a strange sense of disappointment. She wished she could share in Diana’s optimism when it came to finding a suitable beau this Season. But so far, no gentleman at the ball—whomever he might be beneath his disguise—had possessed that magical charisma she dreamed of finding in a suitor. And none had professed more than a general liking for the musical arts.

As a new dance began, she wound her way through the heaving throng, towards the refreshment table at the fringes of the ballroom, trying to spot Diana. The hour was close when they had agreed to meet if they were separated, to go and view Lady Madeleine’s reputedly spectacular garden. But she could see no mermaid among the lingering ladies. Guessing her friend was on the dance floor and would be for some time, and finding the stuffy, hot room stifling, she headed for one of the open sets of French doors lining one wall of the ballroom.

She stepped through onto a wide terrace with stone balustrades, where quite a few people were already taking the air. Leaning on the balustrades, she looked out over the garden as far as she could see, taking deep, refreshing breaths.

“Oh, how beautiful it is!” she breathed, spellbound by the almost maze-like tangle of winding pathways and shrubbery that lined a grand torch-lit avenue. It stretched away to a large fountain in the distance. Everything was subtly lit by a rainbow of coloured, concealed lamps, giving the whole a magical air to Cassandra’s eyes. Spellbound by the sight, she had an idea.

While I am waiting, why should I not take the opportunity to do a little exploring by myself? Finding no objection in her own mind, she placed her glass carefully down on the balustrade and headed for the main steps leading down to the garden.

The first thing she did on stepping down was to pull off her mask. It had grown increasingly hot to wear and was tickling her face. She slid it along her wrist, where it hung safely from its ribbon. The fresh air was like nectar, and she breathed it in, suddenly catching the scent of roses in the air. Great yew hedges, neatly trimmed, made high green walls on either side of the grand avenue. They were punctuated by shadowy archways, each leading off to other parts of the garden. Cassandra was captivated.

Following her nose, she took the left-hand archway and was delighted to find herself in an extensive rose garden. Smiling to herself, she walked amid the softly illuminated, carefully tended displays of blooms, delicately running her fingertips across their silken petals now and then. The temptation to feel the grass beneath her bare feet suddenly overcame her. Propriety made her look around to see if anyone was watching, but there was no one. So, she slipped off her satin dancing pumps and stockings and sank her tired feet into the soft turf beneath with a grateful sigh of relief.

Feeling a glorious sense of freedom, she balled up her stockings inside her slippers and dangled them in one hand, along with her mask, as she continued to wander carefree through the various garden rooms. She was not worried about getting lost, for in the quietude of the night, she simply followed the plashing sound of the water from the fountain. Its melody drew her like a siren song.

After several long minutes, she came to the end of the grand avenue, which gave way to the grand centrepiece, the brightly lit, ornately carved marble fountain. In the Italian style, it featured three comely, half-naked stone nymphs pouring an endless stream of foaming water from their large pots into a stone pool about thirty feet wide, assisted by a cluster of fat-cheeked cherubim. The sculpture presided majestically from the centre of a large, paved area scattered with stone benches and classical statues. Cassandra stood entranced, breathing in the lavender scented air. Then, unable to resist temptation, she hitched up her skirts and broke into an impulsive run towards it, heedless of her bare feet on the stone beneath.



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:08 am*

Behind his guise of a falcon, Malcom feared he might pass out from the feeling of suffocation threatening to overwhelm him. The wretched mask was driving him half mad, even if it allowed him to navigate the tumultuous social sea of the ball surrounding him anonymously.

He was standing at the fringes of the throng, a brandy in his hand, glad to take a break from the enforced dancing. He bitterly resented being forced into participating.

“Now, Malcom, I expect you to do your duty and dance with as many young ladies as you can. Remember, this ball is in your parents’ honour,” Madeleine had told him on arrival.

“How can I forget, Madeleine, when you keep reminding me?” he had replied with sarcasm, dreading the evening ahead. He told himself that Madeleine could not understand how the whole thing reminded him of his terrible loss, and the gnawing guilt he still felt over it. Madeleine had no idea what a sacrifice he was making out of respect for her and his poor parents.

Just being at the ball felt like torture, and worse still was having to endure the featherbrained young women he was forced to dance with. In contrast, Terrence had gaily thrown himself into the proceedings and was even then spinning a young lady disguised as a rabbit around the floor. Malcom sipped his drink and scowled, his impatience mounting at the useless charade of an evening.

I have to get out of here and get some fresh air. I need to breathe!

Just as he turned and made for the exit to the terrace, a portly gentleman bumped into

him, sloshing pungent brandy all over his coat sleeve and hand.

“I beg your pardon, Your Grace,” the man said apologetically, looking stricken.

Malcom bit back an oath. “It is of no import,” he replied brusquely, striding towards the French doors, nodding dismissively over his shoulder at the stammering apologies trailing behind. To his disappointment, he found quite a few people out on the terrace. He tore off his mask, stuffing it into his coat pocket. Craving solitude, he quickly ran down the steps into the garden, turning left at the bottom and making for a distant, unlit pathway that he could stroll down unmolested and have a quiet smoke, perhaps by the fountain if no one was about. He fancied the melody of the softly rushing water might soothe his jangled nerves.

As he walked leisurely along, enjoying the fresh, cool, scented air, he wrung out the brandy from his cuff as best he could, hoping it would soon evaporate and not leave too much of an unsightly stain. He briefly hoped the pungent smell of alcohol might convince some of the ladies he was a sot and put them off. Encountering no one, he made his way along a green alley towards the fountain, choosing to stand in the shadows, partially concealed by foliage, though he still had a good view of the fountain. The space was deserted.

Enjoying a sense of respite, he reached for his cigar case. If I must endure this interminable evening, he thought, I can at least allow myself some small personal pleasure to sustain me. He lifted the glowing cigar to his lips and stepped out onto the paved area, heading towards the fountain. Suddenly, he heard the light thud of footsteps on stone to his left, as if someone was running up on him. Blast, he thought to himself, annoyed at being discovered, turning with a scowl to see who was coming.

\*\*\*

Cassandra had never felt so free, not since childhood, at least. She fancied herself a wild horse as she raced along, her black hair flying, clutching her skirts in one hand as she charged towards the fountain. Then, to her horror, a man suddenly stepped out in front of her from one of the pathways, blocking her path. It was too late to stop, but she tried, only succeeding in tripping over her feet and flying helplessly forwards. She grimaced and closed her eyes in anticipation of the impact.

But it never came. Instead, she found herself caught in midair by a pair of strong arms that wrapped around her waist and prevented her from hitting the ground. With the breath knocked out of her, gripped by panic, she was next clasped against a broad, warm, decidedly masculine chest. Winded and horrified by her own recklessness, she looked up into the face of a tall, startlingly handsome man with black curly hair and piercing blue eyes, eyes which were as filled with shock as her own.

As if things could not get any worse just then, she heard voices, and both she and the gentleman holding her looked to their left, only to see a group of people emerging from the grand avenue. Cassandra's heart fell to see one of them was her mother, and the other their hostess, Lady Madeleine.

Realizing the gravity of the situation, she frantically tried to pull away before they were caught in such a compromising position. But as she did so, she found the braid at the front of her dress had caught on one of the gentleman's waistcoat buttons and refused to give way. The gentleman was trying to separate himself from her as well, a look of desperation on his face as the group of people approached.

But all efforts proved in vain, for there they were, stuck together in full view of the onlookers, whose lively chatter stopped instantly as they caught sight of the couple. Cassandra's blood ran cold to think of the scandalous spectacle they must present.

"Cassandra, what on earth do you think you are doing!?" came her mother's familiar voice, full of alarm, from beneath her mask. An array of masked guests in fancy

costumes stood watching from behind. Cassandra's heart plummeted to the floor.

Oh, Lord! How am I going to explain this?

\*\*\*

Malcom felt queasy as he finally extricated himself from the young woman's person and backed away. He stared down at his ruined cigar, which had landed some feet away, still burning, and realized at once that there was no getting out of the situation easily. It was the sort of situation that, though it was perfectly innocent, would be considered both scandalous and compromising by the onlookers and society as a whole. It was the kind that could destroy reputations and only be put right by a hasty marriage between two people who had never even met before.

"Malcom, whatever are you doing?!" he heard Madeleine ask in a shocked voice from behind the mask of a beautiful white feline.

"Malcom?" the young woman gasped, staring at him with an expression of what could only be termed horror. "Malcom Locksley? The Beast of Lindenhall?"

Malcom frowned at her and appealed to his cousin instead. "I assure you, I can explain, Madeleine," he hastened to say, forcing down his panic. "The young lady ran into me, and we collided, that is all. It was an accident."

Mutters of disapproval and disbelief ran around the small group of onlookers, all hidden behind their various disguises. He looked to the young lady for support, but she was gaping at him, her eyes wide.

"Come away, Cassandra," one of the women, he assumed the girl's mother, demanded shrilly from behind her Venetian-style mask, advancing and grabbing the young woman by her arm before pulling her away, back towards the house. The others

hurried after them, already abuzz with gossip, he could tell, while Madeleine came up to him.

She removed her mask and looked at him with a shrewd yet sympathetic expression.

“Well, you have certainly done it now, Cousin. This is a highly compromising situation and bound to cause a significant scandal.”

“But it was all an accident, I tell you,” Malcom protested, filled with a cold sense of dread. “I merely came here for a quiet smoke, and she just collided into me as if from nowhere. I swear, I have never seen that young woman before in my life.”

“That matters not to society,” Madeleine said not unkindly. Malcom squirmed inwardly. He well knew the likely outcome of being caught in such a situation, but he vowed to himself to do everything he could to avoid it.

“There may be only one path to preserving the family’s honour on both sides after being caught in such a disparaging position,” she said, turning his blood cold. He balled his fists in frustrated fury. It was all Madeleine’s fault that he was there at all. “A proposal of marriage may prove the only prudent recourse,” his cousin added. “I had better go back to the house. The Granthams will need careful handling. Oh, what a mess you have gotten yourself into, Malcom!”

“The Granthams?” he inquired irritably, hating them already, furious at the young woman for not looking where she was going.

“The Granthams, the Marquess and Marchioness of Granshire,” Madeleine explained. “The young lady so conspicuously found in your embrace is their elder daughter Cassandra, I believe.”

“Oh, God. I am not marrying her, Madeleine. I absolutely refuse to be forced into a

union with someone I do not know, just to satisfy the gossips. And I am sure she will feel the same!" he cried.

"As you well know, that counts for nothing," Madeleine told him. "We shall discuss it later. Now, I must go and inspect the damage." She turned away and headed back to the house, leaving Malcom standing alone, wondering what, or rather who, had just hit him.

This wretched Cassandra Grantham, that's what!

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:08 am*

Back at the Grantham residence some hours later, the drawing room thrummed with palpable tension.

“Oh, dear Lord, what is to become of us?” Lady Granshire wailed, pacing the Aubusson rug and dabbing a handkerchief to her temples in distraction.

“How could you allow such a thing to happen, Cassandra? And with Lady Madeleine’s own cousin, the Duke of Lindenhall, at her own ball too! Do you not understand how indulging such childish recklessness has put our family’s stainless reputation in jeopardy?”

“And what about my reputation?” a tearful Maggie chimed in from her chair, a handkerchief mopping her tears. “She has all but ruined my marital prospects with her selfishness, just as I feared she would,” she moaned, shooting her sister an accusing glance.

“Indeed, along with her own,” their mother pointed out as she continued her pacing.

“But I have told you a hundred times, it was an accident. The Duke merely stepped out in front of me, I tripped, and he caught me. That is all,” Cassandra exclaimed, desperate to get through to them. “You ought to be glad I was not injured. I have never laid eyes on the Duke before, nor has he laid eyes on me. Why will you not listen to me?”

“Injured, you silly girl? It is us whom you have injured with your wild ways. You have made us a subject of common gossip. No doubt this will all be plastered all over the scandal sheets tomorrow morning,” Lady Granshire told her. “Oh, I shall never

recover from the ignominy.”

“We can but hope the Duke does the decent thing,” Lord Granshire said in a cracked voice, going to pour himself another stiff brandy.

“I pray so, Husband,” his wife moaned, finally ceasing her pacing and sitting down on the sofa by the hearth. “I suppose we can only be grateful he is a duke and not some common upstart.” She fixed a stern warning look on Cassandra. “And if he does propose, Daughter, you will think yourself lucky to accept without hesitation.”

“Yes, Mama,” Cassandra murmured, overcome with remorse. Her heavy heart sank with the certainty that a refusal of the so-called Beast of Lindenhall’s potential proposal after such a scandalous encounter was unthinkable and would spell consignment to spinsterhood. At that moment, she knew that such a proposal, though a horrifying prospect, was the best she could hope for. Besides, what else could she do to repair the damage to Maggie’s marital ambitions but pray the Duke would do what society demanded?

\*\*\*

“Just pack my things. I will be leaving for the country as soon as everything is ready, Carlton. There is not a moment to waste,” Malcom barked as he paced about the house, tired and distracted after a sleepless night. He felt trapped and was silently praying that a swift departure to the country would enable him to escape the entanglement Lady Cassandra Grantham’s unexpected antics had now ensnared him in.

He had left the ball without going back into the house, not wanting to be embroiled in a scene. Early that morning, he had seen the morning papers, with their scandal sheets emblazoned with tawdry headlines citing the unfortunate events of the previous night. He could almost hear the voracious gossip that was undoubtedly already swirling



about London's drawing rooms, and he shuddered, physically pained to see the accidental encounter painted in lurid shades of scandal.

He knew very well that the proper thing would be to go that day to Lady Cassandra's father and make a proposal of marriage. It was the only way her reputation could be saved. However, though he felt a coward, he could not bear facing the scrutiny such a hurried match would draw.

And neither do I wish to end up bound to some silly socialite who recoiled the second she glanced up to find it was me, the Beast of Lindenhall, who had saved her from a nasty spill. And at the cost of my own reputation too! Better to leave London as soon as possible and avoid all this unpleasantness. None shall fault me, surely, for leaving the young woman to whatever future her family manages to salvage from the aftermath of her imprudent behaviour .

However, he was just about to step outside to leave, his carriage waiting, when his stomach twisted at the sight of Madeleine's carriage pulling up behind it. Gritting his teeth in irritation at the intrusion delaying his departure, and with a fair idea of why she was there, Malcom headed back into the drawing room, waiting impatiently for Carlton to show her in.

The instant Madeleine entered the room, she fixed him with a pointed stare, making him feel very uncomfortable.

"I see you are preparing to leave," she said.

"Yes, and I am in a hurry," he replied, impatient for her to leave.

"And we all know why, Cousin. But before you go, may I remind you that your Mama and Papa would expect better from you than this? I do not think they would approve of you simply abandoning an innocent lady to scandal and derision in such

an ungallant manner.”

“I am not acquainted with the lady, so I cannot make such a pronouncement on her character,” he said, his conscience pricking him.

“That is precisely why you at least owe her the courtesy of speaking to her family before making any rash decisions, such as bolting back to the country.”

Malcom sighed and ran his hand through his hair as long-buried shards of guilt and grief resurfaced inside him once more. He suddenly remembered with cutting clarity the awful stormy day years prior when he had insisted upon his parents making haste to London, just to admire the newly purchased town-house he was so eager to show them. But in a freak accident, their carriage had crashed and overturned just a few miles from Mayfair, snatching both their lives abruptly away. Malcom had blamed himself ever since that his youthful impatience had caused the tragedy.

Do I have the right to condemn Lady Cassandra outright when my own actions have wrought such irreparable harm?

“Malcom, I know all this is hateful to you, but you must see that avoiding the discomfort of a forthright discussion with her family serves only your selfish interests and has nothing to do with justice. For the sake of yourself, our family, and Lady Cassandra and her family, you must do the honourable thing, no matter how unsavoury you find the prospect of such an alliance,” Madeleine insisted calmly but firmly, her eyes boring into his. “You cannot simply run away.”

Her arrows hit their mark, and Malcom felt the fight go out of him. The thought of his parents looking down on him and knowing how they would disapprove of his plan to shirk his responsibility made his chest ache.

“All right,” he said finally, feeling his protected world crumbling around him. “I will

do as you say.”

“Good. That is settled then. Do try to keep in mind that the Granthams are a respectable family, and the young lady in question is the daughter of a marquess, not a serving wench to be abandoned on a whim. I hope to see a happy announcement of your engagement to Lady Cassandra in the newspapers in the coming days,” Madeleine told him archly as she swept out of the room. Malcom watched her go with a growing sense that cruel fate was toying with him and that the solitary life he had so carefully built over the last six years was soon to be irrevocably ruined.

\*\*\*

“I am so sorry I was dancing and failed to meet with you to visit the gardens as we had planned, Cassie,” Diana said as the two girls walked in the grounds of Cassandra’s house the following morning. “I feel as though what happened was all my fault. If I had been with you, none of this would have occurred.” She sounded very upset, and Cassandra was deeply touched, linking her arm in Diana’s.

“It was certainly not your fault but mine entirely. If I had not been so impatient and gone exploring on my own, well, it could all have been avoided,” she assured her friend with a heavy heart.

“Do you think the Duke will come today with a proposal?” her friend asked as they headed back to the house.

“I do not know. Half of me hopes he will, and the other half hopes he won’t,” Cassandra admitted, feeling close to tears again but hiding it for Diana’s sake. “But Mama and Papa have told me in no uncertain terms that if he does, I am to accept.”

“Sadly, it seems there is no other way,” Diana agreed sadly. “But perhaps it will not be so bad. He is a duke, after all, and that means you will be a duchess. You could

hardly have hoped for more. I do not see how anyone can object to that.”

“Except that I do not wish to be married, especially not to a complete stranger,” Cassandra said with a deep sigh torn from her heart. “And especially not to the Beast of Lindenhall.”

“That is just a silly nickname the Ton have given him. I am sure he is a perfect gentleman.”

“He is a recluse with a reputedly bad temper,” Cassandra pointed out with some bitterness, silently cursing her own wayward behaviour for her predicament. “But I have no choice but to accept him as my husband if he offers for my hand.”

In silence, they walked around to the front of the house, where Diana’s carriage was waiting for her.

“Well, I am sorry to leave you now, my dear, but I am meeting Mama for luncheon at one,” Diana told her, her eyes full of concern as they made their farewells. “Send me a note as soon as you can if anything happens.”

“I will,” Cassandra promised before watching and waving, as Diana got into her carriage and drove away. She went back into the house and up to her chambers, too distracted to do anything but lay on her bed and worry. She must have dozed off, for she awoke when her maid knocked on the door.

“What is it, Anna?” Cassandra asked, rubbing her eyes.

“His Lordship requests your presence in his study, milady,” Anna told her, “at once.”

“Oh?” Cassandra rose from the bed, frowning. “I wonder what he wants. All right. Please tell him I will be down directly.”

“Very well, milady.” Anna went to do as she was asked. Puzzling over what could be the reason for her father summoning her and having the feeling it could not be good, Cassandra spent a few minutes tidying her appearance before presenting herself at the study door.

Taking a deep breath to steel herself for another telling off, she knocked timidly.

“Come in,” came her father’s voice from within. She opened the door and stepped inside, stunned to see her father standing with a tall, dark-haired figure who immediately turned and pinned her with a pair of bright blue eyes which she instantly recognized.

He is here, the Duke!

She felt like a deer caught in the light of a poacher’s lantern when he bowed to her and brushed the back of her glove with his lips, seemingly the perfect gentleman. But the expression on his face when he straightened up was cold, and he gave off an air of barely restrained anger and awkwardness. Panic rose inside her, and she found she could hardly think with his penetrating gaze resting on her.

“Lady Cassandra. I am pleased to make your acquaintance,” he said in deep, rumbling baritone she had to admit was not at all unpleasant. A part of her also noticed again how good-looking he was, with his dark curls and finely sculpted features. His physique was tall and athletic, with broad shoulders, and his clothes were perfectly tailored. But looks, she knew, could be very deceiving.

Remembering her manners, she curtsied. “Thank you, Your Grace. Likewise.”

“The Duke here has made an offer for your hand, Cassandra,” her father suddenly declared with a bluntness that was painful to her. “And I have given the union my blessing.” He gave her a warning look.

Cassandra saw it and looked into the Duke's cold blue eyes, her heart racing in her chest. From the depths of her being, with a crushing sense of impending doom, she pulled up the necessary words she knew her father wanted to hear and croaked them out.

"Your Grace, I am honoured, and I-I accept your kind offer."

"I am honoured, My Lady," the Duke intoned, sounding for all the world as if his execution had just been announced.

"We shall be applying for a special license," her father told her with an air of distaste. Cassandra squirmed inwardly, for she knew the social stigma such hastily arranged affairs held for an upright man such as him. "The wedding shall be in three days' time, so make ready. You may leave us now."

"Thank you, Papa," Cassandra managed to murmur, her legs turning to jelly. She was shaking and feared she would not get out of the room without collapsing. But once again, her upbringing prevailed, and she curtsied to her prospective husband once more. "Good day, Your Grace," she said. The man nodded, not a trace of a smile on his face as she turned and tried not to run headlong from the study.

She ran into her room and threw herself on the bed, letting the floodgates open. Sobs shook her body as she envisioned all the years stretching endlessly ahead being trapped at Lindenhall, shackled to a husband who surely must hate the sight of her.

This is my punishment for daring to enjoy a few minutes of exquisite freedom, to be forever cut off from the music and liveliness of London. Oh, how shall I live?!

\*\*\*

"In three days' time, I shall be a married man," Malcom said with an air of stunned

disbelief as he sat with Terrence in his cousin's study, already on his second brandy. "I feel as though I am about to begin a very long prison sentence."

"I know. It must be hard to take in, old man," Terrence told him sympathetically. "But at least it is all settled now, and there will be no more scandal now you've done the right thing. I must confess, I am quite astonished to discover that you took the plunge. I honestly expected to find you had already left for the country."

"I was ready to go, but then Madeleine arrived, told me what a disappointment such behaviour would be to my parents," Malcom said bitterly, sipping his drink.

"Yes, I thought she might persuade you otherwise," his cousin admitted. "Still, no use crying over spilt milk, eh? You've got to make the best of it now." Malcom gave a grunt of assent. Terrence went on, "Perhaps with time and patience the match will turn out to be not . . . wholly undesirable from your point of view."

"If you had seen the horror on her face at the prospect of being forced to wed the Beast of Lindenhall you would not say so," Malcom assured him. "The only thing uniting us at present is a mutual dislike and an unwilling adherence to duty." He sighed heavily before holding out his glass and adding, "Give me another brandy, will you?"

Terrence obliged, and as he handed the glass to Malcom he said, "I suppose this is not the right moment to claim my fifty pounds, is it?"

If looks could kill, the one Malcom gave him then would have left his cousin a small pile of smouldering ashes on the hearth rug.

\*\*\*

Three days later, Cassandra found herself standing woodenly, clutching a small

bouquet of white roses, inside a small chapel hastily adorned for the impending nuptials. It was an intimate ceremony, with only her family, Diana, Lady Madeleine, and Viscount Lavington, whom she had learned was the Duke's best friend, in attendance. She felt numb, barely hearing the vicar's drone over the roar in her ears as he stood side by side with the tall, dark stranger fate decreed she must wed.

She repeated the solemn marital vows by rote, having to be nudged gently from behind by her mother to complete them. All the while, she did her best to avoid meeting the Duke's hooded gaze, which she could feel now and then boring down into her from the side.

An uncomfortable silence reigned when the vicar pronounced them man and wife, and she barely noticed when he added, "You may now kiss the bride." So, she was taken aback by the butterfly touch that grazed her cheek as her new husband fulfilled what she believed he thought his unpleasant but necessary duty.

The subdued wedding breakfast, passed in similar awkwardness. The bride and groom barely spoke to one another, and the congratulations they received from friends and family sounded hollow and fabricated to Cassandra's ears. All too soon for her liking, it was time to bid the guests farewell and set off alone with the stranger beside her, to her new home in the country.

"Remember at all times, Cassandra, you are a duchess now, so try and behave like one and be a credit to us, will you?" her mother whispered in her ear as they embraced tearfully, while the Duke shook hands with her father, a stoic expression on his face.

"I will try, Mama," she promised, a lump of misery in her throat.

"It is just as well you are married now, Sister," Maggie murmured as they hugged goodbye, "and once the scandal has blown over, I am sure I shall be proud of you



now that I can tell all my friends you are a duchess.”

“Thank you for reminding me, Maggie. I shall miss you when I am gone to my new home,.” Cassandra replied, meaning every word.

“Try and do your best to be a good wife, Cassie,” her father told her sadly. “There is naught that can be done to change the situation now, so you must make the best of it and try to get on together.”

“Try to be happy, dearest, and write to me,” Diana said as the two girls hugged each other tightly and exchanged kisses.

“I promise I shall,” Cassandra told her before turning to her family once more and saying as brightly as she could, “I hope I shall be able to visit you all very soon.” But her words were met by an awkward silence. It struck dread into her heart.

Fortunately, Anna came up to her just then and bobbed a curtsy. “Many congratulations, milady,” she said with a tentative smile. “I hope you will be very happy. I shall finish packing your things and travel up to be with you tomorrow. I do hope you will be well served until then.”

“I am sure I shall survive, Anna, and thank you for your well wishes,” Cassandra told her kindly. She was relieved that she would at least have one friend with her at her strange new home. “I shall see you tomorrow. Safe journey.”

“It is time for us to depart,” the Duke interjected, offering her his arm. She took it, allowing herself to be led to the carriage and helped inside, feeling like a lamb to the slaughter. The Duke got inside and sat opposite her. Cassandra did not look at him but kept her eyes on her family and Diana through the window. As the carriage rolled away, she waved them all goodbye, choking back the tears she did not want her new husband to see.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:08 am*

The journey of something over two and a half hours passed in virtual silence, with both Cassandra and the Duke apparently tongue-tied. They exchanged a few thin smiles whenever their eyes happened to meet and agreed the weather was fair for the time of year. Still clutching her bouquet as if for comfort, Cassandra felt her cheeks blazing whenever their glances clashed and they both looked sharply away, out of their respective windows. The tension was almost suffocating.

Yet Cassandra could not help but steal furtive glances at the Duke's undeniably handsome but stern profile as he stared out of the window, wondering what sort of beast truly lurked beneath his hard, chiseled facade. How many lonely years housed under his governance must I endure before discovering the truth?

Suppressing a shudder at the thought, she turned her focus to the trees and meadows that had replaced her beloved London's streets as the coach carried her irrevocably into an uncertain future.

Several hours later, they drove through a pretty village and then turned through some spectacular wrought iron gates and up a long winding drive.

"We are here," the Duke suddenly said. "This is Lindenhall Manor." Cassandra looked out of the window at the rolling, green countryside of her new abode.

"The park is very lovely," she said, her eyes suddenly widening as a huge, mansion of grey stone several storeys high, with many glittering windows and a forest of chimneys, rose up before them. Its austere facade filled Cassandra with a sense of foreboding, and she shivered involuntarily.

The carriage finally came to a halt on the circular gravel drive outside the magnificent portico, and Cassandra alighted hesitantly from the carriage, handed down by Malcom. His piercing blue eyes seemed to linger on hers a moment too long, and she felt a strange fluttering in her chest that she could not account for at his touch.

Their gaze was broken when the sound of the huge front doors opening startled her. She looked up as they swung open, revealing a line of servants awaiting them. Filled with nerves, she took Malcom's proffered arm, and he led her up the steps. Cassandra entered the spacious hall of her new home. She felt deeply uncomfortable with all the eyes of the servants upon her, however bright their smiles of greeting.

The butler, a tall, balding, pleasant-faced man, smiled at her warmly, as did the matronly lady by his side. The enormous bunch of keys hanging from her belt told Cassandra she was the housekeeper.

"This is Carlton, my butler and secretary," the duke told her, gesturing with his eyes at the butler. Carlton redoubled his smile as he bowed low.

"Your Grace, welcome to Lindenhall," he said.

"Thank you, that is kind," Cassandra replied, unused to such deference.

"And this is Mrs. Brown, my-our housekeeper," the Duke went on, indicating the woman with the keys.

"Your Grace," Mrs. Brown said with a deep curtsy to Cassandra. "My name is Hannah. We are all so very pleased to have you here," she said, her smile apparently genuine. "I do hope you will soon settle into your new home."

"Thank you, Mrs. Brown, I mean, Hannah." Cassandra said, warmed by the woman's welcoming expression. Then followed a short, nerve-racking interlude when she was

introduced to all the other servants, while the Duke loitered, radiating silent impatience. She was glad when the introductions were over, and the servants dispersed.

“Mrs. Brown, will you show Her Grace up to her chambers, please? We shall dine at eight,” the Duke said.

“Of course, Your Grace.” With that, to Cassandra’s relief, he stalked off down a hallway and vanished. While footmen continued to bring in the luggage from the carriage, Mrs. Brown escorted Cassandra up the elegant sweeping staircase and showed her to her chambers, comprising a luxurious suite of bedchamber, dressing room, and private anteroom, the new duchess’s inner sanctum.

“Goodness, it is very large,” Cassandra burst out when Mrs. Brown ushered her into the main room. She looked around at the imposing furniture and four-poster bed. The room had high, molded ceilings depicting flights of cherubim and large windows that let in plenty of late afternoon light. The air was filled by the scent coming from a large display of pink roses.

“As befits your station, Your Grace,” the smiling housekeeper told her. “I do hope you will find everything to your satisfaction, but you need only ask if there is anything further you wish for your comfort.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Brown, but I am sure I shall be perfectly comfortable. I appreciate your kind efforts. The roses are especially lovely, and it is a very pretty room.” She did not like to admit she was unused to having such space at her disposal and felt very small standing on the large rug in the middle of it all.

“Shall I have some tea and refreshments sent up for you, Your Grace? I am sure you have had a tiring journey and would like to rest before dinner.”

“Oh, yes, please, that would be lovely,” Cassandra replied, running her fingertips up the silk bed curtains with admiration. “It has been rather a . . . long day.” The bed looked very comfortable, and she longed to lay down on it and not go down to dine with her frightening husband.

“Very good, Your Grace. I shall send up a maid to attend to the unpacking too and help you to dress. Will you wish to bathe before dinner?”

“I suppose so,” Cassandra replied, suddenly alert to the fact that it was her wedding night. Panic gripped her as she wondered if the Duke would insist on claiming his conjugal rights. Perspiration broke out on her brow. “Um, Mrs. Brown, where are the Duke’s apartments?”

“Oh, just down the hallway a little,” the housekeeper told her. So, they were to have separate chambers. Good. She resolved on the spot that she had no intention of sharing a bed with a complete stranger, husband or not, and that she would retire to her chambers as soon as she could after dinner and make sure to lock the door against any unwelcome visits, claiming illness if necessary.

“If that is all, Your Grace, I shall go and have the tea prepared and fetch the maid.” Mrs. Brown smiled from the threshold.

“Yes, of course. I shall be fine by myself for a while,” Cassandra told her. As soon as the housekeeper had left and shut the door behind her, she dropped onto the bed.

I must remember from now on that I am no longer plain old Cassandra Grantham. I am now Her Grace, Lady Cassandra Locksley, the Duchess of Lindenhall. Or rather, wife to the Beast of Lindenhall. Oh, Lord!

\*\*\*

I suppose I should be thankful she doesn't chatter away like a lot of young women, Malcom was telling himself, hiding away in his study. He felt safe there for the moment, but he knew the respite was only temporary. In truth, he felt far off kilter, knowing he now had a wife invading his previously safe, solitary bachelor existence. The radical change left him feeling as if he was standing on the edge of a precipice, and he had to be careful not to topple over the edge and be lost.

He poured himself a generous brandy, feeling he deserved it after navigating the horrific social ordeal of the wedding and wedding breakfast. Though he had to grudgingly admit his new wife had looked very pretty indeed. She had a neat figure, long fair curls, and unusual hazel-green eyes, and she looked even prettier when she blushed, which, he had noticed, was often.

It doesn't matter how pretty she is, you fool, the important thing is you are now stuck with her, through no fault of your own!

What bothered him most at that moment was how on earth he was going to get through a whole dinner with her that evening, and every evening after that, for the rest of his life. He hoped she was not expecting him to do his husbandly duty that night because he had no intention of doing anything of the sort with a complete stranger. He resolved to repel any advances she might make towards him on that score, wishing to make it perfectly clear.

He gave not a single thought as to how she might feel about any of it, merely resenting the fact that her presence meant he could no longer dine informally by the fire in his study, wearing his favorite old coat, as he liked to do. No, the dining room, which had not seen a guest since his parents' funeral wake, had been polished and aired and was at that very moment being laid for a formal dinner.

At seven, with an air of imminent doom, he went up to his chambers to dress for dinner. In his guise as valet, Carlton duly arrived, along with footmen and cans of hot

water for Malcom's bath.

"I trust the ceremony went well today, Your Grace," Carlton said eventually as he helped Malcom into his clean clothing. "All of us below stairs wish you and Her Grace our heartiest congratulations for a happy future."

"Thank you, Carlton. It all went tolerably well, considering the circumstances."

"It has been rather whirlwind, has it not, Your Grace?" Carlton ventured, tying his master's cravat with flair.

"More like a hurricane, I would say," Malcom replied, frowning into the looking glass at his own grim-faced reflection.

"Perhaps so, Your Grace. I expect we shall all soon become accustomed to having Her Grace's feminine influence about the place, what with you being a bachelor so long and rather set in your ways."

"Am I so set in my ways?" Malcom asked, not liking to believe it.

"In my experience, when one only has oneself to please, one becomes a little stuck in the grooves of familiarity, Your Grace. I heard a learned gentleman say once that a great change in one's living situation may be invigorating to the spirit and, therefore, good for the health."

"Well, whoever he was, he was likely a fool. I do not feel in the least invigorated." Malcom shrugged into his plum-colored velvet coat and shot his cuffs, while Carlton used a clothes brush to smooth out any wrinkles and remove imaginary lint.

"There, Your Grace, you are ready, I think."

Malcom glanced once more at his reflection, hardly recognizing the man in the mirror. The fellow looked well enough, but there was a hint of desperation in his eyes. He started as the clock in the hall bonged a quarter before eight, the sound echoing through the halls.

“I suppose I should go down. It would be rude not to be there to greet . . . Her Grace, would it not, Carlton?”

“I believe His Grace is unerringly correct,” Carlton agreed, standing back and admiring his master’s appearance with an approving look .

“Well. I am going then.” Reluctantly, he left the room and made his way as slowly as possible down to the dining room. When he arrived, a small army of servants were still bustling about the table. When he entered, they respectfully acknowledged him with bows and curtseys. He nodded in return. Then, having completed their duties, some hurried away, while others lined up along the walls in silence, to await the summons to serve.

She entered just as the eighth and final stroke of the hall clock was fading away, gliding in like the proverbial swan. The sight of her in a beautiful lilac silk gown, her blonde hair swept up in a sophisticated style, with sapphires glittering at her slender throat, quite knocked the breath from Malcom’s lungs. His own throat closed up, leaving him temporarily speechless as he watched her gracefully curtsy to him, looking every inch the duchess.

She smiled at him, a tentative smile, but a smile, nonetheless. For a moment, he was quite blinded by it, for it lit up her pretty features. The sight gave him a funny feeling in his chest, and he had to give himself a mental shake in order to acknowledge it with a nod. He could not bring himself to actually smile back, afraid of encouraging her.



“Good evening, Your Grace,” she said.

“Er, good evening. I think, seeing that we are married now, that you could call me by my given name, Malcom,” he replied, remembering his manners and going to pull out her chair. She slipped into it, enveloping him with a delicate flowery scent as he pushed her in.

“Very well. Thank you, Your Gr-I mean, Malcom.” She blushed and looked down, her cheeks turning a soft red color as she arranged her skirts neatly and unfolded her napkin. He went to his seat at the head of the table, to her right, and set about carving the joint of roast beef. He hoped he could remember how to do it properly. It was so long since he had played the host.

“In that case, you had better call me by my name, Cassandra,” she said, suddenly looking directly at him. He paused in his carving for a moment, surprised to see nervousness in her hazel-green eyes, perhaps even a hint of fear. Am I frightening to her?

“Cassandra,” he repeated. The name seemed to roll off his tongue like a musical phrase. Once more, he found it necessary to rouse himself, drawing his mind back to the present moment and reiterating that she was intruding upon his cherished independence. He finished carving the meat, which he would usually have slapped between a couple of slices of bread with some mustard and consumed by the fire in his study with a book on his knee. His resentment flared briefly to think dinner time was always going to be such a formal affair from then on.

“Will you have some beef?” he asked, holding a forkful hovering in midair.

“Oh, yes, a little, please,” she said, holding out her plate for him to lay the meat upon it. “Thank you.”

“That is but a morsel. Surely, you would like a little more than that?” he said, eyeing the two small slices on her plate as she set it down in front of her.

“I shall have some potatoes and some greens too,” she answered. “It will be quite enough. Shall I serve you some potatoes?”

“Um, yes, thank you,” he said, laying some meat on his own plate and setting the half carved joint aside before sitting down once more. He watched, expecting her to serve him a stingy portion. He tried not to be pleased when she dished him up a generous pile of the golden potatoes before serving herself a much smaller portion.

“And some cabbage? And carrots?” she asked, looking under the silver lids of the serving dishes that lay before them.

“Yes, please. Wine?” he asked, needing something to do to distract himself for the awkward tension between them.

“Oh, yes, please,” she replied, dishing up the vegetables while he filled their glasses with the rich red wine he had chosen, his favorite, to accompany the beef.

“Is the wine to your liking?” he asked, suddenly realizing he had given no thought to her preferences.

She sipped at it and nodded. “It is very nice. Perfect with the beef.”

“Good.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:08 am*

Thus, the meal passed, albeit slowly, with conversation limited to ‘please,’ ‘thank you,’ ‘pass the gravy,’ and so on, interspersed by the sounds of eating and silverware scraping porcelain. Pudding, a fruit tart with custard, went the same way. But when they had eaten their fill—he could not help noticing how little she had eaten and wondered if nerves were affecting her appetite—the awkwardness of the silence that fell had Malcom itching to bolt to his study. The pressure upon him to make hated small talk was becoming almost unbearable, and his resentment of her flared up again.

It is all her fault that we are here at all. She has stolen my life! Well, I am not responsible for entertaining her. Let her do as she pleases without me.

Silently, he plotted when he could best make his excuses and leave. But when he looked at her, about to make the excuse that he had a lot of work to do, he once again saw fear in her eyes. It then hit him like a ton of bricks: It is our wedding night! She is expecting me to . . . Oh, Lord!

Panic rose within him, for he had no idea how to broach the subject with her.

“I trust you find your chambers comfortable,” he began, wondering if he could find some oblique way of making her understand that he had no thought of accosting her in the conjugal manner.

“Yes, they are very nice indeed. Very large. I am not used to having such a lot of space all to myself,” she replied, her voice trembling a little as she lowered her eyes.

“Good. And you have everything you need?”

“Oh, yes, I think so.”

“Excellent. I have my own apartments down the hall. We need not trouble each other if we do not wish to. I am very busy indeed with estate affairs, and I often work into the night. I hope I shall not disturb you” He hoped he had made it plain and tried to gauge her understanding without being too obvious. He thought he glimpsed a look a relief cross her face. She knows what I am saying all right! He too breathed a sigh of relief. He was just about to announce his departure when, to his surprise, she beat him to it.

“If you do not mind, I am rather tired after such a . . . busy day. I would like to retire early to my rooms if I may.”

It rather took the wind out of his sails. She wishes to escape me as much as I wish to escape her! For some peculiar reason, the realization stung him a little. But since it meant they could go their separate ways, he nodded in agreement.

He got up and pulled out her chair so she could leave. “Very well. Good night,” he said, bowing formally.

“Good night.” She curtsied and glided away, a footman rushing to open the door for her. Malcom had turned away, thankful the ordeal was over, when she suddenly stopped and turned back to him on the threshold.

“Will it be possible for me to ride tomorrow?” she asked. “I should like to ride around the park and see my new home.”

Malcom felt a twinge of guilt, for he knew this was the moment when he should offer to take her on a tour of the place. But he did not, fearing that once he started attending to her every whim there would be no end to it, and his privacy would be shattered.

“Ride? Why, yes, of course. You will find one or two mares to your liking in the stable, I am sure. The stable man will assist you.” To his consternation, she seemed surprised, and then she gave a small smile. Something about it told him that she was actually pleased he had not offered to accompany her, that she was as glad to be relieved of his company as he was hers.

“Wonderful. Thank you, and good night again.” With that, she left, and he heard her light footsteps tripping up the staircase.

Malcom stood staring after her for a few moments, deeply confused by his own emotions. For some inexplicable reason, it stung him to realize that his new wife found him so objectionable. A stream of contradictory thoughts rushed through his mind: Why should I care if she despises me? But why does she despise me? I am duke, am I not? Should she not be falling over herself to please me, grateful to me for the sacrifice I have made to save her reputation? But is it not good that she finds your company objectionable? Is that not what you want, you idiot?

Pushing the confusion aside, he returned to the table and poured himself another glass of wine, drinking it down in one go. After some thought, he resolved to keep as much distance between them as possible without being outright rude to each other.

Wife or not, I am determined she shall not disrupt my solitary existence. I shall carry on with my life just as before, remaining in the country, keeping clear of the Ton and their social shenanigans, and she will just have to make the best of it.

\*\*\*

The next day dawned fine and fair, and Cassandra was at the stables in her riding habit before the breakfast hour. With a friendly brown mare saddled, she was soon perched atop its back and following the stable man’s directions as to a circular route around the park. As she rode along at a steady walk, enjoying the sunshine and

surveying the beautiful countryside—which, she supposed, all came within her husband’s domain—she felt surprisingly free, considering the circumstances.

There were no parents and no Maggie to frown at her and tell her what she should be doing. And much to her delight, there was no Duke either. She was alone and at liberty to do as she pleased, for the time being at least. The only person she found she missed was Diana, hoping it would not be too long before she saw her friend again. But she intended to write her a long letter that afternoon, telling her news.

“Come on, Brownie, let us go a little faster,” she told the horse, using her whip to gently steer the steed into a canter along a bridleway that skirted some pretty meadows and woods. She rode for a couple of hours quite contentedly, taking in all the pretty sights and spectacular views that Lindenhall estate offered. It was breathtakingly vast, with lawns and pastures, its own lake, a boathouse, and a series of scenic, man-made waterfalls that funneled into a large fishing pond. It was the sort of place she would usually have loved to explore.

But look what happened last time you decided to explore a garden on your own. Best to stick to the bridleways.

Later that afternoon, just as she was finishing the letter to Diana, Anna arrived in another carriage, along with all her trunks and other paraphernalia that she had not had time to get organized before the hasty wedding.

“Oh, I am glad to see you here safely, Anna. It is such an enormous place, I feel a little lost on my own,” she admitted on greeting her maid. While the footmen brought in all the trunks and boxes, she showed Anna up to her chambers and gave her a short tour.

“What a lovely set of rooms, My Lad-I mean, Your Grace,” the maid said with an approving smile, peeling off her gloves, unpinning her hat and laying them on the

bed. “So, His Grace has his sleeping quarters elsewhere, I take it?” Cassandra understood her meaning at once and felt her cheeks flushing.

“Um, yes, down the hall. I do not know exactly where. That is, as you seem to have guessed, Anna, a blessed relief.” She gave a small, tense laugh. “But I am glad to have my own private chambers, and it is not really to be wondered at that he has arranged things so, since His Grace and I are hardly on the best of terms.” Anna had witnessed a lot of her crying bouts during her last days at her parents’ house and so knew all about her mistress’s thoughts on the subject of being summarily wed to the Beast of Lindenhall.

“That is something, Your Grace, as you say,” the maid said tactfully, venturing to explore the rooms a little, to see the facilities. “But I am sorry to hear you are not on better terms yet. Everyone at home is hoping you have settled in well.”

“In one day? Oh, I suppose I shall, eventually. As well as can be expected in the circumstances. The estate is very beautiful, to be sure. But I am much happier now you are here. I have met all the servants, and I must say, the butler and the housekeeper have been very kind to me. I hope you will get on well with everybody here.”

Anna turned and smiled at her. “I’m sure I shall, Your Grace. I can hardly believe I am now lady’s maid to a duchess. The other girls back home are rather jealous of me.”

“Are they really? But I am still the same person, even though I have a different title now. To be honest, Anna, I do not feel at all like a duchess, and I do not think I will ever get used to it. And I wish you would still call me milady or Lady Cassandra instead of Your Grace. It sounds so stuffy and formal, quite unlike me. I do not even know what a duchess is supposed to do all day. ”

“If that is what you wish, milady,” Anna instantly agreed, “although I had better address you correctly in front of others or they will think me above my station.”

“Of course. Thank you, Anna, it will make me feel a little less homesick. It shall be our secret. I am just so glad you are here, and that I have one true friend to keep me company.”

And in the coming days, she would find herself falling back on her maid for company, since her husband seemed to have reverted to his reclusive ways. She caught rare glimpses of him during the days, as one might an elusive animal in a forest, and they dined together in the evenings. She had learned that he was not a talkative man. Apart from that, when Anna was busy elsewhere, she was alone. She tried to amuse herself by having a routine. Riding in the mornings, then breakfast in her chambers and dressing for the day.

Then, she would write letters to her family and Diana, or she might go to the library and find a book to read, or go for a walk, or sketch some scene outside, or find some other pastime that consumed the long hours. But by the end of the first week, though she tried to keep her spirits up, the Duchess of Lindenhall found herself feeling rather lonely and cut off from all the people she loved and all liveliness of London that she so enjoyed. And the thing she missed most of all was the music.

For a newcomer, Lindenhall Manor itself was intimidatingly vast. Cassandra guessed that hidden beyond the grand salons, the drawing room, the smaller parlours, the dining hall, the library, morning room, and so on, existed a veritable rabbit warren of other rooms, unused by herself or her husband or the servants. That tribe had their own clearly demarcated territory below stairs and in the attics and would only venture elsewhere to clean or mend where instructed.

However, one room she had expected to find in such an imposing mansion and sought out from her earliest days after arriving there, was a music room. Yet this vital



component of daily life was conspicuous by its absence, which struck her as extremely odd if not to say upsetting. In fact, she had yet to find so much as a pianoforte in any of the occupied rooms. There appeared to be not a single musical instrument in the entire place.

Since she knew that music would have eased her lonely hours, the lack of the means to make it was increasingly distressing and frustrating to her. Every night at dinner she almost asked her husband about it, but every time she looked at his stony countenance, about to speak, she lost her nerve and ended up by resenting him even more than she already did.

One afternoon though after she had been at the mansion for around a fortnight, Cassandra, in dire need of human conversation beyond that of Anna or Hannah Brown. In the course of their talk, she had ventured to ask the housekeeper the whereabouts of the music room or, at the very least, a piano. At this point, she would have been happy with a tambourine to pass the hours.

“Oh, there isn’t one, Your Grace,” Hannah had told her.

Cassandra had been taken aback. “No music room? Not even a single piano? In a house this size?”

“No, Your Grace. It is unusual, is it not? But there it is,” Hannah had replied. “Unless there’s one in the east wing. But that has not been used for years, I’m told.”

“What! You mean there is a whole wing that is closed off?” Cassandra had asked, shocked but feeling a scintilla of hope that the unused wing might house what she sought.

“Indeed, Your Grace,” the housekeeper had confirmed.

“Is there something wrong with it?” Cassandra had asked her, puzzled. “Is it damp, perhaps, or in need of repair in some way? Has the roof fallen in somewhere as the result of bad weather?”

“No, Your Grace, not as far as I know. I have been here for five years now, and it has never been used in all that time.”

“Do you think it could be . . . haunted?” Cassandra asked, feeling slightly foolish for asking. But to her relief, the housekeeper did not laugh but answered matter-of-factly.

“Possibly, Your Grace. Many of these old houses are, but I have heard nothing to say so, not even from the servants who have been here for years.”

“Good Lord, it is certainly strange. I wonder why it is unused then.”

“Well, Mr. Carlton says His Grace shut it up after he inherited the dukedom because he said the house was too big and it was too expensive to keep it open. I know no more than that,” Hannah admitted .

“Is that so?” It seemed a spurious explanation to Cassandra, for the Duke was reputedly as rich as Croesus and would hardly baulk at the expenditure of heating and maintaining that part of the historic house. He was a recluse, but she had seen no evidence yet that he was also a miser. But then again, with no guests coming to stay, the extra bedchambers were only standing empty, she supposed.

“We are not even allowed there to clean,” Hannah told her with an expression of mild horror, for Cassandra already knew she was a lady who liked everything in her domain to be just so. To have a whole wing languishing uncleaned and disorderly, she imagined, must be like a form of torture to the meticulous housekeeper. “There’ll be all sorts up there, I’ve no doubt, cobwebs, inches of dust, mould even since the windows have not been opened for years,” the poor woman added, visibly shuddering

at the very idea.

Cassandra thought for a moment, wondering if mayhap her reclusive husband might use the entire east wing as another of his bolt holes. She assumed he had several, for he managed to avoid her, except at dinner, almost all the time. Could he be a secret drinker? Or worse?

“Does his Grace go there at all?” she asked tentatively. Even though she knew her miserable situation with her husband had to be apparent to the servants, she was a little too proud to admit it outright to Hannah.

“Not that I know of, Your Grace. He stays mainly in his study when he’s home, which is most of the time, or sometimes in the library.”

“Well, it is a mystery, to be sure,” Cassandra mused, feeling the urge to inspect the east wing right away.

“If you don’t mind me asking, Your Grace, has the master not given you a tour of the place yet?” Hannah asked. Cassandra looked her in the eye but saw no sign of guile or spite in the question, only a flicker of kind concern.

“No, he, er, he has been so busy, with his work, you know,” she said, furious with herself for defending the wretch. “But perhaps I shall do a little exploring on my own while I await his guidance.”

“Indeed, Your Grace,” Hannah replied with a smile. “If you decide to do so, I hope you will tell me what you find there. Mayhap there will be a good reason for the place to be opened up and thoroughly cleaned.”

“I shall certainly report back to you, Hannah, with a list of all the dusty, dirty horrors I can find,” Cassandra assured her, secretly determined to spend the next few hours

until dinner uncovering the secrets of the forbidden east wing.

“As you wish, Your Grace, but may I suggest covering your gown, for it is bound to be very dusty up there, and I should not like it to be ruined?”

“Sage advice, Hannah, which I shall take directly. Thank you,” Cassandra told the housekeeper as they parted ways. Hannah went about her business, while an excited Cassandra sped back to her chambers. Within a few minutes, she had changed into an old gown and wrapped her hair in a scarf on top of her head. Feeling equipped to brace the cobwebs and dust, and more cheerful than she had been since before the fateful Collins ball, she set off downstairs at a brisk pace. She made her way down the long hallway studded with Locksley family portraits that led to the shuttered wing, her heart beating a little faster in hope of finding a pianoforte or something very similar there.

Oh, Lord, please let me find at least a piano. If I must be stuck at Lindenhall for the rest of my life in this miserable, lonely existence, if I cannot find the means to make music soon, I am sure I shall end my days in the insane asylum!

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:08 am*

The first thing to hit her when she opened the connecting door was the musty smell, which she made a mental note to report to Hannah. She ventured farther into the main hall, which, she noticed, mirrored the layout of the west wing. To her right, an identical staircase swept upward to the floors above. It even had the same carpet as the other one. She glanced up at the landing, then quickly looked away, half expecting some apparition to emerge from the shadowy darkness beyond the bannisters.

In truth, the gloomy, silent atmosphere surrounding her gave the place an eerie, twilit air. Goosebumps broke out on her skin, making her shiver slightly. She rubbed her arms and looked about her. But it was so dim—the daylight was shut out by heavy drapes—it was hard to make out anything clearly, except blocky shapes that were obviously furniture swathed in dustsheets.

She was determined to throw some light on the mysterious place, for she was more wary of spiders than the supernatural and wanted to see if the empty rooms were infested with cobwebs, as Hannah feared. So, she crossed to the nearest window, her footsteps muffled by a thick area rug, and swept back the drapes. Light poured in, dazzling her, and clouds of dust erupted in a grey storm, filling her nose and setting her sneezing.

She dashed away from the worst of it, glad she had worn her old dress, and blew her nose on her handkerchief. After rubbing the dust from her eyes, she looked around. There were indeed several mighty webs up among the elaborate plaster cornicing, but no spiders were in sight.

Breathing a sigh of relief, she continued to explore. Even the paintings on the walls

had been covered up, to protect them from the dust. Filled with curiosity, Cassandra peeked beneath one sheet and discovered a vast landscape in oils. Beneath another, she found an elegant, painted console table. Above it on the wall, when she lifted a corner of the sheet, was a splendid, gilded mirror, the twin of the one hanging in the hallway of the west wing.

“How strange,” she muttered to herself as she went along. “If this house were a tree, it would be as though one huge branch has completely died off, while the rest of the tree continues to thrive.” Her voice echoed eerily around her, raising the goosebumps once again. All the doors leading off the hall were closed. She hesitated to choose one, for she could not help wondering what lay behind them, hoping the spiders were not lying in wait for her.

“Oh, come on, you simpleton,” she chided herself, “you are supposed to be exploring and looking for a music room. Get on with it!” Straightening her shoulders, she headed for the nearest door to her right, suspecting it would be the mirror image of the west wing’s principal drawing room, in size and shape at least. She opened the door and looked inside. It was indeed a sad replica of the other, all evidence of its former luxury hidden away under the white dust sheets and resembling large, lumpy ghosts.

Over the next half an hour, she explored the airy salons on the first floor, but to her growing disappointment, none of them seemed to have anything to do with music. Eventually, she wandered into a huge and silent room that she realized with surprise was a ballroom.

This was an intriguing architectural departure from the west wing, and Cassandra debated opening the curtains to admire it properly. She decided against it, seeing how so much trouble someone had taken to protect everything from the ravages of sunlight, she thought better of it. But as she walked through it, she imagined all the parties and dancing, the music and lively chatter from the guests, which must once

have filled the place.

So, once, there were happier times at Lindenhall ...

She paused to take in the painted, moulded ceilings overhead. They were magnificent, depicting colourful scenes from myth and legend or religious tableaux fit to stir the soul. Left in this state, it seemed they were destined simply to rot away, their beauty lost forever. The idea made her feel sad and even a little angry, for it felt like a crime.

Why, she wondered, has Malcom eschewed all this magnificence in exchange for hiding in his study for half his life, cutting himself off from the outside world, becoming a confirmed recluse? It more than piqued her curiosity. Was it because of some tragedy, perhaps? A lost love? A bitter betrayal? Or revenge?

Her speculations ran wild as she walked slowly through the ballroom, which had a set of grand stairs leading up to a balustraded minstrel's gallery. Now long deserted, she imagined the musicians would once have sat up there and played for the numerous grand guests gathered below, with dancers filling the floor. She fancied she could almost hear the strains of lovely music even now.

Of course, that was pure imagination, she knew. And beautiful though the room was, there was still no pianoforte nor any sign of anything musical. So, amid the hushed silence, she continued exploring. The ballroom turned into a series of large salons made for entertaining, but none held what she sought.

By the time she came to another closed door off the last reception room, she was having trouble keeping her hopes alive. Please, let this be the one!

Taking a deep breath, she turned the handle and pushed open the door. She peeped inside, and her heart leaped with joy. Despite everything being shrouded in semi-

darkness and dust sheets, she knew immediately she had found it: the music room.

She rushed over to the windows and eagerly pulled the drapes aside, letting in the sunlight. Dust motes filled the air and tickled her nose. But she ignored all that and rushed over to the far corner, where the unmistakeable outlines of a piano forte were visible beneath its white swaddling. She tore the covering aside, and gasped aloud to see the beautiful instrument beneath, one of the finest she had ever seen. It was a deep, rich mahogany colour that still shone lustrously in the light. It was an instrument that Maggie would have loved to play, she had no doubt.

“I knew I would find you,” she told it, stroking the silky wood with her fingertips, full of wonder. She pulled off the sheet entirely, to reveal it in all its gleaming glory. Then, unable to wait a moment longer, she sat down at the stool and opened the keyboard reverently. There was even some sheet music left in the rack. She imagined it was the last piece ever to be played upon the instrument. She looked at it more closely and recognized it as the old Irish ballad, Fair Colleen .

“I know that song!” she exclaimed excitedly into the silence. Well, she had sung it many times. In fact, it was quite a favourite with her when Maggie played for her. She doubted she could accompany herself to any great effect, but she was certainly going to try.

She tentatively played a few notes. The instrument had a mellow, rich tone, but it was only to be expected that the years of disuse had left it out of tune.

“Never mind. You will do until I can have you tuned,” she told it, already regarding the piano as her saviour and friend. “I shall pluck up the courage to ask Malcom to organize that as soon as possible. If he will not speak to me, at least he can do that much for me, can he not?”

As she looked at the music and played the opening run of notes a little haltingly, she



once more regretted her lack of skill. Nevertheless, having no alternative, she persevered, finally managing to wring a tune out of the thing.

“Granted, it is a little off key in parts, but good enough to accompany myself,” she murmured, venturing to pick her way through the haunting melody that reflected the unhappiness of the said Fair Colleen after being torn from her true love and forcibly married to an old, cold-natured rich man.

\*\*\*

Malcom had spent most of that day away from the house surveying the estate’s tenant farms with his bailiff. The work had kept his mind busy, which largely meant free of thoughts of his domestic predicament. However, after leaving his horse at the stables, he could find no other excuse for staying away any longer, since the dinner hour was not far off. He began walking slowly back to the house, intent on avoiding his wife by entering through an obscure doorway and then hiding in his study until the meal was served at seven.

Rounding the rear of the property, he approached the back door adjacent to the unused east wing. As he stepped inside the small vestibule, he suddenly froze on the spot, and a shiver ran up his spine. He well knew the only pianoforte in the house was in the east wing, hidden away for years behind a closed door. Yet the distinct sounds of someone playing, or clumsily attempting to play, was unmistakeable.

The sound chilled his marrow, for it had a ghostly, uncanny quality to it that prompted his rational mind to briefly entertain the idea that the player was not of this world. Mother?

“Don’t be such a blasted fool,” he berated himself aloud, shrugging off the odd feeling by telling himself that someone of flesh and blood was trifling with him. His mood darkened at the idea some unknown person had dared to disobey his

instructions never to venture into the wing. Annoyed at being forced to enter the place that held so many painful memories for him, he resolved to catch whoever was responsible and punish them accordingly. Squaring his shoulders, he moved silently into the main hallway of the supposedly deserted wing.

The halting music grew louder as he paused in the middle of the hallway, looking around him. He saw that the several doors leading off it, which had all been firmly shut on his last inspection, now stood wide open. His ire increasing with every stumbling, off-key note, he followed the sound, realizing it was as he suspected: Someone is in the music room!

The sound of playing increased in volume and speed if not skill as, silently, he went further down the long hall, towards the closed door concealing the music room. The place had, according to his decree, stood frozen in time for six long years. He reached it, wincing at the sounds coming from within. Who is in there?

Turning the knob soundlessly, he opened the door and pushed it open. Sunlight hit his eyes, blinding him a for a moment, while the horrible cacophony assaulted his ears as he peered inside. The sight that confronted him was so entirely unexpected and shocking, he froze on the spot, his hand still on the doorknob.

The drapes had been thrown open, and he could clearly make out Cassandra, clad in a simple blue gown, her hair wrapped up in a kerchief, sitting at the piano. She was oblivious to his presence, leaning forward with a look of concentration on her face, peering at a song sheet in the rack. As she tried to read the music, her fingers were at the keyboard, testing out notes and chords as she went along, apparently not caring that the instrument was wildly out of tune. Each note sent a shockwave through Malcom, belaying his instinctively angry reaction for the moment as he took in the tableau.

But it soon reinstated itself, and he was just about to enter the room and voice his

disapproval when something astonishing happened: his wife suddenly opened her mouth and burst into song. A pure, sweet soprano cut through the stale air like a crystal knife and rang from the walls. Moreover, she was singing a ballad close to his heart, one he had himself sung many times, the beautiful and sad Irish air, Fair Colleen .

Transfixed in the doorway, a lump rose in Malcom's throat as he listened to his wife singing. What she lacked in talent as a piano player, he had to admit, she more than made up for with her beautiful voice. It was stunning. He had not heard such dulcet tones since his own beloved mother had filled that very room with her musical gifts so long ago.

He must have made a slight, involuntary movement, for there was a sudden loud creak from the floorboards. Cassandra stopped singing at once, the pure sound dying away mid-verse. He watched as her fingers paused on the keys as she glanced over her shoulder for the source of the sound.

Her eyes immediately found Malcom's, and their gazes locked. Hers were wide and full of surprise. He could only stare into them wordlessly, suddenly awash with the old pain of loss and guilt, the ache around the region of his heart so fresh, it robbed him of breath.

Unable to articulate a sound, unwilling to let her see him so affected, he could do nothing but turn on his heel and make off as quickly as possible down the shadowed corridor. He clenched his arm tightly across his chest in a vain attempt to suppress the swell of grief threatening to overwhelm him.

When he finally made it to his study, slamming the door behind him, he fell into an armchair in an agonized daze. Seeing his wife seated at the piano in the music room, singing so wondrously, had been just too much for him to bear. It had brought back vividly all the times when he and his mother had spent there once upon a time, seated

side by side at the piano forte, making beautiful music together. And one of her favourite songs to sing while he accompanied on the pianoforte had been Fair Colleen.

\*\*\*

“Did you find it, Your Grace?” Hannah asked that following morning, coming into Cassandra’s chambers along with Anna to wish her a good morning. The maid brought a can of hot water for washing, while Hannah carried the tea tray.

“Mmm?” Cassandra replied, not long awake and sitting up in bed, rubbing her eyes.

“The piano,” the housekeeper supplied, placing the tea tray across her mistress’s lap and pouring her a cup of tea.

“Thank you, Hannah. Oh, yes, I did. I found the music room actually. But it is all covered in dust sheets, and the piano is out of tune.” It all came back to her in a flood, like a dream; Malcom staring in at her from the threshold of the room, his piercing eyes flashing a vivid blue in the encroaching sunlight, his expression a strange mixture of what she perceived as shock, then anger, and then . . . pain. Pain? Then, before either of them could say a word, he had left, seemingly in a hurry.

Perturbed, the pleasurable spell of her discovery rudely broken, Cassandra had frowned and declined to follow him. She would have no more pursued him and inquired about his peculiar reaction than she would a stranger in the street. Still, it had shaken her.

Hannah stood by the bed, her hands folded across her stomach, a look of curiosity on her plump, matronly features. Cassandra realized she was waiting for her to elaborate.

“I walked through the rooms, and I can report that all seemed in order, except for the

large amount of dust, of course. But everything, even the paintings on the walls, have been covered up. I looked at some of the furniture while I was searching, and it seems to be in good condition.”

“No mold?”

Cassandra shook her head, detecting a hint of disappointment in the housekeeper’s tone.

“I’m afraid not. Did you know there is an entire ballroom there?”

“I did not, Your Grace,” Hannah said with obvious surprise.

“A ballroom?” Anna put in over her shoulder from the wardrobe, where she was busy gathering the day’s fresh linen for Cassandra. “All shut up, like that? What a shame. But I suppose His Grace is not fond of such things as balls and parties.” She sounded disappointed as she turned back to her task.

“Indeed,” Hannah said somewhat glumly. “The only guests who come to stay occasionally are Lady Madeleine and Lord Terrence. I mean, the Viscount Lavington. And then they only have a quiet dinner with His Grace. Oh, it would be lovely to have a party to cater for, with all the music and dancing and the ladies all in their lovely gowns.”

“That would be exciting, Mrs. Brown,” Anna burst out. “Just like living in London. It’s very pretty country hereabouts, but it’s so quiet. In London, there is always something interesting going on. I miss the excitement of dressing Lady Cass-I mean, Her Grace, for the Season.

“It was always such fun, going shopping for new gowns and the like,” she added a little winsomely, laying the fresh linen on the end of the bed and going back to the

wardrobe to select a dark-blue riding habit for Cassandra to wear on her morning ride.

Cassandra realized her maid was already missing the entertaining bustle of the capital, just as she was. She felt a wave of guilt; as the duchess and, supposedly, mistress of her household, was she not responsible for her servants' happiness? She was failing them!

But the thought of striking up a conversation with her husband to broach the topic of having guests to stay—she was thinking of Diana as well as her own family—was daunting. Especially as she was already digging deep inside herself to find the courage to ask him to have the music room restored and the piano tuned so she could make use of them.

What has happened to me? When did I become so fearful? Where has the bold intrepid woman I fancied myself to be gone?

A small voice in her head answered her: She is paying for her bold, intrepid ways by being incarcerated with a cold-hearted man in this mausoleum of a house for the rest of her life.

Well, are you simply going to lay down and die, or are you going to do something about it?

Her thoughts were interrupted when Hannah drew a little closer and said in a conspiratorial tone, “After our conversation about the east wing yesterday, Your Grace, I took the liberty of asking Mr. Carlton if he knows any more about it than what he initially told me.”

Cassandra's ears perked up. “Oh? And did he say anything?” Anna, who was laying out the riding habit on the bed, also paused, her pretty face filled with curiosity .

“It seems the music room was the beloved sanctuary of the former Duchess,” the housekeeper confided in hushed tones. “Apparently, she had a passion for music and was very accomplished on the pianoforte as well as the harp. She was supposed to have had a lovely voice too,”

“Is that so?” Cassandra exclaimed softly, her teacup pausing in midair on its way to her lips.

“It seems so. But since her tragic passing, the Master banned entry to all and closed off the east wing entirely. Apparently, according to Mr. Carlton, none have dared disturb the music room in six long years.”

“Good Lord!” Cassandra breathed, remembering Malcom’s strange, pained expression when he had caught her in the music room and then hurried away without a word. It hit her like a shower of cold water.

That was why he looked so upset! He found me in his mother’s sanctuary, occupying her seat at the piano and singing, just as she probably used to do. It must have brought back a lot of memories for him. No wonder he looked so grief-stricken.

If he had been a warmer man who showed the slightest interest in her, she might have felt more sympathetic beyond the normal, polite amount one ought to feel for another’s pain. She might have been driven to apologize.

But as things stood between them, this new, tantalizing information—indicating there was a crack in Malcom’s icy armor—coupled with her disappointment in her own cowardice, resulted in a resolution to tackle him on the matter of reinstating the music room and the piano for her use.

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:08 am*

“Hannah,” Cassandra said, putting the tea tray aside and swinging her legs out of bed, “would you have the music room cleaned, please. Today, if possible.”

The housekeeper smiled. “Of course, Your Grace, with pleasure.”

“And I shall take breakfast in the morning room after my ride, in about an hour,” Cassandra added, placing herself in Anna’s expert hands to get ready for the day.

“I shall see to it at once.” The housekeeper, still smiling, bobbed a curtsy and hurried from the room, closing the door behind her.

“Oh, it will be wonderful to hear you sing again, milady,” Anna breathed, reverting to her mistress’s preferred informal title now that they were alone. “I have missed it so much. I can’t help thinking it will do this old house some good to have some music in it again after such a long time,” she added, helping Cassandra out of her nightdress.

“I am sure that if the old Duchess loved music so much, her poor spirit must be upset by the music room being left to rot like that, especially if she liked to play the piano.”

“Do you know, Anna, I think you must be right,” Cassandra answered, bolstered by the observation as she followed the maid to the washstand to begin her toilette. “I suppose His Grace is still grieving for her, in his own way. Grief does funny things to people, does it not?” she mused, guessing that a lot of Malcom’s closed off demeanor and reclusiveness was connected to the loss of his mother. Her heart naturally softened a little towards him, realizing he had to feel her loss unusually deeply.

However, she quickly squashed the feeling, telling herself that since he had never



deigned to tell her about the circumstances of his mother's death, nor his father's, come to that, he had forfeited any right to her sympathy.

"Oh, grief does indeed make people behave in very odd ways, milady," Anna confided knowingly, pouring hot water from the jug into the bowl. "When my granny died, my grandpa went into a decline. Refused to eat a crust, he did, and he died six weeks later, of a broken heart, they say."

"That is tragic, Anna. I am so sorry. How sad!" Cassandra exclaimed, feeling more sympathy for the unknown old couple than for her husband's loss. But that was his fault, for he had never stooped to ask his own wife anything about herself, nor share anything about his own history with her. As Cassandra reasoned it, in the circumstances, how could she be expected to care?

And in truth, she was more than a little distracted by the other thoughts racing through her head just then. As Anna helped her wash and dress, she could hardly wait to get out on horseback in the fresh air, to try to put them into some sort of order. A plan was slowly forming in her mind for staging a small rebellion. She would ride, take breakfast, and then, she would seek out her husband in his den and tell him, not ask him, that she wanted the music room and the piano restored.

I know now that he has no good reason to refuse me, except a sentimental one. And if he does refuse, I shall do it anyway!

\*\*\*

Malcom too was out on his horse before breakfast, though he did not think he could eat anything anyway. He had had a restless night, the vision of Cassandra at the piano and her sweet, soaring voice refusing to leave him. The experience of finding her at the piano in the music room, his mother's favourite place, continued to plague him.

In addition, the strains of Fair Colleen had wormed their way into his brain and were going around and around like a persistent echo, threatening to drive him mad.

But what to do about it? He felt a fool for not simply ordering her out of the room, never to darken its doors again. His grief had made him weak, and he despised himself for it. How was he going to explain himself to her? But as master of the house, did he need to explain himself at all?

Despite being married and dining together each evening—always an excruciating experience—their conversation had hardly gone beyond that one might expect between slight acquaintances. The weather was so far just about their only reliable topic.

With an unhappy sigh, he directed his steed towards a serene woodland trail, troubled by questions and self-recriminations despite the tranquil surroundings. In his head, a small voice was nagging at him, saying, “You must admit, her voice is enchanting. Do you not long to hear it again? Her playing is inexpert, to be sure, and those off-key notes were offensive to the ear. To have the instrument tuned would be but a small thing.

He had half decided to arrange it when his instinct to preserve the past and go on torturing himself with guilt and pain, by way of atonement, gripped him again. It felt far more comfortable than the prospect of actually speaking to his wife and doing something to oblige the woman who had stolen his life. And so, he pushed the idea away.

He was deep in such thoughts, walking the horse along the track, resenting Cassandra afresh, when he was startled by a pigeon taking noisy flight. He looked around for whatever had spooked it.

“It’s all right, Brownie,” he heard his wife’s voice say from the other side of the

copse. “It was only a pigeon, you silly thing.” She laughed, a sweet, musical sound that sent a strange thrill through him even as he froze, desperate for her not to see him. To his relief, she did not and rode slowly on, humming a little tune to herself as she passed further down the track.

Malcom waited until he thought she was out of earshot, letting his horse nibble on the grass, before pressing his heels into the beast’s flanks, anxious to get as far away as he could in quick time undetected. But the horse had other ideas and protested with a loud huffing sound, stamping its hooves, and setting its harness jingling loudly in the quiet air. He cursed under his breath as he gripped the reins and brought it under control. But it was too late.

“Who is there?” he heard Cassandra ask a little nervously, making his heart drop to his boots. Spurred by rising panic, Malcom did not try to reply. He kicked up his mount and took off at a gallop over the meadow in the opposite direction.

“Malcom! Malcom, come back!” He heard her calling him but chose to ignore her, pretending he had not heard. Dammit! Was she following him? What did she want? Surely, she had done enough damage, hadn’t she? As he sped away, it did not occur to him that she could have no idea why or what damage she had supposedly caused .

He neither guessed nor cared that his impenetrable coldness towards her was hurting her. They were but married strangers, and he did not care. He only nursed his resentment against her for ruining his safe, lonely life.

When he got back to the house, hurrying through a rear entrance, hoping Cassandra was still out, he fled to his study. On his desk, he found note from Terrence waiting for him. His cousin had invited himself for dinner that evening. Malcom poured himself a stiff drink and stood frowning by the hearth, filled with indignation and a sense of creeping dread.

Blast! It's bad enough having to dine with her , but with Terrence meddling—which he undoubtedly will—things could get so much worse!

\*\*\*

Cassandra watched through the tree branches as her husband galloped away from her, supposing he had not heard her calling to him. She was disappointed not to have been able to speak to him, as the chance encounter had seemed to present an ideal opportunity to tackle him about the music room. On realizing it was him on the other side of the copse, she had quickly figured out that if the discussion degenerated into shouting, they were at least out in the open, far away from the prying ears and eyes of the servants.

Feeling rather frustrated to have failed to grasp the chance to confront him, she rode slowly home, making a fresh resolution to track him down as soon as she could. She took off her boots in the small vestibule at the back of the house, swapping them for house slippers before walking through to the main hall. The one thought on her mind was to find Malcom and speak to him about the music room before her resolution failed her.

However, in the main hall, she bumped into Hannah. The housekeeper's cheeks were glowing, and her eyes sparkled with obvious excitement.

“Oh, there you are, Your Grace,” she greeted Cassandra, bobbing a neat curtsy.

“Yes, I have finished my ride. Were you looking for me for something?” Cassandra asked, stopping to talk, curious as to Hannah's animated expression.

“No, Your Grace. I was just on my way to collect the flowers the gardener has left for me. But since you are here, I may tell you the exciting news that we have a guest coming for dinner this evening.”

Cassandra was suddenly all ears. “Oh? Who might that be?” Some dull, dreary acquaintance of Malcom’s, she supposed, likely with similarly poor conversational skills.

“The Viscount Lavington,” Hannah told her, with a dreamy look. “He is such a pleasant gentleman. We servants always like it when he comes to dine, especially the cook. She is making a special effort with dinner tonight. Unlike his Grace, Lord Terrence—that is how he likes to be addressed — always has such a good appetite and appreciates a good dinner.”

Cassandra could not hide her surprise. “I met the Viscount at my wedding,” she said, recalling with affection the friendly, rather lanky young man who bore a resemblance to her husband, though he was not so striking in looks. “He was very kind. I look forward to seeing him again.”

It was indeed exciting news. She hoped the Viscount would come with news from the Season, hopefully bringing gossip and some amusing tales of all she was missing out on in her beloved London. She felt a pang of sadness at the thought, but then told herself to be optimistic and grateful for the unexpected company.

“Your breakfast is laid out in the morning room for you, Your Grace, as you asked,” Hannah said, breaking into her thoughts.

“Thank you. I shall just go and change, and I shall be down,” Cassandra told her, starting up the stairs.

“Very good, Your Grace,” the housekeeper said, bobbing a curtsy and flashing Cassandra another warm smile as she went off about her errand.

Cassandra sped up the stairs with renewed enthusiasm, eager to tell Anna that she would be taking extra care with her appearance when dressing for dinner that

evening. The Viscount must not suspect how rocky the situation was between Malcom and her, so she resolved to look her best and try to appear to be cheerful, the better to present at least an impression that they were getting on.

I hope he is fond of music and that we can perhaps converse on the subject. Anything but having to put up with Malcom's cold, unending silence !

After breakfast, Cassandra spent some time composing letters home to her family, and then rather longer writing to Diana back in London. The letter to Diana was much more informal than that to her family. They would not wish to hear how difficult she was finding the adjustment to her new life as the Duchess of Lindenhall. But to Diana, she could pour out her heart without fear of censure or judgement.

. . . we dine together each night but speak only of the weather or perhaps the inexplicable loss of a sick cow. Other than that, we do not speak and seldom meet. It seems he will do almost anything to avoid me. He practically lives in his study, while I am left to amuse myself. Even Anna is complaining of how boring it is here. Honestly, Di, I feel as if I have been buried alive! Pray, do come and visit me as soon as you can. If you cannot, I am sure I shall quite fade away with ennui.

However, let me cease my complaints and tell you what happened yesterday. You recall that the last time I wrote, I mentioned the curious lack of a music room here at Lindenhall, with not so much of a pianoforte to help me pass the long hours of solitude? I cannot tell you how much I miss hearing Maggie play and all the wonderful music London provides so freely! I have been feeling the loss terribly, as you can imagine. However, I hope all that is soon about to change . . .

She then related in great detail the story of her adventure in the east wing and finding the music room. She confided in her friend the strange encounter there with her husband and all she had learned in the meantime about his past.

. . . So, I am presently plucking up my courage to beard the lion in his den, so to speak, and persuade him to oblige me for once. You may think me weak for being afraid of him, but Diana, he is so forbidding! I tremble when I think of confronting him, for I fear he may think I am overstepping the boundaries of my position. But am I not his duchess? So, I am presently steeling myself to the task, in order to achieve my desire. It is, after all, a harmless thing I ask of him . . .

After finishing her letters and preparing them for the mail, she took a walk down to the nearby village of Lindenhall, a quaint, rural place that one might miss if one blinked when passing through it in a carriage. But to Cassandra, at this point in her life, the hamlet seemed a bustling metropolis in comparison to the mausoleum that was her home.

The villagers she passed stared at her as she made her way to the post office, which she supposed had to be because they seldom saw anyone new in the vicinity. She smiled at them as she passed and was taken aback when they appeared awe-struck and bowed or curtsied with varying ability.

These greetings were accompanied by awkward mutterings of “Yer Grace,” causing her to remember with sinking heart just who she was to them: the wife of the man who ruled them and held their lives in his hands. Immediately, she felt a kinship with them.

That was until, to her horror, she heard a man’s voice say, “She’s wed the Beast, the foolish wench.” After that, her cheeks hot with embarrassment, she quickly mailed her letters and retreated from the village. She walked home, feeling lonelier than ever. But as she spied through the trees the towering roofs of her luxurious prison, as she had come to think of the manor, she gave herself a mental shake.

Do not give in to these feelings of helpless doom, Cassandra. You have a mind and a tongue. Use them to claim some sort of life for yourself from this iceberg you are

chained to. You will speak to him as soon as possible about the music room and the piano. But perhaps not this evening, not while we have a guest. Tomorrow. Tomorrow, I shall face him down.



## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:08 am*

“Your Grace, Lord Terrence is—” Carlton began, poised on the threshold of Malcom’s study. The butler’s announcement was rudely interrupted when Terrence himself appeared from the hall behind him and, without invitation, strode into the room. He was nattily attired, as usual.

“No need to stand on formality, Carlton, old fellow. I’m expected,” he drawled, crossing the rug and throwing himself into his favorite easy chair by the hearth. “But I’ll have a brandy if you would be so good,” he added.

Carlton glanced at Malcom, who was sitting at his desk, surrounded by piles of correspondence. He gave the butler a resigned nod and held up two fingers, indicating he too would have a brandy.

“Certainly, Your Grace, My Lord.” Carlton promptly poured them both a drink and served it to them on the low table that stood between them before the fireplace.

Malcom took a much-needed sip of the golden liquor. A taxing evening of social interaction loomed ahead, and fortification was required if he was to get through it.

Terrence picked up his glass and raised it in the butler’s direction. “Cheers, Carlton. You’re a good fellow,” he said before drinking to the butler’s health.

“My pleasure, My Lord,” the inscrutable butler told him with a small bow.

“Will that be all, Your Grace?” he asked Malcom.

“For the moment, Carlton, thank you,” Malcom replied with a nod.

“Very good, Your Grace.” With a smart bow, Carlton left the room, closing the door behind him.

Immediately, Malcom felt his cousin’s eyes scrutinizing him over the rim of his glass.

“Glad to see me?” Terrence asked.

“Not really. You invited yourself, remember. I can’t help thinking, going on your past form, that you are going to be troublesome,” Malcom replied, although it was not strictly true that he was not pleased to see his cousin, his only friend. Of course he was. But being alone with Terrence was far different than spending it with Cassandra and him at the same time.

“I thank you for your warm greeting, Cousin. You have a knack for making people feel welcome.” Terrence replied, shooting Malcom a crooked smile. He paused, his eyes still riveted on Malcom, who tried to avoid meeting them. “So?” Terrence said, raising his dark brows questioningly.

“So what?” Malcom countered, knowing exactly what his cousin was asking but refusing to give in easily to the inevitable interrogation.

“Oh, don’t try to appear obtuse, Malcom. It doesn’t suit you. But if you insist on being difficult, let me make it easier for you: So . . . how is married life treating you?”

“Did Madeleine send you to quiz me?” Malcom asked, deflecting the question as long as he could. He was scrambling for a way to answer that would not alert Terrence to the uncomfortable status quo that currently existed between Cassandra and him.

“No, she did not, although I told her I was coming to check up on you,” Terrence freely admitted, raising his glass to his lips and sipping his brandy.

Malcom bridled, glaring at his cousin. "Check up on me?"

"Of course. The suspicion was that, knowing your temper, you might have eaten the poor girl by now. Or locked her in an attic room. Mind you, I would have put money on you boring her to death first."

"For God's sake, Terrence, at least make an effort to act sane, will you?" Malcom replied, finding Terrence's jibes irritating in this case, though he was used to them. "I may have my faults, but I do not make a habit of eating women."

"Well, we only have your assurance on that. By the way, don't think I haven't noticed that you still have not answered my question."

Malcom sighed, feeling trapped. The fleeting thought occurred to him that unburdening himself might be a good thing. "Oh, very well. Married life is . . . satisfactory." It was the best he could do.

"Satisfactory? Is that it? Good Lord, man, you sound as though you're reading from a school report," Terrence remonstrated, shaking his head in disbelief.

"What do you want me to say?" Malcom shrugged irritably.

"I don't know, but not that! Maybe something along the lines of, 'Married life is wonderful,' or 'we are blissfully happy,' or 'my darling wife lights up my life.' And the Lord knows, your life needed lighting up," he added more darkly. He looked around the study, gesturing with his glass. "Nothing has changed in here, I see. I'm guessing you've been locking yourself away in your little bolt hole as usual." His keen eyes turned on Malcom again, making him feel very uncomfortable, especially when Terrence added drily, "I suspect you're still keeping little wife at bay, eh?"

Malcom could not outright deny it. He sighed and finally voiced his thoughts. "It is

hard to make the transition from being a bachelor to suddenly being . . . married, from no choice of my own. I didn't ask for it, and I resent it. I'm not used to having someone else in the house, making demands on my time. I'm not finding it easy."

"Ah, now we are getting closer to the truth. What demands on your time has your wife made so far? I require specific examples."

"Um," Malcom murmured, wracking his brains, unable to name a single occasion when Cassandra had directly asked him for anything. "I can no longer dine alone in my study. I must dine with her each evening, which means dressing for dinner and making ridiculous small talk about the weather, and so on."

"I see. And do you spend time together after dinner? Play a hand of vingt-et-un perhaps?" his cousin inquired, draining his brandy glass and setting it on the table.

Malcom shook his head. "No, we go our separate ways," he said, aware it was not an answer Terrence would approve of.

"Do you take breakfast or luncheon together? Have you given her a tour of the house, or taken her out riding to show her the estate? Have you taken her to visit the neighbours perchance?"

Malcom just stopped himself from openly grimacing from the guilt that suddenly washed over him.

"Oh, Lord, Malcom," Terrence sighed. "You need not bother to answer me. It's obvious things are just as I feared. You have stuck to your old habits and made hardly any concessions to being wed at all. You are not making an effort to spend time with her at all, are you? You are ignoring her needs entirely and are, in fact, avoiding her."

"I told you, we dine together each evening," Malcom defended himself weakly. He

knew he should tell Terrence about the music room incident and how it had affected him but was having trouble overcoming the lump that had suddenly lodged in his throat.

Terrence sat forward in his chair, his hands clasped between his knees. His usually genial expression had turned deadly serious. Malcom's heart sank, knowing what was coming.

"Malcom, please believe me when I tell you that I am speaking from my heart on this because I care about your happiness, as your cousin and your friend. It's clear to me that you are very unhappy and that things between you and your wife are far from 'satisfactory,'" Terrence intoned. "Obviously, you are still intent on punishing the poor woman for, as you put it, 'stealing your life.'"

Anger rushed through Malcom then, banishing all other emotions. "And why should I not feel that way? She has ruined my life!" he exclaimed. "On a thoughtless, childish whim of hers, I have been unfairly ensnared, and now you expect me to do . . . what exactly? Welcome her with open arms? I-I cannot do it."

"Malcom, listen to me now. I know what you think you have lost—"

"Yes, my freedom!"

"If your idea of freedom is spending your time hiding from everyone, lonely, miserable," Terrence, said.

"I was not miserable."

"Then why is it that you have lost all your former friends? You, who used to be such a merry fellow about town? Why will nobody but me and Maddy put up with your morose, reclusive ways? The facts speak for themselves, Cousin. You have driven

everyone but us away because you insist on cutting yourself off from the outside world, indulging in the luxury of punishing yourself over and over because of what happened with—”

Pushed almost beyond endurance, Malcom held up a hand and croaked out, “Do not say it.”

“All right. I won’t, but you and I know perfectly what I am talking about. You tell me you had this ‘freedom’ you feel you have been cheated of by this marriage. I say you have been miserable for the last six years. You are deluded if you believe you were free. You were in a self-imposed prison. You may throw me out for saying this, but it could be called a form of extreme self-pity.”

“What! You dare to put my grief down to shallow self-pity?” Malcom exploded, furious.

“If the cap fits, then wear it,” Terrence replied laconically, getting up to go and pour himself another drink, taking both of their glasses.

“Why, I should throw you out!” Malcom growled, flexing his hands into fists.

“Feel free. It’s your tomb, sorry, I mean, your house. The thing is, Malcom, though what has happened is far from ideal—in an ideal world you would have met a young lady and fallen in love with her naturally. Even with your walled-in heart, there was always a chance that some woman would finally be able to break through, that you would find happiness under your own steam. But, don’t you see, in your effort to punish yourself for your so-called crimes, you fixed things so finding that woman was almost impossible. You simply stopped going out and meeting people. Admit it, you were caught in a vicious circle of your own making, a self-fulfilling prophecy of deserved doom.”

Terrence came back and placed the fresh brandy before Malcom before sitting down again. He snatched up the glass and drank deeply from it. Terrence's words were lacerating his soul, and he could not find a single rational argument against them.

Hardly knowing what prompted him, he suddenly burst out, "She broke into the music room the other day."

Terrence looked at him curiously. "What?"

"Cassandra. I found her in the old music room, playing the pianoforte. Mother's pianoforte."

"Ah!" Terrence nodded knowingly. "So, the poor girl was no doubt desperate from loneliness and boredom and had the temerity to explore her own home—presumably because you refused to show her around—and 'break into' your hallowed shrine, did she? Well, what a crime. You may feel vindicated, for she surely deserves the cold shoulder in that case."

Malcom's anger drained away under Terrence's sarcasm. "Damn you, Terrence," he muttered, embarrassed by his own behavior.

"Too late, Cousin, for I am surely damned already. Well, are you going to tell me what happened, or do I have to guess?"

Haltingly at first, then more confidently, Malcom spilled the story of the encounter, how she disobeyed his orders and went into the east wing, and then played his mother's piano . . . badly.

When he had finished, Terrence was frowning over his brandy. "I cannot work out if you were more upset that she opened up the music room and played the piano on her own initiative or because she played it so terribly," he said.

For some odd reason, Malcom could not help smiling when Terrence put it like that.

“I have to admit, I strongly objected to it. Every wrong note grated on my ears. Plus, the instrument is out of tune.” He paused for a moment, suddenly recalled his wife’s singing. “But though she does not play very well, she has a lovely voice,” he admitted.

Terrence regarded him with interest. “You heard her sing?”

Malcom nodded. “Yes, she sang Fair Colleen. Well, part of it. She stopped when she saw me,” he explained.

“Fair Colleen, eh? Oh, Lord. Your mother’s favourite if I remember correctly.”

“And mine,” Malcom supplied. “Cassandra’s voice is . . . as beautiful as Mother’s used to be. She is also a soprano.”

“Now I am beginning to understand why you ran away,” Terrence said, nodding. “It must have brought back a lot of memories for you.”

“Painful memories.”

“Yet you enjoyed hearing her sing, I can tell.”

“Yes, I-I did.”

“Refresh my memory, will you, Malcom, please? Am I right in saying that you are passionate about music and are an accomplished player of the piano forte?”

“I used to be both those things.”



“But since losing your mother . . . you gave up playing. Another form of self-imposed punishment.”

“It is not that, Terrence. It just hurts so much to play, to hear all the tunes she loved and know she will never be at my side again, to enjoy the music with me. To find Cassandra there at the piano, well, it felt like sacrilege. ”

“Of course, it did. As I said, you resented her disrupting your carefully preserved shrine. Have you spoken to her about it, explained your behaviour?”

Malcom shook his head sadly. “I cannot. I knew I was being unreasonable, that I let my emotions get the better of me. I almost decided to have the piano tuned for her, let her play if she wants. After all, I don’t have to listen. But I just could not bring myself to do it.”

“Then I suggest you pull yourself together, Malcom, and do it without delay. Not to do so could be considered cruel,” Terrence told him sternly. “What is she, nineteen, twenty?”

Malcom had to think what was on the marriage certificate. “Um, nineteen, I believe.”

“So, we have a genteel young lady, aged nineteen, torn from her home, her family and friends, likely never so much as kissed a man before, who made a small mistake, and she finds herself imprisoned in this old mausoleum with a man who barely acknowledges her presence. I should hardly be surprised if she puts rocks in her pockets and walks into the lake. I am sure I would in her place.”

“Terrence, that is a terrible thing to say,” Malcom protested, truly shocked.

“It sounds dramatic but put yourself in her place. Have you considered for one second how she might be feeling?” He sat back in his chair and crossed his legs. “Of course,

you haven't. You are far too self-absorbed."

Guilt bit sharply at Malcom's conscience. Terrence was right; he had not given it a thought.

"I'm right, aren't I?"

"Yes," Malcom was forced to admit, berating himself for his selfishness. He had not behaved like a gentleman at all. He dared not admit how he had fled from her that day at the copse. He felt pathetic enough about it already.

"Malcom, you must face up to the situation or you will both spend the rest of your lives in misery. I do not want that for you, and if you do not want that for yourself, and can summon some vestige of sympathy for Cassandra, then it is up to you to change things."

Malcom spread his palm helplessly. "How? "

"Are you jesting with me, Cousin? You ask me this, you who once moved with such ease through the drawing rooms and ballrooms of the Ton, charming all the ladies, old and young, single and married? How do you think I learned my social skills with the fair sex? I learned them from watching my much-admired older cousin. And now you ask me how to be kind to your wife? That is rich."

Malcom looked at him in surprise. "I had no idea," he murmured.

"That you were my model of gentlemanly behaviour? Yes, it was so, though it pains me now to admit it."

Terrence sat forward again, his eyes filled with a sincerity Malcom could not doubt was genuine.

“I seem to have forgotten a lot,” he said.

“Nonsense. You have forgotten nothing. I saw you in operation at Madeleine’s ball. You were conversing and dancing, just like the old Malcom, even if you were forced to do so.

“No, you cannot get out of this. You have a wife, and whatever the circumstances of your marriage, you now have to forge a life together. I found her to be perfectly charming at your wedding, though I could see she was terrible upset. She is educated and far from silly. Plus, she is also extremely easy on the eye and has excellent taste in clothes. Now you tell me she can sing. What is the difficulty? Many men would be over the moon to have a such a lovely wife. If I was not your friend, I would say she deserves better.”

“Your support is greatly appreciated,” Malcom replied with deep sarcasm, knowing it was likely the truth.

“What you should have done when you found her in the music room, instead of complaining about her bad playing, would have been to offer to accompany her while she sang, you know that don’t you?”

“Yes, I know,” Malcom agreed with a sigh.

“And if you really want my advice, try being a bit more approachable, talk to her, take her out around the estate, give her a tour of this gloomy old pile. Try to be kind to her, even in small ways, Malcom. If she likes horses, then buy her a new horse. If she likes dresses, then send her to town to shop with a generous allowance. Such things will prove your concern for her, and she may come out of her shell. What you find may pleasantly surprise you.” Terrence swallowed the last of his brandy and stood up. “It is almost six. Dinner is at seven, I presume.”

“Yes.”

“Well, I am going to change. And I look forward to meeting your wife again. She is a part of this family now, and I for one intend to do my best to make her feel welcome. And may I add that you are lucky that it is me who visited you first? Because if Madeleine had come and found such a poor state of affairs, things might have been much worse for you. I trust you will be duly grateful.”

With that he strode from the room, leaving the door wide open, another one of his annoying habits. Somehow, to Malcom, that was worse than if he had slammed it.

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:08 am*

With a sigh, he drank the dregs of his brandy and soon followed his cousin upstairs to change for dinner, his thoughts in turmoil after the roasting he had received. As a rational man, he knew Terrence was right—he had to do better as a husband. But somehow, his stubborn heart still fought against reason, tearing him in two. He had to make a hard choice. Could he go on punishing himself, as Terrence put it, by clinging to the cherished past as he had for so long? Or should he let it all go and try to make the best of this unwanted marriage?

I will try to do better at dinner and engage her in conversation as Terrence suggests. At least that way, he will not be able to say I have not tried.

Just before the hall clock chimed seven, he met Terrence in the dining room. Delicious savory aromas arose from the covered dishes on the splendidly laid table. They would have made Malcom's mouth water if he had not felt so tense.

“You are never late when it comes to your dinner, Cousin,” he observed drily as they stood waiting for Cassandra to arrive, feeling the need to pierce Terrence's cheerful demeanor just a little, in mild revenge for being right.

“Never. As an active fellow, I must keep up my strength. And I must do my best for Cook, who has obligingly conjured up some of my favourites as always. I wish to do her efforts justice.”

Malcom was just about to make a rude retort when the door opened, and Cassandra came in. Looking at her afresh, with Terrence's words still ringing in his ears, while she was greeting his cousin, Malcom took the time to look at her properly.

She looked breathtakingly lovely, moving across the room as graciously as any duchess, the skirts of her willow-green gown flowing falteringly around her legs as she walked. The color flattered the hazel-green of her eyes and brought out the pink blush on her softly rounded cheeks. Small emeralds glittered at her throat and ears, demonstrating a flair for understatement. Her long fair tresses shone in the candlelight and were piled artfully upon her head in a sophisticated style.

She is beautiful indeed .

The smile of greeting she gave Terrence when he kissed her hand was warm and welcoming, and for the first time, Malcom noticed the dimples in her cheeks. He found himself quite captivated by them. Terrence had not been lying when he had said that any other man would have been proud to have her as his wife.

Feeling a strange fluttering in his stomach, the thought of having her smile at him in such a fashion made him all the more determined to make an effort to be kind to her that evening.

“May I say, Your Grace—” Terrence began, but he was cut off.

“Oh, call me Cassandra, please. I cannot be doing with all that formality. We are family now, are we not?” she said good-naturedly in her lilting voice. Malcom’s stomach fluttered again at the sound of it. “I certainly do not feel like a grand duchess at all,” she continued. “I keep having to look behind me when people address me as Your Grace, quite forgetting it is my title now. I doubt I shall ever get used to it.”

“Very well,” his cousin replied, grinning. “In that case, may I say how ravishingly beautiful you look tonight, Cassandra? Your gown is very pretty. You look fit to grace London’s finest ballrooms. And please call me Terrence.”

Oh, God! They are already on first name terms.

“Thank you, Terrence, that is very kind. Alas, no ballrooms for me. But I am sure your company and an excellent dinner will more than make up for it.”

So far, she had not looked at Malcom, but now she turned her smiling eyes upon him. However, the warmth she had shown his cousin had vanished.

“Good evening, Your Grace,” she said, giving an elegant curtsey. “I trust you have had a productive day with your work. Your duties keep you very busy, I know.”

Malcom hardly knew how to react. On the one hand, it was probably more than she had ever said to him in one go. On the other, he was sure he detected an edge of sarcasm to her voice.

“Good evening, Cassandra,” he said with a bow. “Yes, thank you, I managed to get a lot done. I trust you have enjoyed your day also.” He hurried to pull out her chair. Infuriatingly, Terrence got there first. He could only watch in frustration as, with a smile of thanks, she slid into her chair, allowing Terrence to push it in for her.

He glared secretly at Terrence, who gave him a sugary smile in return before they both sat down, with Malcom at the head of the table, Cassandra to his right, with Terrence opposite her.

“Cassandra, you do look charming this evening,” Malcom said, knowing he should have been the one to say it first. But it could not be helped now. To his chagrin, her eyes flew wide, and her mouth dropped open as she looked at him with obvious astonishment. But it lasted only a second before she rearranged her features into a polite smile.

“Thank you,” she said before turning to Terrence and asking him gaily for news of the Season. His cousin immediately launched into what was clearly an amusing anecdote about Lord Stimson being so fat that two footmen had had to lift him

sideways out of his carriage before he could enter a ball.

Cassandra laughed as she followed the story. Malcom, feeling a little left out, could think of nothing else to do but carve the fowl he had been presented with and give the signal for dinner to commence. While he dissected the roast chicken, a footman poured the wine for the first course, while the other servants hurried to remove the lids from the dishes on the table. Through it all, Cassandra and Terrence kept up a lively conversation, full of frequent laughter. Her laughter had a musical quality that reminded him of her lovely singing voice.

“If you would like to pass your plates, I shall serve this chicken,” Malcom said, interrupting them.

“Oh, yes, sorry,” Cassandra said as if she had just noticed him. She passed him her plate, and he laid a few slices upon it before passing it back to her. When it came to serving, Terrence, he placed only a very small piece of chicken on it.”

“I say, old man, do you intend to starve me?” Terrence complained, passing the plate back to Malcom when he saw his small portion.

“My apologies, Cousin,” Malcom told him, reluctantly adding more of the meat and handing the plate back with a hard look.

“That’s more like it,” Terrence said, ignoring the look and reaching for the potatoes. Malcom served himself last and sat down to help himself to the other dishes. The servants returned to their waiting positions, and the meal began in earnest .

Malcom opened his mouth to say something when Terrence managed to start first.

“I had the pleasure of hearing your sister perform at Lady Frinton’s musicale on Thursday evening, Cassandra. She played superbly. Bach, I’m told,” Terrence said



between mouthfuls.

“Did you? How splendid. I am sorry to have missed it. She is very good indeed. We are all proud of her talent,” Cassandra replied, smiling at the news. However, Malcom detected a little wistfulness in her eyes at the same time and wondered if perhaps his wife was a little bit jealous of her sister’s superior abilities on the keyboard.

As if reading his mind, she added, “I wish I could play like her, but even though we are sisters, it seems she has all the ability in that respect. I confess, as much as I love her, over the years, I have often felt a little jealous at her abilities and all the attention she gets because of them. It seems unfair, seeing as I am the eldest. I am joking, of course.” She laughed again after this charmingly self-deprecating admission. Malcom could not help admiring her for being so candid about her shortcomings.

“Well, we all have our different talents, I find,” Terrence said, spearing a piece of gravy-soaked chicken and popping it in his mouth.

“What are your talents, Terrence? Are you fond of music?” she asked with enthusiasm.

“I am in as much as I like a good tune and enjoy dancing. Other than that, I cannot claim to be an expert.”

“So, you do not play a musical instrument?”

“Afraid not. I’m more of an outdoor fellow myself. Like to ride, like a bit of fishing and shooting, that sort of thing,” Terrence said blithely, shooting Malcom a glance that said he should chime in. But before he could say anything, Cassandra went on.

“Oh, that is a shame,” she said, sounding genuinely disappointed. “But as you say, we

all have our talents.” She applied herself to her food for a few moments. In the meantime, Terrence shot Malcom another encouraging look, clearly urging him to join in the conversation.

However, Cassandra forestalled him once again by saying. “And have you been to very many parties this Season, Terrence? Having grown up in London, it is very strange to me to be living out in the country and not attending any events this year. As you may know, it is Maggie’s come out year, and I would have liked to be there for her throughout. She is very keen to find a suitor.”

For some unknown reason, Malcom felt the stab of guilt. It occurred to him that they could have stayed in for the Season so that she could have attended her sister. But he immediately caught himself and ruthlessly crushed the feeling.

What am I thinking! I hate London and the Ton and the Season! I would not have stayed there for all the tea in the world!

“Indeed,” Terrence was saying. “Her come out ball was splendid, a great success, was it not? I do not follow gossip myself, but as far as I have heard, she continues to impress with each appearance. She is very pretty and very accomplished. I am sure she must have a positive herd of eligible gentlemen interested in her by now.”

To Malcom’s surprise, his wife snorted with laughter in a most unladylike, but nevertheless very amusing, way.

“A herd! That is a very good way of describing them. I do not wish to be rude, but the gentlemen falling over themselves to fill in her dance card at her come out ball did so remind me of simpletons,” she said.

Her laughter mingled with Terrence’s and rang throughout the room. They continued chattering, getting on like old friends. They seemed so in accord, Malcom

experienced a flash of something he could only identify as jealousy. It was an emotion he was largely unfamiliar with outside the schoolroom. It was deeply unsettling.

What have you got to be jealous about, you fool? You care nothing for her!

Confused by his own reaction, Malcom remained silent, watching them as he ate. He finished his first glass of wine quickly and indicated to the footman his desire for a refill. The footman immediately obliged.

He listened, feeling increasingly excluded, while Terrence and she continued to discuss balls and parties and people, all things he knew nothing about and was not interested in.

“I never thought I would say it, for I often complained of it, but I do miss the liveliness of London,” Cassandra was saying, reflecting over her wine glass. “There was always something happening somewhere, somewhere nice to go or something interesting to see. I miss the theatres, the operas, and hearing the great orchestras play. I liked to visit the galleries and exhibitions too.

“Oh, indeed. One can never be tired of London,” Terrence agreed.

“But what I do not miss is the Ton and all their silly rules,” Cassandra went on, making Malcom’s ears perk up further. “Even before my own unfortunate experience at its hands,” she paused and shot him an indecipherable sideways glance before continuing, “I find it quite vexing how individuals, particularly young females such as myself, are compelled to undergo onerous tasks for what I perceive as frivolous justifications.

“If one has the misfortune to be born a girl into our society, one’s prospects are severely limited. One relies on the whims of one’s family for an education, which is

usually sadly lacking. One is schooled to believe that the crowning achievement in life is finding a husband. I have always found such attitudes irksome.

“If one dares to read a book, one is labelled a bluestocking and regarded as an oddity. It is as if having an inquiring mind which prefers reading something educational, such as history or travel for instance, to chattering about the latest Paris fashions, one is somehow lacking. You gentlemen have all the advantages, a good education and liberty to live as you wish. While we are held back by a barrage of maddening rules.”

By the time she had finished her speech, both Terrence and Malcom were staring at her in rapt attention, open mouthed, but Malcom guessed it was for quite different reasons.

He was well aware that such radical ideas were quite foreign to his cousin, who had a very traditional outlook on women's place in society's hierarchy. Whereas Cassandra's opinion on the subject of the Ton's immense, unreasoning stupidity and unfairness seemed to echo his own uncannily.

“Well, well, well, it seems we have a rebel on our hands, Malcom,” Terrence cried, grinning widely, inevitably turning it into a joke.

“Of course, I do not expect you to take me seriously,” Cassandra said with a good-natured smile. “I am quite used to being ridiculed for my opinions. My own family laugh at me for them,” she admitted.

Secretly impressed by her intelligence and humility, Malcom could not stop himself from saying, “I do not find them laughable opinions at all. On the contrary, I find them to be very sensible. The Ton is a gigantic pain, no doubt about it. That is why I prefer to avoid it altogether.”

Cassandra turned her head and looked at him with her big hazel eyes as if he had

spoken in ancient Greek. He felt his cheeks flushing with heat under her searching gaze. Terrence was also staring at him, his fork poised in mid-air.

\*\*\*

Cassandra was absolutely astonished. After having hardly spoken two words throughout the whole meal, Malcom had suddenly burst out and appeared, at first sight, to agree with what she had just been saying. In fact, part of what she had been saying—namely, the part about some women not seeing marriage as something to be desired above all else—had been directed at him.

She had wanted to communicate indirectly that she herself was among that number. Having no other avenue open to her, she had made use of the situation to try to make it clear that being married to him, duke or not, was not something that, in normal circumstances, she would have chosen for herself. In short, he should be made to understand that he did not have the monopoly on misery!

But on the other hand, she could not help wondering what he meant by calling the Ton ‘a giant pain.’ Was that his way of showing his resentment at the way he had been forced to marry her through social pressure from their class after their unfortunate mishap? It could certainly be interpreted that way. If that was his meaning, then he would appear to be insulting her in front of their guest.

Since she did not want to be seen to lower herself to that same level, she decided to ignore him.

It is not as if he contributes anything to the conversation.

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:08 am*

Throughout the rest of the meal, she did not so much as look at him, but confined her attention to Terrence, whom she found to be entertaining company. There were times where she wished that if she had had to run into a gentleman by accident and then be made to marry him, it had been Terrence instead of Malcom.

Fortunately, following his strange outburst, he said little more before they all adjourned to the drawing room for drinks.

After Malcom served drinks, the evening went on in much the same vein, with him remaining mostly silent as she and Terrence chattered about all she was missing back in London. She tried to artfully needle Malcom at the same time.

“I believe the Royal Academy of Arts is due to open shortly,” she said in his hearing. “I usually go with my family, although I think I am the only one who actually goes to see the paintings, not the people. This will be the first year in many years that I shall be missing it. Will you be attending, Terrence? I ask because I was wondering if you might obtain a catalogue for me. I shall at least be able to read about the paintings then, even if I cannot view them in person.”

“Oh, yes, I expect I shall go. I’m not much of an art lover myself, but everybody is expected to show their face. I shall be happy to get a catalogue for you, Cassandra,” Terrence replied. “Nothing simpler. But I do not see why you should not attend. Why, we could all go together.” He turned to Malcom. “What do you say, Cousin. You like art and all that stuff, don’t you? I am sure Cassandra would be delighted to have you escort her around the exhibition, wouldn’t you, Cassandra?”

Cassandra could not speak. This was not the outcome she had intended at all. And it

appeared that her husband was similarly struck dumb. Surprised to discover second-hand that he liked art, her eyes met his, and they stared at each other wordlessly for several long moments.

“I’ll think about it,” Malcom finally said, with an obvious lack of enthusiasm.

Very well, if that is how it is to be. “But it is not necessary for me to attend. Such events are always rather unpleasantly crowded anyway, and it would seem strange not to be with my family. Besides, I should not wish to put anyone to any trouble on my behalf. I shall be just as happy with a catalogue, I assure you, Terrence.”

“Surely, we could arrange to meet your family there?” Terrence persisted. “We could make a day of it, have dinner together at Brown’s and perhaps go to the theater afterwards.”

Why would the man not listen? Of course, she wanted to attend, but not with a man who did not wish for her company. The thought of being dragged around in silence for hours by an unwilling Malcom was, frankly, frightening. She felt like screaming, wishing she had not begun the conversation. Things were getting wildly out of control, and she did not know how to put a stop to it. She desperately tried to think of any excuse as to why Terrence’s actually very good suggestion would not suit. As she did so, she could have sworn she saw Malcom and his cousin exchange a meaningful glance when they thought she was not watching.

On seeing it, she bristled inwardly, immediately suspecting that something was going on between the two cousins, some sort of communication she was not privy to. She did not know what it could be, but she did not like it, and she blamed Malcom for whatever game they were playing.

“I shall have to consult my family,” she said finally. “They did mention that they might be away at that time, so it may not be possible. As I say, it is of no great

importance to me if I do not attend,” she blatantly lied, feeling only mildly guilty for it.

“But you sounded so despondent when you said you would miss it,” Terrence protested, looking genuinely puzzled. Good Lord, does the wretched man never give up? She realized she was frowning and immediately smoothed her features and summoned a false smile. She noticed that Malcom also appeared strained about the mouth, and his eyes seemed darker than usual.

“Well, you still have time to make your minds up,” Terrence said at last, to her immense relief. But then, she saw Malcom breathe out too, and his forbidding expression softened a little. Was the notion of escorting her around the exhibition so horrible to him then? Even though she did not want to go with him, the thought he felt the same about her was vexing indeed.

In fact, she was so annoyed, she decided she would be better off retiring for the night and leaving the pair to their own devices. Let them enjoy their silly games if that is what they wanted.

“Well, gentlemen, it is getting late. I think I shall retire if you will excuse me.” She rose from her seat with as much hauteur as she could summon.

“Of course,” Malcom said, no doubt eager to be rid of her. “Sleep well.”

Ha! As if you care!

“Oh, going already?” Terrence said, looking at her as if he was disappointed. “You won’t stay a little longer? I have so much enjoyed our conversation. It has been nice spending some time getting to know you, Cassandra. I only wish I wasn’t such an ignorant fellow and knew more about music and art. But I’m afraid I always was a bit of a simpleton. That’s what my tutors always said anyway.”



He sounded so genuine, she almost believed him. “I have enjoyed talking to you too, Terrence. It had been a lovely change to be able to converse at such length on such interesting topics. It feels like a long time since I was last able to do so.” She threw a hard glance at Malcom then, to let him know the barb was aimed at him. His cheekbones flushed, and she was satisfied he had heard and understood. She turned to smile at Terrence again. “However, I am rather tired. I am sure we shall have the chance to talk again soon. Good night.”

By that time she was at the door, and though she forced herself to make a graceful exit, she could not wait to escape and gain the privacy of her chambers, to perform an autopsy on the evening’s events.

What a pity she did not pause to listen at the door and eavesdrop on the conversation that went on after she left. She would have been truly amazed to hear what was said.

\*\*\*

“What do you think you were doing?” Malcom demanded, keeping his voice low in case she was listening outside the door. Not that he seriously thought she would stoop to such a thing, but one never knew .

“I don’t know what you mean,” Terrence said, all innocence. He took a cigarillo from his pocket and lit it from a spill from the fire. A grey cloud of smoke surrounded him at once.

“Well, after that performance, the least you can do is offer me one,” Malcom told him, deeply disgruntled by what had gone on.

“Oh, sorry, old man. Here, have one.”

Once Malcom was also filling the room with smoke, he repeated his question. “What

did you mean with all that nonsense about taking her to visit the Royal Academy and art and music? Are you trying to make me look a fool?"

"You need no assistance on that score, Cousin. If you cannot see what I am trying to do, then you are beyond any help."

"There you go again speaking in riddles," Malcom complained. "You monopolise my wife all through dinner . . . why, you're even on first name terms, which is more than I am with her. Chattering away non-stop like a gossipy old dowager you were, having a wonderful time as far as I could see."

"Jealous, are you?" Terrence asked, arching an eyebrow.

"I certainly am not!" Malcom lied, his cheeks heating up.

"I was trying to get the conversation around to areas where you excel, you absolute idiot. Art, music, books . . . all things I despise, and you love. I gave you plenty of opportunities to speak up and make yourself shine in her eyes. Yet time and time again, you missed them completely by standing there like an ogre in silence. What is the matter with you?"

Malcom was taken aback at the genuine frustration in his cousin's voice. It was seldom that anything ruffled Terrence's feathers. His anger receded instantly, to be replaced by doubt, and a sense of failure.

"I-I did not realise," he muttered apologetically, slumping into an armchair.

"Clearly not," Terrence said tartly, pacing before the hearth, exhaling a huge plume of smoke. Malcom had never seen him look so agitated. Terrence paused in his pacing to glare sternly at Malcom.

“There are times, Malcom, when I really wonder if we can truly be related.”

“What do you mean? ”

His cousin pointed to the door as if trying to communicate with a lunatic.

“That little woman who has just left us.” He shook his head despairingly. “Do you not realise that half the fellows in Town would pay their weight in gold to have her as their wife? Including myself.”

“What?!”

“Yes, indeed,” Terrence went on accusingly, pointing at Malcom with the glowing end of his cigarillo. “If I could but take her off your hands, I would leap at the chance. She is everything a man could desire in a woman, educated, clever, funny, interesting, with impeccable taste, and above all, she is stunningly attractive.”

Malcom could only stare at him, his mouth hanging open in amazement. His cousin had never spoken to him like this before.

“And what do you do, you oaf? You treat her worse than one of your hunting dogs. Yes, I’ve seen how you fuss over them, patting and kissing them, whispering sweet words in their ears. But a lovely, outstanding woman—a catch, Malcom, a catch—whom Madame Fate has kindly thrown in your path, and you act like an absolute ill-mannered person. It is not right, it is not fair, and it is utterly ungentlemanly what you are doing to that poor girl. And I must tell you, if you do not do something to mend your ways very quickly, I shall not forgive you, and you shall lose another friend through your appalling behaviour. Me!” Terrence was breathing so heavily, and his face was so red, Malcom became concerned for his well-being.

“Terrence,” he said, “calm down. This is not like you.”

Terrence rounded on him. “Oh, but it is like me, dear Cousin. Only I hide my frustration with your antics most of the time. I have grown so used to your anti-social ways; I have even begun to collude in them. When I think how many times I have defended you to Madeleine, and to others, protected you, lied for you. It is no wonder they call you the Beast of Lindenhall.”

“Terrence, do stop, please, I am sorry if—”

“Sorry? I am not interested in your paltry sorry. Now, I am going to bed. If you care about our friendship, I suggest you act quickly to repair things with your wife. That is if it is not already too late.”

He viciously threw his cigarillo butt into the fire and stalked from the room. This time, he slammed the door.

Stunned by the display of fury from his usually mild-mannered cousin, Malcom leaned back in his chair and uttered a surprised, “Well I never.” His mind reeled from all that Terrence had accused him of. His thoughts were in such a whirl, he was forced to go and get himself a large brandy to calm his nerves. He resumed his seat and sipped it, replaying the evening in his mind. Had he not set out with good intentions? Where had it all gone so horribly wrong?

You were jealous, the small voice in his head told him mockingly, because Terrence and Cassandra got on so well. You have been married to her for the best part of a month, and yet you are hardly even on first name terms! How could you be when you never speak to her? Yet Terrence managed to achieve such intimacy in less than a minute!

Malcom realized he had found out more about his wife’s thoughts and opinions by listening to her converse with his cousin than he had in all the time they had been married.

Terrence is right; I have acted shamefully. And now he's threatening to abandon me. I cannot lose him. He is more than a cousin to me, he is my friend, my lifeline. I must somehow find the strength to do as he says, to overcome the ghosts of the past and make things work with Cassandra. But wait, did I not decide that before? Why is it so hard? Why do I keep failing?

He drank his brandy, searching his mind for the answers, but none came. Eventually, emotionally exhausted, he fell asleep in the chair.

He woke up in the early hours, his limbs stiff, with a painful crick in his neck. The house was gloomy and heavy with silence as he made his way up to his chamber to go to bed. It reflected his low mood perfectly. As he fell asleep once more, he could have sworn he could hear the strains of a nocturne being played fluidly on a pianoforte. Its beauty was soothing to his soul, and it made his heart clench in his chest with a strange longing, though he knew not what for.

But then, disturbingly, a wrong note resounded in his head, then another, and another, until the exquisite melody degenerated into a horrible cacophony.

"Oh, stop, will you? Stop!" he groaned, putting his hands to his ears to shut it out. That did no good as it was inside his head. However, as he willed it, the din slowly faded.

That night, for the first time in six years, he dreamt of his mother at the piano. He was watching her play, listening with rapt attention. She was playing of all things Fair Colleen . Then, she opened her mouth and began singing. But to Malcom's astonishment, the voice that came out of her mouth was not hers but Cassandra's, a sound as liquid and pure as that of dawn's first skylark.

Even in his dream, tremors of pleasure shot through him as the sweet notes seemed to pierce his soul. But when his mother finished the song and ceased her playing, she

turned to him and gave him one of her looks. Her beautiful eyes brimmed with disappointment and sadness, yet at the same time were beseeching.

“What is it, Mother?” he tried to say, but the words stuck in his throat, and a feeling of panic seized him. Suddenly, he was back in his bed, awake, sweating and panting a little.

“Calm yourself, you fool,” he muttered, turning over to go back to sleep. Eventually, he did sleep again, but the vision of his mother’s beseeching eyes lingered stubbornly in his mind, along with the faint melody of Fair Colleen .

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:08 am*

In the next few days following the fiasco of the dinner with Terrence, who, she noticed, had departed early the next day, Cassandra felt even more miserable and alone than before. A general sense of depression weighed upon her spirits, combined with a slow burning anger deep inside her that she could not seem to shake, directed both at the men as well as herself.

Terrence's easy conversation at the dinner had cheered her, but the feeling that something was going on between the two men above her head had spoiled any pleasure she might have otherwise found in his continuing friendship. It felt like yet another loss. In addition, it had squashed all her resolution to approach Malcom about having the music room opened up, and she despised herself for being so cowardly. Plus, inexplicably, his jibe about hating the Ton for forcing him to wed her, still stung.

She was so discouraged, she had begged off dinner for the next two evenings, pleading a megrim, unable to face sitting in silence in the dining room for over an hour with Malcom. She had no doubt he would be pleased.

But later on, it had suddenly occurred to her that that might have been his goal all along. Becoming certain of it on reflection, she resolved to attend dinner henceforth, however down she felt, out of sheer spite.

"Oh, milady, you look so pale," Anna told her one morning when she came into Cassandra's chambers with the tea tray, her young face etched with concern. She placed the tray on the nightstand and scrutinized her mistress more intently. "I am worried about you, milady." She pressed her small palm to Cassandra's forehead and held it there for a few moments before removing it. "Hmm, you do not seem to have a

fever. But you have hardly left your room these past three days except to ride, and I know you have not been sleeping well. Should I call the physician? Do you need a tonic or a powder?"

"No, thank you, Anna, I do not need any of those things, I assure you," Cassandra replied, pushing herself up against the pillows and stifling a sigh for the maid's benefit. "I am just a little indisposed, that is all. Please do not fuss. You know how I dislike it. Now, please pour me a cup of tea, and you shall see how quickly I am revived."

The steaming amber liquid did have its usual restorative effect on her body, though it could not cure the ache in the region of her heart that was plaguing her so much. She missed her family and her home, she missed Diana, and she pined for London's bustling atmosphere. She longed for simple human affection. Most of all, she yearned for music, sweet music to soothe her troubled soul.

She glanced out of the window at the weather. It was drizzling, and although the sky was already clearing and the sun growing in strength, she decided to postpone her ride for a while until the rain stopped.

"I shall take breakfast and ride a little later today, I think," she told Anna, who was laying out her mistress's elegant green riding habit on the bed. "I shall just wear the blue muslin for now and change into my habit later, Anna."

"Very good, milady," the maid said with a smile, clearly relieved at seeing her mistress out of bed and taking charge of the day. She went to fetch the gown from the wardrobe.

"And when you go down, would you ask Cook if I can have a couple of those toasted teacakes for breakfast, please, Anna? And a pot of coffee for a change, in the morning room," Cassandra asked.



“Of course, milady,” Anna replied, selecting fresh linen and the blue muslin day dress.

So it was that, at about eleven o’clock that morning, having dressed and enjoyed her light breakfast, with the latest novel balanced on her knee, Cassandra was ready for her ride. After changing into her habit, she was soon out in the fresh air. The puddles were rapidly drying in the sun. The water dripping from the trees sparkled and beat out a continual pattering rhythm.

The ground beneath her mare’s hooves was soft, so they made almost no noise as they traversed the estate’s many bridle paths. That was likely how they surprised the three children whom they suddenly came across playing in a clearing in the woods.

Cassandra had taken an unfamiliar path past a forested area. As she rode by, she heard childish giggling among the trees. Instantly intrigued, she bent to avoid the low branches and rode beneath them until, to her surprise, she emerged into a clearing. There, she spotted the children. She watched unseen for a few moments, trying to discern what they were up to. They seemed to be engaged in some sort of dance.

The horse snickered, the children turned, and froze at the sight of her, their eyes wide and their mouths open with surprise. Then, the eldest, a girl of about twelve, Cassandra guessed, with long, shiny brown hair, shouted “Run!” to the two smaller ones. They had the same dark hair and appeared to be identical twins, a girl and a boy aged around five or six years old. The three of them instantly turned to flee in the opposite direction. But Cassandra, wanting to talk to them, for she adored children, called out, “Wait! Please do not run away. I shall not hurt you. Please, stay.”

The elder girl stopped and turned, looking up at Cassandra perched on her horse with obvious amazement, and a little sheepishness. The twins, following the girl’s lead, also skidded to halt beside her, each taking one of her hands. Their expressions of shock were almost comical. Now she could get a better look at them, she saw they

were clean and well-turned out, though some of their clothing had the familiar worn look of hand-me-downs.

“I am sorry I cannot get down from my horse without someone to help me,” Cassandra apologized, knowing what a towering figure she must seem, looking down at them from on high. Thinking quickly how to keep the children there, she fumbled in the pocket of her riding habit and pulled out a handful of barley sugar twists. She always kept some sort of treat on her for the horses.

“Here,” she told them, leaning down to hold them out to the children, giving them her warmest smile. “Would you like some sweets? You could give one to Brownie too.” She gestured at the horse with her eyes. “She is very fond of them. Here, take them.”

“Thank you, My Lady,” said the big girl with surprising boldness and good manners. She let the smaller ones’ hands go as she ventured slowly forward and gingerly took four of the sweets from Cassandra’s hand before backing away slightly. She offered one, flat palmed, to Brownie. The horse snorted with pleasure as she plucked it from the small hand and devoured it, nodding her approval. The little ones laughed as the girl backed away. She gave them each a sweet, eliciting happy smiles from both chubby- cheeked little children.

“What do you say?” asked the big girl.

“Thank you, My Lady,” the twins chorused and ate their treats with childish, enthusiasm.

“My name is Cassandra, but my friends call me Cassie. I wish you would call me that as I am sure we shall become good friends soon. May I know your names?” Cassandra asked, impressed by their good manners so far. She popped a barley sugar into her own mouth, in a spirit of fellowship.

“Hello, Cassie. How do you do? I’m Mary,” said the big girl. She gestured at the twins. “And this is Lou, my brother, and this is Lynn, my sister.” She turned to the smaller children and instructed, “Say, “How do you do, Cassie?””

“How do you do, Cassie?” came the angelic little chorus, squeezing Cassandra’s heart with its innocent sweetness.

“I am very pleased to make your acquaintance, Mary, Lou, and Lynn,” she told them. “Goodness, how nice to have a brother and a sister. I only have one sister. Her name is Maggie.”

“Oh, we have lots more sisters and brothers at home,” Mary explained around her barley sugar. “There are nine of us. I do not count Ruth as she is only two months old. She is not even a real person yet.”

Though struck by the impressive number of siblings quoted, Cassandra could not help laughing. “Indeed. At what age does a baby become a real person, do you think?” she could not resist asking.

“Oh, I would say when they can walk on their own and say a few words. And when they have been baptised, of course. They are likely people by that time,” Mary opined sagely.

“That sounds about right. May I ask how old you all are?”

“I am eleven, and Lou and Lynn are six. How old are you, Cassie?”

“I am nearly twenty.”

“Twenty? Goodness, that is old. You are older even than Christine, our eldest sister. She is eighteen. She is working in Bath as a governess.”

“Is she indeed? I do hope she likes her position,” Cassandra said, amused at being described as old.

“I do not think she likes it that much. I heard her tell Mama that her charges are ill-tempered,” Mary replied with brutal honesty.

Cassandra stifled a snort of laughter. “Poor Christine. Perhaps she was just in a bad mood that day,” she suggested.

“Hmm, probably. When she is at home, she is quite often in a bad mood. She made a big fuss over nothing when I got a pet mouse, and when Lou accidentally let Barney eat her Sunday hat.”

“It was a silly old hat anyway,” Lou piped up, clearly still aggrieved over the incident.

“Who is Barney?” Cassandra asked, somewhat confused. Was there a hat-eating child in this large family?

“Barney is our doggy. He’s soft and furry, and he’s good, most of the time,” little Lynn volunteered.

“Ah! Of course. Well, I am sure he could not help it. Dogs are prone to such things, I am told. One cannot simply go leaving hats all over the place and expect them not to be eaten,” Cassandra said, ready to burst out laughing. She had not had so much fun since . . . she was married.

“That’s what Papa said,” Lou supplied.

“He is very wise. I hope Christine has gotten over the loss now. But what about your pet mouse, Mary. Do you still have it?”

Mary shook her long curls glumly and said, “No, Mama made a fuss too and said Chips was dirty and to get him out of the house, so I had to let him go. He wasn’t dirty, Cassie, he was always cleaning himself, like this.” She demonstrated, her hands becoming paws as she pantomimed a mouse performing its toilette.

“I am sure he was, but all the same, he was probably glad to get back to his family,” Cassandra pointed out, trying hard not to laugh at the small tragedy.

“That is what Papa said too,” Mary admitted.

Thinking their father must be a fount of calm reason, Cassandra thought she should change the subject.

“So, you are in charge of your younger siblings, I suppose, Mary?” she said.

“Yes. Mother says I am the sensible one, so when I have finished my lessons for the day, it is my job to look after them.”

“And there are nine of you children in total?”

Mary nodded. “Yes. Though we do not all live at home at the same time. Christine is in Bath, and Matthew and Mark, our eldest brothers, are at university in Cambridge.”

University? Cambridge? This was a well-educated and intellectual family evidently, Cassandra concluded, deeply interested. Yet the children were not the pampered kind of her own class. They appeared far more robust. Who were their parents?

“Still, that is a goodly number of brothers and sisters to play with at home,” she said. “I admit, I am a little jealous at having only one sister, and she is far away.” Not so far, but she might as well be a million miles away.

“Do you not know that jealousy is one of the seven deadly sins, Cassie? You had better try not to be jealous, for it may offend God.” Mary said gravely, but the weight of her warning was somewhat undermined by the lisp caused by her vigorously sucking on her barley sugar. The pious caution made Cassandra even more curious about where the children came from.

“That is very true, Mary. I appreciate you reminding me of that. I shall try to do better. May I ask if you live nearby?” Mary turned and pointed through the trees toward some invisible location.

“Oh, yes, very near. Our father is the Vicar of St. Giles’ Church in the village.”

Light dawned on Cassandra. “I see. So, I am guessing that you live at the Rectory.” She remembered driving past the pretty church and the large, creeper-covered rectory beside it when she had arrived in the carriage.

“Mmm, we do,” Mary confirmed.

“And what is your father’s name?”

“Reverend Titus Clarke. We are the Clarkes,” Mary explained.

“Reverend Clarke,” Cassandra echoed, committing the name to memory, while an idea formed quickly in her head. She had always attended Sunday service at their local church at home with her family.

But since arriving at Lindenhall, Malcom had shown himself to be something of a shirker in the religious department. As far as she knew, he did not go to church on Sundays as one might expect from a local landowner and peer of the realm. But coming from him, well known for his reclusive ways, that was hardly surprising .

At any rate, he had not offered to escort her to Sunday service. The manor had its own private chapel, so Cassandra had so far done her weekly worshipping there, alone. Why should I not make friends in the village and attend St. Giles' this Sunday?

Her thoughts were interrupted by Mary asking, "Where do you live, Cassie?"

"Me? Oh, up there, at the manor house," she replied, inclining her head in the general direction.

Mary looked suddenly taken aback. "Do you know the Duke then?" she asked, her eyes big.

"Yes, I know him," Cassandra admitted somewhat reluctantly, fearing Malcom's reputation might precede her and influence the children's current benign view of her.

"I am sorry for you then. Because he is not very nice," Mary confided. "Mama says he is a heathen, for he never comes to church. Father says he has his own church inside his house and does not need to. We are glad because he would probably tell us off. Everyone knows he has a very bad temper."

Cassandra was unsurprised to hear it, but, nevertheless, she frowned in puzzlement.

"Why should he tell you off?" she asked, certain it was not at all beyond her husband's capabilities to wilfully frighten young children.

"Because we come to play here in his woods, where we are not supposed to, which is called trespassing. We are not supposed to trespass against him, like in the Lord's prayer. But Mr. Dawkins, the gamekeeper, says it is all right as long as we keep out of the Beast's way."

"The Beast," Cassandra repeated hollowly. There was that horrible word again. She

had to admit, she could not argue it was unwarranted. Her former horror at being married to a man generally known to all as the Beast of Lindenhall briefly returned, accompanied by a flare of anger against him.

“If he catches us, Mr. Dawkins says he might eat us all up, like a big old wolf,” Lynn put in, not looking unduly worried by the prospect.

“That is just a silly thing he says to scare us, Lynn, you baby,” Mary told her sister with some scorn. “Mama says the Duke is not a wolf who will eat you up. He is a beast because he is beastly to people. He is mean and ill-tempered.”

“Worse than Christine?” Lynn asked.

“Oh, much, much worse.” Mary said with conviction.

“I see. Well, I shall not tell him I have seen you,” Cassandra promised, unable to fault Mary’s mother’s wise evaluation. “Your secret is safe with me.”

“Now, Mary, tell me, what were you all doing when I came? I thought you might be dancing.”

“Yes, we were practicing the waltz, but we are not supposed to,” Mary admitted a little guiltily. “So, please, Cassie, do not tell on us, or Mama will be very angry.” She sounded truly anxious.

“Of course, I shall not. Besides, I have yet to meet your Mama and Papa, so I shall likely not have the chance to speak to them anyway. You need not worry,” Cassandra assured them. All three looked relieved.

“Thank you, we are grateful. Most grown-ups are always sneaking on us,” Mary said with a look of annoyance.



“I am no sneak. Now, Mary, at what hour do your lessons finish each day?”

“It depends on how busy Mama is but usually around two o’clock. We are early today because Papa is ministering to the poor, and Mama is busy supervising Bessie with the washing.”

“Well, now that we have made friends, I hope we shall meet again. If you would like. Tomorrow, perhaps? I shall, come on foot, so I will be able to play with you. I may be able to help because, you see, I have danced the waltz many times. I could help you learn how to do it properly,” she offered.

The way Mary’s face lit up was heart-warming. “That would be wonderful! Thank you, Cassie. We shall be here, whether you can come or not. We come most days when it is not raining, for we have our camp nearby,” the girl explained with excitement. “We could show it to you.”

“That would be splendid. I am honoured,” Cassandra told her, deeply moved by the generous invitation.

“And if you cannot come and want to tell us, you can leave a note in the camp, and we shall see it.”

“Excellent. I shall be sure to do that,” Cassandra told her. She realized she had been out quite a long time and ought to get Brownie back for her teatime oats .

“Well, dear Children, I am so very pleased to have met you. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow and practising our dancing,” she said, smiling down at them.

“Us too,” Mary assured her, beaming back at her. Lou and Lynn smiled at her and waved enthusiastically.

“Goodbye for now then,” Cassandra said, turning Brownie around with some reluctance and making her way back beneath the wet trees and down the bridle path toward home.

“Goodbye, Cassie,” Mary called after her.

“Bring some more sweets tomorrow, please, Cassie!” she heard Lou shout. She chuckled.

“Be careful of the Beast!” came little Lynn’s voice.

“I shall indeed,” Cassandra murmured under her breath as Brownie and she turned back towards the manor.

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:08 am*

When she got home to the manor, Cassandra felt in a much better mood than before. Her self-confidence had been boosted by her encounter with her new friends. Now, she had an appointment to look forward to, somewhere to be tomorrow. She was expected by fine company. It felt good, like a small victory.

Importantly, on the ride home, she had resolved to go to church the next Sunday morning at St. Gile's and make a point of introducing herself to the Reverend and Mrs. Clarke. They promised to be a pleasant route by which she might become a part of the community she was now a part of. She hoped they would help her become familiar enough to the locals not to be subjected to the goggling stares she had endured in the village on her recent trip to the post office whenever she went out.

She spent a few luxurious hours in the library with her favourite books, after checking the Beast was not there first, of course. Far from being disconcerted by the apt nickname, as she had been before meeting the children, she now smiled each time she thought of it. Such was their youthful power to neutralize the ogre in their midst. However, she still had to rebuild her courage to approach Malcom about the music room.

After that, she took tea and a light, late lunch on the terrace, admiring the garden as she did so. She was musing over her book when a maid appeared and handed her two thick letters. She knew instantly who they were from. The slightly thinner one was from home, and the nice, thick one was from Diana. Saving the best till last, she slit open the one from her family with a clean butter knife.

Within a few minutes, she had to dab tears from her eyes with her handkerchief. Each member of the family had penned their own little essay, first asking after her health

and that of the Duke, then giving her all their news from their own points of view.

Mama vented her annoyance at the lack of good serving staff available for hire and bemoaned the destruction of her prized flowering plants by rabbits. She then went on to describe several social events they had attended as a family and gave her usual ruthless assessment of the various successes and failures of their hosts .

She also wrote in detail about Maggie's rapturous receptions on playing at several recitals and musical evenings in Town. Her little sister was making a big impact in all the right places it appeared. No surprise there. Through her tears, Cassandra was able to laugh at herself for the familiar twinge of envy she felt at hearing of Maggie's successes. She did not wish to be Maggie, but she certainly wished she could have been there with them all to see her sister shine.

Papa also wrote a little about Maggie's successful Season, but he seemed more interested in complaining that he had mislaid his reading spectacles and was having dreadful trouble without them. Did she have any idea where they might be hiding? She laughed between her tears at his endearing grumbles.

He also wrote that he had ordered a new book to be sent to her, a newly published travelogue with illustrations, the diary of a gentleman planter's wife who had gone to live with her husband in India. Cassandra was touched he should think of it, for in the past, he had not shown any particular approval for her passion for reading such books. She was excited to receive it.

Maggie's news came in a sealed envelope, signalling intrigue. Cassandra knew that the only reason for her prim and proper sister to communicate in private like that was that she had something to say which she did not want their parents to read. What could it be?

Cassandra opened the letter carefully and began to read the neat, looping handwriting.

After opening with a polite yet cursory enquiry after Cassandra's health and that of the Duke, it soon became clear why Maggie was writing under separate cover.

. . . his name is Lord Euan McMuir, and, as you might guess from his name, he is from Scotland. He is twenty-two, and he is the earl of some place I cannot pronounce, but it is far away and sounds awfully nice, with mountains and lochs and everything. Cassie, he lives in an actual castle! Is it not romantic?

At any rate, he is terribly handsome, tall, strong, with lovely, curly auburn hair and bright grey eyes that shine like sixpences. I think I would miss your silly jokes more, Sister, if I did not have Euan to make me laugh. He is a wonderful dancer too. I am starting to see why you did not like all the rules of the Ton, Cassie. At parties, I confess, I really only wish to dance with him all the time, but Mama insists I can only dance with him twice. How silly! At least Mama and Papa approve of him, for he is very rich and nice. If we get married, we shall dance together all day long!

He adores music, and he is very good at playing too. He can play lots of instruments, so, if I marry him, we shall be quite the orchestra. When he visits, which is often, he always wants to sing when I play. He is a lovely baritone. Is it normal for one to have shivers go up one's spine when someone sings? It is very mysterious, but it is the same feeling I get when I play Bach. And, Cassie, sometimes, he gives me such dreamy looks when I play for him, I think I shall quite swoon away and make a fool of myself by falling off the stool . . .

The letter went on at length in the same vein, ending with a plea to keep all this secret from Mama and Papa for the time being, for Maggie was certain Euan would propose to her any day. Cassandra had to smile as she dried her sentimental tears. It was clear that Maggie was already half in love with Lord Euan McMuir. And it was quite understandable, for the young man sounded dazzling.

She folded the letter away and put it aside, unable to help wondering where her Lord

Euan could be, her musical paragon. But if he had ever existed, he was too late to save her now.

Dinner with Malcom that evening was exceedingly strange. Firstly, when she entered the dining room and greeted him with her usual curtsy, Cassandra noticed he smiled at her. It was a lovely smile, showing his white, even teeth and animating his handsome face. But since he had only ever smiled at her when his cousin had been present, obviously for appearance's sake, she dismissed the fluttering she felt in her chest.

Secondly, he said, "You look very nice this evening . . . Cassandra."

She was so surprised, it was all she could do to keep her composure.

"Thank you . . . Malcom," she replied, suspecting some sort of game was afoot. Was he planning to make a fool of her somehow? She sat down, allowing him to push in her chair. As usual, he sat at right angles to her, at the head of the table.

But what he did next was not usual at all. "May I pour you some wine?" he asked, maintaining his smile, actually meeting her eyes. She could not help staring at him, though she managed to keep her face composed. He really was annoyingly handsome. However, she knew his good looks were a mere facade that hid a cold interior, and she resolved not to be taken in by whatever it was he was trying to do.

"Yes, please," she replied without warmth, breaking their gaze. He filled her glass, then his own. "Thank you," she said, wondering what was coming next.

"I think we have roast lamb today," he observed, lifting the lid from the platter the footman had delivered to his right hand. The sizzling meat sent tantalizing aromas wafting to Cassandra's nostrils, and she realized she was hungry.

As if reading her mind, Malcom said, "I hope you are hungry. I know I am," and proceeded to take up the carving irons and deftly carve the small joint. He laid several slices on her plate before doing the same to his own and leaving the carving irons aside.

"Potatoes?" he asked, giving her an inquiring look, his hand on the serving spoon.

"Yes, please. Not too many," she replied as he dished up far too much mashed potato than she knew she could manage.

"Say when," he invited, removing some.

"That is enough, thank you."

Not to be outdone, she quickly pounced on the vegetables, a mixture of summer greens and carrots.

"Broccoli? Cabbage? Carrots?" she asked, seizing the dish and spoon. She made sure to return his smile but added an edge of sarcasm to it, to show him she was not to be trifled with. To her satisfaction, he appeared a little taken aback.

"A little of everything, please," he replied, a small frown line appearing between his dark brows, his smile narrowing slightly. But by the time she had finished dishing up, he was ready with the gravy boat. He held it poised above her plate.

"Gravy?"

"A little, thank you."

Relieved the rigmarole was over, they finally began to eat. Cassandra could not help noticing the curious expressions on some of the servants' faces. Two footmen

exchanged glances as she watched, making it obvious that they too were wondering why their master was behaving so out of character.

“How was your ride today? I noticed you went out a little later than usual,” Malcom said.

Cassandra, more suspicious than ever now, took the time to finish chewing her mouthful of food before replying tersely, “It rained.”

“Yes, I saw while I was out, but it cleared up quite quickly, did it not? I hope you did not get wet.”

“I did not. Thank you for your concern.”

“Where did you go?”

“Out.”

“I mean, where did you ride? Anywhere of note?”

“I have no idea since I am unacquainted with any places of note. I do not know my way around. I simply ride where the paths take me.”

That shut him up for a few moments. Cassandra hoped he was thinking about how he should have showed her around the estate.

He said, “There is a lake.”

“I have not seen it.”

“If you take the bridle path through the woods to the west as you leave the stables and



keep riding down the avenue, you will come to it.”

“I will keep that in mind.”

“But you are enjoying the countryside?”

“It is very pretty.”

“I am glad you find it so. I much prefer the country to London.”

“Indeed.”

“Did I not hear you saying to Terrence the other evening that you are missing London? Do you object strongly to living in the country?”

She finished her food and put her silverware neatly to one side of her plate. A footman hurried to remove it. Cassandra drank some of her wine.

Then she said, “I like both, but my family are in London at present.”

“And you miss them.” It was statement, not a question. He finished his dinner too, and his plate was quickly taken.

“You are very intuitive,” she said, accompanying her remark with a look that she hoped made it clear she meant the opposite. It seemed to work, for pudding signalled a return to the old silence. Against her better judgement, Cassandra wondered if she was being too hard on him. He was clearly making an effort. She realized it must be hard for him, having someone about the place when he had kept to himself for so long. It was obvious he did not cope well with others. In another time and place, if he would let her in just an inch, she might have been more understanding.

As she was thinking about this, it suddenly occurred to her that his change in demeanour might have something to do with his cousin. Was it possible that Terrence, who was clearly familiar with Malcom's anti-social ways, had taken his cousin to task about his treatment of her? It was a startling idea, yet it would explain the strange looks she had seen the pair exchanging. She was suddenly so sure it was the case, her residual anger towards Terrence melted away.

Unfortunately, the theory also logically pointed to Malcom having fought against his cousin's arguments, not wanting to keep company with her. That would explain his long silences, the tension in his features, his apparent inability to so much as smile. She hardened her heart against him once more.

When dinner was over, before they left the table, he suddenly said, "I meant to tell you to help yourself to any of the books in the library. There is quite a good selection. I believe you mentioned to Terrence that you enjoy reading books about history and travel. You will find many interesting volumes there, I am sure. And there are some beautifully illustrated books on art of all kinds too."

She did not wait for him to pull out her chair but did it herself. He looked satisfyingly startled when she stood up and smoothed her skirts, fixing her eyes upon him.

"I am afraid I found my way to the library shortly after arriving here," she said evenly. "I have extensively browsed every section. You will understand that I wished for something to pass the time and did not want to bother you with my requests, for you are always so very busy with your work. Do excuse me. I shall retire now. Good night."

With that, she lifted her chin and glided as stately as the duchess she was out of the room.

She went to her chambers, where to her consternation, she promptly burst into tears.

Throwing herself on the bed and sobbing into the pillow, she wondered how on earth she was going to spend the rest of her life with the beastly Beast of Lindenhall!

\*\*\*

For the second time in three days, Malcom was completely knocked off kilter. After Cassandra had left, clearly in high dudgeon, he dismissed the servants from the dining hall and refilled his wine glass. He sat with his head in his hands, going over the conversation with his wife.

Once again, it seemed he had inadvertently managed to alienate her despite his best efforts to do as Terrence commanded and win her over. But as he went over the conversation, if it could be called that, he realized that his efforts had been misplaced and downright foolish.

She was not an idiot. She must have caught on to what he was trying to do from the moment she entered the room. After hardly speaking to her for a month, there he was, suddenly asking her where she had been and pretending concern for her welfare.

No wonder she was so cold. She was merely giving me a taste of my own medicine. I have actively tried to oppress her. But she has too much spirit to be oppressed, and I admire her for it. Terrence is right again, blast him: she deserves so much more than I have given her, and if I do not do something fast, I will lose her forever.

He suddenly found that was something he fervently did not want to happen, and an idea began to form in his mind about how he might prevent it.

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:08 am*

Meanwhile, Cassandra had sobbed herself to sleep. But she awoke around midnight, according to the clock in the hall, which loudly bonged out the hours one by one. She sat up and lit the lamp on the nightstand. With the sudden illumination she realized she was still wearing the gown she had worn at dinner, and her jewels had pressed into her skin where she had lain on them, leaving sore, red marks.

She took off the rumpled dress and hung it up, removed the jewelry and put it away, and let down her hair. It fell to her waist, and for several minutes, she stood before the looking glass, brushing it out, looking at the woman reflected there. Her eyes were large and dark, and the turn of her mouth hinted at a deep unhappiness.

When she had put down the hairbrush, she went to the wardrobe and put on a nightgown and a robe, belting it tightly around her waist. She pushed her feet into slippers. Then, she walked around the chamber, feeling restless.

She drank some water to refresh her dry throat, thinking over what had happened at dinner. Her anger with Malcom had dissipated, but a deep sense of confusion lingered. She wished Diana was there to talk to, but there was no one for her to confide in, no one to seek advice from. The burden was hers alone to carry. Only one thing would lighten it, she decided.

Taking the lamp from the nightstand with her, she left the room and made her way down the stairs and along the hallway, towards the east wing.

\*\*\*

Malcom was in his study, sitting by the hearth in his well-worn chair, clad in only his

shirt and trousers, his feet bare. His other clothes lay in a jumble on the chair where Terrence usually sat. He knew he had drunk just a little too much wine, for he had a slight headache. Maybe it was from the wine, maybe from thinking too much; he could not be sure which.

He tried to ignore the throbbing behind his eyes and got up, going to the sideboard and drinking some of the water from the seldom-used carafe that lived there. It was tepid and tasted stale, but it wetted his throat, and he felt a little better. He took a deep inhale, pulled himself up to his full height, and squared his shoulders as if about to go into battle.

Pull yourself together, man. You have a plan of action now, and you need waste no more time in putting it into action.

Taking a lamp from a side table, he left the study and padded silently down the long hallway leading to the east wing.

As soon as he shouldered his way through the connecting door, he heard the stumbling notes, muffled, yet clearly discernible to his ears. Alarming, his heart did a somersault, and his stomach tightened. She is there!

Overcome by confusion, he dithered in the hallway, turning this way and that, caught between the urge to flee and a force within commanding him to go forward. The force won. He went on down the hallway, the ragged notes getting progressively louder as he followed them to the door of the music room.

He paused, steeling himself. Then he knocked, and said immediately, "May I come in, Cassandra?" He did not want to scare her.

The sounds ceased abruptly. The seconds ticked by in agonizing silence. Then, suddenly, the door opened, and his wife was standing before him, looking up at him

with her big hazel eyes. Malcom's heart seemed to cease beating as they stared at each other. It restarted slowly as he drank in her ethereal beauty, his eyes moving involuntarily over her from head to toe.

She was clad in a robe of Chinese silk with an intricate pattern of beautiful flowers, chrysanthemums, he thought. Small, embroidered slippers poked out from beneath it. The robe clung to her slender curves like a second skin. Her small, perfect figure was outlined in silhouette against the lamplight behind her. The pale symmetry of her face was framed by a dazzling halo of shining blonde hair that fell over her shoulders to her waist.

Malcom was dumbstruck. His mouth went dry, and his pulse began racing. She said nothing but turned away from him, going back into the room, to the piano. She turned to face him then, resting her hand on the instrument, looking at him almost defiantly, as if she expected him to berate her at any moment.

Coming slowly to himself, he repeated his request. "May I come in? "

"It is your house," she said curtly, lifting her chin, her round jaw set. Not expecting any concessions, he entered the room and went across to her, setting the lamp down next to hers on a small table near the piano. She moved away but remained facing him.

"I heard you playing again."

"So it would appear."

"I am familiar with that tune."

"It is a popular tune."

“It was my mother’s favourite,” he found himself telling her. Immediately, her expression softened.

“It is a beautiful tune,” she said, looking at her hands.

“Yes, I am very fond of it too. Mother and I often used to play it together.” It felt funny saying it aloud, but not as painful as he expected.

Cassandra suddenly sat down on the piano stool and looked up at him. “That’s why it upset you so much to find me in here the other afternoon, playing, or trying to play, that very tune.”

He was momentarily stunned by her perception. He was slowly beginning to understand there was much more to his young wife than he had at first assumed.

He nodded. “Yes. I am sorry I rushed off like that without explaining why.” He paused to gesture about the room with his hands. “You see, this room, all the instruments you see around us, belonged to her. Being here brings back painful memories. That is why I shut it up. It was a big shock to hear someone in here, playing the piano.”

He paused again and gave her a lopsided smile, half afraid she would laugh at him for what he was about to say. “It sounds foolish, I know, but at first I thought it must be her ghost playing.”

She did not laugh. She nodded. “That is quite understandable. I would have thought exactly the same, I’m sure.”

“So, you do not think I am mad for thinking such a thing?” He thought so himself, so why should she not?

But she shook her head, the movement of her hair creating a dazzling nimbus of golden haze around her head as she did so.

“As I said, I would have thought the same thing. So, no, I do not think you mad for imagining that.” There was a short silence where they simply looked at each other. Malcom was struck by the innocent sincerity in her eyes. There was no doubt she was being truthful.

She suddenly looked away, down at the keyboard. “At any rate, it is I who am sorry for causing you such pain. It was certainly not my intention. I did not know the history of the room. I hope you will forgive me for troubling you in that way. I was merely looking for a pianoforte. I needed music.” Her voice was soft, like feathers brushing against his skin.

“I know. I understand. It doesn’t matter now. You found it. The music, I mean. The piano.” He gestured at the instrument. It glowed richly in the lamplight as though it were something dead coming back to life.

“Well, yes, I suppose you could say that,” she replied, her expression a mixture of humor and regret. “Except, as you must be well aware by now, I do not play well enough to get it out. I know what notes I should be playing, but alas, I can never seem to get them to flow together as I know they should. Sadly, although I have a passion for music, I do not share my sister’s talent at the piano forte.”

Once again, her self-deprecating honesty impressed him. “That may be so, but it does not help that the instrument is badly out of tune. Apart from you, it has not been played in six years,” he confessed, finding it surprisingly easy to talk to her about these things so long hidden.

“Is that so? That seems a terrible shame, for it is truly a beautiful specimen, one of the best I have ever seen. Maggie would love it.” As she spoke, he saw her caress the



piano gently with her fingertips, a look of awe on her face. It touched him deeply. It was plain to see her passion for music ran as deeply as his. A strange warm feeling pooled in his chest, in the area of his heart.

“Perhaps I can help you out. I can play a little,” he offered, surprising himself. Her face lit up. She clasped her hands in front of her like an excited child. Her enthusiasm was endearing.

“Would you? Oh, that would be wonderful. I like to sing, you see, but I am not very good at accompanying myself, as you know.” She gave a small laugh. The sound sent a tingle running up Malcom’s spine like an arpeggio. “Would you really not mind?”

He looked at the piano, deciding to be honest with her since she was being so forthright with him. He flexed his hands .

“I have not sat on that stool for so long. Mother was the last to play, you see. That is why you found the sheet music for Fair Colleen in the rack. I did not have the heart to take it down. It has been there ever since . . .” He trailed off, a hint of the old grief returning. He tamped it down. He owed it to her to play for her. Besides, he wanted to hear that soaring voice again.

“Do not play if it is too painful. I could not ask that of you. I completely understand how you must feel about it. It is clear you loved your mother very much. She must have been a remarkable woman,” Cassandra said softly, her eyes full of sympathy. “Love is not something that simply dies away. It continues on, even after we are gone. I am certain of it. I am sure I would be the same if I were you.”

The lump in his throat made it hard for him to frame a response, and he had to swallow hard to eventually be able to say, “Thank you for trying to understand. Cassandra, I-I know I should have told you all this before, but I just find it too hard to talk about, with anybody, I mean. Even Terrence, who knows me best of all. It is not

just you.”

To his surprise, she got up from the stool and came over to him, placing her hand on his arm as she looked up at him. He noticed for the first time the flecks of gold in her irises. They glinted in the wavering lamplight like stars.

“It is quite all right. But let me say this; I believe that one way our lost loved ones can live on for us is in music. The music we shared with them can comfort as well as pain us, do you not think so?”

The lump in his throat swelled once more as grief threatened to overwhelm him. he clenched his fists, needing a few moments to steady himself and answer her question.

“That can be so, yes, I agree. But I also think it also depends on the circumstances of the loss.” The truth of his guilt over the part he had played in his parents’ terrible demise was on the tip of his tongue, threatening to pour out. But it was as though if he uttered them, they would burn him. So, with a supreme effort of will, he held them back.

Cassandra stared up at him a for a few moments as if she would see into his soul, her hand still on his arm, her warmth seeping through his thin shirt to his skin beneath and making it tingle.

Suddenly, she nodded. “You are right, of course. That must be so. I lack the experience not to concede. But I do believe what I said just then, about our lost loved ones living on in music. But I also wanted to comfort you by telling you that. Now I see that my words were perhaps inappropriate. For some reason, you blame yourself for the loss you have suffered. Please, do not play if you do not wish to.”

Again, he was floored by her prescience, her honesty, her delicate sensibility. She had no idea of the dreadful truth about his parents’ deaths, but she sensed his guilt and

accepted it. He felt a little part of the weight he had been shouldering for so long lift from him.

“I will play for you, Cassandra. I want to,” he said, going to sit on the stool and flexing his hands over the piano keyboard.

“Let us play something different to Fair Colleen ,” she suggested. “It is too sad, I think. What about The Last Rose of Summer ? Do you know that one?”

In answer, he held her gaze as he placed his fingers on the keys and, without looking, played the simple melody, wincing slightly to hear how out of tune the instrument was. The vibrations under his hands felt so strange yet so familiar at the same time. They flowed through his fingers, his hands, and up his arms, infusing his whole body. The sensation was oddly rejuvenating. He felt as though he was back in a familiar place from which he had been absent for a long time and was very glad to be returning to. It was like coming home.

“Lord, it is out of tune,” he murmured, a smile coming unbidden to his lips before he went on. “That was another of mother’s and my favorites to play and sing together.”

“You know it by heart, I see.” She was smiling at him again, looking quietly amazed. For some unknown reason, his heart squeezed in his chest to see she was impressed.

“Yes, I know it by heart.” He played the melody through again, more boldly this time, his fingers gliding over the keys as though he had played the tune only yesterday.

Cassandra gave a small gasp. “That is lovely. You play so well. All this time, and I never guessed! Why, you are even better than Maggie, I do believe. ”

“That is a great compliment,” he said, his smile growing.

“May I sing?” she asked, her cheeks glowing in the warm lamplight.

“I am here to accompany you, am I not?”

Her smile broadened as he watched, mesmerized, for it was like the sun coming over the horizon, signaling the start of a new day.

“Are you ready?” he asked, his fingers poised to play.

She nodded, still smiling as she clasped her hands before her chest and took a few deep breaths. “Yes.”

Malcom played the lead in and looked up at Cassandra standing next to him just a few seconds before she was due to come in, raising his eyebrows in what he hoped was encouragement as he hit the chord.

She opened her mouth and let out the clear, ringing tones of her voice, which glided above the tune he was playing in perfect time as she enunciated the lyrics of the sentimental ballad. Malcom soon became lost in the soaring beauty of the music they were creating together. He closed his eyes, feeling as though he were being transported back in time, to the last occasion when he had accompanied his mother, and her dulcet tones had transported him to a place of transcendent beauty.

He opened his eyes, and saw that Cassandra was also in a state of bliss, her eyes shining as they went on in complete synchronized harmony to the end of the song. They smiled at each other as the last reverberating notes finally died away.

“Oh, that was so wonderful!” she exclaimed, clapping her hands like a child at Christmastide. “Can we do another?”

“Why not? You have a lovely voice, Cassandra. It is a great pleasure to hear you

sing,” he told her sincerely. “It reminds me of Mother’s.”

“I take that as a great compliment, Malcom, thank you. I tried my best to do your playing justice.”

They spent another half and hour working their way through a short catalog of similar, well-known ballads, some sad, some more lively and cheerful. By the time they had finished, Malcom found himself smiling, even laughing at times, his whole being buzzing with a peculiar energy. It took him a few moments to recognize it as happiness .

But as soon as he identified it, the doubts set in, and the old, familiar guilt began to seep back in like icicles piercing his heart.

I should not be doing this, I have no right to be feeling this way. This is an insult to Mother.

Overcome, he suddenly shut the lid of the piano. Cassandra’s bright expression turned to one of dismay. That too pained him, but the grief and guilt was too strong and overpowered any urge he might have had to see her happy.

“It is getting late. I think it is time we retired,” he said in a low voice, feeling himself frown. His heart clenched when Cassandra looked at him with obvious disappointment, and puzzlement, for a small frown formed between her arching brows. He hated himself for putting it there, but he could not seem to control the guilt that was gripping him.

Thankfully, Cassandra did not argue but only nodded and said in her soft voice, “Very well. If that is what you wish. I am very grateful for the time you have spent accompanying me. I enjoyed it very much. Goodnight. I hope you sleep well.” Before Malcom could say or do anything, she fetched the lamp she had brought with her

from the table, dropped him a small curtsy, and left the room.

Malcom remained at the piano for quite a while, leaning his head in his hands, once again awash with guilt. But now, it was joined by all sorts of strange, new, conflicting emotions he could not fathom. When the lamp burned low, he sighed and finally rose from the piano stool to fetch it. He paused to replace the dustsheet over the instrument and made his way out of the room, shutting the door firmly behind him.

As he made his way back to the west wing, despair mingled with the storm of feelings already battling inside him, and he could not help wondering why he seemed incapable of stopping the past from dragging him back and preventing him from behaving properly towards his kind, beautiful, and talented wife. He could only hope she would be patient with him, and that he could conquer his demons before either Terrence or Madeleine arrived at his door.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:08 am*

Why did you not ask him about restoring the music room then and there while you had the chance, you cowardly fool?!

Such were the castigating thoughts consuming Cassandra as she set out on foot the following afternoon to meet with the children. What a grievous disappointment it had been the previous evening, whilst still enraptured by the exhilaration of regaining the ability to sing, with Malcom magnificently accompanying her on the pianoforte. It had indeed been a most unforeseen and delightful occurrence.

Even while she was singing, she had been conscious of softening towards him. Clearly, though he had shared some of the reasons for his odd behavior when he had initially found her in the music room, her husband was enmeshed in some painful aspect of a past she knew nothing about.

She knew it was something to do with his grief for his mother, and it was obviously stopping him from living life to the full. Moreover, she sensed his misery was self-imposed and, therefore, had to be connected to feelings of guilt he had long harbored about something. He was atoning for some imagined crime. How could she not feel sympathy for him?

Last night, she had believed they were at last making a connection through a shared love of music. Hope had blossomed in her breast. But then suddenly, without any warning, Malcom's mood had abruptly changed, and he had ended the session. Why?

The question revolved in her mind as she reached the wood where she was to meet the children. The sound of childish laughter rang out from within, and she could not help smiling. The prospect of forgetting her troubles for an hour or two in their

innocent company was appealing. She ducked beneath the branches and made her way to the clearing.

She was greeted with cheerful shouts of her name as the three children rushed to greet her.

“Cassie! We are so happy to see you. We were not sure if you would come,” Mary said, smiling brightly at her. Lynn and Lou clutched Cassandra’s waist and hugged her. Their obvious pleasure at her appearance warmed her heart and swept aside her other concerns. Here with the children, she could be just plain old Cassie and have carefree fun, forgetting she was the Duchess of Lindenhall altogether.

“I never break an appointment once I have made it. That would be very bad manners, as I’m sure you know,” she assured them, returning their smiles. “I am glad to see you here already. How are you all today?” she asked, letting the younger ones pull her further into the clearing.

“We are all well, thank you, Cassie. And we have cleared away all the sticks and stones from the ground to make a proper dance floor. Look.” Mary pointed excitedly to a smooth, flat area they had obviously worked hard to make.

“Why, that is perfect,” she told them, inspecting their handiwork and giving an approving nod. “I am certain it is just as good as Lady Aston’s ballroom floor, which I have danced upon myself and is said to be the finest in England.”

Mary laughed and gave her a disbelieving smile, while Lou and Lynn appeared delighted, quite taken in by her playful ruse.

“Did you bring the barley sugar?” Lou asked, looking at her with, big, hopeful eyes.

“Lou, it is very rude to ask!” Mary chided him, but he only giggled mischievously,



along with his twin. Mary turned to Cassandra and said, "I am sorry, Cassie. He is only little and sometimes forgets his manners."

"It is quite all right," Cassandra said soothingly, stroking Mary's hair. "As it happens, I do have some treats for us all." From inside her shawl, she extracted a packet containing some small, striped candy canes and handed one each to the children, keeping one for herself. There came a chorus of thank you before a period of quiet contentment ensued, while all four sat on the ground and enjoyed the delicious treats.

When they had finished and discussed their itinerary for the afternoon, they got up, brushed themselves down, and gathered on the makeshift dance floor.

"Now, I shall partner with Mary to begin with," Cassandra explained, "and then, Lou and Lynn, you can watch and try following our steps. Does that sound all right to you?"

"Yes, that sounds fun!" Mary cried, her cheeks flushed with excitement. The twins hugged each other, giggling and nodding enthusiastically.

"Now, Mary, I shall be the gentleman, and you shall be the lady. Let us get into position." She carefully showed Mary the correct starting position for the waltz.

"But what about music," the young girl asked suddenly, looking concerned. "It would be much better with music."

"Well, the timing is the most important thing, but if you would like music, then I shall provide it, and you may all sing along with me if you wish," Cassandra said. "Now, are we ready?"

"Yes!" came the cry in unison.

“Very well, here we go.” She began humming the tune to a popular waltz, taking Mary through the steps, one, two, three, and so on.

The next hour or so provided a joyous interlude that lightened Cassandra’s troubled heart. When she finally wended her way home, now and then breaking into a waltz step and singing to herself, she felt soothed and quite happy. She entered the house by a rear doorway and exchanged her boots for house slippers in the vestibule before heading to the staircase, intent on her chambers. She had not yet finished reading Diana’s long, gossip-packed letter from the day before and wanted to do that and begin a reply to her dear friend before bathing and dressing for dinner.

However, in the main hall, she encountered a bustling Hannah.

“Oh, hello, Hannah, you are very busy, I see,” she remarked, stopping to speak to her. The housekeeper looked flushed.

“Indeed, Your Grace, I am, for Lady Collins has recently arrived,” she explained with a smile.

“Has she, indeed?” Cassandra muttered, taken aback by the unexpected information. She had not bargained on another guest arriving, and she was hardly dressed to entertain after two hours of romping in the woods with the children. Besides, the idea of meeting Lady Collins made her nervous. She had only met the woman formally at her annual ball, the ball where her life had so embarrassingly imploded. She did not know quite how to feel about the woman she knew was another cousin of Malcom’s, nor what she might expect from her.

“I had better hurry up and change then. Where is she? Is she staying for dinner?” she asked Hannah quietly, envisioning another awkward evening spent at the dinner table. Who knew what sort of mood Malcom would be in today?

To her great relief, Hannah said, “No, Your Grace, I believe she is only visiting for a short time. His Grace has ordered afternoon tea to be served in the drawing room shortly. Will you be joining them?”

Cassandra sighed. “I suppose I ought to, but I must change first. Will you tell Anna to come and help me change and send someone to tell His Grace that I shall be joining him and our guest as soon as I can, please?”

“Of course, Your Grace,” Hannah assured her with a smile and a curtsy.

“Thank you. Now, I must run.” Without waiting to see Hannah depart, Cassandra picked up her skirts and raced in a very unladylike manner up the stairs to her chambers, to await Anna’s arrival.

\*\*\*

Madeleine’s arrival that afternoon, though unwelcome, had not been entirely unexpected by Malcom. With Terrence’s foul mood on his last departure, Malcom had known the two cousins would collude. Terrence would have filled Maddy in on all that had been going on in the marital home. It was, therefore, inevitable that Madeleine would appear at some point to give him a lecture on the subject of his behavior towards Cassandra.

He now found himself, teacup in hand, lemon cake in the other—he was eating primarily so he did not have to talk—perched on a settee in the drawing room, listening to Madeleine and his wife engaging in lively conversation about the London scene, amongst a whole range of other topics. In fact, he was rather grateful for Cassandra’s presence, for she was unwittingly delaying the dressing down he was sure Maddy was going to find some opportunity to give him in private before she left.

Moreover, she had arrived looking perfectly attired for tea, fresh-faced and smiling

warmly at their guest when she greeted her. In short, she presented a picture of youthful health and happiness that he felt belied any expectation of misery Terrence might have planted in Maddy's head .

"I have always been in two minds about Byron, I must admit," Maddy was saying over her teacup. "He seems rather to have it in for us ladies. He is always accusing us of being either shallow or faithless, it seems to me."

"Oh, I agree completely," his wife replied with a smile. "I am so glad you think so, too. I am always a little afraid to say what I think of his work in front of others, as he seems to be almost universally worshiped as an artistic paragon. I keep my own counsel, fearing censure from his many devotees."

"Exactly, Cassandra, my dear. I too have held my tongue on many an occasion for the same reason. Between you and I, though I adore *When We Two Parted* , I think His Lordship is so handsome and celebrated and so used to getting his own way, what with so many ladies beating a path to his door, he has grown arrogant in that way which only a man may become," Maddy remarked.

"Indeed, one can see that reflected in his work, though I would be the first to admit he is a superb poet, arguably, one of the greatest of our age. There are some of his works which I truly admire. *She Walks in Beauty* is so deeply affecting to the senses, I find."

Meanwhile, Malcom was watching his wife and listening attentively to all she was saying. He noticed that, once again, as with Terrence, she was ably acquitting herself as a mistress of drawing room talk of a superior nature to the commonplace inanities he so despised. She and Maddy both evinced strong opinions on the artists of the day, while Cassandra enquired intelligently of Maddy as to her views on some of the latest of London's shows and exhibitions.

At one point, to his private astonishment, she briefly left the room and returned with an illustrated travelogue about India which she said her father had sent her, to show to Maddy. Once they had finished discussing it, Cassandra had handed it to him with a kind smile.

“I should like to know what you think of this, Malcom,” she said, just as a normal wife might do to a normal husband. He was so surprised, he almost choked on his cake and barely managed to thank her properly. All the while, he could feel Maddy’s eyes burning into him.

The rest of teatime passed in a similar fashion, with the two women getting on like a house on fire. He was thankful for it, for it saved him from having to bother saying much. Meanwhile, his silent admiration for Cassandra’s well-reasoned opinions on a quite bewildering range of topics only increased. He felt an unaccountable flash of pride that she was his wife. Unbidden, a fragment of one of Byron’s very recent works, *Stanzas for Music* , suddenly coalesced in his mind as his eyes and ears dwelled on Cassandra.

There be none of Beauty’s daughters With a magic like thee; And like music on the waters Is thy sweet voice to me: When, as if its sound were causing The charmed ocean’s pausing, The waves lie still and gleaming, And the lulled winds seem dreaming . .

By the time tea was over, Malcom was feeling very dull indeed. In addition, guilt at having torn Cassandra away from the intellectual milieu of the capital where she obviously belonged, to bury her at Lindenhall, was niggling at him. He was in quite a dream when Madeleine replaced her teacup in its saucer and suddenly turned to him.

“That was quite a delicious tea, thank you both. But now, I find I should like some fresh air. Malcom, would you be so kind as to escort me around the gardens for a while?”

“Oh, certainly,” he muttered, getting up at the same time as she did, feeling a knot forming in his stomach. Was he going to be called to account for his lack of contribution to the conversation? Knowing his cousin well, he feared it was a certainty.

Cassandra obligingly claimed she had to go and see Cook about dinner, while he took Maddy’s arm and escorted her into the gardens, his stomach knotting painfully.

“So, how are you both adjusting in these early days of married life, Malcom? Would you say you are learning about one another, coming to know each other’s rhythms?” Madeleine asked as they walked along the winding garden paths.

He knew she had deliberately used a musical analogy to snag him, which was a little annoying. But he decided that since Maddy was one of the few people who cared about him and knew his past, and whom he trusted, he would be as honest as felt able.

“Truthfully, Maddy, It had not been plain sailing. I have been finding it . . . difficult.” He told her about Cassandra’s and his encounters in the music room, and how they had affected him, bringing back painful memories of the past. “I admit, I have been struggling to let Cassandra in,” he finished.

Madeleine smiled gently. “I expected no less. Look, Malcom, I do understand that this is a difficult adjustment for you, for both of you to make, but I urge you to make more effort. Cassandra is charming. She is beautiful, and she has a lively mind. I strongly advise you to start letting your guard down a little more with her. You have your shared love of music to bind you. I am certain she will respond in kind.”

“I am trying, Maddy, and I have felt that musical connection with her, it is true. But each time I get close to letting her in, something comes over me. It is like panic, a fear of letting go.”

“Do not let the past spoil your hopes of finding lasting happiness, Malcom, I implore you. Please, I know it is hard, but try a little harder.”

“I will, I promise,” he told her, feeling frustrated that he seemed incapable of shedding the burden of guilt that was still oppressing him, even when his intentions were good.

Later that night, long after Madeleine had left and a quiet, tense dinner had been concluded, and Cassandra had retired to bed, Malcom yet again found himself closeted in his study, alone. He sipped a brandy, his mind turning over Maddy’s words. He was grateful she had not given him the grilling he had expected. Instead, she had been compassionate and shown understanding. Even so, she had been firm in telling him to find a way to open up to Cassandra.

Thinking of his clever, beautiful wife sent his thoughts drifting to the music room and the times they had shared there. He wondered if the place, with all its memories of his mother, could offer him some help or inspiration with the battle raging inside him. Before he knew what he was doing, he had taken a lamp and was making his way there.

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:08 am*

As before, as Malcom entered the east wing hallway, he could hear the familiar notes of The Last Rose of Summer being picked out on the keyboard. The memory of Cassandra singing it the night before sent a small jolt through him. The door to the music room was open this time, and Cassandra looked up at him when he hesitated in the doorway. She was wearing the same Chinese robe as before, her hair a bright halo.

“Hello,” she said simply, seemingly unsurprised at seeing him there. She looked back at what she was doing, trying to read the music on the rack. The look of intense concentration he was coming to recognize was on her face. Once more, he could not help but find it endearing, and his pulse began to beat a little faster.

“Hello.” He went over to the piano and set down his lamp next to hers on the table. “It’s very late. I didn’t expect you to be here.”

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“Hmm,” he murmured, knowing what she meant. His mind would not have entertained the idea of sleep either. “Shall I accompany you? Only if you would like, I mean. Perhaps you would rather be alone.” Even though he had set out to find solace and some sort of guidance there by himself, he could not find it in him to resent her presence. On the contrary, in fact, now she was there.

“Only if you would like,” she said, turning his own words back on him. She gazed up at him with uncertainty in her eyes. He knew she was searching his face to gauge his mood, as one looks at clouds gathering in the sky to see if a storm might be in the offing.



“I would be happy to,” he answered, finding he meant it. He did not want her to be afraid of him.

“Very well, if you are sure.” Gracefully, she moved away so he could sit at the instrument. He took his seat and flexed his hands over the keys, eager to play.

“What music would you like?” Cassandra asked. She was sorting through a pile of sheet music he realized she must have taken from the stool.

“You choose.” He did not mind. She could have sung a laundry list, and he would have been enchanted.

“I should like to try this one. I believe it was originally a Russian a folk song, but someone has obligingly furnished lyrics in English.”

“Ah, yes, that has a lovely melody, I seem to recall. Many of those old Russian folk tunes are very beautiful,” Malcom said, looking at the music as she placed it in front of him, on top of the sheet for Fair Colleen, he noticed. He was touched that she had not removed it. “The tune is actually quite simple. I could teach you to play it if you would like,” he said, looking up at her.

She gave a small smile and nodded. “I would like that. Thank you.”

“But let’s run through it first, since you picked it out to sing. Are you ready?”

She nodded again, her hands clasped at her chest once more. He began the introduction, and she came in in perfect time, her voice high and pure, floating above the melody. Goosebumps rose all over Malcom’s body as the angelic tones washed over him thrillingly. Something shifted deep inside him, a stirring of something buried yet still not quite dead and eager to come out into the light again and live. In the battle going on inside him, it felt like Cassandra’s voice had gained the

ascendency over the guilt and self-recrimination that had almost consumed him.

He lost himself in the purity of her singing and the sad, lilting melody of the folk song. When the last note died away, deeply moved, he sat back and turned his head to smile at her. She was staring back at him, her eyes dark in the lamplight. There was a peculiar expression on her face. It struck him as a combination of fear and determination.

“What is it?” he asked, turning in his seat, concerned.

“Malcom?” she asked hesitantly, twisting her fingers before her as nervously as any schoolgirl.

“Yes?”

“Well,” she began, her voice tremulous. “I was thinking that . . . since we seem to share a strong love for music, do you think . . . do you think that it would be possible to consider, I mean, would you consider, restoring the music room so that we could use it again?”

The last words came in a rush, and he could hear her sigh of relief once they were out. The request was not entirely unexpected. Even so, a wave of panic gripped Malcom as the demons from within rose up and battled to claw him back into lonely darkness. He breathed deeply to steady himself as he looked into Cassandra’s eyes. In them, he recognized the same plea he had seen in his mother’s eyes in his dream. He knew it was what his mother would have wanted.

“Yes,” he said at last. “I think it would.”

\*\*\*

The following morning, the weather was fine, so Cassandra decided to take a stroll in the garden after her ride. The events of the night before were fresh in her mind, and she felt full of hope for the first time in weeks. She could hardly believe she had plucked up the courage to ask Malcom about restoring the music room—and he had agreed!

She wandered happily through the rose garden, absently singing an old country ballad to herself as she admired the lovely blooms. Everything around her seemed to have suddenly sprung into vivid colour now she knew she was to have music in her life once more, without having to hide it away. She was so engrossed in her joyful thoughts of the future, for several moments, she did not notice Malcom standing a little way ahead. When she finally did, she was surprised to see he was staring at her. She stopped singing immediately and smiled as she drew level with him. He looked so handsome in the morning sunshine, her heart skipped a beat.

“Good morning. Is it not a lovely day?” she asked.

“Good morning, Cassandra. It is indeed,” he replied, returning her smile. “Shall we walk?”

“Oh, yes, I’d love to.”

They fell into step beside each other. “I know that song you were just singing. My mother used to sing it to me each night at bedtime when I was young, to help me go to sleep,” he told her.

“I hope I have not brought back bad memories for you again,” Cassandra said a little warily, worried he might storm off again and all her hopes would be dashed.

“No. Only good ones,” he told her. “I had forgotten it, in fact. It is nice to be reminded.” They came to a small arbour in the rose garden, with a stone bench set

within it.

“Then I am glad,” Cassandra said, deeply touched to hear him make such a vulnerable admission. It spurred her to make him an offer. “Would you like me to sing the whole thing?”

He seemed surprised, but then he smiled and said, “That would be nice.”

“Why don’t you take a seat,” she said, gesturing to the bench, and I will sing it for you?”

“All right.” He sat down and watched as she took a few deep breaths to warm up.

Cassandra clasped her hands before her and closed her eyes. Then she sang the whole piece through from memory. When she had finished, she opened her eyes and looked at Malcom. She was momentarily taken aback to see his eyes shining with what she realized had to be unshed tears. He looked younger somehow, the lines of care gone from his face.

“Are you all right? I haven’t upset you, have I?” Anxiously, she hurried to him and placed a comforting hand on his shoulder.

He shook his head. “No, I am all right. It was just that it took me back in time, that is all. You may think me silly, but your voice reminds me of my mother’s, and while you were singing so beautifully, it was almost as though I was a little boy again, and she was tucking me into bed.”

Touched, Cassandra took her hand from his shoulder and sat down beside him.

“I am honoured to think that my modest talent may provide a bridge to connect you to your cherished memories of your mother,” she replied, gazing into his eyes, which in

the sunshine, appeared more vividly blue than she had ever seen them. The expression in them as he looked back at her, and the unusual softening of his features when he smiled kindled a flash of hope in her breast that such a simple thing as her voice might be the key to opening the heavily guarded heart of her husband.

They walked for a little while longer, the first walk they had ever taken together, talking of the garden and a little of music. Cassandra was feeling so much lighter of heart that when Malcom finally said he had to go to meet his bailiff on estate business, she had to hide her disappointment .

But it is progress. I must not get too excited and remember to take one step at a time.

Later that same afternoon, she was in the music room, sorting through the many sheets of music she had discovered there when she suddenly came across a composition that was not printed like the other but written by hand in pencil, with numerous scribblings out and reinsertions.

She examined it with interest. At the bottom was a date but no name. However, she could not help wondering if it was Malcom who had composed it. She did some simple maths and decided if it was, then he would have been aged about seventeen when he wrote it. Intrigued and excited by the find, she decided to take it with her to dinner that evening and ask him if he was indeed the composer. Perhaps, she thought, I can get him to play it for me.

So, at dinner, she mustered her courage once again and presented it to him.

“I found this in the music room, and I wondered if it is your composition,” she said.

Malcom looked at it and seemed lost in thought for a few moments as he scanned the complicated notations.

“Yes, I believe it is,” he replied. “I hardly remember writing it though.”

“Would you play it for me?” she asked eagerly. To her delight, he nodded.

“I don’t see why not. By the way, I have asked the piano tuner to call in the next few days, since we are overhauling the room. It will be nice to be able to play properly.”

“Oh, that is splendid news. I cannot wait to hear it!”

After dinner was over, they went together to the music room, to find Hannah had already made considerable inroads into banishing the dustsheets and the accompanying dust. The newly revealed surfaces of the instruments shone, especially the piano, and the place smelled of lemon polish.

“Oh, I am so excited to hear your composition,” she told Malcom as he sat at the piano. She placed the music on the rack in front of him and stood beside him, eagerly awaiting the music he had written himself to flow forth.

“Now then, let me see. I barely recall writing this,” he admitted, testing out a few tentative chords. Then, he launched into the piece, his fingers expertly moving smoothly over the keys. Cassandra listened raptly, immediately caught up in the soulful melody emerging from beneath Malcom’s hands. Despite the few technical flaws which she detected, and the out of tune instrument, the unpolished but sweet, swooping refrains of the sonata revealed to her a vision of the young Malcom, pouring out his secret yearnings onto the page and turning them into beautiful music.

In the days that followed, it seemed to Cassandra that, from that moment onwards, their relationship underwent a profound change. As the music room was brought back to life, and the piano was tuned for the first time in over six years, so their connection seemed to flourish daily. Instead of awkward silences and stilted conversation, dinner times were taken up by passionate discussions about music. And instead of

immediately parting after the meal, they would repair together to the music room and play and sing duets at the pianoforte, singing and debating favourite songs and composers.

Thrillingly for Cassandra, under Malcom's patient and skilled tuition, her keyboard skills began to radically improve. She gained in confidence, and they were soon playing quite complicated duets together and singing along. Each day, she felt them drawing closer to each other, and she could not help feeling she was at last getting to know the man beneath the cold facade whom she had been married to for almost two months.

Then one evening, they were playing a duet, sitting side by side at the piano, when they both reached up at the same time to turn the page of the music. The shock that went through Cassandra as their fingers brushed together set her entire body tingling.

Of course, they snatched their hands back at once, but at that feather-light contact, the notes faltered, and their gazes locked. Feeling her cheeks flaring with heat, she saw Malcom was equally shocked, for his eyes were wide, and his cheekbones had turned pink. She could not help wondering if he had felt it too. Suddenly, she sensed a new tension that seemed to sizzle in the air between them, charging the air with an electric awareness that had not been there before.

Shaken to her core, knowing her cheeks must be crimson, she lowered her eyes. Malcom cleared his throat awkwardly and shifted in his seat, clearly feeling the same tension. The happy mood of just moments before departed, and she physically felt Malcom withdrawing into a brooding silence.

"It is late. I think I shall retire," he said after a few minutes, rising from the piano and making rapidly for the door. "Good night," he added as he left, his voice devoid of warmth.

“Good night,” she called after him, feeling strangely bereft. She packed up and went to her chambers, hoping that he was not going to revert to his former cold ways and all the progress they had made would be lost.

\*\*\*

She awoke the next morning after a restless night, feeling quite despondent as Anna helped her to prepare for her ride. She was, therefore, very surprised to find Malcom waiting for her in the hall when she went downstairs. She noticed he too was in riding gear. She was even more surprised when he gave her a lop-sided smile and spoke to her.

“Would you like some company on your ride this morning? I thought I could show you some of the estate you might not have seen. There are some lovely views,” he said.

Taken aback but pleased by his change in mood, wanting to do nothing to spoil it, she instantly smiled back. “Thank you, I would love that.”

On their way to the stables, Malcom said, “I have a couple of new horses to show you.”

These turned out to be a magnificent stallion called Zeus and a beautiful chestnut Arabian mare called Sheba.

“They are very beautiful,” Cassandra said, admiring the glossy, rippling flanks of the powerful beasts, who whinnied and snorted and stamped in their stalls.

“They are, but Sheba is a little wild. She has not been well broken, and so she’s not suitable for riding just yet,” Malcom told her, stroking Zeus’s velvety muzzle. “We shan’t be taking them out today.”



“What a shame. I hope we can do so soon. It will be exhilarating to ride such a horse as Sheba. But today, I am happy to stick to reliable old Brownie,” Cassandra replied with a laugh .

“And I shall be on my faithful Brave,” Malcom said. “He knows his way around this place without my help. I think I could fall asleep on his back, and he would still bring me safely home.”

Relieved that their former connection seemed to have been restored, Cassandra’s despondency lifted as they set out at a walking pace, with Malcom leading the way out over the meadows, to explore the picturesque Lindenhall landscape in the bright morning sunshine. They spent several exhilarating hours exploring the rolling, flower-filled meadows and woodlands, and even rode around the lake which Cassandra had not yet seen. She realized the estate was much more extensive than she had initially thought, and it was all so much more enjoyable exploring it with Malcom to proudly show her all the best parts of his domain.

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:08 am*

Malcom was also enjoying himself. After a night of fitful sleep, replaying in his mind the thrill that had passed through him at the touch of Cassandra's fingers at the piano the night before, he acknowledged to himself it had shaken him. But he decided he wanted more of it.

He was increasingly drawn to Cassandra in a way that could no longer be denied. Despite his fears, there was no doubt in his mind that they were growing closer, and it was the music that was responsible for melting the ice between them. He fancied it was his mother's spirit moving in mysterious ways to bring them together.

He had awoken with the idea of joining Cassandra on her ride and staging a small surprise for her. Partly, he wanted to make up for his withdrawal the previous night, and partly he just wanted to see her smile again. He halted them in a meadow studded with poppies and cornflowers and helped her dismount. He lifted her down from the saddle. She was as light as a feather, and the feel of the small span of her waist beneath his hands sent tingles up his arms.

"Why are we stopping here?" she asked, letting Brownie loose to graze on the fresh green grass nearby.

"I have a surprise for you," he told her, rummaging in his saddle bag and producing a blanket, a stoppered bottle and two cups, and a large packet of waxed paper.

"Oh?" She regarded him with curiosity.

"A breakfast picnic." He spread the blanket on the grass and invited Cassandra to sit.

“A picnic?” she said with a smile, her cheeks glowing. She sat down gracefully, curling her legs beneath her. “How exciting. I have picnicked in the past but never for breakfast. This is a new experience,” she joked.

“I am glad to hear it,” he told her, pleased that they seemed to have re-established their fellowship. “Let us see what Cook had packed for us. But first, some wine.” He opened the bottle and poured them a cup each, passing one to Cassandra.

“Wine for breakfast. I cannot help feeling that is very decadent.” She sipped it. “Mmm, but I think I could get used to it! ”

Malcom laughed, finding her happy mood infectious. He unwrapped the parcel. “Oh, we have sausages, some rolls with bacon, some slices of pork pie, and some buttered fruit buns. Quite a spread,” Malcom said appreciatively, laying out the food on the waxed paper, along with some napkins that had been thoughtfully added to the package.

“A feast for a king. And a queen,” she said as he laid out the picnic on the blanket before her and sat down opposite.

Before long, they were picnicking leisurely and were soon back on their favourite topic—music. Over sausages and bacon rolls, a lively debate developed over which soaring compositions elicited the greatest emotional swells.

“You have a highly developed musical sensibility, Cassandra,” Malcom told her eventually, meaning every word.

“Thank you. That is very kind. I must say, I feel it fits rather well, with your expertise in all things classical, my weakest area,” she admitted before popping the last of a fruity bun in her mouth and visibly relishing it.

Malcom watched her, admiring her fresh-faced beauty that was almost luminous in the sunshine. Tendrils of blonde hair that had escaped from her bun blew across her face as she drank her wine, and her extraordinary hazel eyes sparkled. He could not help it; she drew him like a magnet.

“Such expertise, as you call it, is all very well, but it is nothing on its own. I think you bring a fresh spirit that enlivens my own rather stale knowledge,” he told her truthfully, finding himself inching closer to her. On impulse, he reached over and brushed the back of his fingers across her wind-burnished cheek, mesmerized by her lips, with their finely drawn cupid’s bow.

Though she appeared startled by the sudden caress, she did not move but gazed into his eyes, a half-smile on her temptingly rosy lips. There was a rushing sound in Malcom’s ears that had nothing to do with the breeze, and he could hear his own heart pounding in his chest.

The distance between their faces shrank as they leaned almost imperceptibly towards each other. He yearned to kiss her, and he was about to, when suddenly, the familiar panic seized him. What right do you have to such happiness? None!

Before he knew what he was doing, he pulled back. The tender moment was lost, and the disappointment he saw in Cassandra’s eyes was like a knife in his thudding heart.

Malcom was angry with himself, and things were understandably a little awkward between them after that. And although Cassandra made efforts to lighten the tense atmosphere and return to their former carefree mood, he felt himself retreating once more. The underlying tension between them crackled with things unsaid. He felt defeated when she quickly agreed to his suggestion that they pack up their picnic and rode back to the manor, to go their separate ways.

\*\*\*

Following their return to the manor after the picnic, Cassandra went to her chambers and sat in a chair by the window. She propped her chin on her hand, staring out sightlessly at the grounds beyond the glass, turning over in her mind what had occurred at the picnic.

She was deeply confused by Malcom's strange behavior yet again. The picnic had been so wonderful. To think he cared enough for her to arrange such a lovely surprise had set her pulse racing with excitement. Their bond had been steadily growing, she could feel it in her bones.

When he had seemed about to kiss her for the first time, her heart had fluttered in her chest, almost robbing her of breath. She had been ready, desperately awaiting the feel of his lips on hers . . . but it had not come. At the last moment, he had drawn back, leaving her feeling rejected and disappointed. Why?

Her husband was a puzzle she could not seem to solve, and she had absolutely no experience of either men or romance to fall back on. Her soul cried out for someone to talk to about it all, but there was no one. All she could do was write to Diana. So, with a sigh, she got up and sat at her writing desk, pouring out the story of the picnic, the almost-kiss, and laying out all her confusion. It was unfortunate that she would have to wait several days to get a reply.

In the afternoon, needing some fresh air and distraction, she dressed for walking. As she left the house by the main entrance—there was no sign of Malcom—she left her letter to Diana on the console table for mailing. Then, she set off to find the children, hoping their company would provide a balm for her troubled mind, even if only temporarily.

\*\*\*

Malcom spent the afternoon taking a long walk, raging at himself for what he

regarded as his weakness. Once again, he felt a failure, a man hardly in control of himself. Having to face Cassandra after the fiasco of the missed kiss left him feeling anxious. He worried that he may have done permanent damage to their growing connection. Would she skip out on dinner that evening to avoid him? Would they pay their usual visit to the music room together? How long would her patience last?

He was sunk in his gloomy thoughts when he happened to pass by a copse on the extreme northern edge of the estate. To his amazement, he suddenly heard among the trees the unmistakeable sound of his wife's laughter, mingled with the giggling of children.

Mystified, he took off his hat and crept into the trees, keeping himself out of sight. Through the branches, he spied a clearing in front of him and saw Cassandra. She appeared to be dancing. She was rosy cheeked and out of breath, yet at the same time, she was singing, and smiling, and laughing. She also seemed to be giving instruction or encouragement to someone he could not see. Filled with curiosity, Malcom hunkered down behind a bramble bush, set his hat down beside him, and positioned himself to get a better view of what his wife was up to.

Once he crouched down, he could clearly see she was accompanied by three children, a girl of around twelve and two smaller ones, a girl and a boy. He recognized them at once as belonging to the vicar of St. Giles. The church came within his demesne, and he himself had given their father, the Reverend Titus Clarke, the living five years earlier.

He also knew them because he had sent them packing from the estate grounds, where they had no business playing, on more than one occasion. Usually, he would have chased them off, cursing Dawkins his gamekeeper for failing to keep them out. But now, he was so entranced by the scene in front of him, he could think of nothing but how delightful it was and how utterly charming his wife looked as she demonstrated the steps of a French cotillion with the bigger girl, while the twins did their clumsy

best to follow their lead.

“That’s it, Lou, you are doing very well. Remember, just count, one, two, three, four and you will have it,” Cassandra was saying breathlessly to the small ones, in between singing a musical accompaniment and dancing with the bigger girl. “And Lynn, you have got the arms just right, well done. Just make your steps a little bigger and go forward . . . very good!”

All this was punctuated by bursts of giggling from the children and peals of laughter from Cassandra and her young dance partner as they watched the twins massacre the stately old dance figure.

Finally, they took a pause, all of them panting and laughing. “You are really a wonderful dancer, Mary,” Cassandra told the bigger girl, whom Malcom had concluded must be the twins’ elder sister, for they all looked so alike.

“Thank you, Cassie, I do so love to dance, but if I am good as you say, then it is only because you are such a good teacher,” Mary replied, hugging Cassandra’s waist and leaning her head against her with obvious affection. Malcom’s heart clenched. He was dumbfounded. Cassie?

“Nonsense, my dear, you are fit to grace the most splendid ballrooms in the land, I assure you,” Cassandra told the child, stroking her hair tenderly before they parted.

“Even Lady Aston’s?” Mary asked with a mischievous look.

“Most certainly Lady Aston’s,” Cassandra replied. They gave an exaggeratedly grand curtsy to each other and giggled.

Malcom watched on, for some bizarre reason, with a lump forming in his throat. When the twins ran to Cassandra and, one by one, she picked them up and whirled

them around, eliciting shrieks of laughter, he felt pressure at the back of his eyes as if tears were ready to burst forth at any moment. He watched until he saw the dancers were preparing to disband and say their farewells.

While they were doing that, Malcom retrieved his hat and stealthily crept away, feeling a little bad for spying on her. He continued his walk slowly, his head full of new thoughts about his wife. But the overriding one was what a wonderful mother she would make.

So, bearing in mind his bungling of the kiss that morning, and now the heart-warming sight of Cassandra with the children, it was with some trepidation that Malcom went down to dinner that evening. He did not know what to expect from her. Fearing she might make a scene, he dismissed all the servants from the room, saying they would serve themselves.

But he need not have worried as it turned out, for as soon Cassandra joined him in the dining room, she smiled warmly at him. The tension in his body immediately lessened, and he found himself smiling back at her. She looked around.

“No servants this evening?”

“I thought we could see to ourselves. It seems an awful lot of fuss just for the two of us. I hope you don’t mind.” he told her.

“Of course not. I completely agree. It is a silly waste of everyone’s time. I have always thought that if one is not capable of pouring oneself a glass of wine or putting a potato on one’s plate then it is a sad state of affairs,” she observed drily.

“If we both feel that way, then let us not bother with them in future,” he suggested.

“Indeed, let us not. We need not be so grand.”



That was music to Malcom's ears. "You are looking extremely well," he told her as he pulled out her chair for her to sit down. "You have colour in your cheeks. It suits you. As does that lovely gown you are wearing." She was looking striking in a red dress, with rubies at her ears and wrists, her fair hair worn in a sophisticated twist. Her ethereal beauty seemed to grow more entrancing daily.

She looked pleased at his words yet also looked at him a little warily. "You are very complimentary this evening, Malcom. Thank you. As to my cheeks, it must be the fresh air. I went out walking this afternoon." She looked up at him as he tucked her chair and then went to sit down himself. "You look very well yourself," she added, shaking out her napkin. "I think you have caught the sun a little."

"Yes, I have been walking too," he said, beginning to carve the joint of roast pork in front of him. "Did you go anywhere nice? Meet anyone to talk to? Some of the villagers perhaps?" He watched her carefully as she answered .

There was flicker of discomfort in her eyes as she said, "Oh, no, no one. I am not acquainted with anyone around here." Clearly, the lie sat uneasily with her. So why lie at all? Malcom served the meat, thinking he knew the answer. It seemed likely that the children knew her only as Cassie, not the Duchess of Lindenhall. Therefore, they had likely told her all about the horrible Beast of Lindenhall and how he had chased them from his land. She was lying to protect the children. In his eyes, that was admirable.

"How about you? Where did you walk? Did you speak to anyone on the way? One of your tenants perhaps?" she asked, serving up their vegetables, while Malcom filled their glasses with wine. He had been enjoying himself far more without the servants watching their every move, but her question put him on the spot.

"Um, no, I was quite alone. I went to the east fields and walked around the paths over there," he fibbed, feeling the prickle of guilt himself. She must never know he had

been spying on her!

“Malcom, I was thinking of going to the church in the village for Sunday service,” Cassandra suddenly said. “I think it is called St. Giles.”

“Yes, it is. I appointed the Reverend there some years ago,” he replied, wondering where she was going with her mark. “But it is really not necessary to attend. We have the chapel here.” He himself seldom ventured to the village except on estate business, and never to the church, preferring to keep to himself wherever possible. In his experience, people usually wanted something from him which he was not prepared to give.

“Yes, and I have used it. But it is not the same without a vicar and a congregation, I find. I also thought I should introduce myself to the Reverend and his family—I am assuming he is a family man,” she hastily added.

“Oh. Any particular reason why?”

Well, yes. I feel I am part of this community now, and I should like to get to know people. I thought that would be a good place to start.” She paused for a moment, before adding, “And you are usually so busy during the days with the estate and your magistrate’s duties, if I can make some acquaintances hereabouts, it will be company for me.”

“Would you consider accompanying me to church one Sunday? I think it would be better to go together than alone. When I went into the village to post a letter recently, people looked at me strangely. But I am a stranger after all, so I suppose that is not surprising. But I did not like it. If they knew who I am, they might be less . . . reserved.”

She looked at him so appealing, he almost gave in then and there. But his ingrained

habit of solitude held him back.

“I shall think about it,” he said eventually, to be rewarded with a small smile.

“Thank you. And Malcom?”

“Yes?” What now?

“I wanted to thank you for accompanying me on my ride this morning. It was far more interesting with you there to show me around. And the picnic was a lovely surprise.” She dipped her lashes shyly. Malcom’s heart squeezed.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” he managed to answer, feeling his cheeks heating up. Pray to God she does not mention the almost-kiss! “We must ride out together again soon.”

She beamed at him. “That would be lovely.” His heart melted a little more.

After dinner, they repaired cheerfully to the music room. However, despite their enjoyment at making beautiful music together, Malcom was supremely conscious that something fundamental had changed between them. It was growing increasingly more difficult to sit next to her at the piano, to be thrilled by her voice, to try not to touch hands with her, without wanting to take her in his arms and kiss her.

The trouble was that the stronger the attraction grew, the more the little voice inside him told him he was unworthy of the happiness that caring for Cassandra promised, that he did not deserve it or her. Despite his increasing feelings for her, he realized his demons were still very much alive, and they were not going to give up without a fight.

But by the same token, he decided he would not either and that though he might still

be struggling with the vengeful devils of his past, in the meantime, he could still find ways to make her happy. If she wanted company, then he would give her company.

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:08 am*

The following morning, with an idea in mind, Malcom sought Cassandra out in the morning room after she returned from her early ride. He would have offered to ride with her but had business with his bailiff at one of the estate farms and so he was unable to.

She looked up from her cup as he entered, looking surprised to see him.

“I thought I would join you if you do not mind,” he said, taking the chair opposite her at the small table where she was sitting by one of the large windows.

“Of course. I am glad of your company.” She smiled at him as she poured him a cup of coffee from the pot and handed it to him.

“I have been thinking, Cassandra,” he said.

“Oh, what about?”

“I realised after what you were saying at dinner last night that living in the country like this must be very tedious at times for you after London. Lonely, even.” He paused and saw she was listening attentively while sipping her coffee. “I was thinking that you might like to invite your family to come and stay as our guests for a few days, perhaps sometime next week. Would you like that?”

His heart swelled in his chest to see the way her face lit up. “Oh, I should like that very much, Malcom. I have not seen them for so long, and I’m sure they would be thrilled to come.”

“Then why don’t you write the invitations today?”

“I shall,” she declared, wreathed in smiles, “as soon as I have finished breakfast. Oh, I can hardly wait to see Maggie’s face when she sees the piano. You will not mind her playing it, will you?” she asked a little doubtfully.”

“Not at all,” he replied, finding it was the truth. He was quite pleased with himself because of it. There might still be a struggle going on inside him over certain things, but at least he had gotten over his obsession with preserving the music room.

At that moment, they were interrupted by Carlton bringing a letter for Cassandra.

“Oh, it is from my friend, Diana,” she exclaimed after Carlton had left, laying the letter unopened by her plate. “I shall read it later. Now I think of it, would you mind if I include her in the invitations? She is my very best friend, and I do miss her company.”

“Why not? The more the merrier,” Malcom answered, wondering what he had gotten himself into. In his view, other people were his greatest torment. But if it made Cassandra happy to have guests to stay, then so be it. He would have to put up with other people for a few days and play the host. That was if he could remember how.

With that settled, the next problem he faced was how to get out of attending church with her.

“It would be nice if they were all here on a Sunday and we could make a party going to the church?” he suggested, thinking that way, he could blend into the crowd and not be required to make too much effort on the social front.

“That would be nice,” she agreed, beaming at him again. “I shall be sure to arrange it that way.”

\*\*\*

Cassandra was very surprised and excited by Malcom's suggestion that she invite Diana and her family to stay. After breakfast, when Malcom had gone off to attend to estate business, she settled in the morning room to write the invitations. But first, she opened the letter from her friend. It was the sent one in reply to her appeal for advice following the almost-kiss at the breakfast picnic with Malcolm.

. . . your husband is certainly a conundrum, but I think I may have found out some information that may help shed some light on his strange behaviour. I went to visit my Grandmama recently and happened to mention that you were now married to the Duke of Lindenhall. She expressed surprise and showed some sympathy for you. I did not tell her all the details, of course, but since she has an encyclopaedic knowledge of the Ton and going back many years, she told me the story of the death of the Duke's parents. Some of this you may already know, I am not sure. But she told me that the Locksley family were highly respected with an impeccable reputation. The Duke was reputedly a very kind man who enjoyed attending parties. He was in some demand for his tenor singing voice and often used to participate in his younger days in performing at various musical events.

Grandmama said that when he met his wife, Malcom's mother, it was love at first sight. She was very beautiful and gentle, and she too had a talent for music and could play many instruments, including the pianoforte and the harp. She would play at recitals, and it was at one of Lady Castelreigh's musicales that they first met when they were quite young. They quickly fell in love and married and were blissfully happy. They were rather the golden couple, it seems.

But there was one cloud on the horizon. It was well known among the Duchess' friends that she was desperate for children, but they did not come. Only after five years did she give birth to their only son. You are now married to him. He was, of course cherished, doubly so because no more children came.

The child inherited his parents' musical talents and when a young man out on the town was very popular for his singing and playing abilities. He was reputedly a great one for a party and would dance all night if he could. Apparently, he was popular and had many friends. When he completed his musical studies, he took up residence full time in Town and purchased a considerable mansion of his own as his base. You have not mentioned this house and so I do not know if you are aware of its existence.

That brings us to the tragedy that Grandmama told me about. It seems that the Duke and Duchess were travelling from the country into Town one day to visit Malcom at his new house. I suppose he wanted to show it off to them. They were riding in their carriage when they were involved in a terrible accident. I do not know exactly what happened, but both were killed. It truly is a tragic story, is it not?

After that, Malcom unexpectedly became the duke at the age of twenty. He went into something of a decline. Gradually, he ceased to appear in public at all. He gave up music and, as you know, became a recluse, shunning the Season and society and keeping to himself in the country. In short, he became the Beast Of Lindenhall.

Besides what Grandmama told me, I have also heard gossip that this tragedy is what lies behind Malcom's withdrawal from the world. This is what I think you are battling with, my dear—a man with a terribly wounded heart. It seems he has never got over his grief at the loss.

But that is as much as I can tell you. I hope it may do something to help you figure out how to approach the situation you now find yourself in. My advice would be to continue to try to draw him out about himself. It sounds as if you have made considerable inroads if you have got him singing and playing again, and he has shared his grief with you about the loss of his mother. Apparently, they were very close.

And if it has got to the stage where he has almost kissed you, I would say there is a



definite bond forming between you. I think it will take a lot of patience on your part, but perhaps you could try to see it as helping somebody who has been ill for a long time to regain their health. Be the kind, sweet, caring Cassie I know, and all may be well.

Cassandra dropped the letter on her lap, the information within hitting her . . . now armed with some knowledge of Malcom's past, pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place. But knowing Malcom as she did, she had already discerned there was something more than mere grief behind his behaviour, that he was carrying around some sort of guilt stemming from his parents' death. It was as though, for some reason, he blamed himself.

But why that should be she could not guess, but she sensed it was that which was holding him back from cementing their relationship. And preventing him from making that final leap into accepting her fully as his wife. She admitted to herself that she was beginning to have deep feelings for Malcom despite their poor start in married life.

She resolved to show him that she cared about him, to continue to be patient and show him that he could trust her. That way, she might finally break through the walls he had erected around his heart, and there was a chance they could be happy together.

She folded Diana's letter away and began penning the invitations, enclosing her thanks to her friend, along with the invitation. She went out to leave them for posting and then went to seek out Hannah. She found her in the kitchen, having a cup of tea with Cook and Carlton. When she told them about the forthcoming visitors, they were all delighted.

"This will be the first time the Duke has entertained, apart from Lord Terrence and Lady Madeleine in six years," Carlton said, beaming.

“Oh, it will be wonderful to have guests here, Your Grace” Hannah exclaimed, looking as if she was about to cry with happiness. “I shall see about preparing the rooms at once! We must show them the best of Lindenhall hospitality.”

“Please, Your Grace,” Cook said, her round face lighting up beneath her mobcap, “if you would be good enough to tell me some of the dishes your family likes, I will be sure to prepare them.”

“I shall most certainly do that,” Cassandra promised, pleased to see them all so happy at the news. They seemed as excited about it as she was. “Now, let me see, today is Tuesday. I have invited them to arrive on Friday late afternoon and stay over until Monday.

“We will be going to church on Sunday morning at St. Giles.” This elicited looks of astonishment, so Cook, we shall have a cold collation for luncheon that day. The guests will be my father and mother, the Marquess and Marchioness of Granshire, and my younger sister Lady Margaret, and my good friend Lady Diana Melville. So, four altogether. Once I am sure of the dates and numbers, we shall all sit down together and make our plans.”

\*\*\*

Over the next few days, although he felt a growing sense of dread at the imminent invasion, Malcom could not help feeling amused at the way Cassandra threw herself so enthusiastically into preparing for the visit of her family and Lady Melville. Her excitement was a joy to observe. He knew he must not let her down and would somehow have to polish up his rusty hosting skills and make them feel welcome, for her sake.

In the meantime, he could not help but notice that Carlton and Hannah were walking around with continual smiles on their faces, and that the household had gone into a

frenzy of scrubbing, dusting, and polishing for the benefit of the guests.

Carlton and two footmen even lowered the hallway, drawing room, and dining room chandeliers to meticulously clean the crystal sconces. In addition, he and Carlton spent a lot of time in the wine cellar, planning what to serve with each meal for the whole of four days. It was quite exhausting!

It was during a lull in this domestic commotion at dinner that evening, when they were by themselves that Malcom made a suggestion.

“Cassandra, I thought it might be nice of us if we rehearsed a few pieces of music to entertain the guests during the evenings. What do you think!”

“Oh, that would be marvelous, Malcom. “You are so clever to think of it. Yes, let’s rehearse some of our favourites. We might even get Papa to sing!” For some reason, she seemed to find the idea very amusing.

“I have not told you this,” she said somewhat conspiratorially over her dinner plate, “but you know Maggie is a virtuoso on the pianoforte, whereas my talent lies in singing?”

“I am well aware of your angelic abilities on that score,” Malcom said gallantly.

“Well, I used to be rather envious of Maggie because everyone fussed over her so. Mama and Papa thought nothing of paying for the best tutors for her, but when I asked to have a singing tutor, Mama turned me down flat. She said anybody can sing, and that it is not a particular accomplishment in a young lady. What do you think of that?”

He had to smile at her indignation. “I think that is not very fair or accurate,” he told her. “So, our duets will show them that you have a great talent, will they not?”

“Indeed. That is exactly what I am thinking. I do not wish to blow my own trumpet—”

“You play the trumpet? You have never told me so,” he put in jokingly. She giggled.

“You silly, you know what I mean. I should just like Mama and Papa to see that I have some accomplishments as well as Maggie. Is that a little childish of me?”

“Not at all. We all like to be appreciated sometimes, I feel.”

“Exactly. Oh, Malcom. I am so excited! I cannot wait to show them around Lindenhall. I have truly grown to love it.”

“That is very good to hear, Cassandra,” he said. “I am truly touched. I love the place, but then I have lived here all my life and am bound to be fond of the old place. However, some people find it, I rather forbidding.”

“Oh, I don’t agree at all. It is a fascinating, wonderful home. It is our home, and I shall thoroughly enjoy showing it off.”

“It truly warms my heart to know you have come to love it as I do,” he said honestly, deeply moved by her professed love for their home. “Now, if you have finished eating, shall we go and choose some duets to perform for the visitors?”

“Yes, of course.”

He pulled out her chair and offered her his arm. She took it with a smile, and they paraded gaily over to the other wing and settled in the music room to sort through the sheet music and plan their entertainments.

Though he was dreading the strain of the social performance he was going to have to

summon strength from somewhere inside him, Malcom had to admit. He strode along feeling proud to have Cassandra on his arm and he could not remember having felt so happy in six long years.

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:08 am*

Cassandra felt she was walking on air. For the first time since well before the fateful night of the Collins ball, she was bursting with happiness. And Malcom was responsible. She was excited about their guests coming, for she had sorely missed them all and wanted them to see Lindenhall. But there was another reason too. She yearned to show them all that the brooding Beast of Lindenhall actually possessed a deeply compassionate heart if only one took the time to peer beneath his brooding facade.

Even as she went down the hall arm in arm with Malcom to the music room, despite the poor start to their marriage and the setbacks they had encountered, she knew in her heart that she was slowly falling in love with him. She wanted so much to tell him how she was feeling, but she held back just then, for she was a little worried she might frighten him.

But she was not sure how long she could keep from confessing her feelings to him. The dam of her affection was piling up and seemed likely to burst forth at any moment. However, that evening, with her admission to herself so new, she simply threw herself into the pleasure of being in his company and into to their rehearsals for the visit.

They made a careful selection of duets and practiced for hours, perfectly engrossed in what they were doing. Malcom sang with her in his fine baritone, in perfect harmony.

“It is as if our voices were meant to blend together, Malcom, do you not think so?” she asked him after one particularly beautiful rehearsal. He gave her one of his lopsided smiles that made her heart flutter and nodded as he sat at the piano. He looked younger, more carefree than she had ever seen him.

“We certainly do seem to harmonise perfectly,” he told her. “You have given me back my joy in music, Cassandra. You know, after my parents died, I did not sing or play until you came along. I am grateful that you have brought the pleasure back into my life.”

To his great surprise, she suddenly leaned over and planted a chaste kiss on his cheek. He felt his cheeks grow warm, and the urge to seize her and kiss her was strong. But he held back, afraid of what would happen if he let loose his growing affection for her .

“I am so glad of it. And I must tell you that although I have been passionate about music since I was a little girl, I have never enjoyed it so much as with you!”

“Thank you, Cassandra. I think that is the nicest thing anybody has ever said to me.” He was indeed deeply touched by her sweet and obviously heartfelt declaration. It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her how he felt, but something still held him back. It felt dangerous to care for her so much.

\*\*\*

On Thursday afternoon, Cassandra took time off from the arrangements for the visit to walk to the wood where she usually met the children. It was too early for them to be there, she knew, for Mary would still be having her lessons. However, since she would not be able to meet them while they had company staying with them, she had decided to leave them a note in their little camp by a hollow tree. She tucked it away safely where they would find it and it would not get wet if it rained, and she weighted it with a stone so it would not blow away.

Once she had done that, she returned to the house. She met with Anna in her chambers to go over what outfits she would be wearing during the coming four days. The poor maid had been in a frenzy of pressing, cleaning, and mending her gowns, to

make sure her mistress looked her best.

Despite the hard work, she too was very excited to see the Granthams again because her great friend, Lady Granshire's lady's maid, Clara, was coming too.

"It will be such fun to see her again and catch up on all the news," Anna had said when she first heard of the visit.

At four o'clock, Cassandra and Malcom met in the music room for their penultimate rehearsal before the 'invasion', as he humorously called it, on the morrow, when the guests would be arriving.

"I think everything is ready," she told him as they settled at the piano. "They are expected shortly before luncheon, and Cook has promised a splendid repast, which I have helped to devise, featuring all my family's favourite dishes. And yours too, of course," she added. "I would not wish you to feel left out. "

"I doubt I shall, but that is very thoughtful of you." Malcom said, smiling at her.

They were so engrossed in what they were doing, they decided they did not want to break off for dinner, so they had it brought to them in the music room and ate together, while they went over the duet they planned to perform.

"I think I should like to have a little more practice at playing The Hills and Dales , Malcom, if you don't mind running through it again. That tricky little passage is still giving me a little trouble, and I so want to get everything right for Mama and Papa, and Maggie of course."

"What about your friend Diana?"

"Oh, she won't mind if I make a few mistakes. She would be the first to admit she's



no great virtuoso on the piano either. I shall be happy if she does not laugh out loud at me!”

“We shall practice some more after we have eaten, will that suit you?” he said, unable to stop smiling at her childish excitement.

“Perfectly, thank you.”

She placed a hand on his shoulder affectionately. These moments were becoming more and more precious to her. It was becoming hard not to touch Malcom, for she felt so close to him, and he seemed to grow more handsome with every passing day.

She loved to stand by him while he played, admiring his thick dark hair and the nobility of his profile. But most of all, she loved his gorgeous blue eyes. When she looked into them, her heart thudded, and she wanted to fall into them and never get out. It seemed that every moment, she was falling more deeply in love with her husband.

That night in bed, she was so excited, she could hardly sleep. But it was not just the prospect of seeing Diana and her family again that was the cause of it. She felt as though her heart was full to bursting with love for Malcom, and she did not quite know what to do about it.

She could not get his face out of her mind, and those vivid blue eyes seemed to be indelibly engraved on her eyelids whenever she closed her eyes and tried to sleep. Even when she did finally fall asleep, he haunted her dreams. After another bout of dozing and then suddenly coming awake, she came to a decision.

There is nothing for it. I will get no rest until I pluck up the courage to tell him how I feel. I shall do it in the morning before the others arrive.

Friday morning dawned bright and fair. Cassandra rose early, and with Anna's help, prepared for the day ahead. When she went downstairs to find Malcom to see if he had breakfasted, she met Hannah in the hall.

"Are we all set?" Cassandra asked the housekeeper, who was looking impressive in her white starched cap and collar and smart black dress, the enormous bunch of keys at her waist as always. She looked very happy.

"Yes, Your Grace, I think so. Do not worry, I shall make sure the guests are most comfortable."

"Wonderful, Hannah, thank you for all your hard work. Now, do you know where His Grace is?"

"I believe he is in the music room, Your Grace. He told Carlton he was going to practise."

"Oh, thank you. I shall go and join him."

The pair parted, and Cassandra hurried along to the music room, her pulse racing with nerves. She had gathered her courage to steal a private moment with Malcom before their world filled with guests, to tell him of her feelings for him.

"Good morning!" she cried as she entered, to find him seated at the piano, practising a piece.

He turned and smiled at her, a heartbreakingly beautiful smile that sent tingles up her spine. He was already dressed to greet their visitors, in well-polished, high-top boots, buff trousers, and an elegant cutaway coat of midnight blue. He looked magnificent.

"Good morning, there you are. I thought I would spend a few minutes going over a

few last-minute details,” he told her, making room for her to sit beside him on the piano bench. Cassandra’s pulse quickened further when she caught a waft of his spicy bergamot scent mingling with the fresh rose bouquet that had been set atop the piano. It was delicious!

“Shall we run through the Hills and Dales again quickly?” he asked, turning his dazzling blue eyes upon her. They seemed to pierce her soul, and her heart turned over at the affection she saw there. It gave her courage.

“Yes, I would like to,” she agreed. Her fingers trembled almost imperceptibly as, together, they turned the pages, practising the classical duet selection intended to impress everyone later over post-dinner brandy. Lulled by the soothing strains swelling around them, Cassandra finally decided she could no longer contain the profound truth burning inside. Halting mid-chord, she turned towards Malcom hesitantly.

“Malcom, I have something I should like to tell you,” she began, her voice barely above a whisper.

He turned to her and gazed into her eyes intently, making her feel weak at the knees.

“Oh, yes, what is it?” he asked.

She had rehearsed a little speech, and she groped for the words now, her stomach knotting with nerves. Holding his gaze, she forced herself to speak.

“Malcom, I must tell you the joy and creative passion we have shared together these past weeks have helped me to comprehend that we are connected on an even deeper level than either of us could have initially predicted. The musical bond that first kindled our . . . our fellowship has, I have to tell you, sparked into something much more.”

His eyes were staring into hers, pulling her in. She took a deep breath and said the words.

“Malcom, I have to tell you that . . . I am in love with you.”

\*\*\*

Malcom’s fingers froze upon the ivory keys. He felt the blood drain from his face, and he found himself staring wordlessly at Cassandra for an agonizingly protracted moment.

The old panic suddenly surged up from within, the demons of the past gripping him in their claws tightly, robbing him of breath.

All at once, he felt himself spinning back in time, immersed afresh in that feeling of complete loss of control over his emotions that he experienced on that fateful, awful night six years ago. He was reliving the moment when the terrible news arrived, shattering his world to smithereens.

“Malcom? Are you all right? Did you hear me?” Cassandra asked eventually, her voice small and filled with painful anxiety.

“I love you, Malcom.” She repeated, her eyes bringing him back to the present with a jolt. Finally, he found his voice.

“Cassandra . . . I cannot . . . I cannot return your feelings. I am sorry, but I just cannot.”

The look of agony in her eyes, the sudden pallor of her face as she bolted from the seat and sprang away from him, he knew would stay with him forever.

“I-I apologise for my foolishness. Forgive me, I must go,” she said in a choked voice, her eyes shining with tears.

She ran from the room, and the pain inside Malcom’s chest was so excruciating, it was as though a crystal dagger had been plunged into his heart and viciously twisted.

\*\*\*

Cassandra blinked back a swell of mortified tears as she blindly rushed from the music room without a backward glance, her final shreds of courage and hope deserting her.

You foolish girl! How did you think you could ever heal a man so scarred by grief? What made you think for a minute that the ice around his heart might actually thaw enough to embrace this gift of love you offered to him so freely? His soul is damaged, battered; he is incapable of loving or accepting love!

She fled to her chambers, slamming the door behind her and throwing herself on the bed, letting the tears of anguish gush from her eyes in wracking sobs. The love that had only minutes ago filled her heart for Malcom had abruptly turned to a terrible, burning pain she could hardly endure. Now she understood what it meant to have one’s heart broken into pieces.

\*\*\*

Alone, still sitting at the piano, Malcom put his head into his shaking hands, vaguely aware of the door closing as Cassandra rushed out. Furious with himself, he cursed under his breath, bringing his fists down on the keyboard in a discordant cacophony that mirrored the turmoil in his soul.

What have you done, you absolute fool?! This is the last unforgivable failure you will

get the chance to make, pushing away the one person brave enough to try to cut through your carefully constructed walls with such heartfelt, patient compassion! The one soul who bothered to look past the surface scars, right into the essence of who you are underneath all this pain. There will never be another like her, one who has earned your trust as she has. She is the only woman you have ever loved this way.

Yes, you know you love her, but because you are too weak to escape the past, you are incapable of voicing the affection that has been growing inside you . . . not even when she shows you what true courage is by so boldly declaring her love for you!

Now, you have probably lost her forever!

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:08 am*

Cassandra sobbed until she had no more tears inside her. Reeling from Malcom's blunt rejection in the music room, she began to feel the room closing in on her, as if she was suffocating.

I have to get out!

Heedless of the fact that her family and Diana were imminently due at Lindenhall or that she was still attired in a pretty day dress quite unsuitable for riding, she hurried from her chamber and down the staircase before making her way to the rear courtyard entrance. Once outside, oblivious as to whether anyone was watching, she picked up her skirts and ran as fast as she could to the stables. All she wanted to do was get away.

She reached the stables and waited, hiding behind the door for few minutes for the only groom she could see to leave and go up to the offices above. She could hear the stablemen talking up there. Once the groom had left, she entered, and her attention was immediately met by the demanding neigh of Sheba in her shadowed stall. The high-spirited horse was pacing anxiously as if sensing the hurricane of emotion whirling inside this unexpected visitor.

“You want to get away too, do you?” Cassandra whispered, in her distracted state quite forgetting Malcom's previous stern warning that the temperamental Sheba was entirely unsuitable for riding. Gripped by an unfamiliar recklessness fuelled by her acute emotional pain, her sole desperate thought was to escape the suffocating humiliation she felt and flee deep into the remote reaches of the estate, to nurse her shattered heart in solitude after being so callously rejected by the man she loved.

“Come on, then, girl,” she murmured, opening the stall door and leading the horse out by the halter. A saddle and blanket were resting on top of the wooden partition by the stall, so she grabbed them and quickly saddled Sheba. The Arabian mare obligingly stood calmly as Cassandra tightened the girth straps beneath the belly, perhaps sensing freedom from her restrictive prison was coming.

Minutes later, sitting astride Sheba, Cassandra galloped heedlessly from the stable courtyard and out into Lindenhall’s vast acres, urging Sheba onward at an ever-faster pace. Yet no matter how fast and far they raced, Cassandra could not outrun the awful echoes of Malcom’s rejection.

“Cassandra . . . I cannot . . . I cannot return your feelings. I am sorry, but I just cannot.”

They rode and rode, with Cassandra low in the saddle, gripping the reins tightly, giving the horse its head. The wind tore at her hair and at Sheba’s mane, as if the two had become one in their desperation to escape. They were several miles from the manor, in a place Cassandra had not been before, a bridle path that ran between an open field and the side of a wooded area to her right, where she glimpsed a steep incline leading down to a rocky ravine through the trees.

Without warning, a pheasant suddenly exploded from the brush in a burst of noise and feathers. Before Cassandra knew what was happening Sheba screamed shrilly in fear, skidded to a halt, and reared up on her back legs, her hooves thrashing violently at the air before coming crashing down, brutally jarring Cassandra and threatening to topple her from her seat.

“It’s all right, girl, it’s all right!” Cassandra shouted, pulling back on the reins sharply in an attempt to control the panicked horse. But Sheba was not to be soothed and reared up once more. Cassandra felt herself losing her grip. Powerless to do anything to save herself, she was suddenly violently pitched sideways out of the saddle and



into thin air.

The earth came rushing up and impacted her body with brutal force, sending shockwaves through her, rattling her bones, and forcing the breath from her lungs. She felt herself spinning, rolling toward the edge of the precipice, blinded by white hot pain as she shot over the edge, hitting several tree trunks and boulders as she tumbled down the sharp incline to the bottom. She finally came to rest when her head connected sharply with a large rock. The last coherent sensation she recalled was Sheba's panicked squealing and pounding hooves as they faded rapidly into the distance.

Then, a merciful blackness descended as she passed into oblivion.

\*\* \*

You should have gone after her, you fool, you shouldn't have just let her go like that!

Back at Lindenhall, Malcom was sitting in the silence of his study, staring blankly at the closed door, the glass of brandy in his hand forgotten. Cassandra's anguished parting words were still echoing relentlessly through his mind like the tolling of a bell heralding his doom. He raked a hand through his hair repeatedly, cursing himself, calling himself an idiot for failing to call her back.

You should have met her brave admission with the joy, honesty, and respect it deserved and told her that you return her feelings with an overwhelming passion the like of which you have never known before—that you love her with every fibre of your being!

But the vicious little voice in his head laughed and said, ' It would have been no good going after her . . . you are damaged and incapable of expressing this love you hold for her, this tumultuous affection flooding every chamber of your battered heart. You

have allowed your demons to triumph by means of your irrational fears, to sabotage the first glimmer of happiness you've known since you killed your parents. It is only what you deserve!

He was jolted from his self-recriminations when a knock sounded on the study door.

"Come in," he murmured, half hoping, half afraid it might be Cassandra that returned. But it was Hannah. The housekeeper looked worried.

"What is it?" he asked irritably, disappointed.

"Your Grace, Lord and Lady Granshire and their party have arrived."

"Oh, God," Malcom muttered under his breath. In his anguish, he had forgotten all about Cassandra's family coming. How on earth were they going to get through the next four days pretending everything was well between them? He sat up and put down his brandy on a side table, once more running a distracted hand through his hair. His thoughts were so disordered, he could hardly take in the news.

Making an effort to compose himself, he asked, "Where is my wife? She will wish to greet them."

"That is the problem, Your Grace," Hannah said, her face creased with concern. "We cannot find her anywhere. She seems to have disappeared. We are all looking for her, but she does not seem to be in the house."

"All right. Put them in the drawing room and offer them refreshments. Tell them Cassandra has been unavoidably delayed and that I will be there shortly."

"Very good, Your Grace," Hannah replied, bobbing a curtsy before she left.

With an inward groan, Malcom dragged a hand roughly down his face. He got up and smoothed his coat, steeling himself to somehow pretend to be the gracious host, whilst in reality, his marriage to the daughter of the very people who were now his guests lay in ruins about him.

To be forced to engage her family in banal pleasantries would have been torture enough at the best of times. But the prospect of having to do so while knowing that his entire future happiness was likely fleeing from him through the gathering dust at that very moment, nursing her broken heart, was beyond excruciating.

“Oh, Lord, what am I going to say to them?” he groaned to himself as he finally left the room to go the drawing room and face what could be his nemesis.

“Your Grace, I hope you will not think me rude if I ask why you alone are here to greet us without my daughter?” Lord Granshire was on his feet and confronting Malcom as soon as he stepped through the door and wished them all a good day. Over the Marquess’s shoulder, he noticed Cassandra’s sister and Lady Diana exchanging uneasy glances. Her mother was frowning worriedly.

Malcom summoned a hearty smile and lied blatantly. “Yes, it is unfortunate that she has been slightly delayed. However, I promise you she will be joining us presently. Do take your ease and enjoy the refreshments.” Tea had already been served he noticed with relief. It was something to keep them occupied and distract them from the wait.

“Very well,” the Marquess agreed, not looking at all convinced. While the others were seating themselves, whispering to each other over their teacups, Malcom discreetly sidled to the door and instructed a waiting footman to return shortly and announce dinner would be delayed. Then, he joined the party, steeling himself to play the dutiful host until Cassandra arrived.

“I trust you had a pleasant journey,” he said, seating himself stiffly in an armchair.

“As pleasant as can be expected, thank you,” the Marquess said, clearly disgruntled. It was obvious he suspected something fishy was afoot. The man was clearly no fool. In fact, the whole party seemed on edge.

“I must say, it is a pleasure to see you all again. We have not met since the . . . wedding, I believe,” Malcom said, trying his best to sound jovial.

“We have not, Your Grace,” Lady Granshire chimed in, her tone rather pointed. “And as that was some time ago, you can imagine that we were very pleased to receive Cassandra’s invitation.”

“Ah! Splendid. I know she is very excited about showing you the house and the estate,” Malcom said, maintaining his false smile, while his stomach tied in knots.

“I do hope she is all right. I cannot help wondering what is keeping her. It is not like Cassandra to be tardy,” Lady Diana said suddenly, her auburn curls a vivid flash of colour beneath her bonnet.

“Indeed not,” Lady Margaret echoed, her pretty little mouth turning downwards.

“I know she is as impatient to see you all as you are her. I am sure she will be here very shortly.” Please, Cassandra, please come back . . .

An uncomfortable silence descended over the room, broken only by the occasional chink of china meeting china. Malcom scrabbled helplessly for small talk but failed to come up with anything. He was starting to panic when salvation arrived in the form of the footman coming to announce dinner would be delayed until her Grace arrived.

This did nothing to reassure his guests.

“I say, Your Grace, is everything all right?” the Marquess inquired in a forthright manner, getting up from his seat. “She is not ill, is she?”

“Oh, no, she is very well,” Malcom fibbed, “it is just a short delay, that is all.” But fate decided not to back him, for at that very moment, Carlton appeared in the open doorway behind the departing footman and, bowing, said, “Your Grace, your presence is required immediately in the hall.”

Sensing the tension in his usually sanguine manservant’s voice, Malcom replied, “Very well.” He quickly turned and bowed to his guests. “Do excuse me one moment.” He followed Carlton out into the hall.

“What is it, Carlton? Where is she?” he inquired in harsh whisper.

The butler leaned in close and replied in hushed tones, “We do not know exactly, Your Grace, but I have just been informed by the stableman that the horse Sheba is missing from the stables.

“Oh, God, no!” Malcom exclaimed, cold panic gripping him as he realized with horror that Cassandra must have taken out the unpredictable Sheba. He tried to think what to do, but over Carlton’s shoulder he spied a mud-spattered stable boy, twisting his cap in his hands, appear at the open front door. Carlton spotted him too.

“What is it, lad?” he asked, beckoning the boy forward.

“It is Sheba, Sir, she been spotted by one of the grooms, running riderless on one of the bridleways by the north woods,” the boy stuttered.

“I knew it!” A roar came from behind them that made them all turn in unison.

“What has happened to my daughter?!” Lord Granshire was storming up to them, his

face red with anger. “I demand to know what you are hiding, Sir,” he demanded of Malcom.

“You may leave, boy,” Malcom quickly dismissed the stable lad, who ran off through the front door looking frightened out of his wits. His stomach churning with dread and barely managing to maintain his outward composure, Malcom exchanged a look with Carlton. The butler nodded and withdrew to a discreet distance, awaiting orders.

Malcom turned to Cassandra’s father and said as placatingly as he could, “I’m afraid it seems that Cassandra was out riding on a problematic horse and has now gone unexpectedly missing.”

A panic that mirrored his own flared in the Marquess’s eyes, and the man’s face blanched in sudden fear .

“Then what are you doing to find her, Your Grace? I demand you organise a search for her with no delay!” he declared.

Needing no second bidding, Malcom turned to Carlton and the small tribe of footmen who had gathered around him.

“Bring lanterns and ropes, gather as many hands as you can to search the estate for my wife. And someone go to the stables and tell them to ready Zeus, my fastest horse. I shall be there directly,” he barked, realizing he could not delay joining the urgent search himself. Cassandra, the woman he loved, was out there somewhere in the gathering dusk, possibly laying injured. He had to get to her!

“I am coming with you,” her father suddenly declared.

“There is no—” Malcom began, but the Marquess abruptly cut him off.

“She is my daughter. I am joining the search, I tell you!” he shouted. His wife suddenly appeared in the doorway of the drawing room, her face contorted with worry.

“What on earth is all the commotion, dear?” she asked.

“Cassandra has gone missing on some unpredictable horse it seems,” her husband replied.

“Oh, Lord!” the Marchioness cried, her hand flying to her mouth.

“We are forming a search party to find her,” the Marquess went on. “Go back in the drawing room and keep the others calm until we return,” her husband commanded her in a tone that could not be denied. The Marchioness nodded and disappeared back into the drawing room, closing the door. Malcom was grateful for the man’s forthright manner.

The search party gathered on the drive by the front door. Lanterns and ropes were distributed, and the Marquess assumed command of the men, dividing them up into pairs to better aid the search. He paired up with Carlton, who knew the estate well and helped assign. They headed up towards the northern part of the estate, towards the woods where Sheba had last been spotted running riderless.

Zeus was brought round. Without hesitation, Malcom swung into the saddle and kicked up the stallion, which took off into fast gallop in the same northerly direction, quickly surging ahead of the searchers on foot .

With only the stars and the light of a half moon to guide him, Malcom slowed Zeus to a walk, his eyes straining as he peered into every hedgerow, every hollow, every shadowed clump of trees, trying to pick out any hint of Cassandra’s presence.

He shouted her name over and over, hearing it echoing back to him from the other searchers off in the distance as they too looked for her. But after what seemed like an eternity of searching, with no answer from Cassandra to his increasingly frantic calls, Malcom, swamped with deep despair, feared the worst.

And if the worst has happened, then you alone are responsible. She ran from you, and if anything has happened to her, it will be your fault. Just like it was before.

Then, as he was riding down a remote bridleway between an open field and a copse, which he well knew housed a steep ravine, he was searching for signs of her passing when he saw the plants and undergrowth by the trees bordering the ravine had been crushed.

With hope leaping in his chest, he leapt from the saddle and threw the reins around a low-hanging branch. He crept carefully through the trees and rocks to the edge of the ravine.

“Oh, God, no!” he exclaimed, terror gripping his heart with icy fingers as he looked down and saw at the bottom of the steep incline, illuminated by the moonlight, the fragile, senseless body of his wife.

“Over here!” he bellowed, hoping the others would hear him. “This way! By the ravine!” Vaulting recklessly down the slippery slope, he soon reached her and fell to his knees, seeing blood matting her hair. He realized it had come from a deep gash in her head from where she had collided with a large boulder nearby.

“Oh, my love, I am so sorry, it is all my fault,” he murmured, in an agony of self-hate as he gathered Cassandra's limp form gently into his arms. His throat constricted in relief to hear her still shallowly breathing as he urgently gathered her close to his chest and bore her up the arduous incline towards the waiting Zeus.



He somehow got her in front of him as he swung into the saddle, clutching her tightly to him as he set off home as quickly as he dared. He emerged in into open land and saw some of the searchers topping a ridge about half a mile distant, their lanterns swinging.

“I have her!” he shouted to them. Shouts echoed through the darkness as they turned and began to follow his lead back towards the manor. The front door stood open when he arrived back at the house, with Hannah and some of the maids peering anxiously out from inside. Malcom slid from the saddle, cradling Cassandra’s immobile form in his arms as he hurried into the hall. They all looked horrified, and one of the maids began to cry.

The housekeeper rushed up to him.

“Oh Your Grace—” she began, her hand at her mouth. Malcom cut her off.

“Send for the physician immediately,” he barked, “and inform the family she has been found and that the physician is on the way. Keep them in the drawing room until he has seen her.” Not pausing to say any more, only vaguely hearing Hannah’s response, he took the stairs two at a time and headed straight for his chambers. There, he laid Cassandra tenderly down upon his bed.

Mr. Lewis, the family physician completed his examination of the still unconscious and badly bruised Cassandra and looked over at Malcom, who was standing pacing at the other side of the bed.

“Will she recover?” he asked anxiously, his heart sinking to his boots to see the grave look on Mr. Lewis’s face.

“Let us go outside and speak,” the physician said, picking up his bag.

“Yes, yes, of course.” Malcom stuttered. When he opened the door, he saw that Casaandra’s family and Lady Diana had gathered in the hallway, all looking anxious and restless. Anna was there too, her eyes red with recent tears.

“Anna, will you go in and sit with her for a moment, please, while we speak with Mr. Lewis?” Malcom asked the maid.

Anna bobbed a quick curtsy and hurried inside. Malcom closed the door.

“What is the prognosis, Mr. Lewis? Will she recover?” he asked. The family gathered around to hear what the physician had to say.

“It is difficult to say with any certainty,” he said gravely. “She has taken a nasty knock to her head, which means she likely has a concussion, and she has many cuts and abrasions. I cannot say what internal injuries she may have sustained.”

The Marchioness broke down at that point and began sobbing, a handkerchief to her face. Her daughter put her arm around her to comfort her, but she too had tears in her eyes. The Marquess looked on stoically, but Malcom could see fear in the man’s eyes. Lady Diana was as white as sheet. Malcom’s blood ran cold as the physician continued his report.

“However, she appears to be stable for the moment, and youth is on her side. But she will need constant watching. The next few hours will prove critical. Due to the injury to her head and the possibility of a serious concussion, I must advise you all to prepare yourselves for things to take a turn for the worse.”

“What do you mean?” the Marquess cried, his face contorted with fear.

“I mean, My Lord, that she may not awaken at all.”

Upon hearing this grim assessment, Cassandra's mother released a strangled sob and collapsed against her husband's shoulder. Lady Margaret, still trying to comfort her mother, began weeping softly. Lady Diana wrapped a consoling arm about her trembling frame.

Though maintaining an outward veneer of stoic composure, Malcom inwardly blanched at the physician's ominous words. They stabbed at his very soul with chilling force like daggers. The stark truth concerning the possibly fatal outcome of his failure to overcome his demons was now staring him unmercifully in the face.

Beneath the scars of the past, he knew he loved Cassandra with a searing intensity. He loved and admired everything about the joy and creativity and understanding she had so selflessly brought into his lonely world these past weeks since their rushed matrimony had begun. And now, just as he had been on the very cusp of embracing that love rather than recoiling from it with his familiar paralysing fear, this horrific accident threatened to steal Cassandra away from him.

While the family asked the physician questions in hushed tones, Malcom stood like a statue, reflecting numbly on how utterly and completely essential Cassandra had become to him in a few short weeks. She could not suspect how deeply she was engraved upon his heart .

The charming young lady he once dismissed as merely a frivolous socialite had gradually illuminated all the hidden shadows still haunting him with her patient wisdom. She had penetrated his deepest fortified walls with her persistent tenderness and compassion until, finally, he simply could not envision living out a solitary future bereft of her beloved companionship to guide him out of the darkness.

After Mr. Lewis had left them, promising to call in and check on Cassandra on the morrow, Malcom came back to himself. He knew that as Cassandra's husband and the host, he needed to take charge of the situation, that he was not the only one

lamenting the situation.

“I shall sit with her throughout the night,” he told them. “I think it best that you retire to your chambers and try to get some rest now. I will inform you if anything changes. I will have a maid show you to your rooms.”

“Very well,” the Marquess agreed, looking stricken but also weary. “Perhaps that is for the best. Come my, dear,” he said, turning to his wife and daughter. “We can do no more here for the moment.”

Malcom did not have the heart to bid them good night. He went back into his chambers and instructed a tearful Anna to show them to their sleeping quarters. When she had left the room, glad to be alone with his wife at last, he went to the bed and sank down heavily onto the mattress next to her unconscious form. He gently enfolded her heavily bandaged hand between both of his own.

With his shoulders sagging beneath the weight of an unspeakable dread that threatened to overwhelm him, he began to recount in hushed, fervent tones all the treasured moments of their fledgling marriage bond.

“Do you remember that first time we walked in the rose garden together? I recall vividly the conversation we had then, arguing whether we preferred Bach to Mozart and who was capable of moving the human heart the most, simply with a few beautifully expressed chords? And when we had those lively debates in the music room over our favourite ballads? It was the first time since Mother that I had had such conversations with anyone.

“We talked and played and sang late into the night, did we not? You do not know how I treasured those times, Cassandra, because I was not able to voice how much they meant to me, how much your company means to me. To play those soothing classical duets with you, side by side at the piano, the notes of the instrument and

your heavenly intertwining upon the lingering notes, I swear, it was like you were breathing new life into me.”

Choking back his pent-up emotion, Malcom gazed down upon her delicate features, her eyes still closed.

“Yours is the face of the woman I love with all my heart and soul. Forgive me for what I said this morning, for turning your loving declaration away in such a barbarous manner. I did not mean it. Please, Cassandra, come back to me, and I will do everything in my power to make you happy. I cannot lose you now, not when we have only just begun to create this unique melody that unites our two hearts.”

A sob burst from his lips as he gripped her slender fingers through the bandage, as if though sheer will alone, he could tether her there with him. He bowed his head and for the first time in six years, he prayed. His prayers were desperate pleas to the Almighty.

Let her awaken, Lord, let her come back to me, I beg of you. I cannot, I do not wish, to live without her. She is the joy of my life . . .

He remained like that, gazing down at her beautiful face, holding her hand in his, gently stroking her soft cheek, whispering his love to her as the long hours of the night ticked interminably by. Eventually, the silvery light of dawn began filtering softly through the drapes at the windows, heralding a new day.

Just as the birds began their chorus outside, Cassandra suddenly stirred upon her pillow. Malcom gasped, and his whole body tensed as hope shot through him. Had the Lord answered his prayers?

“Malcom?” she whispered hoarsely, her eyelids fluttering. Then, miraculously, she opened her eyes. Malcom clutched her hand more tightly, leaning over her.

“Yes, my love, I am here,” he murmured, his voice trembling. On tenterhooks, he watched as lovely hazel eyes slowly came back into hazy focus and fixed upon his face. She smiled weakly at him, and she felt her fingers grasp him through the bandage. “Lord, thank you, thank you, for sending her back to me!” he breathed, relief crashing over him with all the force of the ocean’s tide. “I am here, darling.” He tenderly brushed back the stray golden tresses from her clammy brow.

“Malcom, what happened?” she asked. “Am I ill?”

“You had a fall from Sheba,” he told her gently. “Do you remember?”

She looked puzzled, confusion filling her eyes. Then she said, “I-I think so but, my head is throbbing.” She put her other hand up to her head, by the gash, encountering another bandage. She looked surprised to feel it there. “I think I hit my head on a rock.”

“You did, my love, but I think you are going to get better now you are awake. We did not know if you would wake up.”

“How did you find me?”

“When I learned the Sheba was missing from the stables and was spotted running loose, we formed a search party. I searched for you, and I found you at the bottom of a ravine.”

“Oh, thank you for coming to find me, Malcom,” she said, trying to push herself up by her elbows. But then she winced with pain and laid back down.

“I would have searched the four corners of the earth to find you, Cassandra. my darling. And it was all my fault, I drove you away. I am so sorry for what I said this morning. I was a stupid fool. Please forgive me,” he begged her contritely.

“Of course, I forgive you,” she told him without hesitation.

“May I have a drink of water? My throat is so dry, it aches,” she asked.

“Of course.” He let go of her hand and hurriedly poured her a glass from the carafe on the nightstand. “Here, let me help you.” He tenderly slid his arms around her and cradled her as he helped her to sip the water.

“Oh, that is better,” she told him with a grateful smile as he laid her gently back down.

“Do you feel up to having some visitors?” he asked, returning her smile, his heart overflowing with tenderness for her.

“Visitors?” She looked surprised .

“Your family are here, and your friend, Lady Diana. They are all waiting anxiously to hear how you are.”

“Oh! They are here? I forgot! Yes, of course, I would love to see them.”

“I shall send word,” he told her, going to pull the bell rope to summon a servant. It was Anna who appeared at the door just a few minutes later.

“Oh, my dearest Lady, I am so glad to see you awake. I was so worried for you,” the maid gushed, coming over to the bed, in her joy, quite forgetting to curtsy to

Malcom. He did not even notice, for he was so happy.

“Will you tell Her Grace’s family that she is awake and would like to see them?” Malcom asked. “And also inform Carlton and Mrs. Brown.”

“Oh, Your Grace, I am so sorry,” Anna cried, now bobbing a curtsy. “I shall tell them at once.” With a beaming smile for Cassandra, she hurried from the room.

First through the door was her mother, her face alight with joy and relief as she rushed toward the bed and gently embraced Cassandra. Malcom stood back, smiling, while they gathered around the bed with expressions of delight.

“My darling, thank goodness you are awake. I have not slept a wink worrying about you,” the Marchioness declared, her eyes shining with happy tears.

“Oh, Mama, I am so glad to see you,” Cassandra told her, hugging her back as much as her injuries would allow.

“How are you feeling, Cassie?” asked Lady Margaret, hot on her mother’s heels. She leaned over and planted a kiss on Cassandra’s cheek before letting out a little sob and embracing her sister.

“Oh, darling Maggie!” How happy I am to see your face. You are the best medicine,” Cassandra told her, beaming and hugging her back warmly as though she was the one comforting her sister. Malcom was touched to see the affection between the pair, considering the envy Cassandra had confessed to over her sister’s musical talents. Clearly, it did nothing to alter her deep love for her Maggie .

“Darling, you cannot imagine how relieved I am to see you awake,” Lady Melville said, the next to come forward and kiss and embrace Cassandra. “Do not ever do anything like that again. You frightened us all so badly, I could not stand it!” Diana



declared with naked affection for her friend.

“I promise, my dear. Oh, it does me good to see you and know you are here. I am so sorry this is how your visit has turned out. I apologise. It was very thoughtless of me, I admit,” Cassandra told her, her face wreathed in smiles.

The last to come to the bedside was the Marquess. Malcom could see that he was not altogether successful at concealing the depth of his emotions at seeing his daughter awake.

“My darling girl,” he said gruffly, sounding close to tears himself. “I thank the Lord for sending you back to us.”

“Oh, Papa!” Cassandra reached up to him, tears suddenly falling from her eyes as he bent down and gave her a fatherly cuddle. “I have missed you so much,” she whispered.

“I too, my dearest girl,” the older man murmured, his voice thick with emotion. Father and daughter remained like that for several moments, their love for each other almost palpable. Malcom had to wipe a tear from his eye to see the tender exchange.

They were still gathered around Cassandra when the arrival of Mr. Lewis was announced. Malcom welcomed him before escorting the family and Diana out into the hall while the physician examined the patient. In sharp contrast to the previous night, the conversation was far more relaxed, for they were all so relieved, and conversation flowed freely as they exchanged their thoughts on Cassandra. Malcom could not help noticing what a close, warm family they were, and Lady Diana impressed him with her calm, good sense.

They all hushed when the chamber door opened at last and Mr. Lewis appeared, shutting the door firmly behind him.

“How is she, Mr. Lewis?” Malcom asked, still anxious for Cassandra to make a full recovery. His anxiety melted away when the grey-haired, bewhiskered physician smiled.

“Well, she is awake, which is, of course, a very good sign. I think I may say with some confidence that she is out of danger from a concussion. That too is a great blessing. However, understandably, her constitution will be weakened after enduring such a violent shock and the subsequent prolonged unconsciousness. But the worst of the danger has passed, I feel fairly certain.”

Malcom felt almost weak with relief, and a collective sigh came from the others, mingled with thankful mutterings to the Almighty for His help in delivering Cassandra from further danger.

“Her body only requires ample rest and care over the coming weeks to fully mend,” the physician continued. “But I anticipate that she will make a steady if gradual recovery back to full health and strength.”

“Thank you, Sir,” the Marquess said, grasping and pumping Mr. Lewis’s hand enthusiastically.

“Yes, Mr. Lewis, we are very grateful to you,” Malcom seconded, suddenly unable to stop smiling.

Once the physician had gone, they all filed back into the chamber and surrounded Cassandra once again. But this time, Malcom noticed the atmosphere was lighter and even quite cheerful as Lady Diana and her family lingered, holding her hands and soothing her brow, smiles of radiant relief lifting their drawn expressions.

However, when her mother noticed her elder daughter was looking tired, she said, “I think it is time to let Cassandra rest, my dears. And I expect the Duke would

appreciate having his wife to himself for a little while.” She bestowed a beaming smile on Malcom, who could not help but return the gesture. So, albeit a little reluctantly, they all slowly wished Cassandra a good rest and hoped that she should feel better soon before filing out of the room to go and have some breakfast, leaving Malcom alone with her at last.

The instant her family had gone, and the door was firmly shut behind them, Cassandra reached out her arms to Malcom. Eagerly, he hurried over to her and sat by her on the bed. She took his face tenderly between her palms.

“Malcom, I want to apologise to you for giving you such a fright. I was very foolish to take Sheba out like that. It was utterly reckless of me, and the resulting accident and my injuries are due solely to the decisions of my disturbed state at the time, following our . . . misunderstanding in the music room earlier. ”

“Hush, my love—” he began, urgently wanting to refute her claim.

“No, I must insist that you take not a whit of blame upon yourself for what has happened. The fault was mine alone, and I beg you to forgive me for my foolishness,” she broke in, gently releasing him.

Malcom thought his heart would burst with love for her, yet at the same time, he could not help the small smile that crept to his lips at her humility.

“I cannot agree that any of this is your fault, but if you wish it, then you have my forgiveness. I would forgive you anything, my sweet angel.” He drew closer to her, stroking her cheek and looking tenderly into her eyes. “You see, my darling, there are many things I have not told you that I know now I should have at the beginning.”

“What is it , my love?” she asked softly, her beautiful eyes brimming with affection. Haltingly at first but then with building confidence spurred by her frank and gentle

gaze, he finally told her all about his past.

“You know I lost my parents six years ago and that life stopped for me after that.” He paused, to see she was regarding him intently.

“Yes, I know.”

“Well, I must tell you what happened and the reason why I have been so cold to you and shamefully rejected your sweet declaration of affection yesterday. You see, six years ago, on the night of a terrible storm, my parents were on their way to Town, to visit me on my invitation.

“I had bought a new house, and I was so excited about it, I could not wait for them to see it. I sent them a note, telling them to come at once. Of course, they could not deny me. So, despite their better judgement, they took their carriage and set out on the journey from Lindenhall to my new address. But when they were only halfway there, a bolt of lightning hit a nearby tree just as they were passing . . . and it fell upon the carriage, crushing them both and killing them both instantly.” The words felt wrenched from his soul, and he bowed his head to choke back tears.

“Oh, Malcom, how terrible!” Cassandra cried, grasping his hand tightly .

“The thing is, Cassandra, it was all my fault. Do you see? If I had not insisted that they come at once because I was so eager to show off the house, then they would likely be alive today. I not only lost them both in a horrific way, but I also have to live with the fact that I was responsible for their deaths.” For some reason he could hardly fathom, it felt as if a weight was falling from his shoulders as he confessed his feelings of guilt to the woman he loved so much.

“Oh, my poor darling, come here,” she said, sitting up and wrapping her arms around his neck, pulling him to her breast, and cradling him in her arms as she stroked his

hair.

“That moment, when I heard the terrible news, forever altered my existence,” Malcom confessed wretchedly even as he found comfort in Cassandra’s arms. “After that, I withdrew from the world, unable to forgive myself for what I had done. I closed myself off, rejecting all my friends. I shut myself away here. I shut up the music room, and I stopped playing music altogether. It was my mother’s favourite place, and it did not seem right to use it or enjoy music anymore when it was my fault that she was dead. I built walls around my heart to keep people out, telling myself I was not worthy of happiness. I deserved nothing but loneliness and a lonely death, to atone for my crime.

He gently pulled away from her to look deeply into her eyes. “But then you entered my world so unexpectedly. I tried my hardest to keep you out, but day by day, your generous patience and compassion gently wore down my defences. Until finally . . . miraculously . . . you managed to illuminate all the lingering shadows, all the demons that held me so firmly in their grasp. You, with your radiant light, have at last released my trapped spirit.”

“My poor darling, how you have suffered,” Cassandra told him, her eyes brimming with unabashed love.

His voice catching with profound emotion, Malcom continued speaking, wanting to get everything he had been holding back for so long out in the open.

“And now, my darling Cassandra, I want to tell you how grateful I am for all you have done for me, for loving me despite everything. I desperately want to build a new life with you at my side forever. I want us to be true soulmates. That is, if you can manage to find it somewhere within your heart to forgive me. For you must know by now that I have fallen completely and irreversibly in love with you.”

\*\*\*

Cassandra's heart fluttered rapidly as she absorbed Malcom's raw confession of enduring love for her.

"My darling," she told him softly, through tears of joy, cradling his face in her hands. "We have already come so far together, though the way has been hard and full of obstacles. Yet here we are, sharing our deepest, most tender thoughts, as only true soulmates can do.

"There is nothing that can hold us back from finding lasting happiness with each other now. I have perfect faith that our bond will endure, and that this wonderful love we have found in each other shall continue lighting the way ahead, carrying us forward into a happy future where we can weather any storm together. I love you with all my heart and soul, my darling Malcom."

"Oh, my sweet Cassandra, how lucky I am to have found you, the light of my life. I shall do everything in my power from this day forward to make you happy. I love you so much!"

They embraced tightly, and finally, his lips found hers, and they shared a tender, loving kiss.

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:08 am*

One year later...

Sunlight streamed through the high stained-glass windows of St. Gile's Church in the picturesque village of Lindenhall, washing the walls of the interior with vibrant hues of red, blue, green, and gold.

Cassandra was standing at the front next to Malcom, watching intently as the Reverend Titus Clarke cradled their infant son, Thomas, just two months old, carefully in his arms. The vicar intoned the sacred words of baptism while anointing the mite's tiny, wrinkled forehead with holy water, scribing a cross upon it as he spoke the final blessing.

Unfortunately, little Thomas did not seem to like this treatment. He opened his little mouth and let out a loud cry that reverberated around the church rafters, drawing indulgent smiles and soft chuckles from both his proud parents and the rest of the congregation. And once he started, he showed no sign of stopping.

Ever good-natured, the bespectacled Reverend Clarke smiled as he handed the noisy bundle back to its beaming mother.

"He certainly has a strong pair of lungs," he remarked, wiping his wet hands on his vestments.

"Having fathered nine children, he should know," Malcom whispered in Cassandra's ear, causing her to have to stifle a giggle.

"He takes after his mother," the Duke told the Reverend in a more normal tone,

grinning down at his son and putting a protective arm around his wife's shoulder. The crying ceased, to be replaced by an angelic gurgling as Cassandra ticked the baby's cheek and smiled down at him dotingly. Then, she smiled dotingly at her husband, and he at her. As Mrs. Clarke had observed to Reverend Clarke on greeting the parents at the church door before the service, any fool could see the couple were besotted with one another.

To complete the christening, a couple more hymns were sung, during which the usual indifferent vocal contributions of the majority of the congregation were put to shame by the exquisite blending of soprano and baritone from the happy parents. As the guests poured out of the church on to the gravel forecourt, it was generally agreed among them that the young Duke and Duchess made the perfect duet.

"Now, Cassandra, do not let little Thomas get cold," the Marchioness of Granshire told her elder daughter, fussing over the baby.

Lady Margaret, delighting in her new role as aunt, tittered and said, "Do not worry, Mama, we have brought enough swaddling blankets to keep ten babies warm, I am sure."

Cassandra laughed at her sister's wit.

"You may laugh at me, you girls, but one cannot be too careful with babies in this climate," the mother warned them.

"He seems a strong, bonny little fellow," remarked the handsome, debonair Lord Euan McMuir cheerfully, his arm linked with his fiancée's as he looked admiringly at little Thomas. "When you come to visit me and Maggie up in the Highlands after we're wed, you may need to bring those extra blankets. It can get very cold up there!"

"We're both looking forward to that very much," Malcom told him with a grin,



finding the good-humored Scotsman fine company. Just as he finished speaking, he felt a hard slap on his back. He did not need to turn around to know who it was. He laughed and released Cassandra long enough to embrace Terrence warmly.

“Malcom, old chap, this is a truly happy day, is it not? I like the thought of having a new little cousin to play with. You are not much fun anymore, it has to be said.” He rubbed his hands together gleefully while the others chuckled. “I am in sore need of someone I can squander my ill-gotten gains upon. I intend to thoroughly spoil my little godson. I am sure he will want a bow and arrows, a toy drum, perhaps a tin trumpet or two before very long.”

“Oh, Lord, please, Terrence, we shall never have any peace,” Cassandra playfully scolded him.

“Well, with you two as his parents, the child is bound to be stuffed full of musical talent, so I intend to start him early,” Terrence declared, eliciting general laughter.

“Oh, Cassandra, do let me hold Thomas for a minute or two, would you, dear? Having none of my own, it is always nice to have a baby in arms now and then. And I am his great aunt. Lord, that makes me feel old!” Madeleine said with mock ruefulness. “Of course, the best part of borrowing one, so to speak, is that one can hand them back when they start crying or are wet.”

“Of course you can hold him, Madeleine. Here . . .” Cassandra carefully transferred Thomas to Madeleine’s arms. For all her talk of handing him back, the merry widow cooed and fussed over him like the proverbial mother hen until the party was due to walk back to the manor for the christening celebration.

Then, the child was passed to his grandfather, who smiled benevolently at everyone as he walked along, cradling his grandson, his face flushed with pride.

“After having two daughters, it is certainly a nice change to have a little lad in the family,” he said. “I am sure he will be much less trouble to his parents.”

“Oh, Papa! What a thing to say,” Cassandra complained laughingly, blissfully happy to be walking along in the sunshine on Malcom’s arm on such a happy day.

“Even the weather is celebrating today,” Malcom told her as the party went chattering merrily up the gravel drive to the manor, referring to the unusually fine, warm May day.

“Well, our son has a sunny temperament, and Mother nature seems to agree,” Cassandra replied, looking up at her husband lovingly. “Are you happy, darling?”

“Happier than I could ever have dreamed, my love,” he said, giving her a tender glance.

“Oh, you two love birds are quite sickening,” Diana complained, catching them up. “May I remind you that you are married. You are not supposed to be canoodling with each other so happily, are they Georgie?” She addressed the tall, fair-haired young man walking next to her. Lord George Mackintosh, the Viscount Mowberry’s bright gray eyes twinkled with amusement.

“I certainly don’t recall anything of that sort in my home growing up,” he said. “My mother and father were hardly ever in the same room and seldom spoke together, let alone ‘canoodling’ as you put it, Di.”

“You see, you two. It is not at all the done thing to enjoy each other’s company so brazenly,” Diana pouted playfully. “ Besides, it makes the rest of us jealous!” She glanced rather wistfully at her viscount, who Cassandra noticed, winked at her friend.

“Isn’t it strange, my darling,” Cassandra said to Malcom a short while later as they

stood looking down at their infant son as he gave a miniature yawn and closed his eyes. “He is the reason for us holding this lovely party today, “but he cares not a whit. He is content to have his milk and go fast asleep, the angel.”

“He has not a care in the world with two such doting parents watching over him,” Malcom replied, putting his arm around her shoulder and pulling her close before kissing the top of her head.

“He does not know how he is cherished,” she murmured. They were interrupted by a soft knock at the nursery door.

“May I come in, Your Graces?” asked Christine Clarke, who had given up her job as a governess and had come to work for Cassandra and Malcom as a nursemaid for little Thomas, for a far more generous annual stipend than before. Far from the ill-tempered miss described by her younger sister Mary, the Reverend Clarke’s eldest daughter had turned out to be a girl with a sweet, calm nature perfect for looking after small children.

“Of course, Christine, we were just saying good night to him before we go down to join our guests,” Cassandra told her with a warm smile. “Now, do not forget, Anna will happily stand in for you for a few hours if you would like to come down and join us at the party. I would not want you to miss it all. Your mother and father are there, and I am sure Mary and the twins are somewhere about.”

“Oh, that is very kind, Your Grace, but I have enough of them at home. I shall be quite happy sitting here with my book in peace while the little man sleeps, I assure you.”

“All right, my dear. We shall leave you, then. I expect we will be in later to see him before we retire.”

Cassandra and Malcom left the young woman to her coveted peace and quiet and went out on to the landing. The buzz of chatter, laughter, and music floated up to them from downstairs.

“Let’s spend a minute or two here before we go down and join in the fun, Cassie,” Malcom said, catching her around the waist and drawing her close.

“All right,” she agreed, winding her arms around his neck and smiling into his eyes. “I would be content to stay here and just gaze into your eyes forever,” she murmured, standing on her toes and pressing a small kiss to his lips.

“And I yours, my darling,” he said, smiling against her lips before holding her close to his chest. “Ah, Cassie, what a lucky man I am to have such a wonderful wife, who has given me my dear little son. I am the happiest fellow alive, I swear. Can my life get any happier than it is at this moment?”

“Oh, yes,” Cassandra told him, her eyes twinkling. “I am perfectly confident that it almost certainly will.”

They laughed together and shared another tender kiss before finally joining hands and going down the steps to join the celebration.

THE END

He had to be in the wrong place.

Noise assaulted his ears until his hands itched with the urge to cup them. Vincent Latrice was quite used to hustle and bustle, accustomed to loud and abrasive men shouting at him to get their businesses done. In his line of work, Vincent assumed that he had interacted with all walks of life. But this? This was unlike anything he had seen before and he wanted to leave.

Only the single sheet of paper in his hand kept him where he was as he stared at the sight before him. Roars erupted into the night sky, which was oddly devoid of light. It seemed both the moon and the stars were hiding from the violent scene below. Only a few paces away from him, two men grappled with each other, one of the men putting the other in a headlock. Onlookers shouted their encouragements, while others stood off to the side placing their bets.

He was at a fighting ring.

Not just any fighting ring, though. The likes of which were often whispered in hush tones among men, the outcomes talked about for days until the next. Vincent couldn't believe that it was happening at the very same dock he would accept shipment of his goods.

With a quiet sigh, he looked down at the hastily written contract he'd done just before leaving his comfortable manor to come to...this place. The terms were simple, he thought. Yet weighty enough that he wasn't sure if the other party would be willing to sign.

Vincent looked up when the crowd roared again. One of the men was struggling to get to his feet while the other stood over him with his fists raised. Vincent's eyes remained on the man standing. He wasn't nearly as bloody and bruised as his opponent and the size difference between them marked him as the clear winner before the match even began. Those who had placed their bets on the man still attempting to stand shouted lewd things at him, their frustration obvious.

A burly man stepped into the ring just as the struggling fighter collapsed. The crowd erupted, the noise so deafening that it was a wonder they weren't disrupting the nearby neighborhood. Vincent couldn't even hear the victor being announced.

He studied the man's face. He didn't smile, didn't even seem to care that he had won his fight. He just sauntered out of the ring, in Vincent's direction.

"My lord." Vincent stepped in his path. The man's eyes flashed with irritation before his entire expression curled with it.

"Do not call me that here," he hissed. Then he looked Vincent up and down. "Who are you?"

"Should I call you by your given name then?" Vincent asked. All he received were narrowed eyes in response. "Austin then. I have been looking for you."

Austin didn't deign to reply. He crossed his arms and waited.

Vincent ignored the tickle of apprehension at the base of his spine. He'd dealt with more dangerous men than him, he reminded himself. Then again, there weren't many bastards who could say they'd claimed an earldom. Austin Thomas might be more dangerous than Vincent gave him credit for.

"A friend of mine—and I suppose of yours as well—told me where I could find you,"

Vincent explained. "I have a proposition for you."

"I am not interested."

Austin attempted to walk away but Vincent caught his shoulder. At the look Austin gave him, he quickly let go. "It will be worth your while, I assure you. I have done my research and I know you are in need of money, which I have. All you have to do is—"

"I said, I am not interested." The ice in his voice could have frozen a volcano but Vincent would not be deterred. Austin was his only hope. If he didn't want to take him up on his offer, then his sister was doomed.

"Read it first." Boldly, Vincent shoved the crumpled contract into Austin's hand and quickly backed away. "My address is stated on that paper. If you would like to take me up on the offer then visit me. If not, you may ignore it."

"I said I don—"

"Thank you!" Vincent turned and jogged off, not daring to look back. He listened for footsteps behind him and only breathed a sigh of relief when he realized that he wasn't being followed.

That didn't mean he was going to accept his offer, however. Vincent understood that but he didn't dare to consider the possibility. He couldn't. His sister's future was riding on Austin's acceptance. Or else she would die a spinster.

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:08 am*

Becoming the Earl of Derby might have been a terrible mistake.

Austin was willing to blame the earldom for his current situation and not his refusal to accept what came with it. Dismissing his coachman earlier had sounded like a fine idea at first. He didn't need someone carrying him around. He'd done well without that luxury before so he had no need for it now.

But with every grueling step he took, he was beginning to wonder if he might have been a little hasty in his dismissal. The sun beat down on him as if it aimed to make him regret what he'd done, sweat running down the back of his neck. The contract he'd tucked into his waistcoat seemed to burn right through his skin. At this point, he wondered if he should just turn around.

Walking would do him some good, he told himself. The megrim pounding in the base of his skull made his eyesight a little splotchy, but at least the fresh air helped a little. And he needed to think about what he was about to do. Needed additional time to back out of his decision.

Still, he pressed on. He had no choice, he thought bitterly. This was the only option he had left.

Latrice Manor came into view the moment he rounded the corner. It was an ornate slab of white brick, taller than the others and sporting a sizeable front yard behind its iron-wrought gate. Opulence dripped from every inch of the manor. Austin gritted his teeth.

This is a mistake , he thought as he headed for the manor. I should turn around right



now.

He kept going, even though every bone in his body urged him not to. These were the kind of people he despised. He was about to walk into the home of a rich man who thought he owned the world just because he was deemed upper class.

But would a rich man approach him late at night, at a fighting ring, and all but beg him to sign a contract? A contract that basically sold his sister into marriage?

The poor woman had to be a sorry sight if this was what they had to resort to.

Austin knew he was no better. He might be deemed handsome if he ever cared to wear a more pleasant expression but it was not his lack of physical appeal that rendered him ineligible for matrimony. It was his true status as a bastard. He wouldn't have cared if it hadn't been for the fact that, in the position he stood in now, he had to get married.

Even their front gate was overdone. Latrice Manor was interwoven in the metal, the gate so tall that even Austin would not have been able to touch the top without jumping. He stood and stared for a moment, the name giving him pause. It nagged at him since last night, as if he should know it.

And then it hit him. He knew the name Latrice. A man without title but with enough wealth to put him in rooms with earls and dukes. He'd even gotten an audience with the Prince Regent himself. Dubbed the Merchant of Brentwood, the Latrice family sat atop a shipping empire.

A mistake, he thought again as he pushed the gate open and approached the front door. He used the obnoxiously large knocker on the door and listened to the sound echo on the other side.

Only a few seconds later, the door opened to reveal a thin-lipped butler with spectacles perched on the very tip of his nose. The butler slid the spectacles just a bit further down to look Austin up and down.

“May I help you?” he asked, his slow drawl so haughty that Austin curled his hands into fists on instinct.

He swallowed the irritation he felt at the butler’s tone and pushed through gritted teeth, “I am here to see the master of this house.”

“Mr. Latrice is not available at the moment.” The butler raised his chin, clasping his hands behind him. “What is your name, sir?”

Austin nearly curled his upper lip in annoyance. He thought such a disdainful demeanor was only reserved for the upper class. “None of your business,” Austin replied. “Now step aside. I do not have time to waste here.”

“Sir.” The butler stepped in Austin’s path, stopping him from crossing over the threshold. It looked as if he was trying his best to hold back his own annoyance. “I understand that you may be eager to learn under Mr. Latrice’s expertise but as I have stated before, he is busy. So he is not available to attend to you at the moment. So if you could please leave—”

“I am the Earl of Derby,” Austin snapped. “And your Mr. Latrice is expecting me. Now step out of the way or else I will remove you myself. And I don’t think you will fancy me doing that.”

Horror flashed across the butler’s face for a split second before he masked it quickly. He took a discreet step backward, clearing his throat. It took everything in Austin not to shove the man aside when he gave him another once-over, as if he was deciding whether or not he should believe him.

His clothes weren't very fashionable, Austin knew. And the lengthy walk from his townhouse had covered his waistcoat and breeches in a fine layer of dust. So yes, he may not look like a proper earl right now and usually, Austin wouldn't care about that. But if this butler insisted on standing in his way—and if Austin wanted to keep this civil—then throwing his title in the butler's face was the only way to get past this door, as much as he hated to do it.

For a moment, he thought he would really have to resort to a less favorable option but then the butler said, "Forgive me, my lord. Please, follow me."

Stiffly, he turned and walked away. Austin grunted in annoyance and followed behind him. He should just turn around. Everything in him was telling him that this was a bad idea, even if it sounded good on paper. Nothing good would come from involving himself with these people and this odd contract.

But he needed the funds. For his father. For his late stepmother. And for the legacy they left behind.

"But, Vincent, you promised!"

The shrill voice nearly made Austin stop in his tracks. The butler was slowing down and then he halted in front of a door that was slightly ajar. Instead of indicating such, he only bowed to Austin and walked away.

"Lav, you have to understand that I do not have time for this."

"That is what you always say! But I won't let you push me aside again. I have been trying to have this conversation with you for days now and I won't leave this office until you tell me what you have planned."

A breath of frustration. "Lavender, please."

“No.” A foot hit the floor, hard. “Tell me, Vincent. Or is it that you haven’t planned anything at all?”

Austin pushed the door aside. The two occupants within didn’t notice him. One of them he recognized as the man who had approached him last night, Mr. Vincent Latrice himself.

The other person was a lady, similar in appearance to Vincent. Her hair was a mousy brown that was pulled back into a chignon, a few tendrils framing her face. She clutched a book to her chest, her slight frame draped in a brown dress that did not complement her well. She didn’t seem to care about that, however.

She looked so...normal. Not exactly what Austin was picturing and yet not surprising either. Had they been in a room full of people, she would have become a wallflower.

“Vincent, you promised!” Despite the plainness of her appearance, her voice was full of life, even though it was frustrated. “Father promised and you promised to uphold it when he died.”

“Lavender, I know.” Vincent pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m working on it, all right.”

“How? Just tell me anything and I will leave you alone.” When her words were met with silence, she seized Vincent’s sleeve. “The London Season has begun and yet I have nothing to—”

“If you don’t mind,” Austin cut in, leaning against the door frame. “I would like to get on with my meeting with Mr. Latrice.”

The lady—Lavender—whirled to face him with a gasp. Looking at her full on stole Austin’s breath for a moment. Her chocolate brown eyes were vivid with emotions,

surprise and then confusion and then annoyance washing over her face in such clarity that Austin doubted she was capable of hiding her thoughts.

“Who are you?” With that book still clutched to her chest, she approached him, looking him up and down. Unlike the butler, she only looked curious rather than uptight. “How did you get in here?”

Austin tilted his head at her, surprised at himself for nearly responding. Then he met Vincent’s eyes over her head. “Shall we?”

“My lord, I did not expect to hear from you so soon.” The distress that had consumed Vincent before was gone, a smile on his face. “Come, come. Have a seat. Let me pour you a drink.”

“But Vincent—”

“Lavender, we can continue this conversation another time. And I promise you, when that time comes, I shall answer all your questions, all right?” Vincent approached her, ushering her towards the door.

Lavender pouted, looking back and forth between Austin and Vincent. She looked just about ready to argue but then Vincent said, “Not in front of guests, Lav. Or have you forgotten your lessons?”

She thinned her lips at that, narrowing her eyes at Vincent. For a moment, Austin was certain that she would continue to argue. He was oddly looking forward to it.

But then she sighed heavily, sending a scathing look in Austin’s direction. Up close, she was far smaller than him and yet she glared him down as if she were twice his size. “I hope you know that I find it quite rude of you to interrupt another’s conversation in that manner.”

Austin tilted his head to the side, his irritation mounting. This had already gone on for much longer than he cared for. "I do not care what you think."

"That comes as no surprise to me, considering your propensity for impudence, sir," she shot back without a second of hesitation, taking Austin by surprise. "But I'll have you know that the only reason I am leaving is because I have better things to do than waste time in your presence. I have important matters to deal with, like the ending of my book. But I'm sure you would know nothing about that."

Austin frowned at that. Did she just imply that he could not read?

Before he could think of a reply, Vincent stepped in between them with a sheepish grin. "Please do not mind her. She is quite used to getting what she wants. Lavender, please leave."

Her cheeks grew red, her shoulders rigid with mounting tension. Vincent grasped both her shoulders and forcefully guided her out the door. She didn't let up her glare however, burning holes into Austin until the door closed in her face.

Austin let out a breath, raking a hand through his hair. "Let us get this over with, Mr. Latrice. I have come here regarding your...contract. Or whatever you deem this to be." He pulled out the folded piece of paper and rested it on a mantle nearby. "In it, you state that you wish for me to marry your sister, but surely you cannot be serious."

Vincent faced him with a gleam in his eye. "It is exactly as it says, my lord. I wish for you to marry my sister, Lavender by the end of the Season."

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:08 am*

Austin had to sit down. He usually considered himself a strong man, mentally and physically. Capable of handling the toughest situations he found himself in. But Vincent Latrice's words had a way of bringing home the reality of what he was about to get himself into and he had the uncomfortable notion that the ground was swaying under his feet.

He sank into the armchair next to the hearth, folding his fingers in front of him. Lavender Latrice. Mr. Vincent Latrice, one of the wealthiest men in England, wanted to marry his sister off to a bastard son of the late Earl of Derby. How mirthful.

"Why?" was Austin's first word after a minute of silent contemplation.

Vincent made his way over to the sideboard and began pouring two glasses of brandy. "It is simple, my lord. Lavender is now ten-and-eight years old. It is time for her to be married."

"But why me? You approached me in the dead of night at an illegal fighting ring to all but beg me to consider the offer. Why?"

Vincent's face gave nothing away as he approached. Austin wondered if this was his usual demeanor when working. "Before I answer your question, Lord Derby, I take it you are considering saying yes?"

Austin hesitated, then nodded. "I am. For my own personal reasons. But I need to be certain that I am not walking into a trap."

"I would have no reason to trap you, my lord."

“That is what someone who wishes to trap me would like for me to believe.”

Vincent chuckled. He chose the armchair next to Austin, sitting in a familiar manner that instantly made Austin uncomfortable. He took the glass of brandy Vincent offered to him and immediately set it aside.

Vincent raised a brow at that but chose not to comment. Instead, he said, “Firstly, I appreciate your consideration. Considering the fact that your first meeting with my sister did not go as I anticipated, I was almost certain that you would reject me outright.”

“That option is still on the table,” Austin stated.

“Of course, so allow me to be plain. The only thing I request is that you accept Lavender as your betrothed for the duration of the Season and are wed by the end of it. However, you would be expected to perform your duties as her betrothed.”

Austin raised a brow. “Which would be?”

“Escorting her to any event to which she is invited to. Lavender is quite the socialite, you see. She will expect to attend them all and I think she would fancy having a handsome gentleman as her escort.”

“I’m sure you would have done a fine job yourself. Why do you need me for that?”

“Sadly, I do not have the time to attend to every one of my sister’s wishes, as much as she would want otherwise. This way, you two could get to know each other a bit more, as well. I must also inform you that Lavender will expect a lavish wedding at the end of the Season. She’s always dreamed of it, after all. Our father promised her that she would get it once she was at the age to be married and I took on that promise when he passed away. Lavender, as you could see, will not let me forget it.”



Austin shifted uncomfortably in the chair. “The contract didn’t state any of that.”

“I did not want to scare you away,” Vincent stated, sipping his brandy calmly.

Wise thinking . “Then I want double her dowry,” Austin announced on a whim.

Vincent did not bat an eye. “Deal.”

Austin didn’t dare show his surprise. There was something about Vincent Latrice that put him on edge. As if the man saw more than he let on. “I do not understand you,” Austin confessed. “If rumours are true, you are one of the wealthiest men in England. Why do you and your sister care so much about high society?”

“Do not get me wrong, my lord,” Vincent answered and Austin resisted the urge to tell him to stop calling him that, “I do not care about such things. While I do understand the weight placed on having a title, I find that wealth moves mountains far more than prestige does. Lavender, however, has always dreamed about attending the London Season with the upper echelons of society since she was a little girl. Perhaps it has something to do with the books she reads. I’m not certain, nor do I intend to question it now. But you know how the ton can be, my lord.”

“Do I?” Austin asked dryly, which made the merchant laugh again.

“You are far closer to them than we will ever be. Wealthy we may be, my lord, but we are nobodies. We have no titles. We have nothing that will guarantee us an invite to any of these events. You, on the other hand, will be issued an invite or two to a number of parties, soirees, and balls and I would like for you to bring Lavender with you to each one. As such, if you accept the terms of this agreement, your betrothal would have to be established quickly.”

“You have thought this out quite thoroughly,” Austin observed.

“You see how persistent Lavender can be. I had no choice. Now,” Vincent leaned forward a little, “do we have a deal?”

Austin studied him for a moment. Vincent’s face was perfectly neutral but his words were what gave him away. This was not just to fulfill a promise made by his father. He was going to such lengths because he loved his sister dearly, enough to approach a man like Austin and give him whatever he wanted if it meant his sister would be happy.

A kinder man would accept the terms as they were. A smarter man would capitalize on the small show of affection.

“I want the doubled dowry in full,” Austin stated.

“If you so wish,” Vincent responded without hesitation.

“I also want you to pay for the renovations of my properties out of pocket over the course of the Season. By the end of it, your sister and I shall have proper homes to start our lives in.”

Something moved in Vincent’s expression. Austin didn’t miss that he hesitated for half a beat before saying, “I accept those terms.”

Relief flooded Austin instantly, enough for him to reach a hand out and say, “We have a deal then.”

Finally, a smile stretched across Vincent’s face. “I’m glad to hear it. I shall begin the preparations right away.”

Austin stood. There was no reason to stay here any longer. He’d gotten what he wanted out of this and that was to preserve the legacy his father had left behind, the one his stepmother had loved so much. His neglect of the family manor had gone on

for too long but now things would begin to change.

“Just one more thing, my lord,” Vincent said as he began leading Austin back to the door. “Would you happen to know of any titled young ladies looking for a husband?”

Austin blinked at him. A beat of silence went by before Vincent laughed awkwardly.

“I will take that as a no. No worries. I shall continue the search myself.” He opened the door. “Thank you for taking the time to come, Lord Derby. My butler will escort you out.”

Indeed, the butler was already standing on the other side as if he had been waiting for the meeting to be over. Austin instantly felt annoyed at the sight of him. “We’ll be in touch, Mr. Latrice.”

“Vincent, please. We will be family soon.”

Austin only grunted at that, turned, and left.