



The Duke's Absolutely Audacious Debutante (The Notorious Briarwoods #10)

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Category: Historical

Description: Beloved child of Lady Juliet Briarwood and American printer Tobias Miller, Portia cannot wait for her first London Season! When one is part of the Briarwood family there is always fun to be had. When a duke who seems her opposite in every way begins to pursue her, she's captivated by his quiet ways. But can such a serious fellow fit in with the rowdy, ever-expanding Briarwood family? One fiery kiss suggests he might be perfect, if he can release the perfection he seems so intent on finding.

Rufus Barret, Duke of Fararr, is the catch of the ton and extremely shy. All his life, he has worked to be a great duke, as his family expects, but sometimes, he wishes he could simply slip away from the public eye. Until he meets Miss Portia Miller, someone who seems to be at every event and reveling in it. It's true her family is wild, but she's also niece to a duke. With her effervescent personality, surely she could be his perfect duchess. All he has to do is convince her that following the rules is the best thing for everyone. Yet, when he holds her in his arms, all rules disappear. Something he mustn't allow, not even for a taste of her love.

Total Pages (Source): 21

Yorkshire

1789

Kites soared in the bright summer sky.

The village boys raced back and forth over the fields, laughing. They seemed so happy. Rufus Barret, future Duke of Ferrars, could not recall ever being so happy. His life was one of duty, of seriousness, of being quiet and listening. That's what he was always told.

Be quiet and listen .

After all, the son of a duke had to know how to run a dukedom and could not engage in such frivolous pursuits as the boys of the village did. Yet, as Rufus watched them run merrily, playing, he felt such longing in his heart that he could not describe it. It ached almost like a wound.

He glanced back over his shoulder at his tutor, who had fallen asleep underneath the tree. They'd had a particularly long lesson on mathematics this morning. At least it had been out-of-doors instead of in his rooms in the castle. Little light pierced the thick walls of his wing of the place.

Still, even here by the tree under the blue sky, it was not enough. He hungered to be like those boys. To laugh, to run, to play, to have friends. But he did not have friends. One could not call servants or tutors friends, and he had no siblings, so he was lonely. There was no other way of putting it, and a call deep inside him urged him to dart

across the field and speak to the children at play.

Did he dare?

It seemed impossible, and yet he glanced back again at his tutor, who was now snoring. Mr. Munroe's cravat had been pulled slightly askew. The leaves of the willow were shading him from the bright sun. He was lost in whatever dreams tutors, of middle age and determined to shape a young man into his father's ideal, dreamed.

Yes, Rufus would dare. He did dare. Rufus swallowed and raced across the ground. His leather-clad feet ate up the earth, and he did not know if he should be full of triumph or terror at his boldness. He'd never done anything like this in the past. He couldn't pass up this chance, could he? This moment of sheer bliss and joy?

He watched the kites dance in the air like jewels, dancing against an azure background, guided by strings in the hands of boys who made them bob and weave and dip like magical creatures. The children all stood together in their ratty clothes. Most of them had no shoes. Several of them had clothes with frayed hems.

All of them were in short pants. Their faces were dirty but joyful.

"May I join?" he asked, his voice nearly catching in his throat, but he managed to get the question out with conviction.

The boys stopped their chatter and turned to look at him. There were six of them. Freckles danced across their faces, mud streaked some of their cheeks and foreheads, and they all looked at each other warily before looking back at Rufus.

Their eyes traveled over his clothes. For a moment, Rufus felt terribly self-conscious. He knew he looked nothing like them, not in his pressed linen suit, his elaborate cravat, and his pomaded hair. His clothes were carefully chosen every day by his

manservant.

After all, boys of his stature looked a certain way. They dressed in particular clothes. They weren't sent out of the house to run madly through the fields.

"Please," he said, rather desperate to set them at ease. "I should very much like to fly a kite. I never have."

The boys again exchanged a look as if they were uncertain.

"You won't get into any trouble," Rufus rushed. "My father..."

"We know who your father is," one of the boys cut in.

"But if you want to," the tallest said, "I suppose we'll let you. Would you like to handle my kite?"

Rufus's eyes widened, stunned. "Yes, thank you," he said, and he strode forward.

The tallest boy gave him a surprisingly kind look. "Everybody should know how to fly a kite," he said. "Now, come here. Take this ball of string."

He did as he was told, taking the piece of wood with string spooled around it into his hands. Immediately, he felt the tug of the kite.

"Don't let go," the other boy instructed.

"Oh, I won't," he promised, a smile pulling at his lips. "I won't."

But he could feel the kite in the air being yanked by the wind. The power of it astonished him and he laughed. The other boys laughed too and started doing tricks

as if they were accustomed to the wild nature of kites.

Rufus was not accustomed to the wild nature of anything. His entire life was carefully curated.

“It’s wonderful,” he breathed, unable to tear his gaze away from his kite, which was fluttering in the gusts of wind. “How did you make it?” he asked the taller boy.

“My sister sewed it for me,” the tall boy said.

“What’s your name?” Rufus asked.

“Tom,” he said.

Tom . A very common name amongst English people, Rufus thought to himself. He liked it, he liked Tom, and he liked watching the kite soar through the air, dancing.

He laughed again; he was so happy.

The kite pulled him forward and he ran with it for a few moments.

“Yes. That’s it,” Tom called, clapping his hands together. “Run. Make it fly.”

And he did.

Rufus ran and ran until his shoe caught on a rock. He fell to his knees, but he did not let go of the string.

He glanced up into the sun and laughed again, so full of joy. He did not hear the sound of approaching horse hooves. So wrapped up in controlling the kite, he did not hear the sound of the other boys’ laughter dimming, and he did not know that his own

father had jumped down to the ground until it was too late.

The footsteps thundered toward him. Then a hand grabbed him and pulled him up. “What are you doing, Rufus?” his father demanded.

“I am learning to fly a kite, Father,” he admitted, his stomach knotting.

His father yanked him a step forward and the strings slipped out of Rufus’s hand. The kite soared up into the air. He watched with horror as it spiraled in the wind for several moments and plunged down to the earth. Its framework cracked as it crashed into the ground.

His eyes stung with tears, but he blinked rapidly. Tears would not go well for him. But the agony of what he’d done rushed through him. He’d let Tom down. He’d broken the kite and that was nothing compared to the disapproval of the duke.

He had let his father down.

It was clear. His father stood in his beautiful black riding attire. His ringed hand glowed in the sun and his carefully curled wig shone white, glinting, almost like a mirror.

“You are Viscount Northley,” the duke growled. “You do not play with village boys. You do not associate with these sorts of people. You are above all of them. Do you understand?”

Something snapped in him at his father’s censure of the only boys who had been kind to him. He seemed to be in the mood to dare many things today. So, he countered, “But Father, they are perfectly—”

“They are nothing compared to you,” his father cut in, bending down, his gaze

furious. “You rule over them. You do not play with them. Do you understand?”

He swallowed. “Yes Papa, but I...have no friends. I thought—”

“You do not need friends,” his father ground out. “You are going to be a duke. Dukes do not have friends. Dukes have people who do what we say.”

Rufus’s hands were shaking. He knew what a terrible mistake he’d made to dare—to dare to be different, to dare to be happy, to dare to want more.

Dukes did not need to be happy. Dukes had power instead. They had land, and they had people who followed their orders. A duke need not be content. A duke need not laugh.

His father certainly never did.

“Now, come along,” his father commanded. “I am taking you back to your tutor, who will be lucky to have a position by the end of the day.”

Rufus winced. He had not meant to get his tutor into trouble, yet he did not like the man either for keeping him a veritable prisoner in such a beautiful place. For that’s what he was in many ways. A prisoner of his family, his title, his fate. It might seem a grand prison, but it was isolating.

The boys had all scattered to the wind. His happiness had gone with them. That brief chance he’d had at a bit of joy slipped away. His father strode back to his stallion, who was obediently waiting, for no one—not even a horse—would defy the Duke of Ferrars.

His father mounted with surprising ease for a big man. He was well over six feet tall and a sight which always sent fear and intimidation wherever he went. Then, without

another word, his father hauled Rufus up on the stallion before him, wheeled them around, and charged back towards the willow tree where the tutor was waiting.

His father lowered Rufus abruptly and commanded, “Mr. Munroe, you will discipline him. You will make certain that he understands what his true position is. If you cannot make him see this, you’ll be replaced by someone who can. I shall see you later, Rufus,” his father said with the sort of cold tone that predicted a harrowing evening, “and we shall discuss this.”

He nodded, trying to stop himself from letting his voice pitch up in fear. “Yes, Father.”

He spent so little time with his father. And it often seemed the only time he did spend with him was when he proved that he was not the son his father hoped he’d be.

But everyone disappointed the mighty Duke of Ferrars.

With a final look, his father wheeled his stallion about and took off across the fields.

Rufus stood before his tutor, who was now definitely not asleep.

Mr. Munroe’s eyes crackled with fury. “Well then, Lord Rufus,” he began in a carefully and frighteningly quiet tone. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Munroe,” he said, but he couldn’t bring himself to lower his gaze or hang his head. Surely, he was allowed to want more than this?

“You’re sorry?” his tutor mocked, folding his hands behind his back. “I think you must understand that just because you’re a future duke, my boy, does not mean you don’t need a bit of correction. Discipline is what your father requires. Discipline is what he shall get.”

Discipline was his father's favorite word. And he believed that children were to be shaped, especially with force.

With that, Mr. Munroe looked to the tree, then back at him and said, "Find me a switch."

He winced, his heart beginning to pound against his ribs.

He knew exactly what was about to happen. It had happened before when he dared to step a little bit out of line, to want a little bit of something for himself...to be himself.

But dukes could not be themselves. That was a lesson he had yet to learn. He had to learn it or else he would suffer. Quickly, he picked up a thin branch from the ground.

Mr. Munroe shook his head, causing his wig to tremble. "Not that one."

Rufus swallowed. He knew the sort of branch Mr. Munroe was looking for. One that would whip well and whistle through the air. Though dread filled him, Rufus spotted one about five feet long. Resigned, his body tensing in anticipation of the pain to come, he took it from the ground and carried it over to his tutor.

And prepared to learn his lesson.

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London

Regent's Park

1807

Miss Portia Miller loved London, life, and curricles even more than she loved New York City. It was a challenge, having grown up on both sides of a rather large ocean, and yet she liked the fact that it had given her such a unique perspective on the world and those who inhabited it.

She'd had the experience of growing up without always being at the center of the ton. In the United States, she'd had many opportunities and liberties she simply did not have in England.

Her mother loved to act upon the New York stage.

Her father was an important printer, both in New York and London.

But above all, Portia loved England, for all her cousins were here, and now she had returned with her parents for her very first Season. Quite possibly her only Season, because she wanted to marry and stay in England.

Perhaps that was sacrilege to all the people in the United States of America. It was such a brilliant country, but the truth was Portia loved her family.

She loved her cousins so dearly, she loved her aunts and uncles, she loved her

grandmother, and frankly, she wanted to spend the rest of her life surrounded by them. So, she was determined to find an English husband.

He did not need to be a great duke, he did not even need to be a lord, but she would marry, and she would marry well enough that she would eventually be able to drive curricles on her own.

One of the great frustrations of being in London for the Season was that she could not drive a curricle in the city. It was not something that unmarried ladies did. Even ladies who belonged to the Briarwood family.

But how she loved them! So Portia did the only thing that one could when one needed to at least appear to be ladylike in such circumstances.

She went driving with her male cousins.

Regent's Park was full of the very best sorts of people, or at least the sorts of people who the ton deemed the best.

The park was such a beautiful addition to the city, and she loved the Greco-inspired buildings and the glorious green there.

Her cousin Nestor extended his gloved hand. "Come along then, Portia," he called. "Are you daydreaming about your first ball? You'll be the Diamond for sure!"

She would not. Her mother had been the Diamond of her Season, but since Portia was the daughter of two people who'd chosen their own paths, she knew the only way she was going to be accepted by the ton was through sheer boldness and her family connection to a duke.

She rolled her eyes, took Nestor's offered appendage, and then launched herself up

into the precarious vehicle.

It only had two wheels and the horses danced excitedly, for they were eager to have their way.

Her cousin Calchas shoved in behind her. “Right, budge up, budge up, old thing,” he declared.

The twins were a formidable pair, but she knew how to handle the wild, dark-haired, dark-eyed, yet oh-so-loving fellows.

The three of them had spent their lives running through the countryside of England together with their many, many other cousins. They had been in each other’s pockets for as long as she could remember.

As a matter of fact, she couldn’t remember life without them in some capacity. She’d always been heartsick those times when she’d had to go to New York and be away from her family, though she’d tried to hide that from her parents, for they loved life in the New World so very much.

Now, as she was facing her first Season, she was incredibly glad that Calchas was home.

He was captain of a ship and was shockingly young to have his own vessel, but when one was the son of a duke, such things seemed to happen. It might have also been his sheer nerve and bravery, for he had been in more sea battles than years she’d been alive.

Calchas was incredibly capable and had been at sea since he was twelve years old. It had been a shocking thing for the Briarwoods, but Calchas had been determined. He’d had a passion for the sea. He’d said it called to him like a mother.

Mercy, Portia's aunt and Calchas's actual mother, had been dubious about that, but she'd been unable to argue with her son, and the tradition of English boys going to sea at a young age could not be ignored.

Perhaps it was because he had been so enamored with the writings on Admiral Nelson. It was hard to say. Nestor, his older brother, though only by mere minutes, could not go to war as so many of the young men of the country had done. As all her male cousins old enough to fight and not destined to inherit a title were doing.

But Nestor was the heir to a great dukedom, and he was not allowed to put himself at such risk.

So he tested himself in other ways, curricule driving being one of them.

The twins were astonishingly handsome, as all Briarwood men were, and their youthful zeal made them the envy of the ton. They had reputations, of course, but not for cruelty.

They were young men who lived and lived well.

She positioned herself between her two cousins, braced her feet on the footboard, and grabbed ahold of the seat. "Let's go," she called out.

Nestor laughed, his dark hair shining in the morning sun. "As you command, Portia," he said. He whipped up the horses and then they began to trot through Regent's Park, gaining speed.

She let out a delighted laugh, for it was the best thing in the whole world. She felt completely alive when racing along in a curricule. It had to be the closest thing to being a bird on the wing.

Her cousins laughed with her, and she urged Nestor, “Faster! Faster!”

It was a tradition in this part of town for young men to come and drive wildly. Sometimes, there were races between two drivers, and she thrilled at it. If she could have, she would have raced her own curricule. But that was impossible.

It was another reason to get married as soon as she could! Unmarried ladies had to follow so many rules. But all her aunts? They had seized life and were living as they pleased.

Taming herself for the next few months would be a bit difficult, and she did hate that she couldn't entirely be herself. She could never abandon who she was, but she knew she could not yet behave exactly as a Briarwood might wish to.

No, she would have to wait for marriage for that. Or, she supposed, spinsterhood. But she had no wish to be a spinster. She wanted to marry and have a horde of children.

That was the life for her. The Briarwoods had taught her the more the merrier, and that no matter what life brought, it was a jolly old affair.

Another curricule raced across the park.

“Who's that?” she asked, trying to make out the driver, feeling suddenly intrigued by his large form.

Nestor groaned, though it was in good humor. “That is my nemesis,” he supplied.

“Your nemesis?” she queried. “He appears to be rather fashionable for an enemy.”

For, whoever it was, he was driving one of the latest curricules.

“That’s because he’s a duke,” Nestor stated with a sigh.

“Oh, dear. He outranks you, does he?” Portia teased. Her cousin was the eldest son of one of the most powerful men in England, and one day he wouldn’t often find men to outrank him.

“Only for as long as my father is alive, so hopefully forever,” Nestor replied.

It was such a complicated thing. Nestor would only have his true power when his father died.

The Duke of Westleigh was so beloved by the whole family that they all hoped he would live forever. Especially his sons, which was a testament to the nature of the man.

Such a thing was not possible, but none of them would ever choose to think about Uncle Leander’s end. And she rather thought that Nestor was quite pleased with the position he had.

He was capable of doing so much without having to achieve his father’s position. And the two of them loved each other so well that she knew Nestor had no desire to seize a ducal coronet.

She adjusted herself on the seat, trying not to sound too curious. “A duke? Who is he?”

Much to her annoyance, her breath caught in her throat.

There was something magnificent in the way he was tearing through the park, whipping up his horses as if he did not care for his own life and limb. Yet, he did not harm the beasts but rather seemed to be encouraging their energy.

Dukes usually cared a great deal for their life and limb. They had to. They were in control of a great many things. But this duke was racing across the green, his horses sleek, his curricule as smooth as butter, as if he and Death could dance a fine waltz with no ill effects.

Yes, the formidable duke looked as if he was flying through space. His dark hair was wild underneath the sun, a hat seemingly unnecessary. Or impractical, given his speed.

He'd taken off his great coat, and the fine tailoring of his clothes emphasized his broad shoulders and waspish waist.

"That is the Duke of Ferrars," Nestor intoned.

"He's boring," pointed out Calchas.

"Boring," she gasped. "How can a man who looks like that and who is driving a curricule be boring?"

Nestor shrugged as he held his reins easily. "When he is racing, that is the only time he's interesting," he replied. "When he's out here like this, he's a fearsome sight."

"Doesn't say a peep in company though," added Calchas, folding his arms over his blue naval uniform.

"Truly?" she asked, looking back and forth between her cousins.

Calchas nodded. "It's true," he said. "The Duke of Ferrars is notoriously quiet, always judging everybody, looking down his nose, off on his own, but he does like to come out and race us. He's not a bad fellow. Just...well, a typical duke."

“Would you like to meet him?” Nestor asked.

“Oh yes, please,” she said. “I’d love to meet a man like that.”

And she would because he was clearly a strange conundrum. Silent but fierce. Wild but dutiful.

Yes, she’d like to know him quite well. Nestor whipped up the horses and then raced towards the duke.

The Duke of Ferrars slowed his curricule and inclined his dark-haired head. “Good day, Huxton,” the duke said to Nestor, using her cousin’s courtesy title.

“Good day, Your Grace,” Nestor said with a touch of melodrama.

When one was a Briarwood, melodrama was a way of life. Portia adored it. She was the daughter of an actress after all. So drama was her specialty.

“This is my cousin, Miss Portia Miller,” Nestor said simply.

The duke looked to her as his hands played easily with the reins. His eyes—beautiful, bright, shining sapphire eyes—locked on to hers, and for a single moment, she saw his pupils flare.

He arched a dark brow ever so slightly, then inclined his head. “Miss Miller,” he drawled as if he had been introduced to a pillar.

She couldn’t have that. She was certainly worth more attention than a pillar.

“How do you do, Your Grace?” she said jovially. “I hear you are terrible company but a marvelous driver.”

His jaw dropped.

“Portia,” Calchas said from the corner of his mouth, elbowing her.

She turned to him. “What? Is it not true? Have I heard a pack of lies?” she asked.

The duke’s brow furrowed and he narrowed his gaze. “I suppose it depends on what you consider terrible company,” he said. “I certainly don’t speak when it’s not necessary.”

His voice was so full of disdain she nearly laughed. She had poked a nerve, and he was certainly insinuating that she spoke too much. How wonderful. It would be so easy to drive him around the bend. So how could she resist?

“Oh, Your Grace,” she began, “perhaps it’s simply because you have nothing to say.”

“Portia,” Nestor warned, turning towards her.

“Oh, forgive me, Your Grace,” she said quickly, bringing her hand to her heart. “I am being terribly American, aren’t I? Horribly bold in speech, and it does help that my uncle’s a duke, and so I’m not afraid.”

“Afraid isn’t the word that I’d use,” the duke returned, his voice a low rumble, and yet she could feel it. He was intrigued, possibly mystified, by the way that she was speaking to him. He was fairly crackling with it.

The energy suddenly rolling off him came straight towards her, and it seemed like her cousins couldn’t sense it at all, but she did. There was a connection racing right between them. Yes, she thought to herself, smiling at him, he wants someone to jar him from his boring life.

I understand you, Your Grace. I understand what you are hiding from the rest of the world. There's someone inside you who longs to come out to play but cannot, isn't there?

The duke cocked his head to the side and, as their gazes held, he sucked in a long breath. As if he was shocked, as if he could almost hear the thoughts in her head.

He let out a low growl. "Too much talking, not enough racing. Isn't that why you pulled up beside me, Huxton? You wish to race?"

"Oh, indeed," Nestor rushed, now clearly sensing the tension. "I do. Let's show Portia what real driving is like."

"She drives?" the duke challenged.

She sniffed. "Of course I do. But not here. After all, here, I must behave."

The duke swung his gaze back to her and arched his brow again. "Do you often misbehave?" he queried.

"Oh, most certainly," she replied jauntily, giving him a grin. "It's the only way to thrive in this mad existence."

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:34 am

A young lady with a mangled accent that was neither quite American nor quite English, who spoke out of turn and adored curricule racing, was not duchess material.

And yet as Rufus studied the young lady, he found himself immediately considering her.

He wanted a wife this Season; it was time. He needed to produce an heir. That's what dukes did. It was necessary. It was incredibly important to ensure the continuation of his line, and the one thing he wanted, contrary to what ton mamas believed, was a woman who was not afraid of him.

His mother had been afraid of his father, and before that, his grandmother had been afraid of his grandfather. There was a certain tradition of ladies, in general, being afraid of dukes. Oh, they all wanted dukes...but they all seemed too terrified to speak to them.

People, in general, were afraid of dukes. But this lady? She was different.

Granted, she was only Miss Portia Miller, but her uncle was the Duke of Westleigh, and her cousin was going to be the next duke. It was clear she was accustomed to the life associated with dukedoms, and she was not at all intimidated.

Whether it was because of that close association or being raised partially in America, he did not know, but it was damned appealing.

His hands played easily with the reins, keeping his fiery horses in check. He swung his gaze over to the two young men who he admired. The Briarwoods were not nearly

as old as his family line, the Barrets. Even so, it was impossible not to have some liking for the family that took duty so seriously that a good number of them were fighting on the Continent, making certain Napoleon did not cross the English Channel and take over all of Europe.

They were fighting for the liberation of many countries from that tyrant. How could that not cause him to like them well, even if he might find some of their behavior outside the bounds of what a noble family should engage in?

If he could have, he would have gone to war, but he had a great deal to protect here in England, and then there was the need to ensure that the idiots who thought that supporting Europe wasn't worthwhile did not gain power in the House of Lords or the House of Commons.

"I think your cousin should ride with me. Otherwise, it won't be a fair race," Rufus stated suddenly. He did not know why he said it, but the words came out all the same.

Lord Huxton's brow shot up. "I beg your pardon, Your Grace?"

"Well, if the three of you are sitting in that curricule," he pointed out, realizing that for all his logical words, what he wanted was Miss Miller's lush body beside his, "and I'm alone in mine, then surely it will not be a fair race. So let the lady come and ride with me. It should be us against you."

"I could never go against the Briarwoods," she insisted, though her gaze was dancing as if she enjoyed the whole exchange. "I am a Briarwood through and through," she replied.

"Of course, you are, Miss Miller," he said. "But you would not wish them to lose just because you wouldn't ride with me, would you?"

She tsked. “That is not a very nice invitation to change sides, Your Grace. Surely, you could do better.”

A laugh burst past his lips. There it was, that thing that made him think she was indeed duchess material, not a cowering little violet. “All right then,” he allowed. “My dear Miss Miller, it would give me the greatest pleasure if you would come and sit beside me during this race. Cheer me on and lend me your clearly superior knowledge of racing.”

She folded her arms underneath her breasts for just a moment, causing them to press against the soft pink bodice of her gown.

He forced himself not to linger on her soft curves, and he waited with surprisingly bated breath for her answer.

“What an intriguing invitation. You’re saying you’ll take my advice, Your Grace?” she asked playfully.

“How could I not?” he returned. “You’re obviously so willing to give it.”

Her smile only deepened with her amusement. “Well, this I must see! A duke who will take advice. Hand me over,” she instructed to her cousin.

Her cousins let out murmurs of protest as if they were afraid that they had gotten her involved in something that they should not have.

But then the twins exchanged a look.

Lord Calchas shrugged.

“Right,” Huxton gave in. “If this is how it’s to be, who are we to stand in the way of

such a fascinating and sudden alliance?”

Rufus pulled his vehicle up directly beside Huxton's.

Both men kept their horses steady.

Lord Calchas passed Miss Miller over into Rufus's curricule. She moved with surprising ease, negotiating the transfer in her pink skirts as if she was a mountain goat rather than a delicate lady.

Holding his horses with one hand, Rufus took her small one with his free appendage. Their hands connected for a moment, and he gripped her fingers in his, swallowing hers up in his big grasp.

“Now, now,” she said. “Don't crush them. They're surprisingly delicate.”

“You? Delicate?” he drawled, finally releasing her. “Never.”

“I know,” she replied, smoothing her skirts. “Shocking, but I am a lady. And you are a good foot taller than me, and I'm sure you could crush me if you fell upon me.”

“Fell upon you,” he breathed.

If he fell upon her, there were certainly other things he would do than crush her, but he kept such sentiments to himself. The thought was far too tempting.

Instead, he waited as she settled down beside him, moving her skirts this way and that. It was impossible not to notice the way her thigh pressed against his, or the way her hip occasionally managed to bump into his own, or how her arm brushed along his side.

“Ready?” he asked, surprised by how a young lady could cause him to burn with a slow-building desire.

“Always,” she replied. “Now, I’d like to see my cousin beat you,” she added, waggling her brows.

“Wishful thinking.”

He and Huxton both took up their whips. They moved side by side, eyed the long road, and then, without any need for silly roars, they both snapped their teams to attention and headed off.

Miss Miller seemed completely at ease. He kept waiting for her to grab his arm or hold onto the seat and let out a peep of feminine dismay. She did not. As a matter of fact, she leaned forward, and he spotted it immediately—her competitive edge.

Though they were her cousins he was attempting to beat, she began coaching him. “Your Grace,” she said, “they are going to pass you. Their curricule is lighter.”

“Yes,” he pointed out, “but so are you.”

She swung her gaze to him, her cheeks blooming pink. “Have you noticed my figure then?”

“How could one not, Miss Miller?” he rumbled as a strong wish to see her figure without linen obscuring it raced through him. “You have a fine one. The exact sort that a gentleman might hope for.”

“And are you hoping for it?” she said, pursing her lips. “This seems scandalous ground. I should command you to pull over at once and allow me to escape your clearly salacious company.”

Salacious. He'd never been accused of that by a young lady before. But she brought something out in him, something he liked a great deal and had never experienced before.

He'd, of course, spent much time in the demimondaine. His father had encouraged it. He was supposed to be a gentleman of knowledge and exposed to the culture of the day.

But she? She made him wish to speak, to say more than he usually did, and certainly in a way that he never did.

"All right then, what do you suggest?" he asked, realizing that he couldn't exactly say he hoped to one day see her without her clothing on.

As if she knew that she'd caused him to lose his usual cool demeanor, she leaned in and placed a gloved hand atop his. "Your reins. You're holding them too tightly."

"I am not," he countered, her scent wafting towards him, far more appealing than the summer flowers filling the park.

"You must ease your grip. You must relax," she instructed. "The horses know that you're tense and the line..."

For a single moment, he felt himself slip back to another time when he had held the line too tight and then let go. "You're mistaken," he growled. "I am holding it just right."

"Oh, there it is, the duke," she drawled, "who cannot take advice. I never should have trusted that you would listen."

He snorted. "I will not be accused of lying, Miss Miller."

“Then don’t,” she said simply. “I would hate to find you disappointing so quickly.”

He swung his gaze to her. “That intimates that you have hopes of your own for me,” he replied.

“What young lady does not have hopes for a duke?” she teased back.

And with that, he did exactly as she suggested. He eased his hold on the reins and the horses seemed to take flight.

“That’s it, my darlings,” she cried out to the horses, continuing to let her hand rest atop his. “What beauties you are!”

The horses seemed to take pride in her pleasure and her praise, and they suddenly danced forward.

“I say,” he blurted, still captivated by the feel of her so near to him. “Can you talk to animals?”

She laughed. “Oh, the Briarwoods are full of all sorts of remarkable accomplishments. I am convinced my Aunt Perdita speaks the language of all beasts. Animals do whatever she bids.”

He cleared his throat. “Yes, I am familiar with some of the whisperings about your people.”

“My people,” she said with mock horror. “How ever can you say such a thing when you are clearly so enamored?”

“Do you think so?” he asked, as he guided the curricule to begin to overtake her cousins.

“Of course,” she announced, gesturing with her chin to her cousins. “Otherwise, I would be sitting over there and not over here. Are you in want of a wife, sir? Is that why you have invited me?”

For a moment he fumbled the reins. “You are bold.”

“Yes, and again, that is why I’m sitting here, isn’t it? Not over there. My boldness is exactly what you’re looking for. You are bored. You’re bored of all the people bowing and scraping. And I? I promise you this. I shall never bore you as long as we know each other.”

“Perhaps we shall not know each other long at all,” he pointed out.

She cocked her head to the side, clasping her bonnet to the top of her head as the horses picked up speed. “Who knows what the future will bring,” she said. “Forever could be just tomorrow or years and years and years, Your Grace. The only way to find out is to live.”

To live , he thought to himself. What a unique concept . Most people were just getting by, but not Miss Portia Miller. What a fine duchess she could make, if she but learned. Could he teach her? Could he instruct her on how to be a great duchess? Yes, he rather thought he could.

“I will continue to take your advice,” he said softly, his words nearly eaten up by the beat of the horses’ hooves, “if you will take mine.”

She turned her head towards him. “And what is it that you wish to advise me upon?”

“Oh,” he said, eyeing her lips, then yanking his gaze to her mischievous eyes, “for that, you’ll have to wait and see.”

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The curricule whipped around a curve, and Portia slid right across the bench and nearly landed in the duke's lap.

For a moment, he tensed, clearly needing to handle the horses. But then he passed one rein into his other hand, commanding both lines with one great, intimidating grasp. He pulled her tightly to him.

"Steady there," he soothed her. "Steady."

She laughed. "You could not shake me free of my steadiness, no matter how hard you tried."

"Is that a dare?" he teased, his hand pressing into her side, spreading a delicious warmth that slipped through her veins and came to rest in the place between her thighs.

Her insides shook at that.

Who was this duke who was supposedly so quiet? Her cousins had made it sound as if he was a little mouse of a man. He was not. He was a giant. A lion.

Perhaps he did not wish to speak a great deal in other people's company, but he did not seem to have difficulty in hers. The power of him next to her reverberated through her body. Her cousins were shouting at them, and she laughed at the looks on their faces!

"Oh no, Your Grace," she said, still in his embrace, knowing she should push away

lest they be spotted. But surely she could argue he was merely making certain she did not bounce out of the vehicle! Even so, their breakneck pace was everything she adored, and everything society might cluck their tongues at. Hence, her cousins' dismay. "You are causing them apoplexy."

"Then they never should have dared me to a race to begin with, not with you present," he returned, his gaze trained ahead, focused on outpacing the Briarwood cousins. "Are you afraid?"

"How could I possibly be afraid when I'm with you?" she said merrily.

"Flattery," he intoned, "will get you into the most interesting of places."

"Do you promise?" she drawled.

His gaze slid to hers and crackled with intensity. "Oh indeed, I do, Miss Miller," he said, "if that is what you want."

They whipped around again, nearing the end of the road and racing ahead.

With just half a length between the curricles, they came to the end of the path first.

She cheered and then slowly slid away from his touch. His lips curled in a smile as his hand slipped from her waist.

"Will you crown me the victor then?" he asked, his voice a low gravelly sound.

"Us," she corrected, her voice shockingly breathy to her own ears. What was happening to her? This morning she'd had her tea, her toast, and been prepared for a lovely but normal day in London. Now? She was flirting with a duke who evoked and fanned to life a desire in her and made her even bolder than she usually was. "We are

the victors.”

“Then I must find you a coronet,” he replied, his heated gaze searching her face, promising that he wished for much more than a simple crown.

Her heart slammed against her ribs at that. The excitement of the race and the way he spoke, so playfully, so full of what seemed to be his intention to single her out as a candidate for his duchess, or at least his desire, was a revelation.

At least she felt that was what he was doing. Surely, she was not deluded.

Nestor tied off his horses and then he and Calchas jumped down from their curricule. Nestor charged towards them. “My father and my uncle would dig a hole and thrust me in it if you’d murdered Portia with that mad driving.”

Calchas strode forward, his golden epaulets glinting in the sun. “That’s not actually true, cousin. After I explained to them what happened, they’d murder the duke there.”

The duke laughed. “No one’s going to murder me.”

“That’s what you think, but you’ve never seen a group of Briarwood men together.”

Portia groaned but sensed the silly male banter that was so common among their sex at work. “I confess, Your Grace, my uncles might indeed murder you,” she said. “I’m sure it would be a wonderful funeral. Would you be buried at Westminster?”

“No.” His lips pursed, taking this all in with surprising ease, as if he found the whole interaction to be a breath of fresh air. “My family plot is in the north,” he returned. “But I still have things to do. So, alas, I cannot allow such a thing. I need to get married after all and have children.”

“My goodness,” she exclaimed, waggling her brows. “That is a great deal of important work to do. And when do you plan to do it?”

He arched a brow at her. “This year,” he said before he cocked his head to the side. “Do you have any plans for this year?”

She sucked in a sharp breath, stunned. It was tantamount to a wedding proposal. Almost. And she had just been thrust into his arms a moment ago, arms she found quite appealing.

“Oh,” she mused carefully, determined not to appear flustered, “I am about to have my first ball of the Season,” she said. “I have already been presented to the queen.”

“Then perhaps you met my sister,” he said. “Lady Margery?”

She thought back but knew she’d remember becoming acquainted with a duke’s sister. They were so rare, and she knew the particular challenges of being so close to such power. “I confess, there was a sea of young ladies, and I did not meet her,” she said, “but I would like to meet her very much if she’s anything like you.”

“Not a whit. She’s far better than me, and far younger,” he replied with a smile. “But I’m sure we can arrange it. Your first ball, you say?”

“Yes,” she said.

The duke gave the horses more head, allowing them to eat the grass along the edge of the road. “And your goal, Miss Miller?”

“To find a husband, of course. Why else would I be in London?” she said easily, though a part of her—a growing part—thought perhaps he could be her husband. “Isn’t that the point of a Season for a young lady? If I didn’t wish one, I would’ve

stayed in New York City.”

Her cousins stood by the curricule, their gazes going back and forth, watching the exchange unfold. They’d been stunned into silence, which was a complete rarity for a Briarwood.

“You’ve come all this way for a husband?” the duke drawled. “There are no suitable men in the United States?”

“Oh, many more suitable men,” she said confidently, “but my family is here, and I will not be parted from them.”

“You like family, do you?”

“Well, I like my family,” she said honestly.

“ And you like to win.”

“Who doesn’t like winning?” she sallied.

Nestor and Calchas, though good sports, grumbled at that.

“To wed well is to win, is it not?” the duke asked.

“I suppose it depends on what one means by well ,” she breathed.

“Doesn’t every lady wish to wed a duke?” he asked.

She sat a little straighter, leaned slightly towards him, and said quite seriously, “I’m not every lady.”

“Clearly,” he replied.

Yes, this duke was interesting. He was someone who would keep her on her toes. He was someone who didn’t mind a merry exchange. Quiet? She didn’t see it. No. She saw someone who knew how to command, someone who was powerful, someone...

“You like the power, don’t you?” he said so softly only she could hear.

“Of the horses,” she replied louder, even as her heart skipped a beat. This exchange was daring, exciting, on the verge of scandal. And she could not yet leap into scandal. So, she evaded. “Yes, they’re absolutely magnificent. I enjoy their withers. They know how to move, to run, to take control.”

He cocked his head to the side. “You like that they take control, do you?”

She narrowed her gaze at him for a moment. “I like to be in control too,” she said.

Her cousins both coughed and cleared their throats.

“Hmm,” he said, ignoring the younger men. “We shall see.”

With that, the duke offered his hand. “Regretfully, I must hand you down to your family. I have a great deal of work to do, you see, but we shall meet again.”

“Well, it is London,” she said simply. “Will you be attending any balls, since you are in want of a wife?”

“Oh, I attend them anyway. It’s what a duke does, you know, whether I enjoy them or not.”

“I think I should make them more enjoyable for you,” she ventured. “You seem to

like my company a great deal.”

“You’re intriguing, that’s for certain, and not at all like the ladies I am accustomed to.”

“Poor things,” she sighed. “It’s bred out of them, you know, the ability to speak to a duke like this, but in my family, it’s different. You know my mother is an actress.”

“And your grandmother too,” the duke drawled.

“And that’s not off-putting?”

He arched a brow. “Should it be? Are you not the granddaughter of a duke? Are you not from a powerful family?”

“Oh, yes,” she said, “but we don’t do things the way other people do.”

“Do I look like I do things the way other people do?”

“No,” she breathed, “you certainly don’t.”

“Good.”

And the strangest thought slipped through her head—that he might expect her to do things the way he did. She wasn’t certain she could do that, but he was certainly intriguing. His hand slipped around hers, that powerful, capable hand, and then, with utter ease, he guided her down the side of the curricule and to her cousins.

“Good day, Briarwoods,” he declared, then he whipped up his curricule team and raced off, no doubt to rule the world in the House of Lords, in some unseen back room where the true deals were made.

“My God,” she said. “The duke is something.”

“Something is not the word for it,” Nestor ground out. “I’ve never seen him act like that. Have you, Calchas?”

“No. Usually he walks into a room and doesn’t speak to anyone. He acted like we were wallpaper and spoke a great deal.” Calchas swung his gaze to Portia. “To you.”

“Maybe that’s because there’s no one worth talking to,” Portia replied, shrugging.

“Well, that’s a bit arrogant,” Nestor scoffed. “But yes. He liked speaking with you, Portia.”

Her breath caught in her throat. Did he? Did he like her so much more than others? Surely, she shouldn’t believe it and so she said lightly, “Well, we’re different, aren’t we?”

Calchas and Nestor both narrowed their eyes.

“And he clearly wants something different,” she added.

Nestor let out a bleat of alarm. “You’re not thinking—”

“Why not?” she cut in. “I like a challenge.”

“That man is not a challenge,” Nestor warned.

“That man is a fortress,” Calchas added. “That man is as powerful as our father.”

Nestor nodded. “And I’m not really sure—”

“I think that a fortress could be fun to climb,” she rushed.

“This is not 1066, Portia,” Calchas said, alarmed. “You don’t wish to launch an invasion.”

The truth was she wasn’t entirely sure who would be invading whom. She was rather curious. But it was also slightly dangerous. A man that powerful? Would he let her be herself? Yes, he would, because it was her boldness, her audaciousness, which clearly attracted him to her. Yes, this was perfect.

He was perfect.

She’d come to London knowing the Season would be wonderful. Oh, she knew she wasn’t going to be admired by everyone. Most of the ladies in London did not like her. After all, there were all the whispers about her mother, who was a bit of a scandal, marrying an American without a title. And, of course, she acted upon the stage.

But there was her grandfather, her uncle, a long line of people closely linked to the king. She had a great deal to bargain with if she wanted a duke.

But the question was... Did she want a duke?

She had thought she would come here not hoping for anything in particular. Perhaps she would not set her cap at Ferrars. Perhaps that was the best thing. Perhaps it would be wisest to wait and see what he had in mind, but she could not deny the excitement coursing through her.

Nestor and Calchas both groaned, a habit they’d developed as small children. The twins often did exactly the same thing at the same time.

“This is not how we thought your first Season would go,” Nestor said, thrusting his hand through his dark hair, leaving it curly and out of sorts.

A look that endeared him to many a lady.

“And how did you think it would go?” she asked, folding her arms just beneath her bosom.

Calchas snorted. “We assumed we’d be able to bully anyone who wished to marry you, put them in their place, and ensure that no one could do anything to harm you.”

Her eyes widened. “You think the duke would harm me?”

“No,” Nestor said carefully, “but we’re not going to be able to put a man like that in his place. He knows it well. But if we get enough of the family together, we might be able to—”

“Stop,” she countered, throwing up her hands. “You two are being ludicrous. He hasn’t asked me to marry him. He might not even be thinking of marrying me. Perhaps he will find this whole episode horrifying upon reflection, and he will run a mile the next time he sees me.”

Nestor and Calchas stared at her for a long moment. Then both of them started to laugh.

“Run a mile,” Nestor echoed, wiping at his eyes.

“Ha,” Calchas said, nearly choking on his laugh. “Men like that, when they see what they want, they don’t wait. They take it.”

“I’m not going to be taken,” she said, though the idea of it sounded rather interesting.

“No?” Nestor replied.

“No,” she said. “Briarwood women aren’t taken. They lead the charge.”

And with the Duke of Ferrars, one would need nerves of steel. Would he be worth it?
She did not know. Only time would tell.

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Heron House

The garden

Everything that Rufus had suspected about Miss Portia Miller was clearly true.

Standing on the edge of the garden party unfolding at Heron House with his much younger sister, Margery, on his arm, there was really only one thing to conclude. Miss Miller, even if she would not be the Diamond of the Season, was the most popular lady of the Season.

People clustered around her.

They moved about like hummingbirds to a particularly beautiful flower with sweet nectar inside. Bees to a hive also came to mind, all buzzing happily, clearly in love with life because Miss Miller was in love with life. Being in love with life was a noble concept to him because he'd not been taught to love life. Largely, he'd been taught to manipulate and cope with it.

After all, an attack could happen to him at any time if someone wished to make it so. At least that's how it had been when he was a boy. But after his father's death, he had risen to power. He became the one to control things, but he'd never been able to enjoy himself and come out of his shell.

He projected strength, and he was strong. One cannot be beaten frequently without developing a certain sort of strength. But in that strength was a wariness of other people, a knowledge that he could easily be hurt again if he was not careful. And

there was the general recognition that the parties that occurred at his house were nothing like this.

Oh, no. His guests came, and they paid their respects to him. They were quiet, they were subservient, and they ate their cake and drank their tea, but there was never anything to compare with the enthusiasm here.

Certainly, his guests did not interact with himself or his sister in the same way that the company here was doing with Miss Miller. She had a veritable crowd of admirers.

The group was not limited to just young men, though there were dozens of young bucks in their brightly colored coats and fawn breeches who were eager to please her. Young ladies, in their swishing, full lacy skirts in various pastels bobbed about with glasses of lemonade in hand too.

The brightly hued guests reflected the colors of all the flowers filling the garden with hope and a scent that was close to heaven.

Miss Miller stood in a pale yellow gown, as resplendent as the sun. Her cheeks were pink, her russet hair curled softly about her intelligent face, and a light in her eyes positively danced.

“Who is that?” his sister asked, all but awed.

“That is Miss Portia Miller, and she is why we are here,” he said.

Margery squeezed his arm and jerked her eyes up to his. “Truly?” she asked, clearly astonished and yet surprisingly hopeful. “Are you thinking of that young lady?”

“Yes, I am,” he allowed, his plan sharpening with every passing moment.

Margery's lips parted in a rather jolly smile as if she was being offered a slice of chocolate cake after a long period of abstinence. "How interesting," she said. "Not at all the sort of person that I would've imagined you with."

Imagination was key to his future, of that he was certain. He needed to have a bit of it, or else he was going to end up completely at his wit's end. And ineffective.

Times were changing. And while he had to be the sort of duke to make his family proud—his father had made sure of that—he also knew that the old ways needed a bit of modification.

He needed someone who loved people, someone who loved company, because he did not. In truth, he could barely stand company. Often, he wished to be alone, to fortify himself with the silence of a room, books, and possibly music. But he desperately longed for silence where he was not judged, where no one complained about him, where no one tried to tell him exactly how he should be.

Yes, that isolated life was what he preferred, but a dukedom could not be run in silence. Unlike his father, he struggled to be both distant and a force in society ballrooms. So, he needed a duchess who was particularly loud, but in the very best way.

"She is the niece of the Duke of Westleigh," he added, as if this explained his choice.

"I have heard of her," she exclaimed excitedly.

"Have you indeed?"

"Yes," she enthused as if being permitted to take part in an indulgent treat. "And of course, Heron House is legend. Thank you for bringing me. I never thought you would."

“Why?” he asked, frowning. His sister was having her first Season, and it was his duty to make certain she was taken out and about, though he would arrange a good marriage for her. One where she would be content and safe and never harmed.

She bit her lower lip as if trying to find a suitable reply. “Because the family is...”

“The family is a bit much,” he finished.

Margery let out a sigh that sounded almost like a swoon. “They’re like a living novel,” she breathed.

“That is not necessarily a good thing,” he pointed out as they continued to observe from a distance.

“Well, it’s better than the mausoleum of our house,” she groaned.

He blinked. “Do you really think it’s like a mausoleum?” he asked.

“Well, it’s as silent as one. And cold and filled with marble,” she said tentatively, clearly not wishing to hurt him. But then she gestured to the cheerful crush of Briarwoods mingling with the many, many thrilled guests. “This party is so...happy. Now, I’m parched. It is a particularly warm summer. I’d like a glass of lemonade and one of those cakes. Pink! Look at the frosting,” she gushed. “How delightful.”

The truth was they could have had as many pink cakes as they wanted, but neither of them were whimsical people. They had never been allowed to be. Not even his darling sister, who was charming, but her charm had largely been repressed out of fear of displeasing their parents, specifically their father.

Both of them had learned to curb any particular sort of characteristic that stood out. It made them both seem as if they felt they were better than everyone else. They’d been

raised to believe it. But they'd also been raised to have any sort of uniqueness in their person crushed.

"Come along then," he said, his heart aching for his sister. He wished he could do a better job of correcting all the ill done to her as a child. Even after several years free of their father, they were both still prisoners of him in many ways. "Let us indulge."

"Aren't you going to go over and speak to her?"

"I will," he said. "But first, let us make certain that you're—"

"Oh, no. I should like to meet her immediately. Let us go," Margery exclaimed, all but tugging him along towards the crowd of people.

He felt himself wincing, trying to pull back. It wasn't something that he wished to do—to immerse himself in the horde of admirers about Miss Miller.

Then a voice called just behind him. "You've come."

Rufus swung his gaze and met the rather boisterous Lord Huxton's gaze. "Well, I was invited," he pointed out.

"Yes, you were, Your Grace," Huxton agreed heartily.

Lord Calchas popped up from what seemed like nowhere, but he had clearly been just behind his twin.

They were prints of each other, except for their clothes, of course. Lord Calchas was in his naval uniform, and Huxton stood in his beautiful but slightly austere clothes.

"I suppose you two had a hand in the invitation?" Rufus asked, brow arched.

Huxton nodded. "Indeed."

Lord Calchas scowled. "I didn't think you should be invited. I think that you will be a disaster."

"I, a disaster?" Rufus asked, rather amazed that the young man had managed to say something like that to him.

"Indeed," Lord Calchas said. "This can't turn out well."

"Why not?" Rufus demanded.

"Well, you're you," Lord Calchas said as if it was obvious.

Huxton clapped his brother on the back. "Don't be so rude. People can be full of many surprises. Look at all of our family."

Lord Calchas snorted.

"Now, now," the duke rushed, "I appreciate the invitation, Lord Huxton. You clearly sensed that your cousin and I had a successful time together, and you felt that I might enjoy the society of your family more."

"Was I correct?" Huxton asked, wagging his brows, then looking over to Lady Margery. "How do you do? I don't believe I've had the pleasure."

"Actually you have," Margery replied, giving a nervous smile.

Huxton winced. "I'm so very sorry. I don't recall it. Perhaps I was being a nitwit and was under the influence of too much champagne or brandy."

Lord Calchas was silent, as was Rufus.

They were aware that Huxton did not over-imbibe, but it was rather gallant of him.

Lady Margery gave a tight smile. “How very kind of you.”

“May I take you to the refreshments table?” Huxton said suddenly, offering his arm. “A lady like yourself deserves a sweet treat, especially having to put up with us dolts of men.”

Lady Margery laughed and tentatively placed a hand on the arm of one of the most handsome men at the gathering.

Rufus hoped that his sister enjoyed it and didn’t find it too overwhelming, for it was not likely that Lord Huxton would take an interest in Margery. Though another union between the two families could be most interesting. Huxton was the son of a duke after all, and Margery was the daughter of one. The power there would be astronomical.

But Lord Huxton was still young, and a marriage was unlikely. Still, he rather appreciated the kindness. Not everybody was always kind to Margery for the sake of it. They were only kind to her because of the dowry she had and the potential influence that she could wield.

As the two departed, Lord Calchas eyed him. “You were going to go over and speak to her, weren’t you?”

“Well, Margery wished to.”

“And you don’t wish to speak to her?”

“She is surrounded at present.”

“She is always surrounded,” Lord Calchas pointed out. “Wherever she goes. You’ll have to get used to that if you decide to pursue her.”

He pressed his mouth into a thin line. “Is it that obvious?” he asked at last. “The possibility that I might pursue her?”

Lord Calchas let out a laugh. “Yes,” he said. “I’ve never seen you so animated in my whole life.”

They’d known each other for some time, despite the fact that Lord Calchas was often at sea. Rufus and Huxton were also well acquainted, though they were not exactly what Rufus would call friends. But young men of a certain age and a certain set with power did navigate the same circles.

They attended the same club, went to the same gatherings, were well aware of the same opera dancers and singers.

None of the Briarwoods, and there were several other young Briarwood bucks cutting their teeth on the town at present, could be categorized as rakes. Not really. They loved women, but there was nothing cruel about them, and he would argue that he was the same.

Still, he didn’t know exactly what to say. Was he really so very wooden?

Yes, he supposed he was.

“I liked how bold she was with me, if I’m honest with you. Very few people will talk to me like that because they think...”

“What?” Lord Calchas asked, blowing out a cynical breath. “That you’re going to ruin them? Of course they’re afraid of you. You could ruin them with a single word or look of displeasure. You could do that to anybody here, except, of course, the members of my family. And that’s why...” Lord Calchas’s face transformed with understanding. “That’s why you are interested in her, isn’t it? You want a bit of blowback, don’t you? At last. A group of people who can be honest with you and not cower.”

“You’re very good,” he said. “Have you considered going into government? You read people so well.”

“I’d rather die,” Lord Calchas drawled. “Give me a ship any day. At least the crew is honest. We’re all fighting the weather and the French, and that’s enough.”

“Yes, I suppose it is. I rather admire you for it.”

“Thank you, but I don’t need admiration,” Lord Calchas bit out. “We need more ships, we need more money, and we need better guns.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Rufus replied earnestly.

Lord Calchas’s brows arched. “Will you?”

“Indeed, I will. Napoleon must be stopped. He’s a tyrant, and he’s going to destroy all of Europe and then us if he can.”

“I agree with you,” Lord Calchas said. “He’s been allowed to exist for far too long, and sometimes when I watch people here eating cakes and having parties, it’s damn difficult to reconcile with the truth of war.”

“Truth is always hard to reconcile,” Rufus said softly, “with what’s happening about

one.”

Lord Calchas cocked his head to the side. “Still waters run deep, eh?”

“If you don’t think I have a great many thoughts about society, you’re vastly mistaken.”

“Good to know, good to know.” Lord Calchas’s skepticism slipped a bit, and his tone softened. “I was reticent to allow the idea of our darling girl being with you to take root because I feared that...well...”

“Well, what?” Rufus demanded.

“That you really were boring. That you really had nothing of interest to say. That you simply were doing your duty but with no real passion or thought. But if there’s more under the surface...”

“You won’t get in my way?” Rufus prompted, intrigued and surprisingly not offended. Though, was that how society saw him? Someone who merely did his duty but had no passions, no strong opinions?

Most likely, he realized. For he did not raise his voice as his father had. He worked quietly in the background, avoiding people as much as he could, his stomach always on the verge of knots.

“Something like that,” Lord Calchas said. “Besides, you will want her family to like you. It’s the only way she’ll say yes.”

He cringed at that. “And what if I’m not good at getting people to like me?” he asked.

“You’d better start trying now,” Lord Calchas returned.

“Am I succeeding at all?” he queried.

“Perhaps,” Lord Calchas said before he clapped him on the back. “But I’d start trying harder. Let us see this part of you more. The part that clearly hates Napoleon and all he represents. It’s most satisfying. Now, don’t leave Portia too long, or you’ll be battling with five other fellows who wish to marry her.”

“Ah, yes,” he said, “but I am a duke.”

Lord Calchas grinned then. “You’ll learn.”

“Learn what?” he bit out, confused.

“You’ll see,” Lord Calchas said, laughing. “Win over the family, old man. I don’t know why I’m being so nice to you, but...you’ve won me over with your determination to save Europe from a tyrant. We need more powerful men like you.”

Lord Calchas strode off, leaving Rufus to wonder if he could manage it.

Win over Miss Miller’s family?

He really had no idea how to win people over. He’d never had to; he’d never wanted to. Not since that day with the village boys.

Befriending people had been far too risky, not just to himself, but to others. For his father had come down on those boys and their parents, making their lives harder, kicking some of them off the estate for daring to play with the duke’s son.

Yes, making friends with anyone was a dangerous thing indeed.

There were always consequences.

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Heron House

The garden

A slightly secluded hedge row...with roses

Everyone adored the garden parties at Heron House.

Over the last decade, the elaborate flower gardens, especially the rose gardens, had been the most popular recent additions to the beautiful estate along the Thames.

Rows and rows of roses and artistically landscaped flowers and hedgerows had been added by Portia's aunt, Duchess Mercy, and her grandmother, the dowager duchess. A few of her other aunts and cousins had contributed too.

It was a unique situation the way the ladies came together at Heron House. In most families, there was a singular matriarch, the one with the most distinguished title, who ran everything.

But not with the Briarwoods. Though Aunt Mercy had precedence as the current duchess, possibly because she was American, she'd wished to have more views and opinions in the running of the family's and dukedom's estates than just her own.

Some of the aunts and cousins cared more about gardening than others.

There was never any argument or fighting about the estates, houses, and various charities. Oh, there was bickering and banter! But they thrived off the stuff! Always

making each other laugh in the end.

That was one of the things Portia loved most about her family. The way they laughed. But in the end, somehow, they all just let each other be and pursue the passions they loved. It made it possible for them to all come together with love.

After having spoken almost nonstop for two hours, Portia sneaked off to one of the winding hedges and surrounded herself with a glorious collection of roses.

She leaned in, took in a breath, and found herself entirely fortified again. Though she dearly loved company, she knew how vital it was to pull herself back together so that she could do it all again with pleasure.

She cupped a bright yellow rose, the same shade as her gown, and marveled at how each petal perfectly unfurled from the bud.

If she ever found herself doubting the beauty of the world, all she had to do was look at the magnificence of something as simple as a rose.

“That rose is exceptionally lucky to have your undivided attention.”

That sound, that deep, growling, gorgeous sound, sent a shiver of delight through her that was even more delicious than the scent of the rose that had just filled her senses.

She closed her eyes for a moment, anticipating this conversation and so glad that he had finally found her. “There you are at last,” she said.

“At last?” he echoed.

“I have felt you watching me, Your Grace,” she pointed out, stroking the rose petals, careful to avoid the thorns before she let it go and turned to him. “I’ve felt and seen

you for some time. I saw you on the periphery speaking with my cousin while I was chatting away and...waited for you to join me. Whatever took you so long?"

She wagged her brows. "Or am I so frightening?"

"Not you," he admitted, his dark hair as rich as obsidian under the much-beloved sun. "The crowd about you is what gave me pause. None of them would disperse."

"And that stopped you?" she teased playfully, even as she drank in the sight of his powerful, tall body. He seemed so different here, alone with her, than he had while keeping on the fringes of the party. There he'd seemed so distant. Here? She could feel his power, his strength. As if he was that lion she'd thought of, eager to show off for a potential mate.

"I thought you were made of sterner stuff than that, Your Grace," she goaded.

"Why in God's name would you think I have the stuff to deal that horde of mundanity?"

"They're not mundane, Your Grace," she said with a gentle shrug. "They are all interesting people in their own right."

He snorted.

She studied him, surprised. "Do you dislike people so very much?"

"No," he admitted.

"Ah," she breathed, a thought hitting her. "You find it hard to be yourself with others?"

A muscle tightened in his jaw. She had the right of it, she felt fairly certain, and she thought again of her cousin insinuating that the duke was boring.

“I don’t need to be myself with others. That’s not a requirement of a duke,” he stated.

She blinked. What a terrible thing, to think it wasn’t a requirement to be himself. For if he wasn’t being himself, who exactly was he being?

She had a niggling suspicion, but she wasn’t ready to voice it. But wasn’t everyone essentially a product of their parents? Even dukes.

He wasn’t boring. That was certain, but she wasn’t quite certain what exactly he was either. When he was in her company, he was alive, vital, interesting.

“You have come and found me alone,” she said quickly, shifting her slippared feet on the gravel. “You shouldn’t have done that, you know?”

“You’re not entirely alone,” he said. “Just a hedge over, there are hundreds of people all milling about.”

She groaned. “Yes, but some people might think you got me into the hedgerows for nefarious purposes.”

He laughed. “I don’t think so. We can still hear everyone, and you are the one who went off by yourself.”

She nodded. “Just for a moment’s peace, but alas, it is not to be.”

He frowned ever so slightly. “Would you like me to go? Is that what you are trying to say?”

“If you think I wish you to go, you’ve misread me,” she replied. “I enjoy you, Your Grace.”

He took a step closer, his footsteps crunching on the gravel. “You do?” he said softly. “Not just my dukedom?”

“I know very little about your dukedom,” she sallied. “I’m sure it’s marvelous. You have multiple houses, no doubt, lovely fine coaches and all of that, but I’ve grown up with all those things, and I don’t find them particularly necessary. You know, in New York, we have a rather nice house, but it’s nothing like the places here. It’s quite simple, and the truth is sometimes I think people are happier with less.”

“Do you?” he drawled. “How very philosophical.”

“I like to think that I am,” she said.

“And do you, like so many of the great philosophers, fancy going off into nature and being on your own?”

“Oh, not a bit of it,” she exclaimed. “While I do need a few moments to collect myself, a hermit I shall never be. I adore the cacophony of people, their chatter, and all the things they have to say.”

He gaped. A rather endearing look upon such a stoic face. “You actually like the ton, don’t you?”

She nodded easily. “Oh, yes. I have been desperately waiting for my chance at a Season for years. I watched my mother go out so many nights with my grandmother, my uncles, my aunts. Oh, how thrilling they all seemed, like goddesses and gods going off to the heavens to parade about and revel in the newest ideas and fashions.”

He scowled. "I'm not sure if that's what I'd say was actually happening at those events."

She took a step towards him, rather compelled by this strange man who did things to her she could not quite describe.

"What would you call it then, Your Grace?"

"Well, it is a group of people maneuvering for power," he said.

"Oh, it is so much more than that, don't you think?" she encouraged. "Or are you so very ill-minded about humanity?"

"I've seen a great deal to make me ill-minded."

"And that is why you stay away from people?" she ventured. "Because they're all so ill?"

"No, that is not it," he whispered.

"What else could it be? As a duke, you were born to be separate, like a prince. And you find all of us mere mortals to be less than adequate?"

He tilted his head to the side slightly. "You're closer, but that's still not it."

She laughed.

He did think he was above everyone else, but not in the way that some might think, she was sure of it, because he wasn't unbearable or cruel or disdainful. Above. Not better.

And he was above in every sense. At least above most of society. Above in power, above in wealth, above in status.

There was something else too. She longed to know what it was.

“Why did you come find me?” she asked.

“If I’m quite honest, you’re the only person I’ve enjoyed being with in some time. Is that so very bad?” he asked.

“Not a bit of it. I’m pleased.”

He blinked, then swallowed, which caused the muscles of his throat just at his cravat to do the most delicious things. “How do you do it?”

“Do what?” she asked.

“Spend all that time with all those people and not grow annoyed with them or feel uncomfortable.”

“Oh,” she exclaimed. “I don’t know. I think I’m simply accustomed to it. My parents encouraged me to talk a good deal from the time I was small, so I’ve been conversing with anyone who’d come my way since I was a child. I was quite curious about them. Everyone has a remarkable story.”

“Do they?” he asked softly.

“Oh, yes.” She leaned in towards him, clasping her hands behind her back, bouncing on her toes. “Would you like to tell me yours?”

His gaze traveled down to her bosom and then back to her eyes. He rather liked it, her

bosom, she'd noticed. It was not the first time he'd glanced in a southerly direction.

And an ember of heat bloomed just between her thighs at his admiration.

"My story?" he mused before he looked away swiftly. "There's not a great deal to tell. Noble man, wealthy child, raised to rule."

"And that is all?" she asked, tilting her head to the side.

"Yes," he said.

She tutted. "How very sad. You are living up to my cousin's proclamation about you."

"And that was?"

"Boring," she said, daring to wink at him. How glad she was that she had been raised by Briarwoods. For, yes, she dared to wink at a duke. Her aunts were all excellent winkers!

He rolled his eyes. "Oh God, that again. I just don't spend a great deal of my time in idle prattle. Is that so very terrible?"

"No, of course it's not," she said. "But if you did engage in some idle prattle, I'm sure you would find people to not be so difficult."

He bit his lower lip. "You're not difficult," he said.

"You don't think so? Most people enjoy me but still find me to be...shall I say, unique?"

His gaze crackled then, not with admiration but something stronger. “You’re charming, you’re warm, and you’re engaging.”

“Goodness me,” she said. “What a list of compliments. I bet my cousins don’t think you have that in you.”

A muscle tightened in his jaw and his gaze went to her lips as he took another step forward. “I think I should like to spend even more time in your company.”

“Alas,” she said. “I will have to go back very soon. It is in many ways a party for me, you know. I’ve been introduced, and I must seek out a husband.”

“Am I not someone who could be considered a suitor?”

“I don’t know,” she said, pursing her lips. “Are you? You seemed to insinuate it the other day, but you have not paid call.”

“No,” he agreed carefully. “Because that’s not how men like me go about pursuing ladies.”

“How do gentlemen like you pursue ladies?” she asked, batting her lashes at him elaborately, enjoying their exchange immensely.

“Well,” he said, “there is the fact that I’m a duke.”

“I know that. And you’re proving my cousin correct again,” she said. “Don’t be boring.”

“I’m not boring,” he growled.

“Prove it to me then.”

“You wish me to prove that I’m not boring?”

“Indeed. Otherwise, I’ll just think that the curricule ride was a one-off and my cousins were correct, that the only time you are interesting is out-of-doors in a vehicle racing through the park.”

He closed the distance between them, his eyes darkening with passion. “Then I shall show you,” he declared so boldly that he seemed to surprise himself as he swept her into his arms.

He kissed her then, pulling her upward so that her slippered toes barely skimmed the gravel of the path.

With his height and intensity as he arched her back, she grabbed hold of him.

For one moment, she felt entirely off-balance as if the world was tilting. But it wasn’t tilting to disaster. It was tilting to perfection.

Her fingers splayed over his hard sinews, warm beneath his perfectly tailored morning coat.

The feel of his long, hard body pressed against hers was decadent, lush, surprising. For someone who was supposedly so distant, he didn’t feel distant at all at that moment in her arms.

The power of his kiss, the way he took such utter control, stunned her, and she longed to yield to him. Was this passion? Was this true connection?

All her life, she’d witnessed the passionate marriages in her family.

But she’d never experienced anything like this, and the storms that crossed the

Atlantic when they sailed from New York to England came to mind. This was powerful. This was magnificent. This could be dangerous.

She did not know what to think or even how to think as his sensual mouth coaxed her own with a passion so unbridled she felt enveloped in it. She was not like her aunts and uncles. She did not believe in fate when it came to matrimony. No, the world was full of too many people for that, but his embrace felt as if it could never be replicated by anyone else.

It was his intensity. As if he'd kept all his passion at bay and reserved it for her and her alone.

The realization echoed through her, lacing with an aching desire that coiled in her belly, spread through her breasts, and left a longing between her thighs that was so powerful she feared she might lose her wits. Permanently.

And then she stepped back.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She couldn't breathe. She could barely stand.

He blinked, clearly as shocked as she was. "Was that too interesting?"

Portia cleared her throat. "Not at all, Your Grace. It was most edifying."

His lips curved then in a wolfish smile, as if he was pleased that he had made her feel thus.

She cleared her throat. "I think I should like you to do that again and again if I was quite honest. It was quite eye-opening, but... I could not forgive myself if you and I

were pushed into a position of being wed. That would be terrible for the both of us, don't you think?"

"Would it?" he rumbled, his gaze still hot with desire. Desire for her.

And if he was not a man of honor, she rather thought he might have dragged her off into the hedgerows to show her just how interesting he could be.

The thought left her breathless.

"Yes," she managed. "I have no wish to go about the rest of my Season being the girl who the duke kissed behind the hedge and then had to marry."

"If I choose to kiss a young lady in the hedgerows, I know the chance I'm taking."

"Point to you and how very honorable you are." Had he just made it clear he'd marry her if they were caught? Yes. He had. But she did not wish to marry that way. Not to anyone. Not even to a man who made her very tempted to abandon her brain. "But now I must get back. They will be expecting me, and I refuse to start a scandal."

"From what I understand, your family loves scandals."

"Perhaps," she allowed. "But I wish to do things a little bit differently this time. I wish to get my husband and have no gossip about it at all."

The duke's eyes narrowed. "They're going to gossip about you, Miss Portia," he growled softly. "Because if I choose to make you mine, you'll be a duchess. And people always gossip about duchesses."

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Rufus read the collection of information carefully as his coach raced through the streets of London towards the club where both he and the Duke of Westleigh were members.

Notorious. That's what the Briarwoods were.

It was a simple word, singular and descriptive.

And that was the general summation of his man, Mr. Foyle.

The Briarwoods were quite simply legendary. He was aware of them. After all, he did work with the Duke of Westleigh, attempting to get bills through the House of Lords, often through back channels, making certain that the country didn't collapse given the state of the monarchy and Europe.

Still, the Briarwood family was spoken of often with either gossiping or reverent tones, sometimes with great disdain, often with great awe, for they operated in a way that seemed to be almost outside the bounds of society.

It was something that he wanted for his family going forward. After all, powerful people didn't need to care what other people did, and he, like his father, believed that dukes were a law unto themselves.

The union of two such lines, though exceedingly different, could be very good.

Miss Miller's uncle, the Duke of Westleigh, was wealthy and powerful. The family had more money than most of England. They had a great deal of land and interests all

over the globe. Their ties stretched like a spider's web, if one wanted to imagine something villainous in regard to the Briarwoods, though he doubted villainy was in their capacity.

Despite their origins by way of the mistress of a king, they were fiercely loyal to the crown and had an honor of their own.

Yes, Miss Miller was the ideal ally.

To some, it might've seemed better if she was the daughter of an earl, not of a printer, but in many other ways, it was better that she was her own person and had not been raised in England.

Some of the ton might hate her for being so closely affiliated to the world outside of the ton, but he rather thought she'd be better for it.

After all, she'd been raised in a hotbed of independence and clarity. With his guidance, yes, she would be the perfect duchess.

He'd read about the various Briarwoods and quickly surmised that all of the family quirks could be dealt with. He was accustomed to dealing with challenging people. He knew how to maneuver them and arrange the results he wanted.

He did not have many friends because of his ability to watch and assess. But as he had learned so very long ago, dukes did not need friends. Dukes needed control.

And then, of course, there had been the encounter in the garden with Miss Miller. He could not stop thinking about her. Her effervescence for life, her sense of amusement, and how she had looked while taking in the scent of that rose before she had gone toe to toe with him in conversation.

Not to mention the kiss. He had dreamed of that kiss. She would not be a cold, dutiful wife. There would be passion between them, and yet she would still be his ideal.

So, as his coach pulled up before the club, he drew in an anticipatory breath. Yes, this new plan was going to go marvelously well.

He climbed down from the coach easily, strode up the stairs, handed his coat and top hat over to the footman, headed up the next set of wide stairs past the foyer, and honed in on the area that the Duke of Westleigh preferred.

The duke would be present, for there had just been a meeting he had led. After such things, Westleigh went to the club and stared into the fire or read.

Though the love the duke had for his house on the Thames was legend, it was also full to the brim. A bit of peace was just the thing an overworked duke needed after a long day before heading home or out to a ball with his wife.

Rufus strode past men smoking, drinking, and arguing in small groups at various tables. But as he passed, the conversation paused, and several sets of eyes followed him.

When one was a duke, one became accustomed to being stared at. It was the nature of things. And as he crossed into a fairly crowded room and turned towards a back nook, he spotted the Duke of Westleigh.

The imposing statesman sat before the fire, his dark, slightly silver-lined hair glinting in the golden light, a cup of tea in hand. He was a notorious teetotaler, having given up alcohol. Legend had it that brandy and wine brought on black moods in the duke.

Rufus crossed to Westleigh and sat himself down in the chair opposite.

The duke arched a brow. "I've been expecting you."

"Have you?" Rufus asked.

"Indeed I have. My sons told me about the event in Regent's Park."

That shouldn't have surprised him. But it did. His father had never had time for him.

"Did they?"

"Oh, yes." The duke lifted the porcelain cup to his lips and took a drink, letting out a satisfied sigh. "My sons tell me everything."

Rufus couldn't imagine having such a relationship with one's father. He'd told his father almost nothing because his father had no desire to hear his opinions.

Rufus cleared his throat. "Then you'll understand why I'm here."

"No, not yet." Westleigh's eyes glinted in the firelight. "I have to admit I'm most curious. You seem to enjoy my niece, Miss Portia Miller. Is that correct?"

"Enjoy is not the correct word," Rufus ventured, feeling comfortable as the first phase of the negotiation had clearly begun. "I found her rather astounding, formidable, and exactly the sort of young lady I think would make a tremendous duchess."

The Duke of Westleigh paused and gave no reaction. "You wish to make her your duchess?"

Rufus nodded. "I think she suits. She has the sort of character needed. She won't easily be tread upon, and she won't faint in my presence like my poor mother did in my father's."

Westleigh's lips curved into a strange smile. "Your father was a bit of an ass, as was your grandfather. And given such sires as you have had, why do you think I would give my permission for her to marry you?"

He blinked. Rufus was a duke. Of course Westleigh would give permission. It had never occurred to him this could be a factor in the negotiation of a marriage settlement.

"I'm nothing like them," he replied honestly.

The duke cocked his head to the side and contemplated the contents of his teacup as if he could see vast worlds there. "That's not entirely true."

He tensed at that. Was he? Was he like his father and his grandfather?

Perhaps an exterior view would suggest such a thing, but he had done everything he could over the years to make certain that he wasn't the cruel bastard that his father wished him to be. He had no desire to crush the people around him into submission. Oh, he always achieved what he wanted. But he did not use a cudgel as his father had.

Rufus had other methods.

He spoke so little, he supposed some might think he was cruel. For he did not give approval with ease.

"I'm a duke," he said at last. "It would be an advantageous marriage."

Westleigh laughed. "Do you think I don't know such a thing? Of course I do, and I'm well aware that most dukes go about marriage in the way that you are going about it now. They collect facts and negotiate the thing like a treaty, forgetting that the whole affair is about two people. No doubt, you have a collection of information about us to

decide whether or not she's worthy, but because I'm a duke, you will overlook anything that's odd. And she's beautiful, of course."

Two people? Was a marriage ever about two people? The idea was laughable. A marriage was a contract negotiation. A dance between money, land, and the promise of heirs.

"She's beautiful, it's true, but that's not what intrigues me about her," Rufus replied factually. "And yes, I do have a large collection of information about your family, which I surveyed before coming here this evening."

Westleigh rolled his eyes. "Of course. How very dukely of you."

"She's not afraid," Rufus said bluntly.

The duke paused. "And that is a quality you wish for in a wife?"

"It is a quality I need in a wife. I am intimidating. I'm aware of it. It seems to be a family trait, though I have tried to soften it. People assume that I'm a bastard like my father, just as you did, and I need someone who can stand up to me and who will take up the duties of a duchess without flinching. She seems like she can do that. She certainly stood up to me in the park."

"But she's not at all like you, you know," the duke warned softly. "She's a Briarwood."

Rufus shrugged. "It doesn't really matter," he said. "I'm sure that it all shall work out in the end."

The Duke of Westleigh paused, eyeing him carefully. "You understand that if you marry her, you are marrying the family."

“How difficult could that be?” the duke scoffed.

Westleigh’s eyes shone with amusement. “You don’t have a great deal of family, do you?”

“Just my sister,” he said. His darling sister. Margery had been a lifeline in the solitude of his life, giving him someone to look after. She was born when he was nearly eleven and she had become his whole world. The only good thing. The only thing that was not cold or cruel.

Westleigh’s look grew a touch calculating. “She’s having her Season as well.”

“Yes,” Rufus affirmed, though warily now. Westleigh was up to something.

Westleigh placed his teacup down and clapped his hands together. “Tell you what, give your sister into the keeping of my grandmother and into the keeping of my wife, and I shall consider the marriage proposal. Though truthfully, it’s not me you should be asking.”

“Isn’t it?” he demanded, wondering what difficulty lie in what seemed to be a generous offer. He was guiding his sister through her first Season, but the aid of the formidable Dowager Duchess of Westleigh and the beloved current duchess would be an advantage. Unless, of course, they led Margery astray with their eccentric ideas.

This was, of course, the challenge of this alliance. He was choosing a woman from a family that was almost as powerful as his own...and so they would not simply submit to his every wish.

But someone who would not submit was what he desired above all, even if it felt...strange.

Westleigh bridged his fingers. “You’ll need to get the approval of her mother and father. And I will tell you this. My sister and my brother-in-law are unique, just like their daughter.”

“One would imagine so,” Rufus drawled. “Given the fact that your sister chose to be an actress in New York and marry a printer.”

“And that doesn’t bother you?” Westleigh challenged.

A muscle tightened in Rufus’s jaw before he blurted, “Every family has interesting people in it.”

“Not yours,” Westleigh countered with an amused tone. “At least not for a few centuries.”

“Then we’re clearly due,” Rufus replied flatly, having been ready for this. Still, he was surprised at how much this chafed. He was now so accustomed to the world bending to his whims. But that was also why this was so needed.

Why she was so needed.

“My, my,” the duke ventured softly, “you came prepared for my doubts.”

“I always come prepared,” Rufus said tightly, and he did.

After years of punishment, he’d learned how to navigate people who challenged him, who underestimated him. No one underestimated him now.

And while he’d largely expected to be given what he wished quickly after a few arguments were made, Rufus did understand why Westleigh might give pause.

Westleigh's family was definitely different than Rufus's.

His family had had land in this country since the Norman invasion and his power stretched back in a way that Westleigh's simply did not. Westleigh's family had achieved their dukedom and power through a scheming and talented woman, who'd had a child by the king and managed to leverage a dukedom for him.

Rufus's family had passed down power uninterrupted through the rise and fall of dynasties and religious wars.

"A little new blood wouldn't hurt," he said softly.

"Well, I have to tell you one other thing," the duke said. "My permission can be given. But in truth, it's not the permission that will matter."

"How the bloody hell could your permission not matter?" Rufus demanded.

"You'll have to get the lady's permission. And if she says yes, none of us will stand in her way."

Rufus laughed, but that laughter died at Westleigh's expression. He sat up straighter. "You will let the lady decide. Is that truly how it works in your family? You don't have a committee of Briarwoods to decide who one should marry?"

It was Westleigh's turn to laugh, and it filled the room, causing several heads to turn in their direction.

"Actually, Ferrars, we do. My mother is quite the matriarch, and she always knows who someone should marry and who they shouldn't."

"So shall I have to gain her approval as well?" Rufus asked, beginning to wonder if

he should abandon the whole affair, but then he recalled spotting Miss Miller across the park—how happy she had looked and how full of life.

“Of course you shall,” Westleigh said merrily. “After all, your sister will be in her keeping.”

He ground his teeth but kept his face impassive, a skill he’d developed as a boy. He didn’t like the idea of being paraded before a family and judged. He was used to coming, presenting his ideas, and getting his way.

Westleigh sighed. “We are a bit much. Perhaps you should choose the daughter of an earl instead.”

“No,” Rufus countered. “She’s the one. I know it.”

Westleigh stilled, then leaned forward ever so slightly. “I’m sorry. What did you say?”

“She’s the one. I know it,” he replied simply. “Forgive me. Are you growing hard of hearing, Your Grace?”

The duke laughed again. “Oh, indeed, I am becoming most decrepit.” Westleigh was in his late forties and clearly fitter than men half his age.

Westleigh was silent for a long moment, then said softly, his lips curving in a maddening smile, “Yes, you must certainly marry her.”

“Why do you say so now?” Where were all the hoops that the good duke had planned to make Rufus jump through? All the obstacles he’d suggested.

What had he said that there was now no difficulty?

“Oh, no reason at all. No reason at all,” Westleigh said, taking up his teacup again. “It’s just a suddenly strong feeling that you belong in my family, Your Grace. We’re going to do you a world of good.”

“I’m fine as I am, thank you. I’m simply in need of a wife.”

Westleigh lifted his cup in a salute. “Well, if she will say yes, the Briarwoods are happy to supply you with one.”

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“Mama, whatever are you thinking?”

Lady Juliet, wife of Portia’s father, Mr. Miller, sat across from her daughter smiling gently. “Oh, my love,” she said, her russet hair ever so slightly lined with silver glinting in the blue light of evening coming in the coach windows, “I am thinking of my own first Season.”

Portia beamed. “You were the Diamond, Mama. Everyone knows it.”

“Yes,” her grandmother, the dowager duchess, crowed, sitting beside her daughter. “Your mother was a triumph.”

Juliet smiled ruefully. “And I was seeking a duke, which is terribly ironic.”

“Why?” Portia asked. “Because you married Papa? The opposite of a duke?”

“Yes. A printer who makes me very happy,” her mother mused, still deeply in love after all these years. “I cannot imagine being married to a duke now. My life would be so very different. But, no, my darling, that is not what I am thinking. I am thinking how very interesting it is that a duke wishes to wed you.”

She swallowed. “What, Mama?”

“My brother Leander came to me this evening and told me a most interesting bit of news. I think you’ll be receiving a proposal very soon, my love.”

The exquisitely luxurious coach rolled through the London streets heading towards

the Marlborough ball.

Already there was a crush of people waiting to get out of their vehicles, but since they were the Briarwoods, it was going to be relatively easy for them to make their entrance.

Her father and the Duke of Westleigh were in a separate coach just behind them. With their elaborate gowns, it made more sense for the ladies to travel thus.

Her grandmama was still smiling quite mysteriously. “The Duke of Ferrars, my dear. What a coup! And a surprise. He is no easy catch. If you want him.”

“Well, Mama, Grandmama,” she replied, her heart racing as she recalled the kiss in the garden, “he is most intriguing.”

“He’s terribly odd,” her grandmother said. “I, for one, think we should reserve judgment, don’t you, Juliet?”

Juliet cocked her head to the side. “You’ve always preferred odd, Mama. The whole family has. So, I say we leave the decision to Portia if he is the right sort of odd for her.”

Portia swung her gaze back and forth between the two formidable and beautiful women. Women she adored more than she could ever say. Women who had both defied the expectations of society.

Both of them had been actresses, both of them had been wild, both of them were powerful.

Sometimes she wondered why she did not feel like being an actress. After all, her grandmother had been one of the greatest of her day, and her mother had had great

reviews in New York, but Portia had never felt the urge to tread the boards, though she dearly loved to see plays.

She'd grown up watching plays from backstage in those mysterious spaces where ropes hung and set pieces waited to be rolled out, where actors practiced their lines and warmed up their voices before striding out to make magic and transport people to imaginary worlds. No, all she'd ever truly wanted was to be at the center of her family and full of happiness.

"I think that he is quite a good catch," she replied simply and rather vaguely to her mother and grandmother.

The two older ladies exchanged a glance.

"Everyone will think you are triumphant, my dear, if you catch him," her grandmother assured. "After all, he is the most eligible man of the Season, and you could be his duchess, but he's a rather reticent individual."

She snorted. "He is the boldest of creatures with me. He makes me feel—"

"How bold?" Juliet prompted.

Portia coughed into her gloved hand.

Her mother and grandmother groaned.

"This shall be a very interesting Season," her grandmother said.

"But please, not too interesting," her mother urged. "Though if it is, we shall all cheer you on and make certain that you are supported."

She had no idea what to say to that. Silence seemed wise, so she folded her lace-gloved hands over the striped ivory silk of her gown.

Her grandmother pursed her lips. “I am eager to see what the two of you are like together.”

Her mother frowned. “He does have a bit of a reputation for being cold and distant.”

“Is that not a challenge for a duke?” Portia defended. “To be warm and effervescent? Not everyone can be like Uncle Leander.”

“That’s true,” her mother allowed, “but I’m wary of giving you over to him if he is not like a Briarwood.”

Her grandmother let out a laugh. “My dear, you know that most people are not like Briarwoods.”

“True,” her mother agreed tentatively, “but we never let anybody into the family who can’t quickly adapt.”

“And so he shall have an audition,” Portia teased, so grateful that she had the encouragement of the women in her family. She was well aware that many young ladies of the ton did not.

“Of a sort,” her grandmother trilled, “unless, of course, you’ve already decided, my dear.”

The coach rolled to a stop. And Portia’s stomach twisted with nerves. Would he be present? Was he indeed going to propose? And after that kiss, could she say no? Did she wish to?

“Have you?” her grandmother asked.

Her insides all but rioted. The Duke of Ferrars made her feel all sorts of indescribable things, and there was a power to him that she confessed she admired very much indeed. The idea of being a duchess appealed to her. If she could have the power of her grandmother and Aunt Mercy, she’d be quite a force for good in society.

But that hadn’t been her actual goal in finding a husband. She’d merely wished to be close to her family and have more personal freedom.

And she had no idea if he felt any sort of love for her.

Did she like him enough to accept a marriage proposal without love? She wasn’t certain. She certainly felt an affection for him.

Her mother let out a low groan. “Oh, my dear, I do think you have already decided, haven’t you?”

“Mama!” she gasped. “Can you say such a thing from my mere silence?”

“There was an entire play upon your face,” Grandmama said.

“A drama unfolded,” her mother agreed. “And I think the curtain has already come down.”

Portia refused to say. For in her heart of hearts, she did not know if she was ready to say yes to such a powerful man, who would so entirely change the course of her life. A man who still believed that a marriage proposal should be made through the channels of the most powerful men of the family.

But that was how things were done by dukes. Most dukes, anyway.

“I make no admission or denial,” she replied with as much drama as she could muster.

A sort of drama her mother and grandmother would approve of and enjoy.

But then her mother leaned forward and gently touched her hand, the rich ruby bracelet at her wrist glowing. “Whatever you decide, you are loved.”

Her heart swelled and tears stung her eyes. She was so very lucky. And she’d never forget that.

Then, breaking the moment, the coach door flew open and the steps were unfolded by a footman in beautiful light blue and silver livery.

Her mother and her grandmother were handed down easily, their gowns flowing beautifully as they stepped out into the summer air.

Gone were the restrictive fashions of the previous century. And so their movement was graceful and easy.

Portia followed them down, careful not to step on their richly embroidered and jeweled hems.

Her father and uncle’s coach then pulled up, and the two handsome, impressive men followed closely behind.

Her father gave her an assuring smile before turning quickly to the duke, whereupon they ignored the crush of hopeful mamas and debutantes and lords. Instead, they launched into discourse over a pamphlet they were producing about the ills of children who had no care or education whilst their mothers and fathers worked in factories to earn their meager wages.

Holding her own delicate ivory skirts carefully above the ground, Portia tilted her head back and gazed up at the beautiful house lined with a Grecian portico that showed off a series of reclining gods.

Lanterns lined the steps and there was a bustle of sound and commotion as all of London's society entered into one of the Season's most favored balls.

It was, dare she say, a make-or-break moment for so many young ladies.

And the nervousness was palpable in the air. After all, having a successful ball meant that the next day, one's drawing room would be full of eager gentlemen.

Make a mistake, commit a faux pas, or fumble an exchange, and one's drawing room would be empty, making a lady's first attempts at entering into society a dismal affair.

She knew she didn't really have to worry about that sort of thing. She was a Briarwood, in the end. She had her family to fall back on. Even so, much to her own surprise, she found that she did wish to be a success. Not for anyone else, but for herself.

Since she wished to feel confident as she climbed those stairs and entered the house, she lifted her chin, focused on the doors that were already open, then on the people milling about, waiting to make entry. She bolstered herself. Tonight was going to be glorious. After all, she already had a duke who wished, it seemed, to wed her.

But the way he had gone about it... It was the way it had been done in the ton for a long time. She knew that.

"Grandmama," she ventured, pausing and taking the dowager duchess's arm, "the way he approached uncle. Should it concern me? It's normal, I know, but it is so

very...well, not how we do things.”

Her grandmother’s brows rose and she gave the question great consideration. “My dear,” she began at last with a sort of wisdom that seemed gained from the fray of life, “most of these sorts of marriages are not arranged in ballrooms or between the gentleman and the lady. You already know that. The negotiation is usually done between two families, my dear. You will have little say in the matter. Most of it shall be arranged without your consent or your thoughts, unless, of course, that’s what you wish. The question is not if what he did should concern you. The question is whether you wish to be like me? Like your mother? Like the Briarwoods? To use the words of my youth, do you wish to...run this show?”

“Of course I wish to run it,” she rushed, feeling at once heartened and confused by what lay ahead. “But I also don’t mind having Uncle Leander and Papa in my corner, and I know the two of you shall be maneuvering things from the side.”

Her grandmother let out a booming laugh that caused the heads of the ton to turn, note who it was, and go back to their own gossip. For everyone was accustomed the eccentricities of the Dowager Duchess of Westleigh.

Her grandmother gave her a wink then. The sort of cheeky wink that all the Briarwood women seemed to possess. “We shall be controlling the whole thing from the side, my dear. To society, your uncle and your father? They will give the appearance of running it, but it is the ladies who generally make things happen. The contract, of course, will be excellent. Your uncle will assure you of that. But is this what you want? To be a duchess?”

“He and I will have to negotiate that,” Portia breathed.

Her mother pulled out her fan and whipped it open, waving it, not only to cool the air, rich with the perfumes of the guests, but also to mask their conversation as they made

their way through the crowd. “You must hold a negotiation and find the balance between what the two of you actually want. Not just what you think you want.”

Portia knew what she wanted.

She wanted the duke to take her into a corner and kiss her. Kiss her again as he had in the garden.

Then she would know if their passion was enough to counter all the pieces that might not seem to fit because he was different with her than with others.

Deep down, she already knew that she was succumbing to him. To his plans. Not because she wished to be a duchess. But because she was fascinated by who he showed to everyone else versus who he showed to her.

And as she mounted the steps, her gown flowing out behind her, her jewels bobbing in her ears and upon her throat, she was ready. Ready to see if she was going to win the duke this Season.

And if she was completely honest with herself, she wanted him. Wanted him in a way that made her insides hum and her fingers ache to hold him again. There was no question. As long as he was willing to let her be herself, there would be no argument.

But she’d have to find that out first before she agreed to the contracts and arrangements. Before she gave her heart because, in this, she was a true Briarwood. Once she gave her heart, she would not be able to take it back. For good or ill.

They headed into the foyer crushed to the brim with people. The scents of perfumes and heat filled her senses, and she gazed about, wondering if Ferrars was already in the ballroom.

Her grandmama and mother paid their respects to the host and hostess. She, too, curtsied to them quickly before being swept into the ballroom.

Music was already playing. The surprisingly soulful notes were filling the air.

Couples raced up and down the well-waxed floor, and young ladies negotiated for a good position along the walls so they might be noticed and have their dance cards filled. The air was full of hope.

Yes. The air was full of that sort of understanding that dreams would be made and crushed tonight. But Portia's dreams, she felt certain, would come true. The dream of happiness, the dream of finding a husband who would let her live here, in England and London, and be with her family always.

Soon she would know exactly what her future was to be and with whom... And as if that thought could call her future into existence, she spotted the Duke of Ferrars across the room.

His eyes were upon her.

Heat blossomed through her.

That look was like a velvet net, meant to catch her in its sensual promise.

Instead of being pulled towards him, she squared her shoulders and smiled back, calling to him with her spirit, bringing him across the floor.

When she smiled at him, his sensual gaze turned to one of excitement, and he did indeed walk slowly towards her, her grandmother, and her mother. Undeterred by her father and uncle, and the power of her own family, he approached as if he was a god, untouchable, above them all.

The room hushed and seemed to part for him.

After all, he was the Duke of Ferrars. He was quiet, he was prepossessing, and he, if she wanted, was hers.

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In all his life, he'd never been so entirely focused as he was on one particular person. Miss Portia Miller did things to him that caused his entire world to spin. His father would've told him to run from that. One needed to be in control at all times. But it was her very ability to cause his world to spin that he liked.

He didn't want a meek woman who would do his bidding to run his dukedom. No, he wanted a woman who everyone would like, who people would flock to, who would increase his power. Yes, she was the perfect foil for him. He did not wish to speak when in company. She seemed like the perfect person to speak for him.

Already people were flocking to her. Perhaps people had not noticed that he was striding towards her. She certainly had. But her grandmother and mother were standing beside her, as well as her uncle and father, at least he assumed it was her father from the way that he was standing protectively behind her. There were also several other young ladies nearby who were not, he felt certain, family.

The young ladies had descended instantaneously and wrapped about Miss Miller, engaged in what he could only assume was rather frivolous conversation as he neared them.

Still, he was pleased.

He'd picked well. She might not be the Diamond of the Season, but she was the focus of it. And she was handling it with great effect because, somehow, she was looking at him and yet still making everyone around her smile and laugh.

This sort of affability was a trait that he'd never mastered and likely never would

because it was not a trait that his father had admired.

It was not one of the traits that had been beaten into him. As a matter of fact, anything similar to affability had been beaten out of him, which was why he needed her. He was tired of having people come to his house to win his approval, without having any sort of passion, enthusiasm, or joy.

No, he needed someone who would fill his house to the brim, win him allies, and convince people that his view of the world was the way it should be.

So, as he slowly crossed to her and the room about him began to part, making way for him as it always did, he neared Miss Miller feeling more and more confident. And when he stopped before her and the young ladies who were chattering away suddenly stepped back and caught sight of him, many of them unable to speak in his presence—a condition he was accustomed to—he felt another wave of pleasure.

They would be a formidable couple.

He squared his jaw, looked down his nose, for he was considerably taller than her, and said, “Are you ready to dance, Miss Miller?”

Her grandmother and mother stared at him, then at her.

He knew this was a rather important moment. The Briarwoods cared about each other’s opinions. Upon reflection, he liked that too. It was good to have a family that supported each other. He was already making a plan to win them over, though that would be the hardest thing he’d done in years.

She cocked her head to the side. “I am almost ready to dance, Your Grace. Are you asking me?”

He couldn't help himself. A slow smile tilted his lips. He was not a good conversationalist at balls. He did not enjoy it. He'd never been required to be a good conversationalist at balls. Again, his father had not deemed it important. Why should he lower himself to speak with people who were really rather unimportant?

But his father had not felt uneasy in company. Not like he did.

"I am indeed asking you to dance," he replied. "When do you think you shall be ready?"

Her gaze sparked. "Well, I have a question for you, Your Grace, if you don't mind?"

The young ladies about them watched agog, tittering to each other behind their fans.

"Do ask it," he said. "I confess I am on pins and needles waiting for it."

"Whom have you spoken to this evening?"

He hesitated. "I beg your pardon?"

"Whom have you spoken to this evening? What interesting things have you heard?"

"Are you asking me to gossip, Miss Miller?" he drawled, feeling unsettled.

The crowd about them was watching as if they were engaged in a game. It wasn't a game, he realized. She had noticed what some might consider a flaw in his character and was trying to understand it. This was her attempt to draw him out in company.

His insides tightened at that. This was a surprise. He liked her boldness, but he had not expected this. Not in front of others. "I have not spoken with anyone yet this evening except our host and hostess."

“May I ask why?”

He ground his teeth because he could not say the truth. That would be quite awkward. Did she want awkwardness? Perhaps she did.

“You may ask,” he replied, “but I shall not tell you until you are on the floor dancing with me.”

Her brows rose. “I am intrigued,” she replied.

The young ladies were watching with amazement. Their mamas were coming close, being pulled in, clearly wanting to know what had caused a duke to be so fascinated. He needed to escape before he was mobbed by them. The last thing he wished was for a dozen hopeful mamas to start fluttering at him.

So, he thrust his hand out at Miss Miller. “Does that satisfy your curiosity enough?” he asked, beginning to feel brittle, longing to escape the sudden crush. Feeling that deep unease he felt under his father’s watchful eye when in company, waiting for his censure in private after he had made a mistake. “Will you dance?”

Her gaze softened as she studied him, as if she could sense his sudden difficulty. “Of course, Your Grace. How could I not?”

Thankfully, she placed her gloved hand into his.

A relieved breath, one he had not even realized he had been holding, slipped past his lips. As he drew her onto the floor with him, leaving a clutch of young ladies to squawk and flutter, he tried to still his racing mind and the old feelings coming upon him.

It was why he longed to leave ballrooms and be on his own, why he could barely

converse. For over the years, he had feared his father's punishments for being less than perfect. For being anything his father did not wish him to be. Even now, his body remembered. Even now, it still haunted his thoughts.

"That was most interesting," he said.

"Was it?" she asked.

"Yes, because I think you already knew my answer when you asked who I had spoken to this evening."

She considered this, tilting her head back, which sent her rich russet curls teasing the line of her elegant throat. A throat he longed to kiss. "I am no mystic reader of thoughts."

"Glad to hear it," he managed, still trying to get a hold of himself and finding that her hand in his was doing wonders. "I'm glad to hear we won't be attempting to contact spirits for entertainment."

"Oh dear, no," she assured, slightly horrified. "People are wonderful magicians, but I don't think that such things should be entertainment."

"I'm glad to know that also," he said. "But the truth is I don't speak to people because—"

She stared at him, then blurted, "You're shy."

"What?" he blurted in return as the orchestra began to play the first notes of a waltz.

They stared at each other a moment, both stunned by each other's transparency.

“You are, aren’t you? Everyone thinks that you must be tremendously cold, distant, or superior. You’re not at all. You’re shy .”

“Saying things several times does not make it true,” he countered.

She did not yield but continued her argument. “You’re confident. You’re strong. You’re desperately powerful,” she murmured, “in a way that makes me catch my breath.”

“I’m glad to know that I can make you catch your breath,” he said as he swayed them to the music.

She licked her lower lip—that soft, full lower lip that begged to be kissed. “Oh, yes. The way you speak to me... It sets my heart beating apace. But you genuinely don’t like talking to other people, do you? For fun, that is.”

“No,” he replied. “It is not something my father encouraged.”

“Why?” she asked as the music lilted, the tune encouraging him to circle her about the floor.

“Because everyone is beneath me,” he said.

Her jaw dropped at that. “I beg your pardon?”

“I know,” he began, pained, “you’re half American, and therefore you believe in the principles of democracy and republicanism, but this is not a democracy or a republic. It’s a constitutional monarchy,” he said. “And the powerful people here make the decisions. And I’m powerful. Everyone else technically is beneath me, aside from the king and the queen and a few others like your uncle.”

“And that makes you unable to talk to other people?” she bit out. “Truly?”

Was her esteem for him plunging? Perhaps it should. But he could not tell her about the little boy who had cried alone, about the tutor and his stick, about his father’s terrifying voice, about being a perpetual disappointment.

About protecting everyone he met, lest his father hurt them for being kind to his son.

“You don’t truly want to know why I’m not able to talk to other people,” he said.

He had tried to speak to people his father had deemed beneath him. It had always ended badly. Very badly indeed. And so, he had stopped, and he’d never been able to start again without the old terror rising in his flesh and racing to his heart.

So now, when he was in the company of strangers, no matter how much he wished to, he could not speak to them. He did not cower, that was not the right word, but he could not bring himself to converse. With Miss Miller, he could. She was essentially his equal in many ways. At least as equal as a lady could be. Yes, she was his equal in family line, and therefore he did not have to hold himself back. And he would not hold himself back. Except for his memories.

No one needed to know those. Not even his little sister, Margery. He’d protected her as best he could. And he’d protect Miss Miller from the ghost of his father as well.

Her brows drew together. “You are quite a mystery, Your Grace, for with me, you are a wonder.”

“Thank you,” he said. He found himself growing ever more certain that he had picked well, that she was exactly what he needed. But more so... Their passion, their growing mutual regard? It was a bonus he had not expected. One he intended to increase. “You find me to be a wonder, do you?” he prompted as he easily

maneuvered them through the couples. He did not like to talk, but he did like to dance. And he had always been good at it.

“Indeed.”

“And what is the wonder?”

“The sound of your voice, the way it growls,” she began, her voice breathy to his ears. “The width of your shoulders. Your turns of phrase. And the way you make me feel.”

“And how exactly is it that I make you feel, Miss Miller?”

“As if life is full of possibilities.” Her eyes lit with emotion. “As if I don’t know what’s coming next.”

He pulled her ever so slightly closer, leaned down, and whispered, “Oh, Portia, no one knows what’s coming next. Not me. Not you.”

But this, he did know. She was going to be his. And she’d be exactly the duchess he required.

Heron House

“Come along, Lady Margery, join the fray,” Grandmama called, clapping her bejeweled hands that bore the evidence of time and a life well lived, as she strode into the long drawing room, her emerald skirts sailing behind her like an exotic bird’s wings.

Lady Margery followed in a far simpler gown of light blue and looked as if she had joined a circus.

She had. Poor thing. She had absolutely no idea! And feeling a good deal of sympathy for her, and considering the fact that Margery was very possibly going to be her future sister-in-law, Portia bustled across the room and quite unceremoniously and enthusiastically took Lady Margery’s hands into hers. She pulled her close and said, “I shall make sure you survive the day.”

Lady Margery gave a strange peep of a sound and said, “Thank you. I greatly appreciate it. I confess I have never been greeted by so many people all at once who are in one family and seem so, well...”

“Happy,” her grandmother put in, twirling her hand, which caused her jeweled fingers to wink in the cheerful light.

Lady Margery nodded.

“It is rather astonishing,” Portia agreed, beaming at the young lady, who actually seemed to be bearing up rather well, considering. “We’re all so used to it. Sometimes

we forget what we are like to strangers, but I'm so glad that you are here, and I'm so glad that we're going to get to share the Season together, or at least that's what Grandmama and my mother told me."

A large horde of cousins of varying ages went about their daily activities. From singing, to reading, to reciting, to writing, to dancing about them, they paid Portia and Lady Margery little heed.

But Lady Margery kept being distracted, her brown eyes going from one animated person to the next.

"Oh, will you all stop it?" Portia called out. "The poor thing shall run mad and never return again."

"I rather like it, actually," Lady Margery blurted, holding Portia's hands tightly.

Even if she did like it, it was a lot.

Cymbeline, one of Portia's younger cousins, was skipping about practicing the steps to a quadrille. Just as she curtsied and then began the sprightly steps of a jig, Portia's older cousins, Maximus and Octavian, charged into the room, tossing an orange back and forth between them.

"Stop that," Grandmama called, tsking. "Never waste an orange, my dear. The orange sellers of my grandmother's day would have murdered you on the spot!"

Both boys laughed as if they were thinking something else about what orange sellers might have done back in those days.

Those days were far wilder, it was true.

Still, Maximus kept the orange in his grasp and came forward, his dark hair a mass of curls about his face. Then he took Grandmama in his arms before he kissed her on the cheek. “Whatever you say, Grandmama.”

The dowager duchess patted his cheek. “Well said, my boy.”

Octavian followed. “My turn!” He then took Grandmama into a quick embrace, picked her up, and spun her around. “How we’ve missed you!”

The two of them were dressed from top to bottom in scarlet with gold lapels and sashes. They had both returned from Spain just that morning and their mother, Lady Hermia, and their father, the Earl of Drexel, not wishing to let them out of their sight, entered just behind them and quietly went to sit by the windows, looking on as if life could not get any better. Just to see their sons was a joy.

Maximus strode forward with his orange, began peeling it, and immediately handed a piece over to his mother.

“Darling Mama,” he said, “what shall we do today?”

His father beamed up at his son. Life had been fairly kind to the Earl of Drexel and his wife and their children. But the war? Well, the war was inescapable. And much to the ton’s astonishment, both sons had insisted on going to fight.

There was a younger boy up in the nursery.

In case something happened to Maximus, the title would continue. It was the only way that such a thing could happen. And Portia knew how much it hurt the Earl of Drexel and her aunt to let the boys go, but the twins had been insistent. They wanted to do their part, and they had been fighting hard in Spain for more than a year.

Lady Margery seemed quite overblown for a moment by the two young men, Cymbeline dancing about, and several other people who kept racing in and out.

“My family is exceptionally large,” Portia said.

Margery laughed. “It almost seems as big as the ton.”

Grandmama produced an elaborately painted fan and waved it in the air before she let out a boisterous laugh. “We shall overpopulate the ton, take them over, replace their dreariness, and make it the most stunning, wonderful, beautiful cultural place in the world.”

Margery blinked. “Could you? Would you mind terribly? As it is, it’s a dreadfully dull place, if I must say so.”

“Ah,” Grandmama said, smiling as she came to Lady Margery and linked their arms together. “You belong here. I’m so glad to hear it. Leander, my eldest son, the duke, of course, must have sensed that you needed all of us. Your brother is a dear, but clearly he knows nothing about young ladies.”

At that, Lady Margery pulled back slightly. “That’s not true. He’s tremendously kind to me, I’ll have you know. He’s done everything he can to make life better since Papa and Mama...” Her voice died off.

“Oh, my dear,” Grandmama soothed kindly, “people do forget that even dukes suffer, that the families of dukes suffer, and that sometimes being surrounded by gold and marble can be terribly hollow. Sometimes a little nook in the east of London where at least one is loved is better.”

Margery’s eyes actually filled with tears at that, and she blinked rapidly. “Forgive me,” she said, whipping out a handkerchief and dabbing at them.

“You must never ask for forgiveness for tears,” Portia returned. “We cry at the drop of a hat here. Terribly good for one’s physique, you know, and a must for the soul.”

“What?” Margery gasped. “You cry so easily?”

Grandmama squeezed her tight then, patting her hand. “Very odd with the English, my dear, I know, at least now, but we do, and you shall too if you need to. A first Season can be quite stressful for a young lady. Now, tell us your goals,” Grandmama encouraged as she pulled the young lady to the long mahogany table covered in confectionaries, picked up a pink macaron, and put it on a plate.

Grandmama thrust the ivory and gold plate at Lady Margery. “For you.”

Lady Margery beamed. “You really do serve the very best of pastries.”

Her grandmother gushed, “Thank you. We managed to get the French cook out of an exquisite chateau when France was falling apart. He is very happy working in our kitchens. I have to stop him from gold filigreeing everything though. A dessert is lovely. Gold, I don’t need.”

Margery let out a laugh. “Certainly not. Such a thing would be excessive, would it not? And we are English, not French.”

“Well, we do like the French,” pointed out Grandmama.

“It’s true,” Portia replied. “Although I do understand your comments, especially given the war.”

Maximus called, looking up from the paper his mother was surveying, “What about the war?”

“The French, my dear, we like the French,” Grandmama intoned.

“Oh, the French people are brilliant,” Maximus said.

“Fabulous fighters, nothing better,” added Octavian, leaning against the bookshelf behind his father.

“Exactly,” Maximus agreed heartily. “They’re terrifying. A French column would put shivers down your spine.”

Lady Margery swung her gaze back and forth, trying to eye everyone in the room, especially the brothers who were going on and on now about war.

“Fabulous fellows, delightfully pithy, officers also brilliant,” Octavian put in. “It’s such a pity that they are so determined to cause such a fuss.”

“A fuss?” echoed Lady Margery, frowning. “I wouldn’t exactly call it a fuss,” she said. “War is really very terrible.”

The dowager duchess leaned in and whispered rather loudly, and clearly for effect, “We must make light of it, my dear. A good joke makes terrible things bearable. Don’t you see?”

“Oh really?” Lady Margery said, her brows shooting up. “I’ve never really been allowed.”

“Allowed to joke?” put in Portia, gobsmacked.

“I hate to admit it, but my brother and I...” Lady Margery pushed her macaron about the plate. “Well, we don’t have very good senses of humor. You see, when we were small, our father didn’t laugh at much.”

“Your father was a very difficult brute of a man,” sighed the dowager duchess with a great deal of sympathy. “I had to dance with him a few times. Excellent on the floor, but his conversational style was rather like a hammer. I prefer something far more poetical.”

“I certainly wouldn’t have called Papa poetic,” Lady Margery replied as she lifted her pink macaron and bit into it. She closed her eyes as bliss covered her face.

Nestor charged in, a veritable storm of energy and excitement. “Oh, if the macarons do that to one, give me one, Grandmama.”

“Of course, my dear.” And his grandmother picked up a macaron and tossed it to him.

Nestor caught it in both hands, strode forward, and kissed his grandmama upon the cheek, causing her diamond earrings to dance in the early sun.

Lady Margery gaped at the shocking play between them, and her cheeks turned a bright pink.

“Hello, Lady Margery,” Nestor exclaimed, his eyes warm and merry as he turned to her. “So glad that you’re fitting in so beautifully.”

“Am I?” she asked, putting her half-eaten macaron down. “Fitting in? It all feels a bit odd.”

“It is terribly odd,” Nestor said before popping the macaron into his mouth. Then a look of pure ecstasy crossed his face, his own eyes closed, and he wiped the corners of his mouth with his thumb before continuing. “But the sooner you enjoy it, the sooner you will be happy.”

“Happy?” Margery asked.

That word happy . It seemed to astonish Margery.

A good deal seemed to astonish her.

“We do seem to keep saying things that surprise you, my dear,” the dowager said kindly. “Well, never you fear. We will take you out this evening. I shall look after you, as will Portia’s mother, Lady Juliet. And we shall ensure that only the best of fellows ask for your hand.”

Lady Margery frowned, eyeing her plate. “I don’t think the best of fellows will ask for my hand,” she said. “Perhaps the best of titles with the largest fortunes, but I’d rather think I can only expect someone who—”

Portia grabbed her by the shoulder and turned her about, causing a few flecks of macaron to dance across the room.

“Now, my dear, this you must understand,” Portia began in the same vein that the women of her family had instilled in her long ago, “if you are going to be with us Briarwoods, and you clearly are, tell us what you dream of because that is what we will make happen. It is what the Briarwoods do, you see. We say what we want, and then we get it. And if you tell the whole world that you expect a dreary fellow with a great title and a great fortune, that’s what you’ll get. So please, don’t say it.”

Margery blinked at her as if they had all lost their wits. But then she smiled slightly and ventured, as if she was daring to share the greatest of secrets, “I wouldn’t mind someone very handsome with a large family, a good disposition, a merry humor, possibly a title but not necessarily, with the ability to enjoy life.”

A booming laugh slipped past the dowager’s slightly wrinkled lips. Her laughs had only grown louder and fuller over the years. Her gaze swung to Portia, and she pursed her lips dramatically. “We don’t know anyone like that at all, do we, my dear?”

“No, I don’t know a single person like it,” teased Portia.

“Are you making fun of me?” Margery asked, tensing.

Nestor, serious now, turned to her and leveled a sincere gaze at her. “Never, and if one of them does, I shall come to your rescue and teach you how to give as good as you get.”

“That would be very kind of you,” Lady Margery whispered, “but I realize now that they’re only teasing me.” Lady Margery glanced about. “They must mean that this room is full of gentlemen that I’ve described, but none of you would ever—”

Lady Margery clapped her lips shut. A horrified look crossed her face then.

Nestor cocked his head to the side, studying her carefully. “You mustn’t speak ill about yourself, Lady Margery,” Nestor said. “Not a single one of us will ever allow that. Will we?”

And as one, the cousins, who were used to answering each other’s call, collectively returned, “No.”

Margery appeared both touched and alarmed by the volume.

“You really are going to have to get used to us, especially if...” Portia’s voice trailed off.

Margery put her plate down upon the table and took Portia’s hand. “Especially if you become my sister? How wonderful would that be?”

“I don’t know,” Portia replied tentatively. “You’d have to put up with us every day. For the rest of your life.”

Lady Margery swallowed. “I think I should very much like, if I’m honest, to be part of this family.”

Nestor winked at her. “Nothing better,” he said, then he clapped his strong hands together. “Now, we’re going to go find your brother. He’s gone off with my uncle, the duke. We can’t miss that kind of fun.” Nestor swung his gaze to Maximus and Octavian. “Can we, lads?”

Maximus and his brother let out cheers.

“Certainly not,” affirmed Octavian.

“Let’s go harass Ferrars,” quipped Maximus. “Can’t let new family members off easily.” He wagged his brows at Margery. “We have to show them right away what it’s going to be like so that they’re not surprised.”

“Are we to be family for certain then?” Margery teased, her voice truly playful for the first time since she’d arrived.

Portia smiled at her. “He still hasn’t actually asked me. I think he doesn’t think he has to. He does though.”

“He does seem to think that contracts will be signed soon,” Margery admitted.

“Contracts are fine, but they are not enough,” Portia replied gently. “Not for a Briarwood.”

“And what will you say?” Margery asked. “When he asks?”

She grinned. “Since you will be my sister, there’s really only one thing to say.”

And it was true. She'd be so glad that Lady Margery would join the protection of the Briarwoods. Such a kind young lady deserved to be surrounded by love.

Everyone did. If she had her way, everyone would.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:34 am

Rufus was surrounded by Briarwoods.

It was a great deal to take in. They were all tall, all handsome, and of varying ages, from youths to seasoned adults. In truth, there were simply too many of them for his liking. He was not accustomed to being around so many people in such an intimate setting, and it was indeed intimate, though it was out-of-doors, and it was extremely difficult for him to find grounding out behind Heron House.

He'd brought his sister, Lady Margery. It was clearly part of the whole deal-making process of ensuring that Miss Miller was to become his future wife. Leander, the Duke of Westleigh, had made it clear that having his sister in the care of the dowager duchess would be important, so he had done it.

Now, he was wondering if he should just run off into the woods and silently scream.

Something like that, of course, was completely undignified, but his palms were sweating and his heart was palpating. And not because he was afraid of them as men, but simply because they all looked as if they wished to speak to him. And not about politics, not about bills in the Lords, and not about organization. It looked as if they actually wished to speak to him about themselves and about life, and he did not wish to do any of that. But if he was going to win them over, as he had been told to do, he had to. In this particular capacity, it was alarming.

And not only were there Briarwoods, there was a bull-set, russet-haired Irishman with silver at his temples. As a matter of fact, Rufus felt that he was in a sea of dark-haired people with a blonde person popping up here and there.

As for the gruff Irishman who looked as if he had seen war, hardship, and one too many irritating English lords, Hartigan Mulvaney was his name.

He was standing at the center of what appeared to be some sort of makeshift boxing arena, and was calling out, “Right, lads. It’s time. It’s time to make sure that if you get put down on the ground, you can get back up.”

The Irishman was all too cheerful.

Rufus was not accustomed to such cheerful people, and he certainly was not accustomed to working with people who were clearly not of his class. Especially after the lessons his father had taught him with stick and shame.

Rufus was an excellent fighter. He trained at Gentleman Jackson’s and he had an instructor, but he was accustomed to a certain way of doing things. This was not what he was accustomed to. This felt as if it could turn into a brawl at any moment.

The Duke of Westleigh strode forward, his long dust coat flapping out like angel’s wings. He did have a sort of mad-angel look about him, if he was honest. How could anyone have a man like that for their father and feel at ease? But it seemed that his sons, Huxton and Lord Calchas, adored him.

What would it have been like to have the Duke of Westleigh as his father? It was the strangest thought, and yet it slipped through his head.

Now, Westleigh was still a bit young to have been his father, but certainly the man was old enough to be his older brother. Westleigh was close to twenty years older than Rufus perhaps, and it felt strange seeing a man of such vigor, such magnitude, and such jollity in such a paternal role.

Westleigh yanked off his coat, dropped it to the ground, and strode to the center of

the ring. He stretched his neck from side to side, casually showing off the sinews there.

“Right,” Mulvaney barked in his rich Irish accent, “come along then. Let’s go. Who’s first?”

The other Briarwoods weren’t reticent or fearful, but they did seem to be waiting for something. Or someone.

Mulvaney began to look around for what appeared to be an opponent for Westleigh. He folded his arms over his chest, waiting to see what would happen next.

Huxton crossed up behind Rufus. “It should be you,” he said brightly.

“Me?” he returned. “Why in God’s name would I wish to spar with the Duke of Westleigh?”

Huxton shrugged as if it was all very obvious. “Because that’s what we do. We spar with each other. We have a good time. We hit each other. We slap at each other. Occasionally, we bite each other. We rib each other with words. Now, we don’t really drink together, but we have a magnificent time. And then we all take a plunge in the river and head to the theater.”

He blinked. “To the theater,” he echoed.

“Yes,” Huxton affirmed, folding his strong arms over his broad chest. “You have to go and have a fun time in the evening, you know. It’s the only way to pass those long hours.”

Rufus had certainly not spent long hours at the theater. He couldn’t even imagine this idea of having fun for fun’s sake. But here he was.

There was a round of applause that went up as he took a tentative step forward. Surely, fighting was not the way to win them over. What if it all went terribly wrong?

“Ah, marvelous,” Mulvaney crowed, clearly pleased, as if this was what he had been expecting all along. “Duke on duke. This will be a fight for the ages, gentlemen.”

“I would just like to say that I don’t really understand how this works,” Rufus pointed out.

“You don’t need to understand how it works,” Hartigan said. “I’ll make sure that no one dies. That’s the main rule.”

Rufus scowled. “Well, I suppose that’s somewhere to start,” he said.

“Come along, take off your coat,” Hartigan Mulvaney urged.

He shrugged it off, looked about, and really was amazed to see two sets of twins and several other young men looking on with a merry gleam, and also several gentlemen who had to be the Duke of Westleigh’s brothers and brothers-in-law.

They all appeared positively gleeful. None of them appeared afraid. None of them looked as if they were going to be censured if they did something wrong. And the duke? The duke looked as if he was ready to be the first one humiliated if necessary.

This was all positively surreal. Rufus’s father would never have agreed to such a potential public humiliation.

Rufus took off his cravat next and rolled up his sleeves.

“Oh,” Hartigan cheered, “this gentleman’s getting ready.”

Westleigh held out his arms, his gaze dancing with anticipation. “I’m ready too. Let’s see what you’re made of.”

Rufus was made of hard stuff, but he was not used to this sort of atmosphere. Still, determined, he went and stood before the duke and lifted his fists.

“No, no,” Hartigan said. “Not like that.”

“But this is Queensberry rules, isn’t it?” Rufus defended, suddenly feeling off foot and beginning to wonder if that was the point. “I know those.”

Hartigan let out a long laugh, and everyone around him laughed.

Rufus was also not accustomed to people laughing at him. It was extremely odd. And it hit him that the entire point of this exercise was to see if he had a temper, to see if he was petulant, to see what kind of man he was under pressure.

And if he was either of those, if he reacted poorly, he had a rather strong feeling that his marriage proposal to Portia would be met with a mob of protective Briarwood men.

Westleigh clapped him on the shoulder as if they were old comrades, or even brothers. “We don’t do rules. Not like that,” he said. “This is the real stuff, sort of. No one will die today.”

“The real stuff?” he echoed.

The duke sighed kindly. “We’re very confusing. I know. People do have a tendency to repeat what we say, and usually it’s because they’ve never been exposed to anything like the way we live. We don’t believe in silly prize fighting. There’s no point in us doing it. This? These lessons are for if something truly happens in a real

situation. For instance, if something were to happen to us in the east of London.”

“Or on the battlefield in Spain,” one of the young men in a red uniform called out.

“Exactly,” Hartigan Mulvaney said. “Trained you well, my boy, didn’t I? You look good and strong.”

Lord Maximus applauded. “Indeed. I’m the only officer in my regiment who’s good in a fight without his rapier and his pistol.”

Hartigan gave him a wink. “Glad to have passed on my skills.”

Rufus frowned. “You are a soldier.”

“Indeed, I was,” Hartigan said.

“An officer?” Rufus checked.

Mulvaney’s lined face only increased in its wrinkles as he grinned at the mad idea. “Cannon fodder. But here I stand. Now just try to get him to the ground. All fights end up on the ground, Your Grace,” Hartigan Mulvaney said.

“That’s right,” the Duke of Westleigh agreed.

Suddenly, Rufus felt a wave of apprehension. “May I ask, what is the purpose of this?”

“We told you,” began Mulvaney.

He shook his head. “No. I mean me. Here. This is about Portia, isn’t it?”

The duke gave him a slow smile, leaned in, and rumbled, “You’re catching on. Good. Now, show me what sort of man you are and whether you have the heart to handle my niece the way she needs. And not like your father would have done.”

Those words cut through him, and he forced himself to blow out a slow breath, but his body remained tense.

Perhaps he should just leave.

The duke shook his head slowly. “You are wondering if you’ve made the right decision. You are thinking that a passive young lady from the ton might actually be the better choice. Go ahead. You can still escape. It’s all right. None of us will think worse of you. We are a mad lot.”

A mad lot.

They didn’t know what madness was. This wasn’t madness. This was joy. This was laughing. This was people who clearly loved each other and protected their most vulnerable.

Madness was how he had grown up, with hard blows, cruel words, isolation, and someone trying to make him perfect. At any cost.

Well, none of these young men seemed to care if they were perfect or not. It crashed over him then as he looked around and held the gaze of the Duke of Westleigh. This was what he wanted for his children. This was what he wanted for his life. He might never be able to let go of his teachings. He might need his dukedom to be perfect, but this Briarwood world, well, perhaps this world was the one he really wanted for his future family... If he could allow himself to embrace it.

“All right then,” Rufus said, and a cheer went up all around him.

The duke's hands went out, and they both began to circle each other. Quickly, Rufus realized that this was not about throwing blows but grappling.

The duke came in low and went for Rufus's stomach. He was a little bit taller than Westleigh, and Rufus bent down and grabbed the man's lower back. Pure sinew and muscle were there. Even so, he was younger, taller, and went to pick the duke up off the ground, but Westleigh, with experience on his side, twisted out of the way just in time.

Westleigh slipped out of Rufus's grasp and bent down, grabbed him by the ankle, and started to pull upward.

"Use body weight. Use leverage," bit out Mulvaney from the sidelines.

And then both of them grabbed at the same time, and they both went flying up into the air, feet up, and landed with a hard thud. Air whooshed out of Rufus's lungs.

Westleigh rolled forward and tried to pounce on top of Rufus, but then he rolled too, grabbed the older duke from behind, and started to reach for his neck.

"You're too good at this," the duke laughed, and Rufus suddenly realized that he had years of coiled rage in him.

And just as he was about to wrap his arm around Westleigh's neck, and Westleigh reached back to dig his thumb into Rufus's eye, Mulvaney called, "Time, gentlemen. An equal measure of good show. Bloody hell. I do think that the Duke of Ferrars has quite a lot to offer, gentlemen, if he has never had a lesson like this before."

Slowly, shocked by the anger that had coursed through him, Rufus stood, brushed off the dust from his clothes, and flinched. He'd never allowed himself to get dusty before. He'd never allowed his clothes to get out of place. And as the anger dimmed,

he felt a terrible moment of shame. Shame at not looking like a duke should. Like a member of his family should.

It washed over him, and he hated it, but he couldn't stop it. It was too ingrained. He immediately began trying to adjust his cravat, trying to put it back into order.

As the gentlemen cheered and talked among themselves, Mulvaney strode to him and looked him in the eye. "I see the battle in you, Your Grace. Don't worry. You'll win."

He sucked in a sharp breath as he locked gazes with the Irishman. It was a shocking thing to say, and he wanted to ask for an explanation, but he didn't dare. Not like this.

"Right. No official winner. Excellent show." Hartigan grabbed Rufus's hand, put it up in the air, and then did the same with the duke's. "This is an excellent beginning. Who's next?"

The crowd around him cheered.

Westleigh turned to Rufus then and whispered, "Whatever Mulvaney told you? Listen. I wasn't certain about you, Ferrars. But you've done well."

At those approving words, he felt strangely accepted.

And as the men kept applauding and cheering, he felt the acceptance of them all.

"Well done!"

"Bloody good show!"

"That's the stuff!"

The Briarwood men shouted in turn, merrily, every single one.

As their encouragement poured over him, he didn't feel completely isolated in his position for the first time that he could remember.

No. He felt as if maybe he'd be allowed to be a part of them. Part of their family. Part of a whole other way of life which he'd never been allowed to know.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:34 am

“Y ou’re all wet,” Portia said, then covered her mouth with her hand to stifle a laugh as she observed the Duke of Ferrars marching across the long lawn.

In an exceptionally large piece of linen cloth that brought to mind Roman senators.

It was draped rather artfully about him, but his muscled arms were bared and glistened with drops of water.

Ferrars, soaked! He looked disgruntled as a hawk who had been set down amongst peacocks and wasn’t quite certain what to make of his new surroundings.

Even so, he was a gorgeous sight, she had to admit. The way the linen was draped, the fabric kept sliding and adjusting over his hard body, giving glimpses of his powerful limbs.

She swallowed.

What would happen if he let go of the makeshift toga? She suddenly found herself hoping his hand would slip and his body would be bared to her view.

As it was, there was little left to the imagination. His dark hair was quite a scandal about his face too.

She found herself short of breath, wishing she could run her hands over his beautiful skin and sculpted torso, but she was also on the verge of laughter.

“What happened to you?” she asked at last, though she had a good idea.

“Your family. The male contingent.”

Her lips twitched. “Oh?”

“They threw me in the river,” he drawled as he strode up to her, his bare feet tracing over the trimmed grass. “I was halfway to London before I got out.”

“Oh, dear,” she groaned. “Did they do that? Where are your clothes?”

“I think they stole them. But at least they gave me this. And Huxton said that my clothes would almost certainly be found up at the house, drying before the kitchen fire.”

“They must like you.”

He groaned. “If this is a sign of being liked by the Briarwood clan, what will the rest of my life be like?”

“Do you wish to spend the rest of your life with the Briarwood clan?” she asked, a subtle prompt, she realized, to get him to propose. And she was stunned to realize, in that moment, that she did wish him to propose.

The truth was if her cousins and her uncles had thrown him in the river, they did like him. If they hadn’t liked him, they would’ve just sent him on his way with little said, little done, and certainly without his clothes lost. Briarwoods didn’t waste time on people they didn’t care about, admire, or find interesting.

They ignored them instead of teasing them.

The Briarwoods found no point in giving unlikable people attention.

“I am struggling to imagine it,” he said, “but I do see how it could make my horizons grow and make me a better man.”

She let out a full laugh at that, and her heart warmed at the way he looked at his situation. Some powerful men would be furious. “That is a very diplomatic reply,” she said.

“And you?” he asked, closing the distance between them, the edge of his linen brushing her skirts as droplets of water slipped off of him into the summer air. “Would you like me to be a member of the Briarwood clan?”

She parted her lips. She gazed up into his eyes and said, “No, no, that will not do, Your Grace. You must ask me properly. Not in a roundabout way. You have asked my uncle if you may wed me. I think the time has come for you to actually ask the person you wish to wed.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Ah. I knew your family was not the sort to keep secrets. Your uncle made plain what I wish?”

She drew in a breath. “And my mother, and my grandmother. The whole family knows about the negotiations. We don’t keep secrets,” she affirmed, amazed at how many people did, at how often the Briarwoods had to explain this to people. “We find it to be desperately unhealthy and hurtful. And also, we don’t really do things that we need to be secretive about. You see, we all feel that if one wants to do something, they should just do it. And if they’re so ashamed to do it, then they really shouldn’t.”

“It is a novel concept,” he replied dryly. “Most people can’t live like that. They do what they want in the shadows because they fear what others will think.”

She cocked her head to the side. “Most people aren’t Briarwoods. This gets said a lot, you know, but only because it’s the truth. So, you should really pause, because if you

marry me, it's the family. Are you actually comfortable with that?"

He was silent for a long moment. "I think I am, because I think you would make an excellent duchess."

There was a hesitation there as if he wanted to say something else, but whatever it was, he did not.

"Well then," she replied, "I confess that I think I would like to be your duchess. I enjoy you," she said, "and I enjoy the way you kiss me."

His eyes warmed at that and he pulled her to him. "Do you?"

She bit her lower lip, wishing for his kiss again. It had been far too long. "Yes."

He lifted his gaze to the small walled garden and pulled her through the open gate, so they'd be hidden by the red brick walls. "It won't be easy being my duchess," he said.

"Why?" she asked.

"I'm not like your family. I have a certain prickliness about me. It won't be easy for me to change. I'm not sure I even wish to."

She narrowed her gaze at him. "You do."

"What?" he asked.

"You wish to change. Otherwise, you never would've picked me," she rushed, loving the feeling of being nearly alone with him. Of him standing there in next to nothing. Her future was but a few moments away. "You can tell yourself whatever story you want to, but you would not have picked someone like me if you wanted to remain

silly and austere.”

Portia folded her hands before her and cleared her throat. “Now, I understand sometimes in a marriage there has to be the serious one and the funny one, and I’m quite happy to be the funny one, though I think secretly, actually, you are the funny one,” she said. “You just don’t know it yet. So for now, I am the exuberant one. You are the quiet one. And that is perfectly acceptable to me. You do like rules a great deal though, don’t you?”

He gave a tight nod of his head.

She arched a brow. “And you will want me to follow some of those rules, won’t you?”

He gave another incline of his head.

“That could prove difficult,” she sighed.

“I don’t think it will. You seem an intelligent sort.”

“That’s true.” She smiled, enjoying his admiration of her brain. Not every man liked an intelligent lady. “I am, but how willing are you to allow me to be myself?”

“There’s only one answer to that,” he said softly, inclining his head downward, which caused his dark hair to feather against his cheek.

“And what is it?” she breathed. “I must know before I give you my answer because it is the main thing that my reply hinges upon.”

He smiled ruefully. “Your cousin told me the main thing would be if I won your family over.”

“I’m not my cousin, though he is close to right,” she replied, licking her lips, his nearness causing an ache to travel through her.

“Of course I will let you be yourself,” he returned, reaching up and tracing his fingertips along her chin. “It is you who I want for a duchess. I want you . Not anyone else. I could have anyone else.”

“Don’t be arrogant,” she teased, thrilling at the touch of his hand on her face.

“It’s not arrogance,” he replied honestly, tracing a hand up to cup her cheek. “It’s true. I could go out tomorrow, pick any young lady from the Season, and their mother would swoon with happiness. They’d shove their daughter at me, will she or nil she. Your family doesn’t swoon with happiness over such a thing or force you to bend. They’ve accepted me with a sort of reticence, given my personality, which is quite an unusual thing for me to experience. And again, I think it’s good for me. It will help me grow as a person. But I saw you in the park. I saw the way you behaved and the way you spoke, and I knew that you had to be my duchess. And that knowledge only grew when I saw you at the garden party and then again at the ball. Don’t you understand? I need someone like you. I need you to...”

She sucked in a breath. “You need me to rescue you.”

He winced. “That’s not the word I would use.”

“I thought you liked truth and accuracy,” she said.

“Truth can be dangerous and painful. It doesn’t always need to be shared.”

“I see,” she said. “Then I shall use a different word.”

He gently rubbed his thumb along her jawline. “What?”

“I will make your life palatable, won’t I?”

He grimaced. “It’s not the best word. Rescued might be better. Palatable sounds so...”

“Bland?” she cut in for him.

“Yes,” he said, sighing and lowering his forehead to hers for a moment.

The gentle intimacy of that gesture nearly undid her.

“You wish me to run the social side of your dukedom while you just get on with it, so you can be left alone. Isn’t that it? Because you are shy?”

He gave a nod against her, his pain palpable, his need so strong it passed from her to him through their touch. “Are you comfortable with that?”

“Of course I’m comfortable with that,” she replied, lifting her own hand to cup his strong jaw. “Especially since you’re being honest with me. If that’s all it is, there need be no worries. I will tuck you into a corner in a grand ballroom and make sure that everybody leaves you alone so that you can gaze upon us imperially, and I shall take care of all the conversation. I’m quite good at it. You won’t need to fill in. I can talk a million miles a minute if I want.”

At that, he threw back his head and laughed, a wonderful sound. “It doesn’t bother you then that that’s what I want you for?”

“No, I rather like it actually,” she said, thrilled to see him suddenly light, as if he’d lost a great deal of worry at her reply. “You see, you’ve seen my qualities that some might find irritating, and you have seen what they can be used for. I won’t just be some chatty wife. I will be your social ambassador.” She furrowed her brow. “That is

a strange mouthful of words. I don't know where the idea came from, but it suits, doesn't it? You need someone who will throw balls, throw fetes, arrange things for the tenants on your lands. You'll want me to take care of all of that. When you host large political dinner parties, you need someone to talk to all the other lords and politicians so you don't have to. Not because you're not interested in the subject, but because it pains you."

"I am actually very interested in the subject," he confessed. "But you have the right of it."

"Then I shall happily ease that burden."

His chest expanded against the linen sheet with a relieved breath.

She hesitated, then licked her lips. "Can you tell me why it is so difficult?"

His mouth pressed into a thin line, and a shadow danced over his face, the lightness slipping away.

She sucked in a breath. "It's all right," she said. "It's just your personality."

His eyes narrowed a bit, and then she felt the smallest of chills. Perhaps it wasn't his personality. Perhaps something had happened to him to make him thus, but that wouldn't stop her. She did not want to let go of the way he looked at her. She never wanted to let go of the way he made her feel, and she loved the fact that he saw her as someone who was so full of life and wanted to bring that into his own existence to make his life better.

It seemed like an extremely healthy thing to do, to be able to acknowledge one's weaknesses and try to find a way to mitigate them.

“All right then, Your Grace. My answer is...”

He leaned in, waiting.

She smiled, her heart swelling. “Yes. An unequivocal yes.”

He beamed down at her, closed his eyes, almost as if in prayer, before he announced, “I should like to get married at once.”

“At once?” she exclaimed. “If we do that, everyone will think that you have had me and that I am bearing your child.”

He scowled. “I’d like you to bear my child,” he said.

“Of course you would,” she replied, her mind racing to what it would require to make said child. “That will be one of my duties too, I’m certain. And as you can see, the Briarwoods are very capable of bearing children.”

“Indeed, you could populate the world.”

“Yes, that is what your sister said.”

“It wouldn’t be such a bad thing,” he mused, “if there were more of you in the world, changing it for the better.”

She angled towards him, sliding her hands to his arms, eager to embrace him. “We shall endeavor to do so. Our children will be amongst them.”

“Our children,” he repeated as if awed. “I can’t wait to have you. To make you mine.”

“I don’t suppose you have to wait to have me,” she whispered.

“I want to marry you now. Right away.”

“Why?” she teased. “Do you fear I’ll change my mind?”

A muscle tightened in his jaw. “You are the very devil, my dear, and I adore it. You will not be easy to manage.”

“Don’t try to manage me,” she warned. “It won’t go well. Just go with me, and you’ll be happy too.”

“Go with you?” he queried.

“Yes,” she replied, linking her hands behind his neck. “Hand in hand, we’ll go through our life together. Not one of us trying to manage the other.”

He frowned. “I thought wives always managed their husbands.”

She laughed at him. “Perhaps you are right. Perhaps we both shall be managing each other as long as it is out of caring and not out of control.”

“Then we will get married,” he said, “at once.”

She let out a sigh. “I suppose I shall allow myself to be managed in this, if you wish it so.”

It was so odd. She would have thought he wanted a grand wedding at St. Paul’s before all of London.

But of course not. He did not like crowds. That thought heartened her. He saw their

wedding not just as a cog in a contract, but something to be enjoyed.

Still, his eagerness to wed so fast...

A thought occurred to her, what her mother had said about making sure she negotiated what they both truly wanted. But he was so passionate about her. He wished to make her his. He wished to claim her, and she wished to be claimed. So, it would be fine. She had nothing to worry about.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:34 am

“I loathe this version of Lear !” the dowager duchess exclaimed, sitting in their box as she stared down at the stage and fidgeted. Her grandmama did not usually fidget, but when faced with this terrible version of King Lear , it was all her grandmother could do to keep in her chair.

Her grandmother had pontificated on the matter many a time. Actually, Portia had lost count of how many times over the years that her grandmother had voiced her dislike of it.

And before that, she knew that she had voiced it to her aunts and uncles when they were young!

It was an ever-repeating theme.

“Grandmama, why do you come if you hate it so much?” she inquired, perched on her own seat, her ivory skirts arranged about her.

Her grandmother huffed out an indignant breath and tugged at her long gloves. “You know I must come and support my sister. She has been cast as Goneril. So, needs must. Still, it is appalling what they did to the original text.”

“Yes, Mama,” Portia’s mother said indulgently. But then she added with her own serious critique, “I couldn’t agree with you more. Sometimes in New York, I’m tempted to try the original ending, but people are so sentimental.”

“Can you imagine insisting upon a happy ending?” the dowager duchess said, shuddering.

The Duke of Ferrars cleared his throat, looking suddenly appalled as he stood handsomely in his black evening kit. “I beg your pardon? Lear, a happy ending?” His frown deepened. “Lear does not have a happy ending.”

The dowager duchess brought her hand to her lace-covered bosom. “Be still my beating heart, my boy. You are a purist.”

“I don’t know if I’m a purist,” the Duke of Ferrars said, standing at the back of the box, clearly unwilling to sit down. “But I am unfamiliar with an alternative ending to the play. There is a different one than in the Folio?”

Portia laughed, looked up at the man who was going to be her husband in but in a few hours’ time, and said, “You are very fortunate then that you have not witnessed the new silly ending yet, though you are about to, and you have just won the approval of Grandmama and Mama for the rest of your life.”

“Well done me then,” the duke said with a tentative smile. “Still, I don’t follow.”

“Explain to your future husband,” her grandmother instructed, whipping out her fan and waving it, causing her curls to bounce as the theater filled to the brim with people showing off for each other in their fine clothes.

Portia was very familiar with it and prepared her usual response. “You see, a man named Tate rewrote the ending of the play King Lear,” she explained. “And Samuel Johnson himself said he could not bear how Cordelia died at the end of the play. So, in the happy version, she doesn’t die.”

The duke blinked. “Cordelia dies?” he asked.

She gasped. “Wait. You made it sound as if you had read the play and know it is a tragedy. How can you—”

And then he began to laugh.

“You told a joke!” she crowed, elated. “Mama, he has told a joke!”

Lady Juliet applauded. “Well done, Your Grace. You are growing with us, aren’t you? Soon we shall have you laughing all the time.”

The duke arched brow. “I don’t know if I would go that far, but it was nice, at least, to attempt to make all of you laugh.”

“I’m glad you think so, my boy,” said her grandmama. “What a pleasure it is to see you coming out of your shell.”

He gave a small bow at that, acknowledging the dowager duchess’s pleasure, but she had a funny feeling that it would be years before her soon-to-be husband actually came out of his shell. Still, it felt worth the attempt and the wait.

“Come and sit by me,” she said, patting the cushioned, high-back chair beside her.

A muscle tightened in his jaw and he folded his gloved hands behind his back. “I don’t feel like sitting. I find this all a bit...”

“Overwhelming?” she said softly.

“Indeed.”

“Let us slip out into the hall,” she ventured, gathering her skirts so that she could stand easily. “If you like?”

He gave her a grateful look.

Wordlessly, they headed out into the dark corridor where it was much cooler and not quite so full of the sounds of the audience arriving, taking their seats, and gossiping about each other.

He looked a bit like a caged animal, standing there in the flickering lamplight, his muscles taut and his face a mask as if he was willing himself to appear at ease.

He didn't look at ease.

"You don't have to stay," she offered.

He drew in a long breath, which sent his shoulders up to his ears. It did not make him seem more relaxed. "No, no. I want to stay," he rushed. "I don't have to speak to anyone, so it's not so very terrible," he said. "I can bear it...for your family."

"There will be more of them soon," she warned.

"Well, of course," he said. "I would have trouble believing that it was just the four of us."

And as if on cue, her cousins began appearing at the other end of the corridor.

"How many boxes do you own in this theater?" Rufus blurted.

It was an excellent question. What with all her aunts and uncles and their children, and the adopted Briarwoods too? It was quite easy to fill a theater!

"Grandmama has considered just buying the theater outright, since we have taken over a good portion of the left side. Most of the boxes belong to the Briarwoods, and we do fill them almost nightly. And if we don't sit in them, we allow some of our friends to."

“You really are all theater people.”

“It’s true,” she said.

He frowned. “You’re not going to suddenly become an actress.”

“Oh no,” she assured. “I have never longed to be on the stage. But you never know. One of our children might suddenly wish to. It does seem to be in the blood. After all, my mother, Grandmama, her mother, her sister...”

The duke winced.

She gave him a wry smile. “Are you thinking of retracting your proposal?”

“No,” he said. “I’m willing to take the risk.”

“That’s very brave of you.”

“Not as brave as your cousins who are fighting at war.”

She smiled at his clear admiration for her cousins. She admired them too. With all her heart. She always had and she always would.

Maximus, Octavian, Nestor, and Calchas all charged down the hall and, one by one, they pounded Rufus on the back.

“Bearing up, are we?” Maximus asked.

“Surviving the matriarchs?” asked Octavian.

“Life would be terrible without them,” pointed out Nestor.

“We’ll make a theater man out of you yet,” said Calchas.

“Not if you’re going to be bringing me to plays like this,” the duke groaned. “A happy ending?” he drawled.

“What? Don’t you like a happy ending?” Nestor asked.

“Not in Lear .” Rufus shuddered. “Your grandmother and I are on the same side in this.”

“Everybody is always on Grandmama’s side in our family,” said Nestor, “at least when they’re with her. But sometimes, you know, a happy ending is rather nice. It’s a long play and you get to the end of it and everybody’s dead. That’s a bit depressing.”

“Isn’t life somewhat depressing?” Rufus asked, frowning.

“It is,” agreed Maximus. “But sometimes you just want to go to the theater to have a good night.”

“That doesn’t sound very artistic,” the duke drawled.

“Not all of us are artistic,” Octavian said woefully.

“I can tell,” Rufus stated without irony.

“You’re all hopeless, actually,” Portia put in, loving each of them.

“Look, we’ve been putting on productions of Shakespeare since we were all in leading strings.” Maximus cocked his head to the side and teased without a hint of rancor, “What right have you to lecture? We have not seen you at the theater in years.”

“I am duly chastened,” the duke replied with a bow.

“Of course you are!” exclaimed Nestor.

“You’re a damned good sort,” enthused Octavian.

“You just might survive being with us,” Maximus said, grinning.

And then the cousins poured into the boxes.

“You handled that very well,” Portia said.

He blinked as if a whirlwind had passed over him. “Did I?”

“You will have to come to the theater almost nightly now.”

He pulled her against the curtain. “I will happily do so if I am with you.” And then he kissed her softly.

She kissed him back, giving in to the sensual delight, eager for their marriage when they need not wait another minute for more.

But the sound of footsteps gave her pause and she pulled back.

He groaned and blew out a breath. “Do you know where my sister is?”

“Margery is off with my aunts,” she said, willing her thoughts to behave. “She’s being shown off. She needs to be away from you more.”

“It is my job to protect her,” he stated. “She is my sister.”

She stroked the lapel of his coat, gazing up into his eyes. “And I admire you very much for wishing to protect her,” she said.

His unbridled energy surprised her. But it was tension. Tension at being surrounded by people in the theater. He wasn’t ready to go back to the box, and she rather wondered how he was going to survive sitting through almost three hours, coiled as he was.

As they strode down the corridor, helping him to walk off whatever nervousness was there, she said, “We can do this several times,” she said, “if you like. The play won’t begin for several minutes.”

“Several minutes?” he echoed and then he grimaced. “Do I need to talk to more people?”

“Possibly just my family.”

“I truly don’t mind your family so much.” His hands curled into fists as he strained against his feelings. “As long as we can avoid everyone else.”

“Well, then let me take you down to the back of the theater, where we can be away from everyone.”

“What?” he breathed, agog.

“Yes. Wait just a moment.”

Quite taken with her idea, she rushed back into the box and whispered into her grandmama’s ear.

Her grandmother leaned back, approval shining on her features. “What an excellent

idea, my girl. Do take him. It is an excellent solution to his predicament.”

With that, she slipped back out to the hall and took the Duke of Ferrars by the hand and smiled at him. “I’m going to take you somewhere you’ve never been.”

And then she quietly led him down through the back stairs, behind the curtains, through a door, and to the rear of the theater where set pieces were ready to be moved swiftly in and out.

“What is all this?” he breathed, his gaze sweeping around, full of the wonder of a boy.

She squeezed his hand, overjoyed at his pleasure. “This is the magic of the theater.”

The rough voices of Londoners filled the shadowed space as they readied everything backstage.

Actors were warming up their voices, getting ready to go on in their various elaborate costumes. Portia spotted her great-aunt Estella standing several feet away in a gorgeous Elizabethan costume, not far from the wings.

“Estella!” she whispered.

Her aunt, attuned to the slightest of details, turned, her paste jewels on her rich golden costume gleaming in the low light. Her makeup was exaggerated and made her appear fearsome yet beautiful.

“Is this the Duke of Ferrars?” her great-aunt asked, sauntering forward, her eyes dancing.

“It is indeed,” Portia said, feeling a wave of pride in her soon-to-be husband. Then

she realized exactly why she'd brought the duke here and it wasn't for quiet. "I felt that I should bring him to you. For your assessment."

"I thought you said I wasn't going to have to speak to more people," he said softly.

"This is family," she declared.

The duke's eyes bulged. "Of course. Forgive me. I have heard about you."

Estella's lips turned in an amused smile. "One does love to be talked about. And you are lucky that you've probably met almost all of the family now. I'm likely the last piece."

"And does that mean you are the most important one?" he said, his rich voice a low hum in the shadows.

"Oh, I do like the way you think, Your Grace," Estella returned. "I'm certainly the reason why Lady Juliet married an American."

The duke cocked his head to the side. "You are dangerous then," he said.

"Only if you consider choosing happiness dangerous."

The duke's eyes narrowed at that. "I can tell you are a remarkable person."

"If you can tell that, then you are an intelligent person," she replied. "How are you enjoying the theater so far?"

"It is a new experience."

"How unfortunate for you that you were never allowed to come." Estella lifted her

full sleeves, done in the medieval style, and swept them around as if she sensed a ghost or ill humor about her. “You know, I knew your father.”

“I’m sorry,” he replied.

She laughed at that. “What a good sense of humor you do have. Everyone who knew your father should get an apology. Are you like him?”

“I’m glad to know my sense of humor is growing,” he said. “And, no, I am not like him.”

Estella narrowed her eyes and lifted a pale finger to her rouged lips. “We shall have to wait and see. Sometimes our fathers and our mothers come out in us when we least expect it, when we think we are safe. You shall have to be very careful, lest your father finds a way to come out in you.”

He scowled at that. “The man’s dead and buried. He’s not going to cause any trouble anymore.”

“Glad to hear it,” Estella said before blowing out a breath and shooing them. “Now, run along, children, and go find a good, secluded spot to watch the play. The ending is so bad. I do hope you enjoy each other instead.”

“Estella!” she exclaimed.

“What?” her aunt asked as she batted her charcoaled lashes with faux innocence. “I’m not one of the silly pieces from the ton who thinks the two of you don’t wish to have a kiss and a cuddle before the wedding.”

The duke’s brows drew together. “I take your point,” he said, “but surely...”

“But surely what?” Estella replied. “Enjoy your life, Your Grace. You never know when it shall end.”

“Is that a warning?” he asked.

“Of course not,” Estella said gently. Kindly. “It’s a fact.”

And then the crowd outside began to hush.

It was so quiet that one could have heard a fan open.

Estella turned from them and, in a single moment, she seemed to transform from Estella—the woman of the theater who had grown up in the worst possible conditions and clawed her way up to be the most successful actress in England—to Goneril, dangerous daughter of King Lear, powerful beyond all recourse, ready to do her darkest.

And she strode forward into the light.

As the play slipped towards its altered ending, Portia could not ignore the feel of the duke’s hand so near hers. It was electric in the dark backstage. They lingered in the shadows, near where the ropes for the curtains and set pieces were positioned.

Her body sang with longing for his. Perhaps it was all the wanton, powerful women in her family history. But she wanted his kiss again. She wanted to be daring. With his heady strength and mercurial personality, she was drawn to his touch, drawn to the power that he evoked within her.

As if he felt it too, Rufus brushed her hand with his, then slowly wound his fingers through hers.

For a moment, she could not breathe.

“I want to kiss you,” he whispered.

“What about the play?” she teased.

“Your whole family thinks the ending is terrible,” he whispered. “Surely, our time can be better spent.”

Rufus turned to her and stroked a lock of hair back from her face before he teased her lower lip with his thumb.

“Not here,” she murmured. At any moment, a stagehand or actor could wander by.

“Where?”

She glanced about, and then she knew the exact place.

Silently, she guided him through the back of the theater and to the prop room.

No one would come here. All the props that were required for this play had long ago been taken out and set at the side stage.

Carefully, she inched the door open, guided him in, then lit the single lantern on the table.

The wick flickered to life, illuminating a room of magic. Or at least, the kind of magic that man made to fool the human eye.

The shelves were covered with crowns, painted gold and studded with paste jewels. There were objects of every imagining, goblets, books, chairs, mirrors, and there at

the back, a golden throne.

A low growl rippled from his throat as he took her in his arms. As if the reserved duke had gone and the witty, volatile man she so cared about emerged, he unleashed his passion upon her.

There were no more niceties. No reticence. No shyness. His mouth seized hers with the intent to consume. She met his passion with equal measure.

How she loved the feel of their tongues tangling, of their mouths giving and taking in hot kiss after hot kiss.

He maneuvered her to the golden throne and lowered her to it.

“What are you doing?” she gasped.

“Worshipping at your feet, as you deserve.”

He knelt down before her and took the hem of her skirts in his hands, then dragged it upward. He lowered his mouth to her thighs and pressed soft kisses along her skin.

The shock of it was delicious as he parted her thighs, and just as he was about to lower his mouth to her apex, he met her gaze and said, “If I could make you my queen, I would.”

“I don’t want to be a queen,” she whispered. “I simply want to be yours.”

A low growl of pleasure escaped his throat, and then he lowered his mouth to her most sensitive spot.

She arched against him, grabbing the armrests of the gold-painted throne. With each

wild kiss, each touch of his tongue, she lost herself to him.

He did not stop as she spiraled upward. Her breath came in fast takes and she strained, feeling as if she would break apart, and then he slid a finger deep inside her.

Portia's entire world transformed to bliss. Transformed to love. Transformed to giving herself totally and fully to the Duke of Ferrars.

He lowered her skirts then, his gaze hooded with his own desire.

"Let me help you up," he whispered.

She could scarce catch her breath, and her body was liquid with satisfaction. "But what about—"

He shook his head. "When we are wed. Not before."

It struck her then that somehow, even like this, he had controlled himself. That something deep inside him kept him imprisoned and unable to give himself over to their passion. But once they were married, she knew he would. And she could not wait to see it.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:34 am

“We can still run to New York,” Portia’s father said. “Are you absolutely certain about this, my darling?”

Her father’s American accent filled the coach as it rolled down Fleet Street, heading towards St. Paul’s. She was astonished by the crowds of people awaiting her arrival. Hundreds of them lined the road with flags in hand, cheering and throwing flowers into the streets.

The coach was bedecked with silk ribbons and flowers as was expected for a grand bridal affair. She had no idea how Rufus had done it in such a short period of time. But then again, he was the Duke of Ferrars. And dukes’ weddings were usually events for the whole city!

She had assumed when he picked a quick wedding that it would be in her family chapel. After all, many of her aunts and uncles had gotten married in it. But no, he had managed to arrange St. Paul’s Cathedral in but a few days’ time. And not only that, he’d arranged for her to be welcomed by crowds. Perhaps it was because he had put notices in the papers, stating that the Duke of Ferrars had found his bride and that the wedding would take place immediately due to his very good fortune and her superior charms, and all of London should rejoice.

The ton had also all been invited.

Her name was on everyone’s lips and in all the newssheets. And because she was wedding Ferrars, at present, no one dared to say an ill word.

It was going to be the grandest wedding of the Season, even though there wasn’t a

great deal of warning. She felt nervous, but she also felt excited. And she loved her father dearly.

She eyed the strong, handsome man who had swept her mother off her feet and taken her away from all of the society of London to a new bold way of existence.

“New York?” her father prompted again kindly. “It’s all happening terribly fast. You’re sure?”

“Papa, I am sure,” she affirmed, fidgeting with the exquisite lace at her bodice.

“Truly,” he returned, cocking his head to the side. “You and I could flee for the coast. A ship will be waiting and your mother will meet us. You know she would. She loves New York City.”

Portia laughed. It was true. Her mother did adore New York. She loved it too, but no matter what her father said, this was where she wanted to be, but she understood his sentiment. “Thank you, Papa. You do like him, don’t you?”

Her father was a printer who’d put his entire life into bringing truths and important facts to people. The one thing he hated more than anything in the world was people being misled through fictions presented as the truth, and he wished for the world to understand that they deserved so much more than they had.

Her father believed that this was no longer the age of kings, but the age of reason, and it was an opportunity for all to know freedom, not just an elite few.

He sighed. “Can I ever truly like an English aristocrat? Aside from our family, of course.”

“Is this hard for you, Papa?” she asked.

He frowned. "In what way?"

"That I'm marrying a duke and not an American."

He was silent for a long moment. "In many ways, you are actually choosing the sort of man that your mother longed for in her first Season. She was so determined to have a duke that she didn't even want to consider me. But your family knew that it was love between us. And I don't actually care if Ferrars is a duke or if he's a farmer, if he's an American or if he's an Englishman. My only fear, Portia," he began, "is that I do not see that you two have told each other of your love. And I worry that he is cold, and that he will struggle to love you the way you deserve."

"Oh, Papa," she rushed, her heart aching at her father's concern. She reached across the small space of the coach and took his strong hands in hers. Hands that had been so often stained by ink and labored to work his printing press over and over again, bringing knowledge to the world. "You are right. I don't know if he loves me, but I think that he does. And the truth is, and I cannot believe that I'm about to say it, but I am coming to love him, and I love the sort of life that I will have with him."

Love. It was true. And it was quite a realization to have on the way to one's wedding. But there it was.

"Do you really understand the sort of life you will have with him?" he ventured gently.

"Papa, I have grown up for half my life in the ton, surrounded by family, how could I not understand it?"

He paused, gathering his words. "But that's exactly what I'm concerned about. You have grown up surrounded by Briarwoods. They are not regular members of the ton. I know you know how unusual they are, but I just wish you to be absolutely certain.

This is the last moment you can change your mind, you know.”

Though she was touched, she tsked. “Papa, you shouldn’t be doing this in the coach on the way to the church. You should have said this last night.”

He scowled. “Your mother kept me very occupied last night. I think she was afraid I might make this sort of declaration.”

“Well, Mama was right.”

“She usually is,” her father agreed, squeezing her hands. And then he lifted one of his hands to her cheek, cupping it and gazing into her eyes adoringly. “You are my beloved daughter, Portia, and it would break my heart to see you live an unsatisfied life.”

She tilted her cheek into his palm, recalling all those years when she had sat beside him as he’d printed pamphlets, rode his shoulders, and been tossed into the air until she couldn’t breathe for laughing. How she’d been loved!

“No one can do that to me, Papa, except me. You taught me that. And so did Mama. My husband cannot take away who I am.”

Her father nodded. “Good. If you know that, I feel better.”

“But, Papa, I know this is right.”

“That’s all I needed to hear.”

The cacophony of the crowds increased as the coach pulled up before the steps of St. Paul’s.

She looked to the window and gazed out to the massive cathedral that was the heart of the city in so many ways.

The door to the coach opened.

Her father climbed down, then offered his hand up to her. She took it and descended slowly out to the wide sprawling steps. She clasped her bouquet of beautiful flowers in hand.

Nearly shaking with how important this day was, she drew in a bolstering breath, and then they began to climb the steps and head towards the entrance that lead into the nave.

Her family was already inside. The church, no doubt, was full to the brim with people.

And as her father guided her into the beautiful, soaring space, she allowed herself to smile. She did not feel an ounce of fear, no, she felt only anticipation. How thrilling it was going to be, being Rufus's wife! How she longed to spend her days with him.

Her father began leading her down the aisle. What felt like the entire ton gazed at her, amazed. Their eyes were wide, their jewels flashed, their beautifully coiffured hair shone in the morning light. And their multihued, perfectly tailored clothes were a sea of cheerful colors.

This was a wedding after all.

And they all wanted to see her. The one who had caught the Duke of Ferrars.

She strode down the wide aisle in her own perfect gown—a gown that had been made quickly, but one that fit her to perfection. It was covered in embroidered flowers and

seed pearls at the hem and at the throat. It was simple, elegant, and yet she felt bold in it and beautiful.

Down the long nave, she caught sight of her future husband.

The duke stood, imperious.

It did not surprise her. In this environment, of course, he would be distant, a fortress, but all the while hiding his shyness at being forced to be in company.

She hoped one day he would tell her exactly why he was so shy, but that would take time and it would take trust. She just had to be patient, and he would let her in.

As her father brought her before the duke and handed her over, her future husband's eyes shone with triumph, and he beamed down at her.

"No regrets?" Rufus asked softly.

"I'm marrying you. How could I have regrets?" she teased.

And then he took her to face the archbishop. Of course, Ferrars would have the archbishop!

The ceremony went by in a rush.

The archbishop read from his book, and she and Rufus both said their I dos. And, in the last moment, something crossed his face—a look of relief...as if he had finally accomplished something that he had always needed to do. And, of course, he had. He'd found his duchess. It was a very important thing for a duke to do.

She did not know why, but it gave her a moment's pause.

He closed his eyes for a moment, then his shoulders went back and down, and it was as if he was stepping into a long-known role.

It reminded her of her Aunt Estella becoming Goneril.

Rufus...was gone. Replaced by the duke .

She tried to catch his eye, but he turned out to the crowd. He took her hand and then, to the cheers of the onlookers, escorted her out to the steps of St. Paul's, where people cheered anew and threw flowers at them.

She waved back excitedly.

"A little less enthusiasm," he said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Just a little bit less enthusiasm. You wave so beautifully," he said, "but they will enjoy it even more if you are more reserved."

"I am not very reserved," she pointed out, still waving so that her lace shook.

He cleared his throat slightly. "I know, but in this, it would be perfect. You are a duchess now," he said.

She frowned inwardly for a moment and then waved a little bit more carefully. A little bit less excitedly, perhaps with a little less American flavor.

She looked up at her husband.

He was not waving at all. He stood there simply absorbing the approval and praise of

the crowd, hands folded behind his back. He did not need their approval or praise, she realized. He did not need the approval or praise of anyone.

But as she gazed up at him, she wondered if that need had been driven out of him as a child, the need for others to like him.

She swallowed. She was being silly. It was just wedding-day nerves. Her Rufus, the one who had won her heart, was waiting to come back out as soon as they were alone. That was all that mattered.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:34 am

In all her life, Portia had never been in a house so magnificent and so cold. Ferrars House, just off of Green Park, took up more than a city square. In fact, she was fairly certain it took up almost two .

It was full of every glorious thing. Marble stretched everywhere. Gold filigree trimmed everything. Columns spiraled upward. Paintings that were vast hung from every wall. Grecian busts filled the space. Yet there was not an ounce of warmth to be felt.

The Duke of Ferrars's grand house in the center of London was meant to awe and inspire, but one thing she knew for certain as she stood on the elaborately designed marble floor, spinning around slowly, looking upward to the painted mural on the ceiling: it was not a home.

Nothing felt like home here.

After growing up in Heron House and the small house in New York City, this was like coming to a strange island where nothing made sense. There were dozens of servants, but no one for them to wait upon. It hit her, as she stood there in the vast silence of the massive house with dozens upon dozens of rooms, that the only people who lived here were her husband and his sister. And now, of course, herself. She had not anticipated how difficult it might be to go from Heron House, a noisy boisterous place full of family and, oftentimes, friends, to something like this.

He took her hand in his.

“Welcome to your new establishment, Your Grace,” Rufus said, giving her a slight

bow.

She tried to smile, but she felt overwhelmed. “It is extremely large,” she pointed out.

He nodded simply. “My father had it improved in the last century.”

Improved . She rather wondered about that. “Oh?” she queried.

He gazed about as if looking at it for the first time, as if he did not care for it at all but could still recite all the facts about it. “Yes, he updated all the Jacobin features. He wanted it to be modern and, well, intimidating,” he said.

“He certainly succeeded,” she managed. “Are your rooms like this?”

He eyed her curiously. “Yes,” he said. “I’ll show you your rooms first and then you can see mine. Come with me.”

Of course, she would have her own set of rooms, but she had no intention that they should be apart. They were newlyweds! And her parents didn’t have separate apartments. She’d have to let him and the servants know that she had no intention of keeping her own separate room.

They passed dozens of elaborately dressed and bewigged servants. Servants who looked almost like statues.

She smiled at them and nodded. No doubt, soon, she’d be introduced to the housekeeper, butler, and cook, but it was late, and she was eager to begin her wedding night. So, she was quite glad that Rufus rushed on.

Still, it was odd that there was so little response. They did not even smile. It was astonishing.

“Do your servants not like the idea of a new duchess?” she whispered, feeling a chill that wasn’t just the draftiness of the place.

“Oh, they are doing exactly as they have always been told,” he replied.

“And what is that?” she asked.

“They are to observe without opinion.”

She frowned, trying to hide her dismay. Of course, to a certain degree, that was the rule of many homes in the ton, but not at Heron House. The servants, of course, were not family members, but they were given a great deal of respect and treated like people who had thoughts and feelings of their own.

This was something that she would have to work on here. There was a culture in this place that was old, and she did not think it was actually Rufus’s, but she was the duchess now, and she’d be able to do what she pleased. That thought gave her encouragement as he led her up the many staircases and past several landings and then to a long hall that overlooked Green Park.

He stopped before a beautiful double door. “This shall be your apartment,” he said, pleased.

“Oh, I am excited to see it,” she rushed, trying to find enjoyment in this odd house.

It was the right thing to say, but she didn’t feel excitement. She felt as if she had been brought to a monument of power. A museum at the center of London where there was little comfort and no happiness. Except she was going to bring happiness to this place.

With him.

Rufus threw open the doors and gestured for her to enter. She strode in and was immediately struck again by how little personality there was in the room. Oh, it was beautiful. The curtains were rose damask, and a fire crackled in the marble fireplace. The mantel was engraved beautifully with flowers. And then there was the bed—a massive four-poster affair.

The room was strewn with ornate tables that she guessed were from France. There were beautiful paintings of demure-looking ladies upon the walls.

There were rich carpets along the floor and porcelain figurines of beautiful shepherdesses and long-eared dogs decking every surface. It was a room fit for a princess, not just a duchess, and yet it somehow felt as if all life had been sucked from it.

She was going to have to do something about that. She'd throw the windows open and let the fresh air in. Yes, that's what she'd do. But more importantly, she'd begin with him.

Their love would warm things up quite a bit.

Rufus stood before the fire, his hands behind his back. A strict posture that he was now adhering to that she hadn't noticed before.

She cleared her throat. "I will be able to make it as I like, won't I?"

He stared at her for a long moment. "Of course, the rooms are yours, but what needs to be changed?"

"Oh," she laughed. "Well, everything is beautiful, but it's certainly not my taste. I'd like to bring in some more cheerful and comforting things."

He frowned. "Like what?"

"Well, you've been to Heron House."

"Yes," he said, his brow furrowing all the more. "But this isn't Heron House. They look nothing alike. Will that fit?" he asked.

She blinked at him. "My tastes will fit because I will fit," she said.

He had clearly not considered this, and suddenly she wondered if it had just been his plan that she would slip into his life with little change. But he wanted her in it. He wanted her exuberance and her abilities, so, of course, he wanted the change. He was just being reticent about it.

"Never you fear," she said. "You will not need to worry a bit about it. That is my domain anyway."

At last, he smiled at her. "That is absolutely true," he said. "This house has not had a duchess in some time, so it'll be wonderful to have a lady here who will run the whole place."

"Did Margery not run anything?" she asked, folding her hands before her, lest she fidget with her gown. After all, evening was falling, and she longed for their wedding night to begin.

"No," he said. "She was too young when Mother died, and I wanted her to have a bit of carefree time as she grew. A life that was not riddled with responsibilities. Her girlhood was..."

He cleared his throat. "The house will do well under your care."

She nodded. What had Margery's girlhood been like? Strict.

The word popped into her head. Yes. Strict and joyless. Luckily, she'd had a kind brother.

She wanted to ask more but knew, with Rufus, that information would be given to her slowly when he was ready, and that was enough. She placed her bouquet of flowers down on the inlaid table with its patterned mosaic and strode to him. "I think the best thing that we could possibly do now is to begin to make this place ours."

His smile began to warm. "Oh, that is what you think, is it?" he asked, pulling her against him.

She gave a nod. "I do think so. You see, this place feels as if it hasn't known any laughter."

"It hasn't," he stated suddenly, his smile dimming again, but his arms stayed wrapped about her. "You are not wrong about that."

"So," she said, tilting her head back, "that must begin to change immediately."

"Must it?" he asked, arching a brow.

"Oh, yes. Isn't that why you married me? To have a bit of laughter in your life? And exuberance?"

He arched a brow, sliding his hands along her back. "I married you because I think you would make the best duchess for me."

"And this is part of that," she answered.

He stared at her for a long moment. “Of course. We will do whatever you suggest.”

Despite his arms about her, and his strong hands stroking her, he seemed...so strange in this moment.

She didn’t know what to think. Where was the man who had stood in the garden telling her that he wanted her exactly as she was? Had he slipped away or was it this momentous day? Was he just tired?

Yes. That had to be it. He was tired, and it had been a very busy day, and he’d had to arrange a great deal. The wedding breakfast had been full to the brim with people at Heron House, and that had no doubt made him exhausted.

After all, he’d invited all of the ton and her family was quite large. And for a shy person, that would take quite a toll.

Still...a part of her cried out, Where is my Rufus?

“Let us sit before the fire,” she suggested, longing to go back to the way they’d been so easy in each other’s company before this morning. Before the wedding.

“Ah,” he sighed. “I have a plan.”

“You do?”

“I shall go to my chambers and prepare and give you a few moments to ready yourself. Then I will return. I’ve arranged a lady’s maid for you.”

“Surely, my own will arrive—”

“You are a duchess now,” he cut in. “And you need the lady’s maid of a duchess. Not

of a half-American miss,” he replied. “Much will be required of you.”

The room seemed to spin for a moment. What was happening? Surely, she was mistaken. He just meant to be kind. This was all just the oddity of being married. It would take time for them to get used to it.

And he was more formal than she. She’d have to get used to that.

“Thank you,” she replied, blinking.

As soon as he slipped out of the room, there was a knock on her own door. “Come in,” she called.

A lady entered with blonde hair, bright blue eyes, and a very simple gown. “Bonsoir, Madame. I am Sabine.”

“Oh, you are French,” Portia exclaimed.

“Mais oui. Nothing but a French maid for a duchess. That is what Monsieur le Duc said.”

Did he indeed? Well, it was lovely in its way.

“I am very happy to have you. Will you ready me for bed?”

The maid inclined her head, then gestured to the armoire. “All of your things have already been put into the armoire, and I have picked a nightgown for you.”

“You have?” she exclaimed. “My mother and I picked—”

“The duke arranged for a large trousseau to be sent. There are many elegant things!

Including the finest silk nightgown.”

She blinked, astonished. “Did he?”

“Oh, yes,” the maid said. “It all came from the finest shops on Bond Street.”

“How very kind of him,” Portia mused. It was thoughtful. He was bestowing presents upon her. Decadent presents, no doubt. It was what a duke should do for his duchess. Presents were wonderful, but she’d have to make sure that he knew she wanted him most of all.

“Would you like me to unpin your hair and help you undress for the evening?”

She nodded. “I feel a little...”

“Yes?” Sabine prompted.

“Homesick.”

She clucked her tongue sympathetically. “But of course. You have gone from your home to this one, and I can sympathize. I left my home many years ago, but I am happy here.”

“Are you?” she asked. “How long have you been at this house?”

“Oh!” Sabine laughed, bemused. “I meant in England. Today is my first day here. Actually, I unpacked your things this afternoon.”

“So we are both strangers here, and we shall help each other,” Portia replied.

“We shall help each other,” agreed Sabine.

Portia spotted a long mirror and strode towards it. As her slippered feet trod across the elegant white and blue woven rug, she realized she was trembling. She had not realized how momentous this would be for her. Her new role. Away from family, away from her home.

But she'd be with Rufus, and that would make everything all right.

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The moment she had become his duchess had changed everything. It shouldn't have, but it had, and Rufus was trying not to come apart.

But there was an inescapable fact. She wasn't just Portia any longer. She was the Duchess of Ferrars. Rufus rubbed his temples.

The hours and hours of lectures his father and tutor had imparted on him raced through his head. He blinked and tried to shove that all away.

She was perfect. She would be perfect.

He could feel the drive to be the duke his family had always insisted on rising up, stealing the air from his lungs. Just as he had been trained, he would always be a great duke.

She would be a great duchess too. He'd ensure that. And with his help, her own natural skills would make her the best Duchess of Ferrars that the title had ever known.

It was a harsh set of thoughts for a wedding night. But this was not a normal wedding night. The wedding nights of dukes never were. This was a sealing of agreements, of a deal, of a union of two powerful families, intent on increasing their power.

That's what his father had always insisted.

Yet, his need for her was intense. As he lingered on the other side of her chamber door, all thoughts of duty threatened to scatter. She was not just his duchess. She was

Portia.

Witty, feisty, strong.

That was who he wanted to make love to this night.

Drawing himself together, he raised his fist and knocked.

“Come in,” she called.

He closed his eyes for a moment, willing the war within him to step back. Feeling the din in his head quiet a bit, he grabbed the handle and strode in, his dressing gown whispering over the woven rug.

She stood waiting for him, bathed in moonlight.

The nightgown kissed her perfect body as if the moon was caressing her with gauzy fabric.

The thin silk skimmed her breasts and taut nipples. It flowed like water over her curved hips, and he longed to cross the room and tear it from her body.

He was a duke and had known many women. It was what men of power did. His father had ensured he'd had a suitable education. And he was a man of strong appetites and had had many mistresses over the years who made no demands of him.

But she?

She did something to him that no woman had ever done. She made him wish to lose himself entirely in her. He could never allow that. But he would savor her all he could without giving in. No, he would always hold the reins of control and attend to the

rules that had been carved into him.

Dukes did not lose control.

Dukes maintained their power.

They were never powerless.

They were above everyone and everything.

Even love.

And if he gave himself over, he'd surely lose that power, would he not?

So, he would be the one in control.

"Do you like it?" she whispered.

He inclined his head. "Do you?"

Portia licked her lips, stroking one of the delicate ribbons between her breasts. "It's beautiful. Thank you."

He smiled slowly and crossed to her, slipping his fingers under the thin material at her shoulder. "You look stunning, but you will look even better out of it."

Her perfect lips parted, and she did not resist as he slid the silk down her body, leaving her bared before him.

"Are you nervous?" he asked.

“Yes,” she replied, her eyes wide.

He was going to show her pleasure. He was going to make her glad she belonged to him.

“Surrender to those feelings,” he replied softly. “Do not fight them, or you will be tense.”

She nodded, considering this before she murmured, “Kiss me?”

Portia offered her lips to him, but instead, fearing he would lose his wits entirely if he gave into the intimacy of their kiss, he gently tilted her head to the side. For when he kissed her, he felt as if he was releasing his soul to her, and he had to be terribly careful.

He kissed her throat as if they had all the time in the world. As if he was not fighting the urge to claim her like a man of old, such was his hunger for her. But that... That was impossible for so many reasons.

A low moan of pleasure slipped past her lips and she clung to his shoulders. Wordlessly, he picked her up and carried her to the inlaid table near the fire.

She linked her legs about his waist, gasping with surprise at how easily he held her up.

He supposed he should take her to the bed and simply get on with it.

But he did not wish to do that. During the day, he would follow all the rules. He’d be the duke he had to be.

But at night? Here in these rooms, he could leave the Duke of Ferrars behind and

simply be Rufus.

Here with her, he could be all that she needed him to be. Even if he could never let that side of himself be truly free.

Gently, he laid her back and gazed at her pale body stretched out before him.

Her hair splayed about her face, teasing over the mosaic patterns on the table. He traced her collarbones, then raked his hands down her breastbone, over her ribs, and around her hips.

Her eyes widened, as if she was both surprised and awed by his passion.

He bit his lower lip, contemplating her breasts, anticipating their taste. Slowly, he lowered his head, then took each pink nub into his mouth in turn.

A stunned breath escaped her lips, and she rocked her hips upward.

Slowly, he kissed her, licked her, nipped at her body, teasing it to life, marking it as his.

Once he paused at the juncture of her thighs, he closed his eyes, ready to be drunk on her pleasure. For her pleasure made him feel as if he was the most powerful man alive. Far more than any dukedom ever had.

As he did in the theater, he took her soft, already slick petals into his mouth and teased her until she was moaning and arching against him.

Her hands slid into his hair and she tugged to the point of pain. How he loved making her lose herself to bliss.

To prepare her, he slipped a single finger into her hot core and then another.

Her legs shook as she neared her pinnacle and he did not stop, finding that sweet spot inside her, whilst he circled and kissed the spot without.

Her legs suddenly tensed, and she let out a wild cry.

It was only then that he stood and let his dressing gown fall to the floor. He took his cock into his hand, slid the head up and down her slick sex, and then rocked forward.

Her eyes widened as he thrust past her maidenhead, but she was so ready that it was no obstacle.

She sucked in a sharp breath but then melted again as he began to thrust ever deeper into her core.

The hot ecstasy of it was almost terrifying. She was so perfect, such paradise, that all his control was slipping away. Her sweet body took his and made it one with her own. And with each thrust, he feared he would lose himself forever.

He tried to resist it. To fight it, but when her legs came up and locked about his hips, pulling him even closer, as if she would unite them for all time, he could hold back no longer.

They crested the wild storm together. He cried out her name as his hips shot forward.

His thoughts disappeared, the world vanished, and when he lowered himself, utterly spent, he caught a glimpse of what true joy could be like.

And it was the most terrifying thing he'd ever felt.

For joy had always, always been crushed out of him.

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Five weeks later

Rufus was struggling. Struggling harder than he had in years. He had not understood what the actual marriage would do to him. Portia was a duchess now. She wasn't just a young lady that he was pursuing. She was his wife. She was supposed to fulfill a myriad of obligations, things that he had been raised to expect and demand and want.

But he didn't want to be like his father. He didn't want to make those sorts of hard commands towards his wife.

And so he had, over the last weeks, written her lists, given her information, made several suggestions on how best to be the most effective duchess. How to be more of a Barret than a Briarwood.

It wasn't working.

She didn't like it. He could see it on her face when he spoke to her about the best way to address lords at political dinners. Her face would change as he instructed her that joviality was lovely, but jests should remain free of the sort of wit that lords might not follow.

And of course...it might have been the fact that he was speaking to her less and less about anything that was not related directly to her role as a duchess.

He was failing her, and yet he couldn't stop. But if she could just see that she was so close to being perfect...

He knew that he didn't wish her to be some automaton. That's not why he had married her. If he had wanted an automaton, he could have picked a dozen other ladies in society. No. He had wished for and wanted her. So, why couldn't he have her? Why couldn't he let her be as she was?

He ground his teeth in the breakfast room. She would come down at any moment and their daily difficulty would begin. There should have been no difficulty. They were newlyweds, and it was as though once he had married, he had lost the ability to communicate with her.

Oh, in the hours in her chamber, when he could leave the world behind, when he could forget that he was the Duke of Ferrars, things were different. He could give into the passion that simmered in his soul for her.

But when dawn came, his rules returned and his strict code of how he had to live.

He was no longer a man courting a lady. He was a duke giving commands.

And he hated it.

He hated it with every fiber of his being. How could he go back to how he'd been with her for that short time? Just with her.

He had known that once he married her, he would need her to be everything that he required. He had even told her that, and yet it all felt terribly wrong. It no longer felt easy. He no longer felt like he could simply banter with her.

Was it this house, this place? Was it too permeated with the memories of his father and his grandfather, his mother, his grandmother? The coldness and cruelty that had taken place on a daily basis? Was that why it was all going so wrong?

Everything had been different at Heron House. Hadn't it?

He grabbed his coffee and drank deeply, wishing to distract himself from the turmoil of emotions cycling through him.

"Good morning," Portia called with a forced smile.

He knew it had to be forced. She wasn't pleased with him, and he couldn't blame her.

As she strode through the breakfast room doors, she swept forward and placed a kiss on his cheek. How he admired her for continuing to try to bring more out of him than was there.

"Good morning to you, Portia," he said. "Sit. All of the things that you prefer are here."

He'd arranged it. He'd arranged a great many things for her. But they were all things. No spirit. No soul. And that was what she longed for. It was pure hell because it was the one thing he could not figure out how to give.

"Thank you," she said. "You are always so thoughtful."

He was thoughtful. He was good at thoughts, but he was not good at feelings, and the feelings inside him were coming to such a boiling point that he did not know what to do.

He could hear his father making demands for what he had to do and what a duchess should do. But he had not wanted what his father wanted! Not really. Not truly. Just a few rules. That was all. And yet the coldness that had overcome him in the last weeks—it was terrifying. It was like something had reached out from the past, grabbed him, and refused to let him be happy.

He looked at his wife, who was so beautiful, so boisterous, so wonderful, and he knew he was letting her slip away from him somehow.

“I found several engagements for you, my dear,” he said, clinging to what he knew. His position. “I need you to go to into the city and give a little speech today. Then I have arranged for a dinner party where you will lead the discourse on the changes in rules to chimney sweeps.”

“All of that sounds wonderful,” she said, taking a piece of toast. “But it is a bit late notice. I had a plan of my own for this afternoon, and I would like it very much if you came.”

He frowned. She had made plans of her own?

She poured out a cup of tea for herself, lifted it to her lips, and looked over at him expectantly.

“I’m very busy,” he said.

“You are always very busy,” she replied. “But surely you can make a bit of time for me.”

“You knew that I would always be very busy,” he pointed out.

“Yes, of course,” she rushed, reaching out to touch his hand. “You’re a duke. My Uncle Leander is always busy too, but I find he and my Aunt Mercy do wonderful things together.”

He tensed under her touch, wishing he could relax, but years and years of being driven to be the sort of duke his father wished was holding him hard. “Your aunt is also the owner of a publishing company,” he said. “I think your aunt is very busy.”

“Yes,” she said, frowning. “Are you suggesting that I am not busy?”

“Not exactly,” he said, realizing even as he spoke that he was making a muck of everything. He had assumed she would do all that he asked, but with her nature. Perhaps with a touch less eccentricity now that she was married... He’d been a fool. And he’d no doubt lied to himself to have her. To convince himself that she would be perfect.

“Portia, you are ready now to take up all of the responsibility of a duchess. And so I think...”

She cocked her head to the side. “You do realize that my aunt is a very responsible duchess, but she also has the publishing company. Perhaps I should take up something as well.”

He blinked. Something else? The Ferrars dukedom was all that mattered. His father had beaten that into him daily for years. “I beg your pardon?”

She sipped her tea, her eyes glowing with excitement. “It’s what I was inviting you to. One of my uncles has the most wonderful institution in the east of London. He also works with his father-in-law to bring education and theater and Shakespeare to poor people all over England. I think it’d be wonderful if you came and you witnessed what they’re doing. They do the most tremendous work with children.”

A cold shiver went down his back. “Yes, that sounds marvelous.”

“Oh, good,” she said. “I think it’s very important that when we have children, they go about and they understand what the world’s really like. Perhaps our children can study Shakespeare with the children my uncle works with.”

His hand curled under hers and his heart began to slam against his ribs, all whilst an

icy sweat broke out along his back. “You wish me to be involved with the children of commoners?” he asked. “I’m more than happy to give whatever money is required.”

“No, no,” she protested, clearly certain he was simply confused and not alarmed. “It’s more than that. You should go and meet them and speak with them and see what kinds of lives they have.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he said.

“Why not?” she asked, tilting her head to the side. “It is so important to get involved in the lives of people—”

“Beneath me,” he said.

She flinched. “I beg your pardon?”

He cleared his throat and sat a little straighter, willing his memories to stay at bay. “I understand that your family is very passionate about helping people. So am I. I think you would agree with that if you considered all I have done in the House of Lords and all the work I am doing with the King. I want to improve the lives of the common man, but I don’t actually interact with the people—”

“Beneath you,” she finished, flinching.

And in that moment, he felt as if he had failed her desperately.

“Yes, that’s correct,” he rasped. “And it’s not because I think that there’s anything wrong with them. It’s just that it’s best if we keep a distance. You see, I’m a duke and—”

“Yes,” she said, “I see. You are a duke, and you mustn’t lower yourself.”

Her words were clear, but the tone to them was so disappointed, so appalled that he felt a wave of nausea come up from his stomach and threaten his throat. Memories of his father channeled through him—grabbing him as he tried to sail those kites that day, beating him, being cruel to him, being disdainful of him.

For playing with boys who were not of his class.

“You don’t understand,” he whispered. “I can see it on your face.”

She was silent for a moment. “What can you see?”

He shook his head. “You think that I’m being cruel, cold, superior.”

“Aren’t you?” she asked.

“No,” he bit out, grabbing his napkin and balling it in his fist. “I’m doing what needs to be done.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” she said. “You are so full of life, or at least you were. What is this change in you? Please let me in.”

“What do you mean let you in ?” he growled, a tide rushing up inside him. “I’ve never tried to keep you out. I’ve shown you exactly who I am from day one, more than anyone else.”

She winced, but she did not give way. “And that’s why I feel the loss of it so much more recently,” she said. “It’s as if when we got married at St. Paul’s, everything changed. You became someone else.”

A muscle tightened in his jaw as a part of him longed to confess. Confess the horror of his childhood and how he had been shaped into a person who couldn’t be with

others. "I am a duke. This is exactly who I am."

"But where is the man who raced a curricule with me? Where is the man who followed me into gardens?"

"I am right here," he ground out. "But my role takes precedence and that consumes most of my day."

"So you are only yourself with me at night. Is that it?"

Any reply died on his lips. Perhaps it was true. Perhaps he could only unburden and unfurl himself in the shadows, in quiet, in front of the fire with her in the evening.

They sat like that. Two enemies on a battlefield. Waiting to see who would fire another volley.

At long last, he began, "I won't deny it. But you need to understand this is how I was trained to be. I am fulfilling my role."

"My uncle fulfills—"

"Stop comparing me to your uncle," he hissed, his heart twisting. Leander Briarwood, Duke of Westleigh, had had parents who loved and understood him. He'd not had the hard stick, a lonely room, and utter derision to mold him. "I am not your uncle, and I don't think I will ever be."

"No," she agreed tightly. "You are correct. You are not, but I feel that there is something you are not telling me. Something happened to you to make you push me away. You are not truly like this, Rufus, not in your heart. I can see it deep in your eyes. You long for so much more. It's why you picked me. So allow your choice to hold."

“Perhaps I was mistaken,” he gritted suddenly, and then he tried to swallow the words back.

“You regret it?” she whispered, her eyes widening. “You regret me?”

“No,” he rushed. “I do not regret you. I do want more for myself, for my children, but you need to understand that I was taught most strongly that...”

The words froze in his throat. He couldn’t. He couldn’t admit it. And he couldn’t face it.

Rufus pushed himself back, placed his napkin down, and headed out of the room. Something was flooding through him. It was like a typhoon stealing his words, stealing his thoughts.

He could make no sense of it. Unable to speak, unable to defend himself, unable to justify his own behavior, he hated himself for his weakness.

For the way his father had stolen his happiness, and all future happiness too, to make what he thought was a perfect duke.

He hated his father, even though he was in his grave, for not allowing him to change.

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Portia sat at the breakfast table trying not to cry.

This was not at all how she'd imagined marriage would be. Not even to Rufus, who she had known might prove a bit difficult. But something had happened on the day of their wedding. She'd begun to witness his withdrawal, even at their wedding breakfast and then later in the evening.

Oh, he'd made wonderful love to her, and he continued to do so every night. But he was like two people, someone who could show passion and kindness under the light of the moon. But then, when day came, he was someone else entirely. Someone she barely knew. Certainly not the man who had jested with her and stolen kisses.

But whoever this Rufus was, he had been forged a long time ago. She could feel the pain and intensity of it. A pain he tried to hide.

She was trying her best to be the sort of duchess he wanted, but it was not easy, because what he had said he wanted and what he actually wanted seemed to be two different things.

He wished for someone to run his social calendar, which, of course, she could do. But he also seemed to wish her to be rather unexciting while doing it. He gave her tasks every day, things to get done, and gave very little allowance for her own ideas about things.

He'd said he would let her be herself.

Why had he retracted, trying to make up for it with gifts that arrived from Bond

Street almost daily?

She knew why, or at least she thought she did. Sometimes it was impossible for people to change even if they wanted to. This Rufus that was with her? It wasn't a new Rufus. It was the old Rufus. Who he had been before he met her.

And she had been a fool. She should have listened to Nestor and to Calchas. They'd said he was boring with everyone, and she'd assumed that because he was different with her, that he would be different when they married.

It was as if once he'd caught her, he'd felt he could return to the person he must have always been.

"Don't cry."

She wiped her eyes fast.

"Margery," Portia said, "do come in."

Margery slipped into the breakfast room and sat down beside her, then took her hand in hers. "You mustn't cry. You're the happiest person I know."

Portia laughed ruefully, horrified to realize she had not felt happy in some time. "Well, even happy people cry, Margery. Remember what we told you?"

"Yes, but this is different, isn't it?"

Hot tears slipped down her cheeks. "Yes, it is. I confess I did not anticipate this."

"Maybe I should have warned you," Margery whispered, sympathy softening her gaze, "but I hoped... He seemed so happy with you. He seemed as if he was letting

all of it go.”

“Letting all of what go?” she asked. She had to know. She had to understand because she did have a suspicion. These last days she had felt odd. Different. Her body changing as if it had suddenly taken a new course.

And if what she thought was true, she couldn’t abandon the Rufus who had loved her. She needed to make sense of it all.

“Papa,” Margery confessed, looking ashamed as she did so. “I don’t think you know what Papa was truly like. I don’t think anybody on the outside could know. He terrorized my brother.”

“Terrorized?” she echoed, her throat tightening with dismay. “What do you mean?”

“Anytime he stepped out of line, Papa beat him or had him beaten. Sometimes he withheld food from him. He kept him alone, away from anyone, and he certainly wouldn’t let him speak to or be kind to any person who was deemed lesser. And when one is a duke, everyone is lesser.”

And Portia realized that was what he had meant by beneath him . “He doesn’t think he’s better than anyone else, does he?” she asked softly.

Margery shook her head vehemently. “No. He never has and never will. But you have to understand there were consequences whenever he tried to associate with anyone who was deemed—”

She cut in. “Lesser.”

“Yes.”

“Well, that would explain him this morning.”

“What do you mean?” Margery asked.

She drew in a long breath, hating how pain could shape people. How memory could control and destroy. It wasn't the first time she'd seen it. She'd seen it almost destroy love before. She'd been a girl, and her dear cousin Jean-Luc had been beset by memories of the French Terror and all the family he'd lost. He'd almost thrown love away, but she had reminded him how brave he needed to be.

She held Margery's hand and explained as her emotions got the better of her. For she hated how so many bore their suffering without kindness or help. “I asked him to come to the East End to meet some children there, interact with them, and told him that perhaps one day our children could do the same.”

Margery flinched. “He tried that as a child. I only heard about it, you see, because our tutor would mock him for it and how foolish he had been. How ridiculous it had been to wish to associate with boys from the village. And every time my brother got a little bit out of line, his tutor would warn him that he would have to do again what he'd done that day. So, my brother learned very well to stay alone, to stay away from others, and to not talk with anyone who was not someone our father allowed. He doesn't know how to let anyone in, but it's not his fault,” Margery lamented as her own eyes filled with tears. “He was literally punished anytime he tried. And it was only after my mother's and father's deaths that he took care of me as best he could. He has been so kind, and yet he was hurt so deeply, perhaps irreparably. I don't know if he can ever show the sort of affection that you wish. It was all but beaten out of him.”

“What have I done?” Portia whispered, thinking of how she'd just pushed him and assumed the worst about him.

“You’ve chosen hope,” Margery said. “I chose it too when I didn’t warn you, and I’m so sorry. But perhaps you could choose hope still?”

“I’ll always choose hope,” she whispered. “But...I don’t know—”

“He’s married you, and he’s gone back to who he was before, but perhaps he doesn’t have to,” argued Margery, holding tight, leaning in as if her brother’s life depended on it. “Perhaps you could stop him. Perhaps you could find a way to make him see.”

Perhaps she could. For such isolation and so much suffering could not be good for him. No one could isolate themselves from others for all their life without ill effect.

She fiddled with her teacup.

Was she made of such weak stuff that she would give up after but a few weeks? She thought of her grandmother, who had pulled herself up from the gutters of London to become a duchess. She thought of Jean-Luc, who had chosen love over his nightmares.

She thought of her family, who never let anyone fall.

Rufus was her family now, and she was not about to let him fall. Certainly not because of his dead father and all the rules and cruelty that had entrapped him.

No, she was going to do what she should have done from day one. She was going to bring in the Briarwoods, and that would change everything. It always did.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:34 am

To avoid thinking about what he was going to have to say to Portia when he returned to the house, Rufus had kept himself in meetings all day at the House of Lords. But now the dark night sky was slipping down over the city of London, and he needed to return to his house that had never been a home.

Not like Heron House.

The pain that laced through him was significant. He was hurting his wife. Something he'd never wanted. All because he had lied to himself. Lied about being able to have her—a glorious, eccentric woman—as his wife and expect her to live with his ghosts.

What would he say? How would he explain? Or did he just pretend the conversation had never happened and hope she'd adapt to him and his ways?

Granted, the house was so large that he could go back to his place of dwelling and not see her at all if he wished. But was that what he wished for them, for their marriage, so soon?

His parents had had a marriage like that, only worse.

His mother and father had not spoken to each other, not out of friendship, not out of pleasure. His mother had cowered before his father, and his father had only spoken to criticize her.

Estella's ominous warning slipped through his mind.

She had warned him about how fathers, despite being dead, sometimes came back to

claim their sons. He wouldn't be claimed. He couldn't.

He wasn't doing anything wrong. He was simply asking her to follow his rules, to follow his dictates. There was nothing wrong with that. And he was being perfectly polite. He was nothing like his father.

Except he was sliding away from her. Not because he wanted to, but because something was taking hold of him. Something he didn't feel like he could control, and he hated it. It was as if him daring to want a taste of something more was simply not allowed.

His father's hand was snaking up from the grave, controlling him even now.

He started towards his coach, but it was not where it usually was. There was another coach waiting, and as he approached it, he scowled.

The door suddenly burst open, and he spotted Huxton and Lord Calchas.

"What the bloody hell are you doing here?" Rufus demanded. He was in no mood for chatter.

"Saving you," Huxton announced.

The twins seized him. Rufus was so startled that he could not think of anything to say or do whilst they thrust him into the coach.

He was not accustomed to being abducted by mad twin noblemen.

They slammed the door shut behind them, sat him down, and took the opposite bench. But that was when he realized he was not alone on his side of the coach. No. He was surrounded by another set of Briarwood twins—Maximus and Octavian.

“We don’t all fit in here,” he growled, his shoulders all but going up to his ears as he was squashed in.

The lot of them were quite pinched like sardines in a barrel. Five big men in a luxurious coach was not comfortable, no matter how rich the coach was.

The cousins just smiled at him. Slightly alarming smiles, but smiles, nonetheless.

“Let me out,” Rufus ordered in his most imperious tone.

“No,” Huxton replied, cocking his head to the side.

“Look here, you cheeky puppy,” Rufus rasped, “you are not a duke yet. You cannot—”

“Cannot?” Huxton replied.

“He just did,” said Lord Calchas, his gaze dancing.

“Exactly,” said Octavian.

“We got a message from our cousin,” put in Maximus.

“Oh, did you?” Rufus asked, wincing. “Did she write to tell you how poorly I was treating her?”

“No, you dolt,” Octavian ground out.

“Are you treating her poorly?” Huxton demanded.

“I...” Rufus paused. “What did she say?”

Lord Calchas leaned forward, his golden epaulettes gleaming in the lamplight. “That you were in trouble and that you needed sorting out.”

“I don’t need sorting out,” he returned, gaping.

Octavian and Maximus, sitting on either side of him, eyed him up and down.

“Oh, you do,” observed Maximus, his crimson uniform a dark, almost blood-like color in the dimming light.

“You definitely do,” added Octavian, shifting sideways for more room, causing the gold buttons on his coat to wink.

“You look as if you’ve become a boring nodcock again,” Huxton said.

“Yes. What’s happened?” prodded Lord Calchas. “When you met our cousin, all that seemed to vanish.”

“Now it seems to have returned in full force and worse,” put in Huxton, waggling his brows.

Rufus wanted to protest. He wanted to argue, but it was the truth. “Look,” he said, “I am a duke. I am simply fulfilling my role.”

“Balderdash,” said Octavian.

“Absolute swill,” added Maximus.

“Nonsense,” said Lord Calchas.

“We won’t hear another minute of your excuses,” Huxton replied.

“Excuses?” he echoed before he narrowed his eyes and defended, “I don’t make excuses. I—”

“That is exactly what you are doing,” Octavian drawled as the coach rolled through the London streets.

“Where are we going?” Rufus tried to demand, but it came out more like a bleat.

“To where you need to go,” said Maximus.

He folded his arms over his chest. “This is not...”

“What?” Octavian said.

“Something you’re accustomed to?” demanded Maximus.

“Exactly,” affirmed Rufus.

“You mean you’re not used to people caring about you?” put in Lord Calchas.

“No one has ever cared about me,” he said. “Not really. Except my sister.”

“Well, it’s too late then. We all care about you,” said Huxton.

He winced inwardly. Did they? Did they actually care about him? Or were they just here for Portia, which was understandable?

“That makes no sense,” he rumbled. “You’ve all known me so little and—”

“You’re family,” put in Octavian.

“I’m married to Portia,” Rufus retorted.

“Well done. You’ve stated the obvious,” said Maximus. “You are family now. And we don’t let family wiggle off and do ridiculous things to themselves.”

“Or to Portia,” put in Octavian.

Rufus scowled, stunned that he had been put in this absurd situation. “I’m not doing anything ridiculous. I’m—”

“If you are not careful, you are going to throw your whole marriage away. A girl like that?” Octavian put in, his voice a low hum. “She’ll run off to New York or worse. She’s not going to just trot off and wither away.”

“I don’t want her to wither away,” Rufus protested.

Octavian arched a brow. “Don’t you?”

“No!” he exclaimed.

“Well, then stop it,” Huxton said with surprising intensity, his humor dimming.

“Stop what?” Rufus lamented, wishing he could understand what he needed to do.

“Stop asking her to be what you wanted in the past . We’re not in the past,” Octavian said. “We’re headed towards the future.”

“How profound,” Rufus drawled, finding the entire affair unhelpful.

“But it’s the truth,” said Lord Calchas softly. “You’re stuck in the past. For a moment there, it looked like you were freeing yourself of it, but then you marched backwards.

How ridiculous is that? Do you know what that's called?" Maximus demanded.

He arched a brow. "Edify me."

"A retreat," said Octavian, his gaze dark. "And you are not going to retreat. You are going to go forward and meet this battle."

The coach suddenly rolled to a stop. The door opened, and Rufus realized that they were in a rather rough part of town.

"Where the bloody hell are we?" he asked, gazing out and spotting scum-covered puddles on a road with broken cobbles.

Nestor winked at him. "We're here to meet someone who will sort you out."

He let out a low breath. "I thought you were dragging me before Westleigh."

"Oh we are," Huxton said, "but that's not the only person waiting for you."

Rufus stepped down into the dark, avoiding a puddle, surrounded by the cousins.

It was an old warehouse. And then he heard it.

"Right, Your Grace, you ready to sort out your ghosts?"

He winced.

It was the voice of Hartigan Mulvaney.

The Irishman leaned against a coal-dark doorjamb. "I told you I saw inside you. I saw there is a war there. Now, it's time to kill your enemy."

“And how do I do that?” Rufus ground out. “Are you going to beat me into submission?”

Mulvaney merely smiled a slightly frightening smile, turned, and strode into the warehouse.

With no other choice, since the Briarwoods were at his back, Rufus followed, his stomach tight.

Were all of them going to pummel him into the ground until he’d admitted submission? Maybe it’s what he needed. Certainly, that’s what his father had always thought he needed as a child.

As they led him farther into the dank warehouse with just a lantern gleaming, he spotted the Duke of Westleigh leaning against a cracked table, his ankles crossed and his hands folded over his coat. The rich emerald fabric gleamed in the low, flickering golden light.

Westleigh’s head was tilted to the side and there was something almost mad about him. “Welcome,” the duke said.

“This doesn’t feel welcome,” Rufus replied.

“That’s only because it’s not familiar,” Westleigh replied.

Rufus tensed, looking at all of them—all handsome, all extremely similar in their appearance—as they circled round him.

“What do you all want?” Rufus gritted.

“For you to be happy,” Westleigh said as he pushed away from the table.

Rufus rolled his eyes.

“No, it is true,” Westleigh added as he tugged at the lapels of his coat. “We wish you to know happiness.”

Mulvaney nodded. “I’ve walked many a man through hell, Your Grace. I’ve been through many a battle on the field. And many here at home where the demons are far more artful. You’ve given in to something, something old, something painful, and now we’re going to help you through it.”

Rufus swung his gaze around, accepting his fate. “How do you want to do this?” he asked. “Who’s going to punch me in the face, and who will hold me down?”

Westleigh cocked his head to the side. He looked to Mulvaney. “He thinks that we’ve brought him here to beat sense into him.”

Mulvaney shook his head, then said the most chilling and accurate words. “It’s the only thing he knows. So, of course, that’s what he thinks.”

“Then why am I here?” Rufus demanded, panic rising in him, despite his power, his strength, and his abilities.

Mulvaney looked at him. “Real strength isn’t beating another up. I think your father did that to you, didn’t he? Mine did too. But these lads here, they’ve never done that to each other. They never will.”

And then Westleigh slowly began to cross towards Rufus. “I’m not your father,” he said, “but I think it’s time someone took that man’s place. And I’m going to show you exactly what should be done when a man acts the way you have.”

Rufus swallowed, a storm of feeling colliding inside him. Half fear, half defiance.

But whatever the duke doled out, he could take it. He was strong, and he knew how to endure pain.

And then His Grace strode to him, placed his hands on Rufus's arms, and stared deep into his eyes. Westleigh began, "You don't need to do this anymore. You're not alone, Rufus. And you'll never be alone again because you have family now, and we love you."

And with that, the duke pulled him into his arms, holding him tight.

Then, one after another, from Hartigan Mulvaney to Huxton, to Octavian, to Maximus and Lord Calchas, they strode forward and surrounded him.

It was the most overwhelming thing he'd ever experienced. Not because of a brutal beating and not because of force, but because they all stood there with him. Offering him their strength, their support.

"Let your father truly die," Westleigh whispered in his ear. "You don't have to do anything he said. He can't hurt you now. And you're free. Free to be with your wife. Free to be with us and free, at last, to be yourself."

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Portia's heart sank. It seemed Rufus had not come home.

She had hoped that her cousins might help him, that her family might bring him to his senses so that he could see...

She swallowed back her sorrow, struggling not to succumb to it as she wound her way through the quiet house. Perhaps it would take more time. Perhaps it would take forever, but she couldn't give up on him. On them.

Slowly, she was bringing this house to life. And she would not let some horrible old man who had died ruin her life, her family's life. Rufus's life.

A tear slipped down her cheek, and she carried on walking down the long hall to her chambers.

It had been quite the day. She'd gone out with her uncle to the East End, just as she had told her husband she would. And she had watched the children perform scenes from *The Comedy of Errors*. Now, she was tired. It had been a particularly long day after doing all that Rufus had asked as well.

But she was proud of herself. She was capable and accomplished. Wherever she went, she seemed to spread happiness rather than take it away. And in her mind, that was the triumph of a truly successful person. No matter what Rufus thought, even with all his limitations that kept his heart from freedom, that was the sort of person that she would be.

She slipped into her chamber with a weary sigh. Her middle was beginning to swell

ever so slightly. Exhaustion was creeping through her, and soon she would need to visit her mother and see a doctor to confirm her suspicions.

The fire was crackling away, and she was rather glad. Though it was warm outside, she felt chilled. Chilled by the coldness of the house, the loneliness of it. She had a long fight ahead of her.

“Portia.”

She tensed and turned. “Rufus!” she exclaimed. “You were so quiet.”

He was sitting on her bed, his legs stretched out, his arms relaxed, as if he had been waiting a long time.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Waiting for you.”

“Oh!” Her heart leapt and she tried to tell it not to hope. Who knew why he was waiting. “I see. Have you been waiting long?”

He was silent for a long moment, then he sat up fully and locked gazes with her. “I think I have been waiting my whole life,” he said softly.

Her heart hammered against her ribs and her hope only grew, even as she tried to prepare for the worst. “What do you mean?”

“I have been waiting for you my whole life, Portia,” he whispered. “When I saw you in the park that day, I knew it. I had to have you. I had to make you mine. And so I shoved everything aside. I somehow ignored everything that I had been taught as a boy...to claim you.” His face creased with sorrow. “And once I had you, I couldn’t

keep that force going. So, I let it go and returned to who I had been for so long, the person your cousins warned you about, not who I actually am, not who I have always wanted to be. But you could see, couldn't you? You could always see who I truly was."

She nodded and took a step towards him.

"You called your family to help me," he murmured, his gaze full of emotion.

She nodded. "That's what we do. We help each other. We would not let any of us be left behind or in pain, you see? And so, I knew what I had to do after I understood how you were suffering. I knew that perhaps I couldn't make you see, but maybe they could."

"I never really had a father," he confessed as his voice filled with emotion. "But now I have your family. My father was tortured by his own father, and I was tortured by mine, but that is going to stop with me."

"And with our children," she said softly. Her hand going to her middle.

"What?" he gasped. "Do you mean—?"

"I know we have been married but a short time, but I think for certain that—"

"Oh, Portia!" he exclaimed, his face transforming with joy.

She nodded. "I have only just recently been suspicious. I could be mistaken, but I think that we will have proof very soon."

He climbed off the bed and crossed to her in a few short strides. "You must have been so distressed thinking that I was isolating you."

“I was distressed,” she admitted. “But it is not I who have been isolated, Rufus. You were isolating yourself. I always knew that I would have my father and my mother and my cousins, my grandmother, Estella, all of them. But you did not have that. The only person you’ve had is Margery, and you’ve had to take care of her. No one was taking care of you . But now you know, don’t you?”

He nodded. “Yes, I know.”

“Can you tell me more about what happened?”

“When I was a boy,” he said softly, holding her close as if now that he had her, he was afraid to let her go, “I wanted friends and to be happy. I took a chance one day to try. There was a group of village boys flying kites, and I dared to join them, even though I knew that I wasn’t supposed to. It did not end well.”

It did not end well.

Such simple words, and yet the raw emotion in his voice was harrowing.

She winced, her heart aching.

For a moment, his eyes shone with unshed tears. “It was one of the worst days of my life,” he rasped. “I dared to try to touch happiness, to have friends, but it was ripped away from me brutally. And not only was it ripped away from me, but my father punished those boys and their families too for daring to be kind to me.”

She lifted her hands to his face, cradling it. “And so, all this time, you’ve kept anyone from getting close to you. Anyone who was not of the same rank, anyone at all.”

He nodded, his face softening at her gentle touch. “So, today, when you asked me to go to the East End to see the children and interact with them, it had nothing to do

with the fact that I think of them as less than me—”

“You were protecting the little boy inside you,” she said softly.

He sucked in a sharp breath. “Yes, I suppose that’s true. That little boy was punished so often, and I wish I could go back and take care of him.”

“Well, from now on,” she said gently, her own heart pounding with the desire to protect her husband from all the pain he had known, “I will take care of you. My family will take care of you.”

“And I will take care of you,” he returned, sweeping her up into his arms. “I love you, Portia.”

“And I love you,” she breathed, all of her hope suddenly being rewarded.

“I did not even know what love truly was until now. Not like this.” He stilled and lowered her feet back to the floor, keeping her close. “I did not know that I’d be able to feel it. But love is the only thing that this feeling inside me can be. This feeling has grown and grown since the day I saw you. And your family? They have helped me to free that love by showing me that I don’t have to keep myself alone. That my father cannot hurt me now. How do I thank you?”

She gazed up into his eyes, slipping her hands to his shoulders. “By being yourself, my love. By never isolating yourself again, no matter how hard. And if you feel it coming, if you feel that little boy inside you, who was beaten and treated so cruelly, grow fearful again, you call for me. You reach out, and you allow yourself to be surrounded by my love and the love of your family.”

He smiled then. “It’s a love that our children shall know.”

She nodded. "Our children will have an abundance of love."

"I didn't have it," he said, a tear slipping down his cheek. "But they will. They all will."

Her heart soared as she witnessed his understanding of his new life transform him. "You chose your new family well, Rufus. You chose for your children what you could not have. And whether you realized it or not, you chose for you," she said. "You are going to be so loved and so cared for and nothing can stop that."

"Not even me?" he teased.

She slipped her hand to the nape of his neck and tilted his head down so that his forehead touched her own. "Especially not you, my love."

And as he took her lips in a soft kiss, she knew that hope had won. Won his heart and hers. And with them? Hope would always rule the day.

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The kites soared into the air as the boys from the East End ran, pulling at the strings.

The rowdy children tugged them this way and that. Their laughter filled the air, as did the laughter of Rufus and Portia's eldest son, Augustus, who was amongst them.

Gus, too, ran with a kite in hand, the string tugging at his grip.

A wave of joy crashed over Rufus as he stared at his son, who so easily chatted with the other boys as they played. His son was confident, strong, capable, and the boy did not care that he was a future duke who was mingling with commoners.

No. His son thrived wherever he went, and Rufus knew that it was because of Portia and her family.

Rufus glanced at the horizon where she stood. Her hand was at her eyes so that she could see well, even with the bright afternoon sun. She held their youngest child, a little girl, in her arms. The little girl's blonde curls fluttered in the wind.

Rufus let his own kite soar up in the sky, its tail dancing.

Every day, he grew happier. Each day was another journey. Another step into the future, away from all the pain and the sorrow of the past. Here, joy could exist. Here, he could have friends. Here, he had family.

Several of the Briarwood men had helped the boys from the East End launch their kites just a few moments ago and were currently helping them to fly the sprightly toys properly.

Rufus was no longer someone who only made certain that money arrived at charities. Now, he was someone who not only organized them but actually took part in them.

He and his wife had made certain that children from the East End could be taken out to parkland on the edge of London, giving them time in green spaces so they could run and be free and feel the wind on their faces. The boys could savor the sun and know that they were cared for and that there was a bit of happiness in this world, even when all seemed bleak.

If there was one thing he had learned from his darling wife, the wife he loved so well, it was that happiness was always waiting for one. All they had to do was turn to it and away from the dark.

Gus looked back at him and beamed, his bright eyes shining as he held his string tightly. "Come on, Papa," he said. "Faster. Let's race faster."

Rufus's heart swelled, then he raced ahead with his son, reveling in the joy of all the boys around him, feeling that, at long last, he had found what he had always been looking for.

Love.

The End