



The Duke's Absolutely Wonderful Wedding (The Notorious Briarwoods #13)

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Category: Historical

Description: The Duke of Baxter loves wielding his power.

He loves everything about being a duke, especially making people do as he pleases.

Hes used to getting his way.

Perhaps too used to it.

So, when he meets a fiery young woman one night, a woman who refuses to do a damned thing he says, hes certain hes met his match.

Cymbeline Briarwood is about to start her first season and is reveling in it! Being a member of the Briarwood family, she has no intention of giving in to convention.

Still, try as she might, she just cant find the man for her, until she meets the Duke of Baxter.

She is certain that he might be the only man in London for her.

Some passion, however, burns too intensely, leaving everyone scorched in its wake.

Will their passion for each other prove a perfect love or a perfect path to destruction?

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From the moment of his birth, Callum Royce, son of the Duke of Baxter, was always ready for his next adventure. He had been eager to join the world and had been born, much to his mother's shock, three weeks too early.

He had vaulted into the world, screaming at the top of his lungs, red-faced and ready to finally take part in the global excitement that surrounded him. He took his first step when he was but eight months of age, and his first words passed his lips at ten months of age.

Callum had no interest in pausing or waiting to get on with the exhilaration of being well and truly alive.

Now, some might say that this was simply him carrying on the line of Baxter men, and those who said it would be correct.

Callum, much like his father, could not rest. He could not stop. He had no desire to be temperate.

No, he wished to charge through this life fully aware, living it from moment to moment, wringing out every bit of joy in it, with no respite in between.

Callum and his father, the great duke, spent every moment they could together—though, in truth, there were not many moments. The Duke of Baxter also lived as if life was about to be stolen from him, as if he had more to do than could ever be done in the time that he was given.

That great duke, from sunup to long past sundown, worked and played.

He lived life with zest and made changes that the world stared at with shock.

After all, so many politicians and lords spent their time at ease and leisure—dining, gambling, and really getting very little done—but not the Duke of Baxter, and certainly not his young son.

For at a young age, the boy realized he had power and his own money, and he used both to do good. He also used his time and power to have a great deal of fun.

He watched his father with pronounced admiration as the Duke of Baxter went out night after night to parties, to the opera, to the theater, and then to Westminster the next day. His mother tried to keep up, but it was impossible to keep up with such a man.

So, she was frequently left behind at home, marveling at her husband but often alone.

Callum? He tried as best he could to keep up from the nursery and then from Eton, and then from university, a place that sons of dukes often did not go.

But eventually, the great duke, at forty years of age, stopped.

Not because he wished to, not because he had time or he had turned a leaf, realizing that sometimes it was indeed actually important to sit underneath the sun, soak up its rays, look out at one's estates and simply enjoy them.

No, the great duke stopped because time made him do so.

That ever-present figure who follows one from birth to the end, Death, had finally come to make him stop.

Death was the only thing that could make the duke stop.

Now, some might've taken one look at this and decided that, of course, a lesson had to be learned—that rest was important. But Callum did not take that lesson to heart as he stared at the mausoleum in the cathedral on his family's land where his father now laid at eternal rest.

Callum stood looking at the weeping angels and did not feel the urge to cry, though his heart ached for the loss of the great man who had overshadowed so many around him. No, Callum felt a surge of pride and determination course through him.

He, like his father, had no wish to rest.

Why would anyone rest when one had no idea how much time they had to walk upon this earth? No, he would be completely, totally, and vitally alive. He would live every moment and not a single second would go to waste.

He would change the world as his father had done.

He would soak up every moment. Resting was for those who did not understand what life was actually for.

Resting was for those who were small, who could not see how much there was in the world to be seized and used and enjoyed.

He crossed to his father's name carved into the marble.

He traced his fingers along the carved letters, and he knew it did not matter if he died young or if he died old.

He would not take what he had for granted, just as his father had not done. He would not pause. He would not waste his life as he saw so many of his compatriots doing.

Oh, there was nothing wrong with gambling, enjoying the company of a beautiful woman, drinking a glass of wine or brandy, and enjoying life with laughter. He indeed intended to do that because that's also what his father had done, but he would not ever sleep too late.

He would not ever nap away the afternoon. He would not ever spend a single moment in repose. Why would he do such a thing when he had been given so much and so many had so little?

No, he would let life wring every bit of life out of him.

Yes, he would let life take all of his use, all his capability.

He would be the greatest Duke of Baxter because he owed it to his father to be great, and his son would be great too.

And the next Duke of Baxter after that, because it's what the Dukes of Baxter did.

They lived. They did not stop. And nothing would ever get in the way of that.

Not a single thing.

Because Callum was here to make a difference, and he would not be afraid of that companion who would one day finally come to take him away.

Yes, like his father, Callum Royce had no fear of Death because when he met Death, he would be able to say that he had actually used all the gifts he had been given.

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Heron House

Cymbeline, daughter of Lord Ajax and Lady Winifred Briarwood, knew how to live.

And yet on the cusp of her first Season, standing in her beautiful chamber done up in soft periwinkle and cream, Cymbeline felt, well, a hint of trepidation that she was not going to get to live as fully as she might like. Not at all.

She plunked her elbow down on the windowsill. Moonlight spilled through the open window, casting its rays upon her in a melancholy spell.

Ladies could not live as men did, and she did not want to be a man. Quite frankly, being a man seemed like an awkward, terrible business to her. She had no wish for the messiness of all of that. She loved being a lady. She enjoyed her own sensibility and the way she saw the world.

No, no. She had no desire to actually be a man, but she was most curious about the way men navigated the world and the things they got to see that she did not.

Quite frankly, it irked her. She had asked her male cousins time after time to sneak her into the world of men.

She had pursued it over and over, and yet those cousins, her beloved fellows—Calchas, Laertes, and Octavian—had all told her firmly no .

She knew why, of course. Because if she were to get into any sort of trouble, her father, a rather shockingly large man, would pound them into the earth like pegs. She

could not deny that fact.

Dearly as she loved her father, there were times when she wished he would not be quite so protective, for it did seem to get in the way of her ability to live a little. She could not truly complain though. She lived far more than most young ladies.

Even so, as she stared out of one of the many windows of Heron House and gazed down towards the river, she wondered what it would be like to be a young man going out on the town.

To slip down either to a coach or his horse and ride the road in, or to take a boat down the river to the center of the city, and simply slip into the crowds, make merry, and have no one tell him no.

To have no fears about how one acted! How glorious would that be?

It was most annoying to be a lady in that regard, even a Briarwood lady, because there were some things that she could not do if she wished to make a good marriage. And she did indeed wish to make a good marriage.

Cymbeline was going to fall in love this year.

She was certain of it. It was her first Season after all, and that's what Briarwoods did. They fell in love and they were happy. So, she was quite looking forward to it, although it seemed rather soon for her life to take such a sure path already.

Her life had sped by. She knew that some people found life to be rather slow.

Not herself, likely because she was a Briarwood, surrounded by such an amazing family.

Oh, yes. She was truly blessed and surrounded by people who enjoyed life, who knew how to take it day by day, understanding that the world was quite a tumultuous place and that there was really little that they could control.

Except, of course, their enjoyment of life and each other.

The door of her chamber snicked open.

She did not look back. No. She was too preoccupied in her own thoughts, and frankly, she didn't wish to have a chat with whoever had sought her out. If she did not turn around, perhaps they would slip back out into the hall and leave her to her rather self-pitying thinking.

For it was self-pitying! Which was infuriating.

What had she to complain about? She had everything. Except perhaps a sense of real and true freedom, which she didn't think any lady in this time could ever actually have.

Even if Briarwood ladies could get quite close.

"You've been discontent as of late." Her mother's voice slipped through the room, and Cymbeline's breath caught in her throat.

She did not wish her mother to see her sad or even the tiniest bit discontent.

Her mother, Winifred, was such a kind, lovely, and strong woman who had overcome so much.

Cymbeline had met her mother's mama. Her grandmother was not the easiest of people and had done a great deal of healing over the years, but she knew how much

her own mother had to overcome to marry her father and be well.

So, instead of huffing or acting like so many surly young people might, Cymbeline turned, opened her arms, and rushed to her mama, ready to show her the love she deserved.

And as she rushed, she realized that her mama was holding a bulky and quite large sack in her arms, so Cymbeline could not give her the embrace that she had intended.

Cymbeline lowered her arms and hesitated, determined to explain herself without making her mother nervous. “Mama,” she began gently. “I’m not discontent. I am merely—”

Her mother cocked her head to the side and cut in kindly, “Do not lie, my dear.”

“I’m not going to lie,” she protested.

Her mother gave her a knowing look, the look a mother had when she refused to be deceived.

Cymbeline blew out a breath and shrugged. “I’m merely curious.”

“Curious about what?” her mother said as she took a step forward, the candlelight dancing over her warm, loving form.

Cymbeline nibbled her lower lip, trying to decide just how much she should reveal. “The lives of my cousins, if I’m honest.”

Her mother smiled gently. “I understand.”

“Do you?” she queried.

“Of course I understand,” her mother assured, her hands tightening on the bag. “You know how I met your father and what we did.”

“Yes, Mama,” she replied, loving how her parents had met and how bold her mother had been, given how difficult her circumstances!

Her mother had longed for one adventure before being sent to the country after failing to find a husband, and she had convinced Ajax to take her through Shakespeare country.

With the help of her brother, Cymbeline’s mother had dressed as a boy.

And she and Ajax had fallen in love. A very different sort of adventure.

“But you had good reason to do what you did. I cannot—”

“Cannot?” her mother echoed, a brow arching before she tsked. “Is that truly a word coming from my daughter’s lips? I did not think a Briarwood would ever say cannot .”

“Mama, do be sensible,” Cymbeline rushed, letting her hands fly up in frustration as she tried to dismiss all her own secret inner longings.

“I have given up good sense,” her mother said gently, her lips curling in a bemused smile.

“Good sense is such a trick and the death of so many dreams. It seems practical, but often it is just fear. One should simply choose to be as much themselves as they possibly can, as long as they’re not hurting others. ”

Cymbeline swallowed, her hands falling to her sides, tucking into the folds of her

ivory gown. “You know I could never wish to hurt any of you, Mama.”

“Of course not, my dear. And that is why I have brought you this.”

Her mother thrust the sack at her. Cymbeline took the oddly shaped material into her hands. “Whatever is it, Mama?” she asked, looking down to the tightened drawstring.

Her mother stood for a long moment, then nodded, as if committing to a path. “Well, I had the good fortune to do something that you don’t think that you can and that your cousins have not let you do, which I think is rather ironic, given how much Briarwoods try to free others.”

“You speak in riddles, Mama.”

“Open it,” her mother instructed.

Slowly, Cymbeline pulled the drawstring of the bag. She looked in and sucked in a gasp.

She whipped her gaze up to meet her mother’s gentle but determined stare. “Mama, you can’t possibly be serious.”

“Why not?” her mother asked, folding her hands before her skirts.

“Papa—”

“If Papa says anything about it, I will deal with him, but I’ll have you know we decided this together, my dear.

” Her mother’s face softened with love as she thought of her husband.

“He and I never go against each other. We argue, we disagree, but then we come to one opinion, especially in regards to you.”

“Papa has truly agreed to this?” she whispered, tears stinging her eyes as the love of her parents truly hit home.

Her mother nodded, her silver-streaked dark curls teasing her kind face.

“He thinks that it’s a good idea. He thinks that it will help you to be content in your future.

He and I both agree that if you don’t do this, you never will find contentment.

You’ll always wonder, or you’ll feel pushed into a corner one day and experiment without the support you need.

” She cleared her throat and continued. “I’ve also spoken with your cousins.

They’re going to take very good care of you.

And if they don’t, well, they shall all be most uncomfortable .

Your father will arrange that, you know. ”

“He could never hurt his own family,” Cymbeline pointed out.

“No,” her mother said with a laugh. “It’s true. But he and your cousins would also never forgive themselves if something did happen to you. So...your cousins will take especially good care.”

“I would have given you my own clothes that I ventured out in, but they are

hopelessly out of date. These are the latest fashions, but subtle enough that they will not draw much attention”

Cymbeline reached into the bag and pulled out a linen shirt, breeches, a beautifully stitched coat, stockings, boots, a wig, and a hat.

No wonder the bag had been bulky like a traveler’s.

“I shall have to teach you how to walk,” her mother said. “And to talk. It’ll be quite a challenge. It’s very easy to give yourself away as a female. And, of course, you will have to bind yourself, my dear. That will be essential.”

Cymbeline was not small in her chest. That was quite true.

“Mama,” she exclaimed, hardly daring to believe what was transpiring. She felt half certain she was going to wake up at any moment. “Are you really going to let me go into town dressed as a boy?”

“My dear,” her mother began firmly, “I am going to encourage you to do this, so you will never know regret. So you will never look back and wonder what your life might be like if you’d gotten to have this one adventure.

But you will listen to your cousins. You will not be ridiculous, and you will not go the way of Lady Caroline Lamb.

Some of us are quite worried about her.”

She let out a pained laugh. “Mother, does anyone wish to be like Caroline Lamb?”

“I think many people think it would be quite grand to be Caroline Lamb, poor thing. Her mother scarred her so badly.”

“Do you think she will eventually cause a terrible scandal? She seems...too passionate.”

“Yes, I do,” her mother sighed. “She has known much pain in her life and not enough love. Still, take heart from this. She has gone many, many places dressed as a man, and no one recognizes her, despite her fame.”

Lady Caroline was not so much older than Cymbeline and yet her life had been marked by sorrow. Her own mother had been a scandal.

“Many young ladies throw themselves away,” her mother said softly. “Not because they wish to, but because they are so desperate to find love. To find acceptance. It is so very sad. So many children long for a parent’s love but never quite achieve it.”

The pain in her mother’s voice was undeniable and yet there was a wisdom to it. Unlike Caroline Lamb, Cymbeline’s mother had found the love and stability she’d never had as a child.

“We will help you find who you truly are, my love,” her mother said.

As she held the clothes in her arms, Cymbeline’s heart swelled as she understood the difference between herself and so many girls launched into society.

Cymbeline’s family would support her. She could go have this adventure, but she had to be careful.

But because of her family, unlike other young ladies, if something went amiss, she would not be broken.

And unlike so many young ladies of the ton, Cymbeline had a wonderful relationship with her mother. It had been her mother’s greatest mission to give Cymbeline the sort

of mother she had never had.

She placed her clothes down on the small couch before her fireplace, crossed to her mother, and wrapped her arms about her.

She was so grateful her mother had found the Briarwoods and that she, Cymbeline, had been born to this family.

For they understood that the real point of being alive was simply to love. Love more than anything, more than any pursuit, more than any dream, more than any mission. Love was what the ability to do anything well came from.

Yes, it was the point of being alive. To love themselves and each other.

And so Cymbeline smiled at her mother and said, “Thank you. Thank you for giving me this chance.”

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“I still don’t like it. It could all go very wrong,” Calchas said through gritted teeth as he tugged at the cuffs of his naval uniform.

“Oh, Calchas,” Cymbeline replied with a masculine pat to her cousin’s excellently broad shoulder, decked with gold. “You are a remarkably good source of manliness when it comes to duty and doing what one ought. So grateful to have you reminding me all the time how lucky I am to be here.”

Her voice was low, slightly rough, and well-practiced, blending in well with the din of other men in the club as several people sipped brandies, drank wine, played cards, and made merry.

Anyone who overheard them would have no idea what gave Calchas his sense of unease.

Not dressed as she was, with the male manners she had perfected under her mother’s and her grandmother’s watchful eyes.

She’d practiced for weeks before daring to come out.

Now, she had few worries, for she had adopted her male clothing with a confidence that thrilled her to her bones.

She loved going out with her cousins!

Even if Calchas still bridled. He was a grand fellow, but he was much concerned with the protection of his family. Which made any terseness he offered forgivable at once.

Her other cousins seemed to love taking her out.

There was such a remarkable casualness to this club.

She was stunned, quite frankly, by how all these gentlemen lived.

She couldn't really understand it, though she enjoyed it.

Men were nothing like ladies, and it was fascinating to behold.

Perhaps she should not have tried to gain her way into the inner-sanctum of men's lives, but there was something about being in this particular club that she truly adored.

It was not one of the great lords' clubs of London. She was rather glad not to have to go to those.

No. This one was a club that was dedicated strictly to lovers of the theater.

One could be a duke, but one might also be a well-to-do actor or playwright.

It was a remarkable place, and she was quite relieved that it felt so close to home.

After all, with grandmama being one of the most famous actresses of her day and their having such huge investments in the theater in London, this almost felt like a second home.

Calchas frowned at her, clearly keeping more opinions to himself. But only just.

"Do you think you could have done it?" Octavian suddenly asked before taking a sip of brandy from a crystal snifter.

“What?” she asked, as she lifted her own glass of brandy to her lips and attempted to drink it.

It was really terrible stuff, truth be told, in her personal opinion, but she wasn’t overly fond of drinking in general.

She hated the way it muddled her mind. She liked to stay sharp, and certainly in a situation like this, she needed to stay sharp.

The last thing that she could afford was to suddenly start acting like a young lady because she was three sheets to the wind.

“Do you think you could die for Cleopatra?” Octavian explained, his brow furrowing. “Give up your country and your loyalty and all that?”

They had just come from seeing Antony and Cleopatra at the theater, and their Grand Aunt Estella had been a magnificent Cleopatra.

“Well, after seeing Grand Aunt Estella,” she began, “I could certainly see why one would wish to throw their entire life away for a woman. But the truth is Antony does not throw his life away for Cleopatra.”

“No?” Calchas queried, arching a brow, intrigued despite himself.

“No,” she stated in her most masculine voice possible.

“And why does he do that?” her cousin Laertes asked, adjusting his cravat.

“Because of his arrogance,” she said with a shrug, enjoying the cut of her coat as it tugged at her shoulders.

She said it as a man would, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world and there was no argument to be had.

“He simply cannot stand Octavian, who we now think of as Augustus Caesar, and—”

“Oh, God,” Octavian groaned, as he always did when the dictator of Rome and his namesake was brought up. “We’re not about to go into a Roman history lesson, are we?”

Laertes cleared his throat and swung his attention from Cymbeline to Octavian. “Are we discussing the historical events or are we discussing the play?”

“Can’t we do both?” she protested, eyeing her brandy and deciding against another drink.

“No!” announced Calchas. “And you know it better than anyone. Shakespeare was not writing about real history. He was writing about human nature and—”

“Fine,” she cut in and frowned, loving the freedom of open discourse in public, “but the truth is Mark Antony is a completely unreliable figure, who had no sense of honor and really only cared about himself.”

“Can’t stand a fellow like that,” a voice suddenly boomed from behind them. “Someone who only cares about themselves.”

She whipped up her gaze and spotted a man closing the short distance between them.

The fellow’s long burgundy coat stretched to the floor and drifted out behind him. He was shockingly handsome. Dark hair framed his face, and he looked like no one else she’d ever seen.

He did not fit the classical norm that she was so accustomed to seeing on the gentlemen of her own family or even on the statues in the museums. No, actually, he looked odd if one was going to admit it.

His features were slightly too much, slightly too large, slightly too bold, as if his body couldn't quite contain his whole spirit and soul.

His eyes were a riveting shade of blue that seemed to shimmer between various hues as he looked at each of them.

She clamped her mouth shut as quite unfamiliar sensations shimmied through her.

He was a shocking thing to behold. Everything about him appeared larger than one expected.

"Baxter," Calchas called. "I didn't know you were coming tonight."

"Can't keep me away from an excellent performance like that," Baxter said. "You know it."

She blinked.

The Duke of Baxter.

Of course! She had read about him. She'd even seen him across the theater. He had his own box. He was the sort of hallowed fellow that the ton worshiped, that everyone worshiped, and, well, perhaps she had too in her own way.

He was the sort of man that a girl dreamed about at night and wondered if they might ever have a chance at marrying. After all, he was constantly in the newssheets and his actions were always on everyone's lips.

He was almost like a fictional character.

And here she was meeting this famed fellow, but instead of being dressed in a beautiful gown, she was dressed in the full getup of a young man ready for a night out.

There was absolutely no way she could flirt with the duke like this! That would be a hideous mistake. And so she was going to have to act as normally as she could without...well, swooning.

Because the fact was, dear God in heaven, the entire room seemed to swing to pay attention to him. He was as riveting as his eyes. His entire energy was jovial, bold, powerful. It was as if the sun had come out of the sky and walked into the room and all of them were planets circulating around him.

“And who’s this young, splendidly opinionated fellow I’ve yet to meet?”

” the Duke of Baxter asked with a quirk of his dark brow, which did the most miraculous things to his face, turning it both somehow friendly and captivating, as if he would be her best friend in the entire world if she would but let him.

“This is a distant cousin of mine,” Calchas stated quickly. “Mr. Marlowe.”

“What a pleasure it is to meet you, Mr. Marlowe.” The duke cocked his head to the side, giving him the sort of playful air of a great cat. “Like the author.”

Cymbeline gave a nod. They’d picked the name as a sort of family joke, since Marlowe was never quite given his due at Heron House.

Her grandmother had snorted, rolled her eyes, and then waved them on, for she adored Shakespeare above all.

But wandering about London as Mr. Shakespeare would draw far too much notice.

The duke gave a slight incline of his head. "I am the Duke of Baxter."

"Yes, Your Grace," she coughed, as her voice hitched in her throat, like a boy going through a change of voice. Cymbeline said nothing else, afraid she would say something ridiculous, given how mesmerized she was by him. Or worse, she might give herself away entirely.

"You don't like Mark Antony? Is that it?"

She cleared her throat, determined to answer, and piped, "Not at all."

"Oh?" the Duke of Baxter asked, his brows rising up slightly. "It seems as if we have brought back your boyish indignation about history? You're an idealist, is it? Everyone should be good. Your name should be Sir Gawain, not Marlowe."

She let out a low, slow breath. She'd almost given herself away. Again. In but a minute's time.

Her cousins were shooting her secretive warning stares that, having known them all her life, only she could interpret.

Why? Why was she responding thus to the duke?

Because, good heavens, the things that he was doing to her insides were really quite shocking! That was why. It was as if her wits had been stolen and all her energy had gone to quite different parts of her anatomy.

She had, of course, been warned about desire. But she'd never really experienced it. And this? It was the wildest, most alarming sensation. For the first time in her life,

she felt on the verge of being out of control.

A state that was completely foreign to her.

She'd never felt anything like it in her whole life, and she realized in that horrifying moment that this was it. He had to be the man for her.

Yes, was that not what these sensations decreed? The Duke of Baxter was the only man alive for her. She'd never responded to anyone like this, and it was appalling that it was happening under these circumstances, when she couldn't go after him as she would do in a ballroom.

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She had gotten her adventure. She had gotten her dream of getting to go out as a man. And now she wished she was a woman with every bit of her being.

The Duke of Baxter's merry brow furrowed ever so slightly as he gazed upon her, as if he too was trying to sort something out. Something that did not quite fit.

She swallowed and blurted, "How can anyone like Mark Antony?"

"He is a great speechmaker," the duke returned and immediately started launching into one of Mark Antony's most famous speeches.

"He is a liar, Your Grace," she cut in boldly, as she thought a young man might dare.

"There, I cannot agree with you," Baxter said suddenly, his gaze traveling over her face as if still trying to understand something that was just out of reach. "Antony is not a liar. What he does is he understands how to take the truth and twist it to his advantage. His viewpoint."

"Is that not another form of lying?" she asked.

He looked at her for a long while and then slowly lowered his gaze, raking it up and down her body. And for a single shocking moment, she was certain that he knew .

Or he knew something wasn't quite right.

She had no idea how he could know. No, she was simply imagining things. It was her reaction to him that made her full of nerves.

Her disguise was excellent. No one had once suspected her.

This was not her first outing into town.

She had been going into town for over a week.

But it was as if he could somehow strip every layer away from her, look into her soul, and see that she was no man.

Or at least that she was not a Mr. Marlowe.

No, she was Miss Cymbeline Briarwood. And right now, she desperately wished she could be her true self with the Duke of Baxter.

“Aren’t we all liars to some degree?” he asked, his voice a low rumble that slipped through the room, quiet but commanding. “Don’t we all manipulate the truth to suit our needs, our wants, our desires?”

“Let’s hear it for liars, eh?” she challenged, even as she tingled at his nearness. She folded her hands into fists, so that she might dig her nails into her palms and not become lost to the feelings he was evoking in her.

“We can only see the world from our point of view, and so when we tell the truth, we are only telling our truth,” he said easily, even as his gaze continued to search hers.

“Very artful, sir,” she returned. “You should consider writing plays yourself. But I would wager, given what you’ve said, your favorite characters are Iago and Richard III.”

“Oh, I adore them,” he said without apology. “They are the best characters in the canon. My very favorite, of course, is Edmund in Lear . Shall we hear it for

bastards?”

She was surprised and delighted by his choices. Most people always loved the heroes. But there was something particularly fascinating about the villainous characters who made friends with the audience. “You can’t possibly mean it, since you are a duke,” she stated.

“Oh, I can mean anything that I like, dear boy,” he said, waggling his dark brows. “By the way, I think you’re having a bit of an issue with your clothing.”

And with that, the Duke of Baxter turned and strode away.

“What was that?” Calchas asked.

“Baxter being cleverer than he ought,” returned Octavian.

Calchas let his gaze trail to her shirt and let out a bleat of horror. “Your clothes... There is something amiss, and I think you should retire and fix it.”

She looked down and a wave of horror crashed through her. There was something bulging at the side of her shirt. It was her binding! Her dratted binding!

The cloth woven tightly about her chest to press her breasts down was the most difficult aspect of her costume.

But how could he possibly have noticed something like that?

No. He had not noticed she was a woman. Surely!

She was excellent at hiding her true self, and she refused to be riddled with nerves over such a thing. But why, oh why, had her binding slipped free and begun to bulge?

How had he even noticed?

No one else had noticed. Her cousins, who were all incredibly observant individuals, hadn't noticed. But what if...

She let out a sigh, grinding her teeth together and shifting to the left. Her binding was truly beginning to unravel. At any moment, she'd be freed. And that was not the sort of freedom she wished at present.

Soon she would not be able to hide the fact that she was not at all shaped like a man.

"A moment," she rasped. "I will find a quiet place."

"Be damn careful," Octavian said, a muscle tight in his jaw.

"I told you this was a bad idea," Calchas groaned quietly. "I'm going to have a conversation with Aunt Winifred and explain to her that you've had your adventure and this is done. I can't take it. War with the French is enough. I don't need this extra sort of excitement."

"Oh, Calchas," she said with a smile, "you secretly love it."

Calchas downed his brandy, then shot her a death stare. "I love many things. This is not one of them."

And with that, she gave him a jaunty salute, whilst keeping her other arm pressed against her chest to keep her binding in place.

Discreetly, she slipped out of the room full of men who were thankfully far too preoccupied with each other to notice her. It was something she loved about men. They were so interested in their own lives. It was quite easy to go amidst them in her

disguise without being noticed.

Though perhaps Calchas was right. Perhaps her adventure was done.

Because, after all, she saw another adventure on the horizon, one which would be better served by her being herself sans disguise. And the Duke of Baxter would surely be a part of it.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:13 am

Cymbeline tugged at her shirt in the dark, small room hidden away at the top of the club, trying to put her disguise back to rights.

She tried very hard not to stomp her booted foot in frustration, but the binding had somehow twisted, even though she had done it exactly as her mother had told her to do, exactly as she had the other times she had ventured out.

Even though she had practiced over and over again and had more experience than she should with this.

But for whatever reason, it was not behaving as it ought.

She let out a curse under her breath and attempted to twist it back into shape, trying to tuck the loose end back in place without divesting herself of her clothes.

She was not about to be caught half naked in a club surrounded by men.

Suddenly, the door opened and a man immediately began, “Look, I wanted to apologize to you. I feel like—”

And then his voice died off immediately.

She whipped around, spotted the Duke of Baxter, let out a full-throated curse, and then ordered, “Get out.”

He did.

The Duke of Baxter stepped back, shut the door, and then there was a very long, very awkward silence. She stood in the dim blue light of late evening, closed her eyes, and nearly let out a scream.

Calchas was never going to forgive her. Her mother was never going to forgive her. She could only pray that her wig was good enough and most of her outfit was good enough that he would never make the connection that she was Cymbeline Briarwood, niece of the Duke of Westleigh.

Had Baxter been able to deduce she was a woman?

“Do forgive me,” he said through the door.

She pressed her lips together, feeling at a stalemate.

But then he let out an audible sigh and said, “There’s nothing for it.”

And then the door began to open again. She let out a bleat of alarm, but he appeared to pay no attention to it. As a matter of fact, he opened the door all the way, strode in, and shut it behind him.

If he had dominated the room downstairs, here, in this small space, he ruled it.

Still, she would not be cowed, even though she knew she was in the wrong. She had invaded a male space, it was true, and if he had deduced it—and surely only a dunderhead would not at this point—he could expose it to the heads of the club. If he did, things could get quite chancy.

She held her breath, praying he had not noticed the obvious.

“I had no idea you were a woman,” he said softly.

She stared at him. "I beg your pardon?"

"I knew that something wasn't quite right, but life is full of all sorts of oddities, and I just...

felt like I had given you offense downstairs, so I followed you.

I hate giving offense, though I realize that many people might not believe that to be true, given my character.

But I wanted to tell you I am sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable.

But I see now that, well...a great deal more was afoot than I realized. "

"You, sir, are clearly not used to being at a loss for words."

He let out a laugh. "That is true."

"Are you going to tell people?" she said softly.

"Tell who exactly?" he asked.

"The heads of the club."

"I assumed that the Briarwoods know that you are not exactly as you seem."

She winced. "No, I have not lied to them," she said, wondering if she had to reveal they were her cousins. "I am not really a liar, sir."

"You could fool me," he said.

“I suppose you are correct in the grand scheme of things. We tell the truths that we wish to tell through our own eyes. And truly, I have not lied to them. They know.” She frowned, feeling at a loss as the consequences of discovery began to crash upon her.

“I guess I have certainly lied to everyone else in this establishment, but you see, as a young woman, I simply wanted to know what it was like.”

“What what was like?” he asked, his voice a deliciously low hum as he seemed to display genuine curiosity and not judgement.

“To be a man.”

He arched a brow. “I don’t think you can ever know what it’s like to be a man.”

“No, of course not,” she rushed. “And actually, I don’t wish to be a man.

Not like that.” She licked her lips, gathering her argument.

Could he understand? “You see, I wanted to know what it was like to just be able to stride about and be free and not have to wait to be spoken to first and not have to wait to be asked to do things. Men can do so much, you see? Ladies can’t go out like this to clubs and have independent lives and opinions.

Not truly. They can only have a semblance of it if they are attached to a powerful man, such as a father, a brother, or a husband. Money helps too.”

Baxter cocked his head to the side. “You want to live life to the fullest?” he concluded.

She blinked, rather shocked at how quickly he caught on. “Exactly, yes.”

“You’re my kind of person then.”

“Am I?” she queried, both amazed and intrigued as her insides began to act in those shocking ways they had upon their first meeting.

“Oh, yes, indeed,” he said. “To live a full life is the entire premise of my existence.”

He paused, contemplating her. “Who are you?” he asked. “And don’t lie now.”

“I can’t tell you, Your Grace, because if I do, I could get my family into a great deal of difficulty.”

“Tell me,” he instructed in that inarguable manner of dukes, “and I promise that no harm will come to you or to any of your family.”

She swallowed. She was not going to get out of this easily, and the truth was that lying more would only make it more difficult. “Fine then,” she said. “I am Cymbeline, daughter of Lord Ajax Briarwood and Lady Winifred.”

He gaped at her for a long moment, then started laughing. The laugh boomed about the room and then the laugh turned into a groan. “Oh, dear God, your father’s going to murder me when he finds out about this.”

“Everyone does like to say that about him,” she said ruefully, “But he’s really quite gentle, you know.”

“Ajax Briarwood, gentle?” the Duke of Baxter scoffed. “Have you ever seen him beat a man into a pulp?”

“I confess I have not,” she said.

“Well, if you had, you would not be saying such things. I am alone with his daughter and she’s in a state of undress.”

“I am not in a state of undress,” she huffed, though...she did wonder what it might be like to be in a state of undress with him. But she dared not think such a thing. Not at present. It would muddle her reasoning and she needed all of that just now.

“Well, it looked like you were about to be.”

“Yes, I suppose that’s true,” she admitted, looking down at her binding peeking through the open V at the neck of her shirt. She frowned. “I suppose I should have found a way to block the door.”

“Yes, I suppose you should have.” He straightened and then a mischievous smile pulled at his lips. “Well...” he began, “this is a predicament.”

“It isn’t.” She shooed at him. “Why don’t you just turn around and go away? Then I shall put things to rights and follow you downstairs.”

“I can’t do that,” he said softly.

“Why?” she asked, not sure if she was delighted or dismayed.

“Because I don’t retreat from things. It’s not something that I do and, quite frankly, I’m quite relieved.”

“What?” she blurted.

“I’m relieved to find out that you are, well, you. ” His gaze darkened and he took a step towards her. “Because I was captivated by you, and I have no problems with anybody loving who they wish. But, my dear, I find that I am greatly relieved that

you are a woman.”

She let out a soft laugh. “Oh dear, are you about to make my life very complicated?”

“Only as complicated as you want it to be,” he growled, gently taking another step towards her.

“I am about to have my first Season. I will not allow you to compromise me, Your Grace.”

He gazed down at her through hooded eyes and his sensual lips parted. “I have no wish to compromise you, but I do wish to pursue you.”

She let her mouth drop open as she locked gazes with him and his words landed upon her ears. This was exactly what she wanted the moment she had seen him! She’d wanted him to pursue her. She wanted him. There was no question about it.

But this was all happening so oddly. Perhaps, as a Briarwood, that was exactly how it was supposed to happen. Not normally, not in a ballroom, not during a waltz.

Yes, this was perfect in a small room, in a club of theater goers and theater lovers, with no one else about them!

“Why do I interest you?” she dared to ask, not wanting to seem like a cotton-headed girl who could be won with a few words.

He let out another laugh. “If you have to ask that, you don’t know me at all.”

“I don’t know you,” she pointed out. “I’ve only ever heard of you and seen you across very crowded rooms.”

“And you like what you’ve heard?”

She bit her lower lip and then nodded. “Of course I do. How could I not? You’re one of the few people who I feel lives like my family does.”

“Yes, your family is quite interesting. And I think it is quite fortuitous that we have met. Now...” he ventured, “whatever shall we make of this?”

“I still think you should turn around and go.”

He tsked as if he was disappointed. “Well, Mr. Marlowe , if you wish me to turn around and go, I shall. I won’t betray you, I promise you that. It shall be our secret.”

“Secrets are dangerous,” she returned.

“You chose secrets when you came here dressed as a man.”

“I suppose I did,” she agreed. “But I won’t make a habit of it. This is quite a difficult pickle.”

“It’s not,” he said softly. “Not at all, because I don’t hurt people.”

“You don’t?” she asked softly.

“No. Why would I choose to hurt people when I have the power to help them instead?”

Then, much to her shock and pleasure, he closed the small distance between them, towering over her. “But you? You are not something that I’m going to just be able to give up easily, and I don’t think you want me to, do you?”

“Your Grace,” she began, “why would you want to pursue someone like me?” She scowled suddenly. “Unless you are saying you wish to make me your mistress, and if you wish to make me your mistress, I shall stomp upon your foot and send you running.”

He laughed again, a low rumble, as if he found her delicious and wished to sample her. “Oh, I’m not running anywhere, and I don’t wish to make a young lady or a person of your family my mistress. No, I want to see if you are a good fit.”

“A good fit?” she echoed, the idea fascinating on many sorts of levels.

He nodded, those magnificent eyes of his shimmering iridescent.

“A good fit for what?” she whispered.

“Me,” he rumbled. “Because, you know, almost no one is.”

Her breath hitched in her throat. How did he do that? How was he always stealing her breath away?

It was such an interesting thing to say because everyone seemed to adore him. So surely, almost anyone would be a good fit, wouldn’t they?

“I don’t understand,” she admitted.

“I have to find out if you can keep up.”

“Keep up with what?”

“With me, of course,” he said, his voice an infuriating thrum of temptation.

Her mouth dropped open, then she snapped it shut, lest he accuse her of gaping. At last, she managed, “I could leave you in the dust, Your Grace.”

He said nothing. Except he lifted his hand and stroked the side of her cheek. He tilted her face side to side and then touched her wig. “Fascinating,” he said. “Utterly and absolutely fascinating. You’re not interested in wasting life, are you?”

“Wasting it?” she breathed. “Why in God’s name would I waste the only life that I’ve ever been given?”

He smiled slowly. “Yes. Yes, indeed. I have a very, very good feeling about this, and I’ve never been so delighted to have attended the theater and then come out to this club. I think it was meant to be.”

“Do you believe in such things?” she asked softly.

“If things are meant to be?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Given my life, I refuse to believe it is full of a series of mere coincidences. No. There is something grander at play.” Then he frowned. “You don’t think life is random, do you?”

She gave a shake of her head. “A Briarwood never could.”

“I shall come to call tomorrow,” he said suddenly.

She winced. “Oh God, my entire family is going to know that I failed.”

He smiled slowly, trailing his thumb close to her lower lip. Then, as if thinking better

of it, he dragged his hand away. “Perhaps your failing is your greatest success,” he said. “It’s led you to me.”

Her eyes flared, and she couldn’t stop her snort. “That is an extremely arrogant thing to say. Are you suggesting that you coming to court me is the greatest win of my life?”

“Oh, it won’t be the greatest one of your life,” he said unapologetically. “But it’ll be the first of many. And let’s not be silly. If the Duke of Baxter wants to come to call upon a young lady, it’s a significant thing, don’t you agree?”

She arched a brow. “It is,” she allowed. “And if you wish to be truthful and honest all the time, then I shall go ahead.”

“Yes,” he prompted softly.

She swallowed, hardly daring to believe she was going to be so bold! But she was the daughter of Ajax and Winifred Briarwood. How could she be anything but?

“I want you to come to call,” she stated. “I’m glad you’re here right now, and quite frankly, this is the beginning of the greatest adventure of my life. I can feel it in my bones.”

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:13 am

The Duke of Baxter was not easily surprised, but, by God, he was delighted to be surprised now.

He had not thought that when he entered the club this evening, he would find someone who would entice him and excite him and open up the possibility that he might actually find a woman who was as alive as him.

He had, of course, met many marvelous and magnificent women. He surrounded himself with the very best of all sorts of people. But it had never happened before that he had met an eligible young lady in his set who he could see himself choosing.

Now, it all was a bit precipitous, of course. She had only been in his presence for minutes. But he was a decisive man. She was the granddaughter of a duke. She was the daughter of a lord. What more did he need to know?

Well, he needed to know if she was made to handle someone like him and the way he lived. Many people could act with such passion for a little while, but they burned themselves out quickly.

And he would not do that to a woman.

It would be the height of cruelty. And it was, of course, why he had not yet found a wife. He'd seen the effect that his father had on his mother. His mother had been absolutely marvelous. She still was. She was a woman who knew how to step back and allow power to do what power needed to do.

Even so, the loss of his father had taken a toll on her, as had the way his father had

lived.

He needed someone who did not simply allow him to live his life but could live it with him.

Still, Miss Cymbeline Briarwood appeared to be a strong, bold creature who would have a zest for living that surely could match his.

He just had to wait and see.

She cocked her head to the side. “You know, I think I’ve decided that I’m actually going to take offense at your commentary, as thrilling as all this is.”

“Oh?” he growled softly. “Do tell.”

“Keep up with you, is it?” she tsked playfully. “I think that might be the rudest thing that anyone has ever said to me. The sheer audacity and arrogance of it, Your Grace.”

He let out a low rumble of a laugh. How he dearly loved to laugh. And he had a feeling that, with her, he would laugh often. “You might think so,” he said, “but I don’t wish to burn you down.”

“You act like I’m some sort of candle,” she replied.

“You are like a flame,” he said.

“Am I?” she queried.

“Oh, yes. Flickering, bright, interesting. And I cannot wait to see how you blaze.”

“You make it sound as if you are going to put me to some sort of test.”

“It is like a test,” he said, opening the door slowly, guiding her back out into the hall.

“No,” a voice groaned.

“Bloody hell,” another exclaimed.

“Not like this,” the last cursed.

It was Calchas, Laertes, and Octavian.

“Fellows!” Callum called. “Well met, as Shakespeare is so fond saying.”

“No,” Laertes stated. “Not well met.”

Calchas let an even more bitter note fall from his throat, as if he’d swallowed a fish bone. “Not well met at all, Your Grace.”

Octavian plowed a hand through his hair, looking as if he had aged five years in the last minute. “We’ve simply got to stop allowing these mad little tête-à-têtes in our family.”

Cymbeline let out a peep of dismay. “Nothing has happened,” she said quickly.

“What do you mean nothing has happened?” Octavian demanded. “You’re in a room with the Duke of Baxter.”

“Forgive me,” the Duke of Baxter said. “Can your young cousin not be in a room alone with me?”

Clachas, Octavian, and Laertes exchanged a quick glance. Baxter couldn’t help himself. They had made a quick assumption that somehow he knew that she was

female. Or perhaps they were just supposed to keep her under lock and key all the time, which made sense, of course.

Octavian cleared his throat. “Of course, Your Grace. Do forgive me. I did not mean to imply that our cousin is not capable of going off with you and having a—”

“He knows,” Cymbeline said quickly.

Baxter shot her a glance, surprised.

“We don’t do lies in our family,” she said. “Secrets just simply won’t keep.”

He let out an astonished sound. “Oh, really?” he said.

“Yes. So if that bothers you, you should hie off.”

Calchas let out a note of pure exhaustion. “I told your mother this was a bad idea.”

“Her mother?” let out Octavian. “Who cares about her mother? Ajax really is going to murder us.”

Callum cocked his head to the side. “Lord Ajax. Right,” he said, musing on this. “I didn’t really think about the fact that he would be my father-in-law.”

“Your father-in-what?” demanded Calchas. “You can’t be serious.”

“What do you mean?” Callum asked softly, surprised.

“Take no offense,” Calchas said swiftly. “Look, you are a magnificent duke, but I just don’t think it’s a good idea for you and Cymbeline to form any sort of alliance.”

“Why not?” Cymbeline demanded suddenly.

“He’s a lot,” said Octavian flatly.

Callum laughed, then shrugged. “There’s no denying it. I am indeed a lot,” he said.

“Not just a little a lot,” added Calchas. “A lot a lot,” he said. “You really don’t want him, Cymbeline. He’s a good fellow for fun, but...”

Callum arched a brow. “I feel like I should be taking offense at all of this. Besides, the three of you should have done a much better job of looking after your cousin. How could you let her go off like that? If I had been a man of far more nefarious purposes, as some people think that I am, she could have been up in a trice with the most shocking things happening to her.”

Calchas narrowed his eyes. “I could still call you out at dawn.”

“You could,” Callum said, “but the scandal would be terrible.”

“Our family quite likes a scandal,” Octavian reminded him.

“It’s true,” Callum agreed, “but I’d kill you. And then that would be terribly awkward.”

Cymbeline threw out her hands. “None of this ridiculous male peacocking, thank you. And I am suddenly reminded why I truly have no wish to be an actual man. This season of going out as a man has been most fun, but now I am reminded how absolutely idiotic men can behave when a woman is present. I would like to point out that I am more than capable of defending my own honor. Nothing happened. The Duke of Baxter has merely suggested that because of my adventurous spirit, I would be a good candidate for his duchess. He plans to call tomorrow, and I’m sure we can

all sort it out as a family. ”

“As a family?” Callum quarried. “Surely, you’ll make the decision.”

Octavian, Calchas, and Laertes all swung a shocked glance at him.

“You’re not even going to ask the Duke of Westleigh, her uncle?” Octavian demanded.

Callum narrowed his eyes. “Why in God’s name would I do that? I’m not marrying the Duke of Westleigh. I’m going to marry her, if she suits.”

“You can’t say things like that,” Cymbeline pointed out. “It’s getting very close to a proposal, which could then result in a breach of promise if I wish to press it.”

“But you wouldn’t,” Callum replied easily, enjoying this exchange immensely. “I can already tell you are not that sort of person. You wouldn’t want to be married to someone that didn’t want to be married to you.”

It was her turn to let out a laugh. “Dear God in heaven. You’ve known me for minutes and yet you seem to know me well.”

“It is our spirits that know each other, Miss Briarwood,” he said.

“Oh dear,” she rushed. “Best not call me that at present.”

“Perhaps we should not all congregate here in the hall,” Callum said. “Unless, of course, we should like to go out to the park and make merry by moonlight. There is another party after this. We could all go.”

“You’re mad,” Octavian said.

Cymbeline nodded. “It’s why he’s going to fit in with the family.”

“Stop,” Calchas begged. “Don’t you even dare say it.”

“Why not?” Cymbeline said.

Laertes let out a groan. “Because everyone knows that he’s...”

“What?” she asked.

“Exhausting to be around for any particular length of time.”

“He sounds like a Briarwood,” Cymbeline said.

“He’s not like a Briarwood,” Octavian cut in.

Callum happily watched the banter. He did not have siblings. He did not have much family. But he thought this was terribly fun, and he loved the idea of suddenly being involved with so many people. Especially such unique people.

“I promise you, if this is a good fit, we shall have the merriest of times together. I always have a merry time,” Callum said.

“Yes, we know,” Calchas drawled.

“That’s why we’re not really sure that you’d be a good fit for her,” Octavian put in.

Laertes nodded. “They do say rakes make excellent husbands. But you, Your Grace, make rakes sound like, well, infantile sporting fellows.”

Callum cleared his throat. “That is a bit of a strong accusation. I’m certainly not a

libertine.”

“We didn’t say that,” Octavian allowed.

“Yes, you’re not a bounder,” Calchas agreed. “But we are definitely of the same mind that you are not for our cousin.”

Cymbeline, to her credit, eyed them all in silence. “Men are absolutely ridiculous ponces,” she said at last. “The four of you think you can converse as if the lady has little say.”

“I protest,” Callum stated. “I suggested that it was you who should give me an answer. Not the head of your family.”

“So you did.” Cymbeline turned to Callum and said, “Baxter, present yourself in the morning if you truly are interested. If not, hie off to this party that you speak of, have a marvelous time, and find someone else this Season. My father will be most interested to hear what you have to say.”

“There is a chance that Lord Ajax might actually kill me if he learns all the details of this night, though I have acted with excellent behavior, if I do say so myself,” Callum suddenly said, beginning to really consider what such a conversation could look like.

He frowned. “The truth is that, of all the Briarwoods, he’s the one who makes me the most nervous in all this. ”

Callum’s lips twitched. “And I find it ironic that it’s his daughter who I like the best.”

“You haven’t met the rest of my cousins,” she drawled. “Perhaps you will choose one of them. There are many of us.”

“No, no,” he rushed, realizing his faux pas. “I’m not like that. I don’t go shopping for a wife. When I see what I want, I generally know, and I take it.”

Her eyes flared at that, and the three of her cousins looked as if they might suddenly all launch themselves at him at once, tear his head off, and then tread upon him.

It sounded like a great deal of fun, and he loved fun. And it was difficult to find people who knew how to have fun like he did.

“This is simply going to be marvelous, chaps,” he declared, taking them all in with a great deal of enthusiasm, feeling as if he had finally found his people. “I cannot wait until the morning. Is dawn too early, Mr. Marlowe ?”

All attempts at pretending she was a man now seemed lost, but he did enjoy teasing her with that name.

He loved that she had seized her life with her hands and dared to go out into society for a bit of excitement.

She hadn’t been a fool about it. She’d taken precautions.

She had her cousins. Yes. She was quite a wonder to behold.

She stared at him, quite astonished. “It is not. Most of us are up that early, no matter how late we stay out.”

“Right. I shall immediately consult my solicitor, see what I can say to your father, and I... Well, I think that you and I are about to have a very good time indeed.” He nodded, feeling quite pleased with the whole mad affair. “A very wonderful time.”

With that, lest he drive all her cousins into fits, he gave her a bow, stared at the three

cousins, who were clearly aghast, gave them a bow, then sauntered down the hall.

With a spring in his step, he headed out into the night, eager to wake up his solicitor to see what his options were if he and Miss Cymbeline Briarwood did decide they were a good fit.

But he knew something deep in his core. He'd only need her family's permission because she hadn't reached her majority, a young lady about to have her first Season, though it would be her choice in the end.

But if all went well, she'd be his wife in mere weeks.

He felt it. She'd already chosen him. It was evident in her eyes.

He was not surprised. A woman like that?

No. She wasn't indecisive or milquetoast about life.

And he loved it to bits. Because he did not want a wife who hesitated, or a wife who batted her lashes and demurely did as she was told.

No. He wanted a wife who was bold enough to go out in breeches, give chat back to her cousins, and tell them all off.

Because as he was, he needed a woman who would be able to look at him and tell him the truth.

He might not always listen to her. Oh, no, he might not listen at all.

But by God, he wanted a woman who was on fire.

And there was one thing that was absolutely and irrefutably true: Miss Cymbeline Briarwood was a lady who was about to set the world alight, and he wanted to watch it happen. He wanted to be a part of it.

And she would be the only one who could match his own fire. And when they blended, they could take the world by storm. He was fairly certain of it. And when he was fairly certain of something, well, nothing stopped him.

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“Mama, what would you think if I married a Briarwood?”

Callum’s mother sat at the breakfast table, sipping her tea in her dressing gown. She lifted her chin, took him in, arched a brow, and drawled, “Must you?”

“I don’t know if I must, Mama,” he returned as he strode in, “but it’s certainly a possibility. I met one last night, and she is quite the fascinating creature.”

“They’re all fascinating creatures, my dear. But the Briarwoods? Really? The family is...well, I suppose better than most and possibly...”

His mother cocked her head to the side, her silvery blonde curls spilling to the side. “Possibly the only ones who might be able to tolerate you.”

He plunked himself down at the breakfast table, stretched his booted feet out, grabbed a slice of toast, slathered it with butter and gooseberry jam, then masticated it ferociously. “Mama, how can you possibly say such a thing about your beloved son?”

She threw her head back and laughed. “Oh, my dear, you are my beloved son, which is exactly why I can say such a thing about you. I would never wish to foist you upon a silly young chit, but you must tell me now: Which Briarwood girl is on the market? I haven’t really been paying attention.”

Of course his mother hadn’t. His mother led a rich, wonderful life. He did not have to worry about her much, for which he was very grateful. His mother and his father had raised him to be strong and independent.

She was strong and independent.

And though the years after his father's death had taxed her greatly, she had at last emerged from the shadows of grief to take on her role as a woman in society with, well, vim and vigor.

She had one of the most successful salons in the city, where intellectuals and philosophers came to talk every day, and she kicked out anyone who was tiresome, boring, or rude.

Still, he was happy that she lived in his house. They both had faced the world alone after his father's death. And both of them, independent as they were, had needed each other.

They still did.

It was his duty to take care of her.

"Miss Cymbeline Briarwood," he said. "She is about to have her first Season. That makes me a trifle nervous, but I definitely think she could be a match for me. I thought I'd call upon them this morning and see."

His mother abruptly put her teacup down, leaned forward, and said, "Miss Cymbeline Briarwood?"

"Yes," he said.

"My dear, you amuse me. Indeed you do."

At that, he arched his own brow. "Whatever do you mean, Mama? Don't you like her? Do you know something?"

“I don’t like her. I am in awe of her. And I’ve certainly heard a great deal about her.

While she has not made her debut, my dear, she has been to many a party in society.

And I can tell you this right now. If you want her, you best claim her because she will have a list of gentlemen to choose from.

She’s a Briarwood, she’s wealthy, she’s beautiful, and she’s intelligent.

She will get another duke or an earl. I guarantee it.

Or perhaps an extremely wealthy American.

One never knows. Those Briarwoods are quite odd. She might prefer that.”

“How could she possibly prefer an American to me?” he protested, buttering another slice of toast, refusing to be daunted.

“Well, my dear, they are quite strange. Many Americans are already in the family.”

He snorted. “If I ask her, she’ll say yes.”

“Why do you think so?” she drawled.

“Because you should have seen the way she looked at me from under her wig.”

“Her wig?” his mother repeated as if she was afraid to ask further questions.

He waggled his brows. “I can’t tell you the details. I promised I wouldn’t get her into any sort of trouble.”

“My dear, you have not ruined a Briarwood.”

“For all my antics, I don’t do such things. You know that.”

She let out a long sigh. “Yes, I am grateful that you are still in tune with my hopes for you.”

“I could never ruin anyone, Mama. If I did, I could never meet you at breakfast because I know you’d poison my tea.”

She gave him an approving smile. “Good. I’m glad that we have firmly established that. I don’t mind you going out there, being wild, and doing whatever you please. But, my dear, you must never be cruel.”

He smiled at her. “I know, Mama, and you have raised me well. As did Papa.”

Her eyes darkened for a moment with deep sorrow at the mention of her husband.

He hated that sorrow. He hated to see her sad, and so he raced, “What do you mean she might choose another duke?”

She blinked her tears away and said, “Well, there is another duke on the market, you know. He might be looking for a wife soon. He’s a widower and—”

“Bloody hell, Mama. He could never possibly compete with me over Miss Cymbeline Briarwood.”

His mother gave him a wry stare and adjusted the ribbons on her dressing gown. “Don’t be surprised, my dear. All I can tell you is that if you want to marry Miss Cymbeline Briarwood, don’t wait. If you like her, marry her.”

“But, Mama,” he said softly, “what if...?”

His mother paused for the first time that morning, letting herself be truly serious in a way she generally did not. “What if what, my dear?”

He put down his toast and wiped his hands on the linen napkin. “What if I’m too much for her? What if she can’t keep up? What if she hates the way I live?”

His mother drew in a long breath. “If anyone is going to keep up with you, and possibly admire the way you live, or at least get on with it, it would be a Briarwood,” she said.

He nodded, relief sliding through him, for he’d feared he might never find a woman to truly love him as he was. “It could be fun to be attached to the Briarwood family, don’t you think?”

She let out a long-suffering sigh. “I suppose so. Sylvia, the dowager duchess, is quite a character, exceptionally interesting, and has raised all her children well, and they have raised their children well too.” His mother pursed her lips.

“Except I fear that if you have children with Cymbeline, one of them could end up on stage as an actor or as an activist or running about the world doing God knows what.” But then she smiled.

A deep, happy smile. “You must do it, my dear. You must ask her.”

“Don’t you think that I should give her a tryout?”

She began to laugh. A rich, rolling, bemused sound.

He frowned. “You find me particularly amusing this morning.”

She wiped at her eyes. This time, they were tears of humor.

“Did you not listen to a word I said? Of course you can give her a trial, my dear, but don’t be surprised when she decides to pick someone else.

A girl like Miss Cymbeline Briarwood? I do hope you did not suggest to her that you were going to put her through her paces to see if she’d make a good duchess. ”

He frowned.

“You did,” she exclaimed. “You did do such a thing.”

“Yes, I suppose I did,” he groaned.

“Well, you’ll be lucky now if she says yes at all.”

“No, Mama, I won’t because she liked me well. She saw that I could be good for her too.”

She leaned forward and took his hand. “Then I don’t see what the dilemma is.

Dukes don’t need to call on ladies for long periods of time, especially with someone who is so close in standing.

Go over at once. Give my regards to Dowager Duchess Sylvia.

Give my regards to the Duke of Westleigh.

Tell them I think it’s simply marvelous that Miss Cymbeline is beautiful and accomplished, and I can’t wait to have her as my daughter-in-law, and I shall retire to being a dowager duchess with good grace.

I have lots and lots of diamonds. She'll love them all. ”

“Mama,” he said softly, standing and crossing to her, “you are the very best in the whole world.” And he leaned down and pressed a kiss to her cheek.

“I know, my dear,” she said. “But it is rather lovely to hear it.”

“So, you do give your blessing for me finding a wife this Season?”

“I think it's sweet that you want my blessing at all. You could do whatever you want.”

“Yes, I could,” he said softly, “but I know that you know me better than most and would tell me if I was putting my foot wrong.”

And she would. She had in the past. He didn't always listen, but she understood him in a way that no one else did, and he was grateful for it.

Most people weren't close to their mothers.

Most lords he knew were closer to their nannies or their tutors, but not himself.

He'd always been close to his parents. They'd been a merry band against society, living as they pleased.

Now, it was just himself and her, and he'd always been rather afraid that when he did go to find a wife that it wouldn't go well, that he'd have to pick someone who would never understand him or approve of him or be able to see the world that he saw.

But perhaps, as he'd suggested to Cymbeline, this had been fate. Perhaps he had gone to the theater club on purpose, as if he'd been directed by some unseen hand, to find

the woman who would be just right for him.

“Now, my dear, you best go get ready. You don’t wish to keep her waiting.”

“I’m a duke,” he drawled. “Shouldn’t I be allowed to keep anyone waiting?”

“Of course, you’re allowed, my dear, but you must deal with the consequences if you do. If it was me, and I was you, I’d get my hand in before she was even on the market and someone else might have a look.”

“Well, Mama, if that’s what you think, I agree with you. Still, I worry.”

“Don’t worry,” she insisted, her love for him apparent, as was her concern that he did not believe that he could find love. “You are wonderful, and I’m sure she is too. There will be no need to have regrets.”

He drew in a long breath. Then he stepped back and strode out of the room.

It was going to be a very busy day. He started running up the stairs, calling loudly for his man, “Shepard.”

Shepard, his manservant, a fellow of about forty-five years old and incredibly experienced at boxing and sword fighting, came thundering down the hall.

“Yes, Your Grace?”

He was not the typical sort of manservant that most lords had. There was nothing stodgy about him, nothing reverential, and nothing deferential. Callum didn’t have time for such nonsense. He wanted a man who could not only take care of his clothes, but who could be blatantly honest with him.

“We’re getting ready for an important event. Get the best things out. I think I’m going to ask someone to marry me today.”

Shepard gave him a single look and then let out a cheer. “At last, the duke shall have a duchess, and all London shall be in raptures of enjoyment.”

“Shepard, that feels a bit exuberant even for you.”

“As you’ve taught me, Your Grace: What is life without exuberance?”

“Yes, but surely, you should have a little bit of reserve.”

“No, Your Grace. I should not. This is the day I have been waiting on for years.”

“My God, you make me sound as if I’m quite long in the tooth,” Callum said.

“Well, the moment you turned eighteen, most of us have been counting down, waiting for you to find your wife.”

“You needn’t be so blunt about it,” Callum said.

“You always insist I should. And I’m quite pleased. Let’s get you upstairs, get you dressed, turned around, and then off to the young lady’s house.”

Callum let out a laugh. “Right.”

He was glad Shepard was neither reserved nor afraid to be blunt. It’s what he loved about the man.

They charged up the stairs together, headed down the long hall, turned into his dressing room, and Shepard went to work.

Within a few moments, he was turned out in a beautiful set of clothes that Shepard thought the very best. Not too showy, not too colorful, serious but rich.

His breeches clung tightly. His boots were polished as brightly as mirrors.

His burgundy waistcoat was embroidered with gold.

His white cravat was pressed to within an inch of its life and tied with just the right amount of attention.

It was not too fussy. The cravat pin in his cravat gleamed, and his long coat, something he preferred, swirled about his legs like an echo of power from long ago.

“What do you think?” he asked Shepard.

“The lady would be a fool to say no.”

“Don’t say such things,” Callum said. “I always feel such declarations are courting difficulty.”

Shepard looked at him, then suddenly blurted, “Don’t bunk it up.”

“What?” he asked, shocked. That was extremely honest, even for Shepard. “Good God, man, what do you mean? Tell me before I do indeed bunk it up .”

Shepard cleared his throat. “Your Grace, you are one of my favorite people in the entire world.”

“Thank you, Shepard.”

“But you occasionally bunk things up. People don’t always know if you are jesting or

serious, so you must be serious with her.”

“I don’t know. She seems to like to be amused.”

“Well then, amuse her, but make her understand that this is what you truly want.”

“But, Shepard,” he said softly, thinking of what he’d said earlier to his mother, “what if she marries me and it all goes terribly wrong?”

Shepard gave him an indulgent look, then said with great gentleness, “Oh, Your Grace, of course it will go wrong. Marriages always go terribly wrong. Life always goes terribly wrong. But then it rights itself again. So, don’t worry about it.”

He gave Shepard a wry look, then headed back down the stairs.

After all, what could a man say to that? Did all marriages and lives go wrong?

He thought about his father. He thought about the way he planned to live.

Yes. Shepard was right. It would all go terribly wrong. It always did. And so, he’d have the very best time until that moment happened.

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Heron House

“Not you,” the deep voice growled from across the long study.

Callum glanced quickly back over his shoulder at the retreating form of the butler, who seemed as if he was actually seeking cover in a scenario that was about to turn warlike.

And there was the fact that Lord Ajax Briarwood was polishing a pistol, for who else could the massive man with icy blond hair framing his rather stoic face be?

The man was cleaning it with the sort of love, care, and devotion that one might show a beloved wife.

Callum hesitated, but only for a moment. “Do forgive me, my lord,” he said firmly. “But I am not here to see your esteemed self. I am here to pay call to your daughter, Miss Cymbeline.”

Lord Ajax continued to clean the pistol, working carefully, his eyes trained upon it. “Whom you met in the dead of night. Is that what I am to understand?”

Callum did not hesitate again. Instead of retreating, he took another step forward.

Fear was quite foolish in the face of such moments.

After all, if he wanted something, he had to go forward for it.

He could not go back. “That is correct, my lord. It was a most advantageous meeting. I did not realize I was going to meet such an interesting young lady and my potential wife.”

Lord Ajax looked up from the pistol.

He was a shockingly handsome man. The tradition of Herculean sculpture came to mind, but there was also something rather terrifying about him, for if Lord Ajax wished, he could cross the room in a few strides, rip Callum’s arms off, and then play croquet with them.

Now, Callum was not exactly afraid of engaging in the martial arts.

He had been trained, at the request of his father, from quite a young age by a variety of men in how to handle himself.

Still, he did not like the idea of coming to blows with the large man who was the father of the young lady that he had largely decided to marry.

Though perhaps things weren’t going according to the plan that he had begun to formulate.

Being a duke, and a powerful one, the circumstances felt quite odd. Usually, he was the one who had to be appeased. That did not seem to be the case at present. “Now, why don’t you wish to see me, my lord?”

“No, no, I’m perfectly happy to see you,” Lord Ajax said with a dangerous smile. “The not you meant you are not going to marry her.”

Callum cocked his head to the side. “What an interesting thing to say, my lord. Surely, it is she who decides and not you.”

“What century are you living in? Are you living in some modern fantasy?” Lord Ajax retorted. “She’s not reached her majority of twenty-one years. So, you need my permission.”

“Well, I had heard that the Briarwoods were rather progressive about things like love.”

Ajax narrowed his eyes, leaned back in his chair, lifted his booted feet, and put them quite casually atop the long, polished table before him as if Callum was not the slightest threat in the entire world.

He cradled the pistol. “Are you suggesting that you love my daughter?”

The question was phrased quite calmly, but it felt loaded, unlike the pistol.

“My lord, I have not known her long enough to do so,” he said.

“But I think that I could attribute the sentiment of Shakespeare here. It is my duty to love a young lady who is so fascinating, beautiful, and clearly intelligent.”

“Your very clever words actually make me like you even less,” Lord Ajax said.

Callum’s brow shot up. This was not going at all as he had foreseen. But then again, perhaps he was approaching this entirely in the wrong way. Ajax was a man who did not care for flowery words. The truth was Callum loved words, he loved word play, and he loved to have a good time with them.

But Ajax, of course, loved his daughter and did not wish for anything silly from Callum.

“Look,” Callum allowed quite truthfully, “we met under rather odd circumstances.

I'm sorry if you did not know that she was going out on such adventures."

"I did know, and she had my blessing. I'm not pleased that she got caught, but I suppose I will have to be pleased that it was by someone like you."

"Well, if you are pleased that it was by someone like me," he interjected, "why can't you be pleased that I am interested in pursuing her as a future wife?"

"Because I know about you," Lord Ajax said. "And I knew your father."

"And that is what is prohibitive?" Callum countered, suddenly tensing. He had loved his father. He had loved him dearly, and to suggest that knowing his father was a reason for dismay immediately put him on alert.

"Yes, he died quite young, didn't he?"

"Is that a crime?" Callum challenged.

"Of course it's not a crime. But your father was a strange man."

"Strange?" Callum echoed, a muscle tightening in his jaw. "This from someone like you?"

"Someone like me?" repeated Ajax, leaning back in the high-backed chair.

"Yes, someone who lives largely outside the bounds of society. A Briarwood." Callum forced himself not to rise to whatever bait Ajax had laid out for him.

So, he pivoted in his tactic. "I would've thought you would've liked someone like my father.

Surely, we are on the same sort of mission to improve society and not leave it to the old guard. ”

Ajax drew in a long breath. “You are not wrong about that, but I’ve seen the way you burn the candle, Your Grace. I don’t think you’re going to be able to stop long enough to marry my daughter or even have children.”

“I promise you I will be able to stop long enough to do that,” he said.

“Ah,” Lord Ajax replied. “You see, it is my job and my duty, and I am not at all convinced that you can—”

“I can most certainly make her happy,” he cut in.

“Can you?” Lord Ajax said, his gaze assessing.

Callum nodded, drawing in a breath, knowing that he had the lord here. “Oh, indeed, because no one, I guarantee you, in this town will allow her to behave as she wishes to except me.”

The lines around Lord Ajax’s mouth tightened almost imperceptibly. “And how do you know so very well what my daughter wishes and does not?”

“Because she was in an all-male club, dressed as a man, acting like a man, and convincing everyone that she was a man. How many lords do you think would allow their lady-wife to do such a thing?”

Lord Ajax stilled, then asked quietly, “You are suggesting that you are going to let her go about dressed as a man if she so wishes?”

“I’ll let her live the life that she chooses,” he said softly. “I want someone who’s like

me.”

“And my daughter is like you?” Lord Ajax queried, still seemingly unmoved, save for the way he was now speaking so quietly.

“Yes, and I think you know it, and I think you’re going to say yes at the end of this meeting.”

Lord Ajax tensed. “You seem to know a great many things, Your Grace.”

“Indeed, I do. It is one of the challenges of being so well-educated and also of understanding people the way I do,” Callum stated factually.

There was no point in denying it. “I have been raised to study people, my lord, so that I can use them and get things done. Now I know that might sound terrible—”

“It doesn’t,” Lord Ajax allowed. “We are not so very different in that, and certainly my brother, Leander, the Duke of Westleigh, is not so very different from you. And luckily for you, he doesn’t seem to find you as appalling as I do.”

Callum gave a slight, almost—but not quite—mocking bow. “I’m glad to have a character reference from the duke.”

“I didn’t say that,” another voice called from the hall.

Callum’s lips curled in a smile. This was quite the meeting. “Ah, you have brought reinforcements, my lord.”

“If that’s what you wish to call me,” the Duke of Westleigh said, striding into the room.

The man was tall, dark-haired, with the first streaks of silver hair tracing through those raven locks, and a look that was electric and powerful.

He was the sort of duke that very few could gainsay.

Perhaps Callum could, but he had no wish to.

“You think it’s a good idea, don’t you, my marrying Cymbeline?”

Westleigh crossed slowly to the fire and propped his foot on the grate as if they had all the time in the world. “You are not the first duke to wish to marry into this family.”

“Ah, yes. The Duke of Ferrars,” Callum mused. “It does seem that you breed ladies who are adept at taming dukes.”

“Do you wish to be tamed?” Ajax growled.

He hesitated. “If I’m honest, I don’t know if I can ever be tamed,” he said. “I am a feral creature, wild through and through, but I give a good guise of being tamed, which allows me to move about society and get things done. Surely, Westleigh, you can understand that.”

Westleigh eyed him carefully. “Oh, yes, I understand going about with a guise to get things done. And hiding who one truly is. But I don’t think you hide who you truly are, Baxter.

I think you present exactly who you are, and that’s what gives us the slightest pause.

We don’t want our darling girl to be made a widow too soon. ”

He cocked his head to the side. “I see. You are not like everyone else, which is, of course, no surprise, given the fact that you are Briarwoods. You’ve spotted what no one else has.”

“And what is that exactly?” Lord Ajax drawled, standing slowly, placing the pistol carefully in its case.

“I have no fear of death.”

“That makes you stupid,” the Duke of Westleigh said.

He let out a long, slow laugh. “No, it doesn’t.

It makes me a realist. We could all die at any moment.

I mean, I’m not going to do something stupid like go out and step in front of a coach.

But I could contract smallpox tomorrow. I could drink bad water.

I could make someone angry, and they could assassinate me because I’ve supported an unpopular bill.

Look, if I went about my life being afraid of death, well, then I wouldn’t be able to live, now would I? ”

Westleigh and Ajax exchanged a quick glance.

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“Yes, but you are living at such a pace, Your Grace,” Ajax said, “that we fear you won’t be able to stay around to keep Cymbeline, let alone make her happy.”

A surprising shaft of pain dug at his heart.

These two were far savvier than most. But he’d long ago chosen this path, and he wasn’t about to alter it.

“No one knows when they’re going to die,” Callum pointed out coolly.

“I might live until ninety, but I promise you this, I shall have a contract drawn up so that she and any children we might have are completely taken care of. There will be no concerns upon that score. She won’t need me after I die. ”

“Need you after you die?” echoed the Duke of Westleigh, aghast.

“You see, this is our concern, Your Grace,” Ajax sighed, beleaguered. “You are not thinking of your family or ahead. You are thinking only of what you need to do .”

Callum blinked. “I’m a duke. Of course, I need to think about what I need to do and the people that I must take care of. My family, of course, will be important, but I have been born to this earth for a greater purpose than just a family.”

“Yes, there it is,” the Duke of Westleigh said sharply, shaking his head rather dramatically, as if he found the whole thing terribly disappointing. “What we’re so afraid of.”

The idea that these two men were afraid of things was absurd.

Still, he'd play along with this strange game they'd chosen.

"Afraid? Of what?" Callum demanded. "I'm a good man, don't you think?"

Suddenly, he felt on quite strange ground. Usually, dukes were sought after and daughters all but thrown at them with little argument. There was actually often something akin to begging.

He'd been approached by scores of mamas.

This was something entirely different.

"Yes," Ajax said. "You are a good man, but not for my daughter, I don't think."

"Papa," a voice called.

"Good God," Callum blurted. "Is this a family meeting?"

"Of course it is," the Duke of Westleigh said brightly, his eyes dancing. "Generally, that's how our family does things. A few more people might pop in at any given moment. One never knows."

Ajax let out a loud note of disapproval. "You weren't supposed to join us, Cymbeline."

"It's about my life," she pointed out, bustling in, her apricot skirts rustling about her beautiful form. "How could I not join you?" she insisted.

Callum couldn't breathe at the sight of her! She looked like the pert young man he'd

met, but she didn't... Now, in her silk gown that skimmed her curvaceous body, with her soft hair curled atop her head and tendrils teasing her face, he feared he would not be able to speak.

She was stunning. A goddess divine. And she crackled with life.

And her voice? Her rich, lovely voice felt like a balm to his soul.

His mind seemed to dim for a moment, and he longed to take her in his arms, her family be damned.

After all, he'd all but claimed her. She'd all but said she wanted him.

Why were they performing this mad charade?

"We don't think he's a good match for you," Ajax said firmly to his daughter.

"You are not the one who has to go and live with him," she said.

Ajax frowned. "You are bloody right about that. I'd kill him within a day. He's absolutely outrageous. Showing up after—"

"Yes, he is," Cymbeline said, soothing her father, "but do you think that there's anyone else in the ton who might be good enough for me?"

Callum stood rather tall at that. He liked the fact that she believed he was so singular and saw him so well, but his mother was right.

Cymbeline would have her pick of anyone, and if he was not careful, he'd lose her.

"I've come here," he said, "after doing some thinking last night. I've realized that I

have regrettably made an error.”

She turned to him, shocked. “An error? Are you retracting your wish to call upon me?”

“Yes,” he said.

Her uncle and father exchanged another quick glance. The pistol in its case upon the long table was like another member of the conversation.

Ajax cleared his throat. “You know we have a rather large field outside. We could have a duel and then bury your body in the back. A few people might say something, as you are a duke after all, but...”

“No.” He lifted his hand. “A duel will not be necessary,” he said to Ajax before turning his full attention upon her. “And the real reason I’m here is this. I don’t need to find out if you can keep up with me.”

“Did he say that?” her father ground out.

“Yes,” she said, her mischievous lips twitching. “He did.”

“The very idea that my daughter couldn’t keep up with you,” Ajax said, taking a step around the table.

Callum winced. “Yes. I realize now it was a rather ridiculous thing to say. It was pointed out to me. Occasionally, I do say ridiculous things, but I would assume that being in this company means that you all say ridiculous things every now and then. True?”

“It is true,” the Duke of Westleigh agreed, folding his arms across his broad chest,

causing the jewel in his cravat pin to wink in the morning light. “Now out with it. Why are you here if not to call upon her? Or...to find out if she can keep up with you?”

Those last words caused the good duke to quake with either disgust or amusement. It was hard to discern.

“I’m here to ask for her hand before someone else tries to take it from me.” He crossed to her and gazed down into Cymbeline’s eyes. “Because I think it’s mine, isn’t it, Cymbeline?”

She turned to him and sucked in a breath.

And for the first time in his life, it was him who had to wait for a reply.

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Cymbeline wanted to say yes so badly.

The word was on the tip of her tongue. After all, she was fairly certain that Baxter was the only man alive at present who could suit her. But given the reaction of her father, her uncle, and even her cousins, she was questioning herself.

She was not accustomed to questioning herself, and so it felt quite strange.

Still, she had no desire to look back when she was an old lady to this moment and wonder: What if she'd acted with more measure? Now, granted, a Briarwood was not supposed to act with measure, but nor were they idiots or rash fools.

She would not throw her life away on what could be a whim, on a man she had met in the middle of the night!

Yes, her entire body crackled as if it had been brought to life, but what if she was mistaking lust for recognition of her soul mate because she'd been in quite odd circumstances?

After all, masquerading as a man wasn't exactly her typical behavior.

Getting caught had put her in quite a state too!

What if she was mistaken and her family was correct? She had to be careful. Divorce was almost impossible, and she had no wish to be the first Briarwood in a loveless marriage.

Though she did feel it—the understanding that he was unlike anyone else—and her soul, her heart, her entire body longed to adore him. To be worshipped by him.

Even standing there in the room with her father and uncle, she recognized that she had entered an entirely new phase of her life, like the moon proceeding through the twenty-eight days of its cycle.

She was on the cusp of becoming whole.

If they didn't cock it all up.

But what if he was mistaken? What if he did not actually want her? What if he was the one who was making a mistake? What if he was simply enamored by her seemingly bold behavior?

So, she lifted her chin and said into his rather expectant, extremely arrogant, but oh so beautiful face, “I will marry you, Your Grace, on one condition.”

He beamed. “I am so glad that you are going to...”

And then his voice trailed off as he truly took in her words. “I beg your pardon?”

Her father began to laugh softly. “You see, Your Grace, this is what it will be like to be married to my daughter. Are you truly sure it's what you want? She will always do the unexpected.”

“Dukes are generally accustomed to getting what they want,” the Duke of Westleigh said.

“You might wish for a safer bet. For you see, when one marries a Briarwood, even a duke must become accustomed to not getting what they want. Even I had to with my

darling wife, Mercy. She has provided me with the challenges that I need, which is really what a good wife should do. So, you'd best be certain you want a wife like Cymbeline.

We'll allow you to take back the query. You can turn about now, leave, and we'll pretend as if this never happened. ”

But instead of doing that, of turning tail and running, the young duke grew intrigued. She could see it in the spark in his eyes and the way he tilted his head to the side, contemplating her. “What is it then, my dear Miss Cymbeline, that you require for me to gain your acquiescence?”

Her heart began to hammer at her ribs, and she smoothed her hands down the skirts of her gown.

“You will come and live at Heron House, and we shall spend so much time together that anyone else would grow irritated with each other. My grandmother does have a saying—‘Fish and guests can go bad in a mere three days.’ You must last longer than that, but then I shall marry you.”

He stilled. “You wish me to come stay here for an undefinable amount of time?”

“Exactly,” she affirmed, praying he would accept, wishing she had not even had to say it.

But she had to. She needed to know that he would fight for them.

That he did not merely expect her to give in to whatever he wished, how he wished.

“And if you survive it, then I shall say yes immediately, and we shall be wed at the little chapel that is on my uncle's estate.

Or we can have a great wedding at St. Paul's.

Whichever you prefer. It matters not to me.

But I think we should find out now if I can keep up with you, or if I shall indeed lag behind. ”

“Oh, my dear Miss Cymbeline,” he rumbled, “I think you are already several steps ahead.”

“Your pretty compliment will not make me acquiesce sooner,” she said. “This is my condition. And if you think I am worth it, you will say yes.”

“You don't understand,” he said softly, “what you are asking. I have so much to do. I am continually at work. I never rest, you see. I go from long before the sun comes up until long after it goes down.”

“We've heard rumors that you don't sleep,” Westleigh stated.

“I need little,” Baxter said tightly.

She stared up into his handsome face and her heart sank. “It is quite alright, Your Grace. You have been given leave to retreat, though I confess I am disappointed.”

A muscle tightened in his jaw, and he shook his head. “If this is what is required to get a wife who I think will suit, I will happily do as required.”

He seemed so tense all of a sudden, and she knew she had made the right decision to wait to say yes, and yet she was dismayed.

Would he survive a few weeks with her? Surely, he would. Surely, a man like him

was meant to live amongst the Briarwoods. Why was he so hesitant?

“Though you cannot expect me to turn away from the people who need me,” Baxter stated.

“Of course I don’t. That would be ludicrous.

I could not be so cruel as to expect you to simply come here, eat cake, swim in the river, ride horses, read books, and watch plays with me.

” She shook her head and assured, “Oh, no, no. You must continue to go to the House of Lords, take your meetings, and speak on the floor, and I shall admire you all of the time. I shall go in disguise to cheer you on.”

“You wish to go with me to the House of Lords?” he said softly.

“You will find that the women of this family are interested in all sorts of things,” she said.

“If that is what you wish, then, of course, it is what shall occur,” he said, his gaze easing. “And in the end, I am getting exactly what I said I wanted last night, so I can hear the gods and the Fates laughing at me.”

“And what is that?” she said.

“A trial,” he said. “Isn’t that what this is? I thought I would be seeing if you suited me last night... But actually, it is you who shall judge. And if I fail, you will no doubt have your pick of the Season.”

“You are most clever, Your Grace. You’re certain you’re game for it?”

“For you, I am game for anything,” he rumbled, taking her hand in his and squeezing it.

For a moment, she was certain he was going to twine their fingers.

“Even though you’re a great duke?”

Slowly, he lifted her hand to his lips and gently kissed it, ignoring the throat clearing of her father and uncle.

“ Because I’m a great duke,” he said.

“You’re quite certain that we’ll still want each other at the end of this?” she teased, her body thrilling at the touch of his lips upon her hand.

Her father coughed.

“We’ll have to see,” Baxter replied softly, “but I will not be the one to change my mind.”

And with that, the Duke of Baxter slipped his hand from hers, then gave the three Briarwoods a bow.

“Now, I must tell my manservant, Shepard, to prepare a particularly large trunk and arrange for all my things to be brought here. Are you really certain you wish to have me as a guest, Westleigh?” he drawled.

“I’d like to point out that if I am staying here, spending a great deal of time in Cymbeline’s company, people will draw certain conclusions. ”

“We don’t care about the conclusions of others,” her uncle said merrily. “If you fall

through, we'll find her a rich American, and she can go about having adventures abroad."

Baxter arched his brow. "You and my mother would get along splendidly. She said something similar."

"Your mother is a very interesting woman. I admire her greatly. I'm not surprised that we think alike," her uncle replied, clearly now enjoying this "You can bring her too if you want."

"That's quite all right," Baxter said. "I think there are enough of us dukes and duchesses here, don't you?"

The Duke of Westleigh laughed. "Oh, in this house, there are never enough, and there's always room for more."

The Duke of Baxter turned and strode out of the room.

Cymbeline stood looking at her father and her uncle, feeling slightly flummoxed. This was all far more complicated than she had thought it would be.

"Are you certain about this, my love?" her father asked, crossing to her.

"Yes, I am, Papa. I knew this moment was coming. I just didn't think it would be so soon.

" She did not even know how to truly describe what was happening to her.

She felt as if she was falling towards something strong, like the undercurrent in the tides near their family home on the Isle of Wight. "And with someone so powerful."

Her uncle crossed to her, gave her a strong hug, then said, “Oh, we did. You’re quite special, Cymbeline.

Of course, this whole thing about finding a husband before the Season even starts is quite a ludicrous way for the ladies to go.

First Portia. Now you. Do you really think that you want him ?

I think he is far more complicated than he seems.”

“You both act as if there’s something wrong with him. He seems splendid.”

“He seems so,” her uncle said softly, “but there’s something there.”

Ajax nodded. “Yes. I’ve always sensed it. There was something with his father too. I can’t quite put my finger on it. It’s as if they have a restless spirit inside them, driving them on. Don’t you see?”

“But he seems so happy.”

“Perhaps he is,” her father said gently. “But I’ll tell you this right now. His father lived as his son does, and he died quite young. There’s many a rumor that said he died so abruptly because he lived so hard.”

“The Briarwoods all live hard,” she exclaimed, longing to argue against their comments.

“We live hard and we play hard and we rest hard,” her father said. “He doesn’t do all of those things, my dear. And so you must decide if that is truly the life that you are willing to join.”

She nodded, stunned to find that her path to love was not at all as quick or direct as she had assumed it would be. But surely, it didn't matter that the Duke of Baxter was a complicated man, as her uncle suggested.

In her experience, and certainly with her own family, all the best men were.

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She'd said yes.

Callum sat atop his stallion, riding back towards town and his ducal house in the city.

She'd said yes.

For all intents and purposes, Miss Cymbeline had said yes.

He kept repeating this too himself, trying to assure himself that the meeting he had largely expected to be in charge of had not gone completely mad. What the bloody hell had happened?

In all of his life, he'd never experienced anything like he had experienced at Heron House.

He still wasn't sure what to make of it.

He was getting married. He was sure of that. Her challenge was to stay at Heron House? Surely, the Briarwoods would be wonderful. He would fit in well. They all enjoyed living. And he would be busy from before they all got up to long after they went to bed.

What would be the harm in it? And before he knew it, Cymbeline and he would be in a church saying I do .

And yet there was something inside him that suddenly crackled to life as if he was afraid of being judged or, worse, spotted.

Would they see something no one else did? That there was something amiss with him?

He knew deep in his core that there was nothing amiss. Truly. He was a superior fellow. His father had been a superior fellow, and his children would be superior too. He lived as no one else dared to live, and he would not be ashamed of it.

Even so, something inside him...bristled.

He urged his stallion to ride faster and harder towards town. He had meetings all throughout the day, and he had managed to wedge in this particular visit because finding a wife was important.

And, still stunned, he was trying to understand that she had not been easily swayed.

His mother was right. He never should have said that he would see if she could keep pace with him.

He never should have suggested that a trial would be a good idea. He should have handled it as so many other dukes did, as a business arrangement. But the fact was he was a man who felt deeply and acted swiftly.

Despite the fact that he had known her only hours, he cared about Cymbeline. And the entire reason he'd wished for a sort of trial was because he'd been afraid that she might be hurt if she didn't understand him.

Now, she might understand him particularly well.

And that? That also gave him pause because what if she decided that she couldn't handle being his duchess? The idea that Cymbeline might find him to be...

No, he wouldn't allow himself to think it. There was no need to worry. He could manage this. He was getting exactly what he wanted. Even if it felt as if what he wanted had twisted somehow into something he didn't quite understand.

But if she did decide that she did not want to be married to a man like him...

It would be for the best. It had to be. He would have to let her go, and he would let her go quickly because he knew one thing deep in his core. He would never change.

This was who he was. A man who went through life as if he was one of those things made in the far east, lit and blazing into the sky, bursting with color and banging with noise.

He was meant to strike out and fly across the sky.

He couldn't change that. And more importantly, he did not wish to.

But as the city came into view, a thought hit Callum.

What if, despite all his arguments of wishing for a wife who suited, Cymbeline was the only one for him?

The only one who stirred his heart. For she had awakened something in him, and parts of himself, that he had long been certain were gone, and she'd pushed at the boundaries he had so carefully put up.

What would he do then?

Heron House

The fun, in many ways, had already begun.

The Duke of Baxter had arrived, much to the excitement of the entire household, and it was a large household.

Heron House, unlike most other London homes of great people, was full to the brim. Now, there was always room for more, but in this house, there were most of Cymbeline's aunts and uncles, her grandmother, and many, many cousins, as well as adopted cousins. There were also in-laws.

And there were always people coming and going, like dancing masters, theater teachers, and fighting fellows.

Yes, it was a marvelous place to live and grow up. It was an epicenter of culture and thought, where many were always moving. But surprisingly, quite often, in the evenings, the Briarwoods would simply sit at home and enjoy each other.

Cymbeline could not wait to see what the Duke of Baxter was like in the Briarwoods' natural habitat.

He was currently in his rooms, which were adjacent to her own. She had not missed the fact that her darling grandmama had arranged it so. She felt herself blush.

Cymbeline knew what Briarwoods did. She knew the circumstances of more than one of her aunt's and uncle's rather close relationships occurring right underneath their

family's noses before they were married.

Often, the family put them together on purpose! As she was certain her grandmother had done so now with herself and Baxter.

But despite her grandmother's actions, her family did not seem so very certain that she and the Duke of Baxter would wed.

Perhaps her grandmama knew something they did not.

Generally, her grandmama knew many things that others did not, but this evening Cymbeline could not wait to see him , and to see what he would do when so surrounded.

Many people did not know what to make of the family, but she had a rather sneaking suspicion that the Duke of Baxter would be able to handle her family with aplomb. And once she was certain of that, saying yes to him would be far easier.

So, she crossed to the door that separated their chambers, lifted her knuckles, and wrapped firmly at the door. There was a long pause.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Napoleon," she called through the panel.

"Don't say that. I've no interest in short Frenchmen."

"Apparently, it's a myth," she called back. "He's not that short. It's just English propaganda in the cartoons."

The door opened, revealing his muscled frame clad in elegant clothes, with candle

glow silhouetting him. His shirt was open at the neck, his cravat gone, and his shirt sleeves were rolled up past quite impressive forearms.

“And how do you know that?” he prompted.

“Because I know the cartoonist,” she teased, bouncing on her toes. “And as far as I understand, the emperor is of average height, though not of average intelligence or average ability to do damage to the world.”

“Well said.”

“Thank you,” she replied, bouncing on her toes again and placing her hands behind her back, lest she reach for him. Her whole body ached for his. It was most alarming and delicious at once. “Now, are you ready to go down for the evening?”

He stared at her for a moment, then he smiled and asked, “Where are we going? Whose party is it this evening?”

She blinked. “Oh, there is no party. We’re going to go downstairs, have a light supper, and I’m sure someone will wish to entertain us, either on the pianoforte or perhaps a scene will be done. You may be asked to read Shakespeare.”

His brows drew together. “And this is how the Briarwoods live?”

She stared at him, confused. “Yes.”

“How can you bear to stay at home?” he exclaimed.

“Well, we like each other, so we spend a great deal of time with each other.”

“Doing what?” he asked, stunned.

“Well, I just told you.”

“But surely...” He looked back over his shoulder, then gazed down at her. “Don’t you wish to go out with me?” he queried softly.

“Why would I wish to go out with you when I could stay here instead?”

His eyes crackled with a slow burn of heat at that. “It depends on what you wish to do,” he replied, his voice rough now with the promise of something sinful. “But I am under your family’s roof, and I have just arrived, so I don’t think—”

“Oh, they’ve put your room next to mine, so I know exactly what they’re trying to do.”

“Who is they ?” he asked suddenly, as if he feared they might jump out and take him to task.

“If I’m quite transparent with you,” she began, “ they really is Grandmama. She is the one who runs this house, like a goddess from on high. Though my Aunt Mercy does quite a lot. But if Grandmama thinks that our rooms should be side by side, then they should be. She wants to know if we are compatible.”

“Compatible?” he echoed.

“Yes, in every way.”

His eyebrows rose. “The Dowager Duchess wishes to find out if—”

“Yes, because if we are not, then we can both cry off, and there’s no scandal.”

He let out a bleat of a sound. “How can this not be scandalous? And surely, your

male relatives are going to bury me in the field your father mentioned.”

“No,” she laughed. “Because I’ve already heard the rumor that the family has chosen to tell everyone about why you are here.

Our family will know the truth, but everyone else will be told that my uncle, the duke, invited you to stay so that the two of you can work on a particularly important bill.

You both need to see if you can get some stodgy laws on the ports amended, so that far less harm is done in the colonies, you see.

And that will allow us to be together here. ”

He cleared his throat. “I see. And you’re comfortable with that lie?”

“I am,” she said. “Unless, of course, you wish to tell everyone the truth, which is that you are going to be with me, cheek by jowl, all of the time, and that you could be turned down by a lady like me.”

He laughed. “I could never bear the scandal of such a thing,” he teased.

“That’s what I thought, so we’ll just go ahead with my family’s excuse, if you don’t mind. Besides, you and my uncle might very well solve the problems of the world under this roof. You two seem to have the capability.”

“Thank you for your confidence,” he said, giving her a bow with the flourish of a hand. “But I cannot stay here this evening.”

“Why not? It’s a perfectly wonderful house, don’t you think? Is it not beautiful to you?” She frowned. “Are you one of those silly people who think modern houses are

the way to do things? Because if you are, I can tell you right now that we should not wed.”

A loud laugh boomed from him. “No, I do not think modern houses are the way to do things. I still like my house in the country. We did not tear it to bits and pieces to put in some French monstrosity. Lots of dark wood, don’t you know. I hope you like a good castle.”

“Oh, I do,” she assured swiftly. “Castles make me very excited about being alive. You see, because what I do is go up to the parapet. The wind sweeps my gown, and I pretend that I’m a lady warrior of old, ready to wage a battle against an army storming my keep.”

He gave her a strange look before his lips parted and he leaned down towards her. “I’d like to storm your keep.”

Heat blossomed at her bosom and then traveled lower. Much lower. “That is a really shocking thing to say, Your Grace,” she replied playfully.

“I’m glad. I was hoping to be a bit shocking. I think you need to be shocked.”

“I’m surrounded by my family. It is extremely hard to shock me.”

“And yet, I think,” he said, “you are without experience.”

“Is it so very obvious?” she asked, feeling nervous for the first time in his presence.

He nodded softly.

“Well, I have a great deal of theoretical knowledge,” she said, “it is true, but nothing tried out yet.”

“Aren’t they concerned that you might try it out with me?” he asked abruptly. “I still can’t believe your grandmother has chosen to put my room next to yours. Is this a test? Am I to resist? Surely, that’s what this is.”

“No,” she rushed, understanding his confusion.

“My family doesn’t really put store in such things, as long as no one blatantly finds out about the activity.

That did happen to my Aunt Hermia, and she was forced to wed.

But if you and I would, well, have an affair, it really wouldn’t be a problem, as long as no one found out. ”

His eyes widened, and he leaned against the doorframe, a decidedly delicious action.

She tried not to swoon from the way his muscles rippled and moved under his clothes, and she babbled on, “My aunt, Lady Juliet, had an affair with her husband before they were married. Everyone in the house knew that they were going to get married except the two of them, you see.”

“And your family is full of a great many of these stories?” he prompted.

“Oh, yes,” she affirmed, surprised at the way her cheeks were heating, wondering if she was going to have an affair with him. “Isn’t yours?”

He shook his head. “No, I’m an only child.”

“Oh, dear, how sad for you.” She nibbled her lower lip. “Well, I suppose I am an only child, but I have so many cousins that it feels as if I’ve had brothers and sisters all my life.”

“I can see that,” he said softly, his gaze tracing slowly over her. “Speaking of which, aren’t your cousins going to try to do me in if your father does not?”

“No, no, I’ve spoken with them.”

“You’ve spoken with them?” he queried.

She cleared her throat. She’d prepared an answer to this question, since she’d been certain he would ask.

“Yes, I’ve told them that if they interfere with you, or try to kill you, then I shall have to tell all society about the silly things they did when they were little boys.

I know everything about them, you see. They used to play sprites. ”

“Sprites?” he queried, amused.

“Yes, in plays. They’re very excellent fairies. And I told them that if they bother you, I will force them to put on a play in public with the parts of Mustardseed, Peaseblossom, and the rest from A Midsummer Night’s Dream .”

His lips twitched. “My, you really have planned all of this.”

Oh, how she wanted him. Wanted him in a way that seemed to steal her reason. So she did not think before she blurted, “Yes, so I really think the only solution at present is that you kiss me now, and then we go downstairs.”

His eyes darkened with desire. “Oh, I will kiss you happily,” he said, “but we will not go downstairs after.”

“Will we not?”

“No, because then I shall just be tempted to bring you back up again. If I kiss you, we will go to the theater. Would that please you?”

She gasped. He knew her well. And she loved feeling as if he had chosen something specifically to please her. But there was a part of her that wondered why he was trying to leave when he had only just gotten there.

But she wouldn't let that thought take root. No, he was simply excited by life, as was she. And she rather liked his enthusiasm.

“Well then?” she prompted.

“What?” he said, sliding his hand to her waist, pulling her in close to him.

She could scarce breathe as she realized he was going to kiss her. And as much as she wished it, she was fraught with nerves. What if their kiss wasn't good? What if he didn't like kissing her?

She licked her lips, barely able to put two thoughts together as his hand brushed her hip.

“What play are we to see? My Aunt Juliet is currently in Hamlet . She's playing Gertrude.

She hates the fact that she never got to play Hamlet, but she said Gertrude is a decent part, as long as one doesn't ruin it by getting too silly and maudlin. You have to find the depth.”

“I see,” he replied, leaning in and slowly caressing the curls away from the curve of her neck.

The feel of his hand upon her bare skin was shocking and so tempting she knew she could never say no to his touch. “Have you never contemplated Hamlet before?” she asked, though she had no idea why she asked it.

“It’s my favorite,” he said, bowing his head and pressing a soft kiss to the curve of her neck. “If I’m honest, I can read it like a novel, and I agree with your aunt. Gertrude is a remarkable figure, but I don’t want to talk about her.”

“You don’t?” she breathed, her body arching towards him as if she was a vine twining round a statue of carved stone. But he was no cold statue. He was warm and living and made of flesh and bone.

“I want to kiss you,” he said.

“Then you’d better do it,” she whispered, “before I start quoting Hamlet . That would certainly put a damper on the mood.”

He pulled her further into his arms without more urging and did as she suggested.

Baxter kissed her softly, passionately, like a man who was not afraid that he was going to lose. Like a man who never ever lost and always got what he wanted.

He was a force to be reckoned with. He was a power beyond anything she’d known, and she was accustomed to being around powerful people. He was like an intoxicating spell, wafting over her, convincing her to do whatever he wished.

And in that kiss, the way his mouth moved over hers, the way his hands roved her body, a part of her brain longed to throw all silliness aside and shove away this idea that they spend this time together to get to know each other before they truly agreed on the wedding.

Yes, she should just shove that aside and tell him that they should elope right now to Gretna Green, and that she would happily be his duchess.

How did he do that?

How did he seize all reason from her? Yes, he was like a Pied Piper leading her along to his song. And in that moment, she knew that he was dangerous because he might be able to lead her away from herself if she was not careful.

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In his entire existence, Callum had never seen someone so transported by what was taking place on a stage. They had been to the theater many times. But this was different. This was the ballet.

He had learned that Cymbeline danced almost every day. Her dancing master came and taught her ballet, along with her Aunt Margery and her male cousins.

Callum had yet to take part.

But after watching her this night? He might have to join.

He sat in the ducal box next to Cymbeline, watching her, not the ballet performance taking place on stage. He wanted to reach out and take her hand. Could he manage it? Could he do such a thing without being noticed by the vast array of people watching them and watching the performance at once?

Did he dare?

Bloody hell, he did. He did not care. He cared not, because she evoked a passion in him so wild and deep that all the passion he had heretofore known felt hollow.

And he had been a passionate person all his life.

It was so all-encompassing that he shoved away all common sense, all thought, and slowly reached out to take her hand in the candlelit darkness.

She did not look back at him when his hand brushed hers.

She was so enraptured by the performance below. He knew he should watch the ballet dancers gliding across the stage, moving in graceful symmetry. But instead, he continued to watch her watching them.

He adored the way her soft pink lips were parted in amazement, the way her eyes glistened with tears of wonder, and the way her breasts rose up and down, her breath rapid as if she too was dancing upon the stage. The theater belonged to her aunt, Lady Margery.

He knew that.

It was the first true ballet theater of its kind in London, taking the dance form to a new level in England that had only heretofore been known in France.

He never would've thought that he would love the ballet.

And perhaps, if he was quite honest, if he had had to come and sit in the candlelight and watch the ballet take place below, his mind might have done what his mind often did—racing off in a million different directions—and then he would feel compelled to stand up, leave, and do something.

He always needed his mind to be well exercised.

But here, with her, it was something different altogether.

She was his new passion. From the moment he had arrived at her family's estate, he had begun to truly understand that.

No, that was a lie, a complete and total lie.

From the moment he had walked into that small room and seen her fiddling with the

binding under her shirt, and he had realized that she was a woman, she had become his new passion.

A passion that burned him up and down and all around.

And he wished to be scorched by it. Of course, he still lived his life with passion in the causes that fulfilled him and in the duties of being the Duke of Baxter. He would never stop that. It drove his life. It always would, and he would ultimately sacrifice whatever it took for the dukedom.

But this? This was something else altogether, something that he could barely control, something that rippled through him and made him determined to do whatever it took to make Cymbeline his wife. He no longer felt the need to simply find a wife who would suit him.

No one else would ever do.

Oh, no, he had to have her. So each day of this strange test that she had created for him, he committed himself to it fully.

Sitting in the warm candlelit glow, her fingers curled around his, he felt his own breath hitch in his throat. Her acceptance of his touch was like a balm, so cool, so pure, so perfect that he longed to give himself over to her entirely.

Whatever she asked of him, he would do to make her his duchess.

Here in the candle-kissed darkness, all he wanted was to take her into his arms, feel her pure love for the dancing below, and feel her pure spirit lift him up and give him strength for that which was to come.

And she would give him strength. He knew it in his core.

At last, she finally glanced at him. “What are you doing?” she whispered almost inaudibly.

“I am enraptured,” he growled softly.

“Isn’t the dancing wonderful?” she murmured.

He nodded. “As are you.”

She smiled at that and blushed. “Why, thank you, Your Grace,” she said, “but don’t be ridiculous.”

“You must call me Callum now. No more Your Grace.” He squeezed her fingers gently, stroking his fingers over her knuckles, wishing he could stroke other parts of her. “And I am not being ridiculous. You are more marvelous than any ballet could ever be.”

She shook her head and whispered, “Only because you don’t love the ballet or the theater as I do.”

“Will you dance for me then...?” he dared to ask, letting his gaze trail down the line of her throat, longing to see her do something she truly loved.

She looked at him, amazed. “You wish me to dance for you?”

He bit his lower lip and said, “It would give me great pleasure to watch you move about a room, touched by passion.”

And it was true.

She was so devoted to the arts, whether it be dance or Shakespeare. He could not

even imagine what it would be like to spend one's life so focused on creativity. He spent most of his life dealing with people and solving problems.

She beamed at him. "Perhaps you should join me."

He laughed softly. "Perhaps I should."

And as the ballet came to an end and the dancers took their bows in the crowded theater, he wanted only one thing. It was a thing he could never truly have. For in that moment, he wanted to see the world through her eyes.

To see the beauty of it, the art, the slow, perfect moments of creation.

But he would never have that; it was not how his mind worked.

"Come," she said, standing and slipping her hand from his.

He stood too, looking for her family in the next box.

But she gave the smallest shake of her head and slipped out into the cooler hall. "Come with me now," she whispered softly.

Her family lingered in their box, greeting people, doing what great families always did, which was to make connections and speak with the most important people in the land, as well as their friends.

Quickly, Cymbeline found a way for them to wind down the back staircase and out to one of the coaches waiting below on a quiet side street.

"Won't they miss us?" he asked, wondering if she had arranged this. She had to have done. "Surely, they'll be upset if we slip off."

She gave him a sly smile. “My family? No, they will be overjoyed.”

The footman jumped down, unfolded the steps, opened the coach door, and Callum handed her up into the darkness.

As she took her seat on the luxurious bench, he climbed in after her and the door was shut. The coach tilted to the side as the footman climbed up, and then they rumbled down the road towards the house on the river.

He sat across from her in the darkness.

It was a long drive.

Her breasts pressed to the scoop of her gown, her lips were parted ever so slightly, and her eyes shone with anticipation.

She smiled at him slowly. “Now, sir, whatever will you do with me?”

Callum knew exactly what he wished to do, and so he pulled down the curtains.

There was something tantalizing about the way Callum pulled down the curtains of the coach.

Her whole body seemed to spring to life with promise.

They had been dancing about this now since the kiss the other night.

He had been unwilling to go further then, but now, she knew he was going to allow them to sample what they both wanted so much.

He was such a big man. He filled much of the coach, and his legs stretched out in

their taut breeches, his boots brushing the hem of her gown.

Instead of reaching across and grabbing her as she thought he might, he leaned back and his gaze crackled with a slow-burning heat that whispered through her and sent an impossible ache between her thighs. An ache she knew that only he could satisfy.

His gaze traveled slowly over her face, then to the swells of her breasts pressed against the cut of her high-waisted gown. That gaze grew hooded, feral even. He pulled his lower lip with his teeth and let out a low growl before he leaned forward.

She assumed he was going to kiss her, but he did not. Oh no, he slowly eased her back against the soft squabs of the coach seat and angled his way towards her.

He crossed the distance, sitting beside her, and then he let their gazes mingle.

“I’m going to show you pleasure now. I will not take you. Not here. Not until you are my wife. Do you understand?”

She let out a moan of protest. She wanted him to take her. All of her. But his meaning was clear and so she nodded her head, unable to reply.

Without another word, he turned his attention to her lips.

Much to her surprise, the kiss wasn’t reserved or slow or tentative.

No. This was a kiss by a man who knew how to take, if he chose, and how to awaken.

His mouth worked over hers, teasing, seducing, until she opened to him, and his tongue thrust in to tangle with her tongue.

His hands slid over her body. Those hard, strong fingers of his worked over her

curves, and she clasped on to him, feeling spun about and tossed on the winds of growing pleasure.

As he kissed her, teasing her lips, he slid his hand up her skirts, exposing her thigh. And then, oh then, he slipped his fingers to her core and teased her there as he teased her mouth.

All thought vanished from her as she trembled under his masterful touch. He stroked his fingers over her slick folds, and she clung to him, shocked by the power of it.

And then, gently, he stroked a finger against her opening before sliding it inside.

As he tasted her mouth, he thrust another finger deep within her, stretching her ever so slightly, stroking until he found a place she had not even known existed. And she bucked against his hand.

“Yes,” he growled against her lips. “Ride it. Ride your pleasure.”

She did not really understand, but instinct took over and her hips began to undulate as she rocked against his hand and fingers. And then his thumb found the most sensitive spot at the top of her folds, and whatever she thought she knew about life and love and men and women vanished forever.

Callum’s touch transported her to paradise, and she knew she never wanted to leave.

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She wanted to be consumed by him.

It was a shocking thing to realize.

She'd never wanted anything like that before in her entire life. And she was almost loath to admit it. She was supposed to be an independent, strong woman, raised by independent, strong women, who were married to men who adored them.

She would also be independent and strong, but good heavens, Callum did something to her that was a mystery.

How she longed to yield entirely to him. As a matter of fact, this entire, frustrating experience of waiting to say yes felt almost foolish, like a ridiculous exercise that she was putting them through.

But she understood why she was doing it. It wasn't just for herself. It was for her family, so that her family could see that when she picked the Duke of Baxter, it would be a good thing and not a whim.

But the truth was, dear God, she wanted him.

It blazed through her, the passion she felt for him.

It was an all-consuming force. She did not care about society, she did not care about rules, and she almost did not care what would be best for her.

It was if he was the very air she wished to breathe, and without him, she would not be

able to take in a breath.

And that, well, that made her wish to throw herself into his life and his existence with no apologies, no thoughts, and no worries.

The ride home from the ballet the other night still coursed through her veins. Every night was like that with him now. There was no one in the world for either of them except each other. Of that she was sure.

Now, there was most definitely still his work.

And he did work hard. Very hard. And she admired him for it.

Yet, somehow, he found time to shower her with the attention that women only dreamed about.

She didn't understand how he could have so much passion, how he could blaze so brightly.

And yet he did, and it made her wish to do the same in turn.

Oh, how he left her scorched with want, with longing, and it would never be enough. For the more she had of him, the more she needed.

Each night before the ballet, they went out somewhere different—to a card party or to the theater or to a dance, and each night he proved he was perfect for her.

And she rather thought that she proved that she was perfect for him.

And then every night, when they returned to their rooms, he would dutifully go back to his chamber, and she would dutifully go back to hers.

But now she did not wait, nor did he. Not after that night at the ballet. No, she would throw the door open between their chambers, and he would be waiting for her, just as he was this night.

But this night, there was a strange look upon his face as he sat before the fire.

She didn't quite understand what it was. She'd never seen him look troubled.

"What is amiss?" she asked.

He turned towards her and shook his head. "Nothing," he said. "There is nothing to be worried about."

"You can tell me," she insisted, crossing to him.

Again, he shook his head, crumpling a small note in his hand. "Don't worry about it."

"You must tell me if we are to even contemplate being each other's everything."

"Each other's everything?" he teased. "This is how I know you come from a family that loves theater."

She tsked. "You must tell me."

He frowned, tightening his fist about the note. "Well, my doctor wrote me to say that I should get some rest."

"Then you must rest," she said firmly, closing the gap between them and kneeling down beside his chair.

He wagged his brows playfully as if he refused to acknowledge the note further.

“Will you help me to rest?”

“What we do is not rest,” she pointed out. “I keep you busy, even more than you would be without me.”

“No,” he cut in, tossing the note onto the fire, which he had lit despite the warmth of the summer night. “You give me happiness in a way that I did not even know existed before I met you.”

“That is a very beautiful thing to say,” she said.

“And now I know you love the theater too, even if not quite as much as I. But...Callum, you were working hard before, and now the pressure of courting me... Of trying to impress my family. Perhaps it is too much. I can see the amount you do. I would not add to your burden.”

“You could never add to my burden,” he growled, seizing her hands and pulling her onto his lap. “And I do not know what you mean that you can see my strain. My life is effortless, for I believe in everything I do so entirely. And being with you could never be an effort either.”

She didn’t believe that. She’d seen the way he sometimes hid his struggles to be surrounded by her family, no matter what he said.

“You do say the most impressive things,” she replied, realizing she was not going to convince him to acknowledge how his work truly affected him.

“Thank you. Now,” he began softly, stroking his hand along her back, “will you dance for me? You know how it makes me happy.”

She smiled and stroked her hand along his hard jaw, tilting his head oh so slightly so

she could gaze deeply into his eyes. Slowly, she slid her hand into his thick hair, teasing her fingers at the nape of his neck.

How had she been so lucky as to find such a man? What would she ever do without him?

And in that moment, she knew she was never going to let him go, even if she might not say it to him yet.

Oh, how he made her feel!

As if he could sense it, he lowered his mouth to hers in a soft kiss.

The touch of his lips always stole her mind, her heart.

Somehow, he made her feel that she could be exactly herself, and she wanted him to feel that he could be that way with her too.

She knew that he was uncertain. She could feel it from the way he held back sometimes, just ever so slightly.

But she wanted to make him throw all of that aside.

She wanted him to give in to the passion they felt.

“Dance for me,” he whispered against her mouth. “I want to see you lost in it, like you were at the theater.”

The way he looked at her sent a shiver of something powerful and terrifying through her. Their passion for each other, though not yet consummated, was so powerful. So intense. It made her wish to overlook all his faults.

Was that a good thing? She did not know, but it felt... It felt like she might be willing to throw everything away to be with him, even her good judgement.

Slowly, she slid off his lap and began to dance for him.

She took up her position, the one that her dancing master made her take every morning. But she did not go through her regular routine. No, she envisioned herself as one of the exotic creatures in the ballets that her aunt ensured were performed at the theater.

She moved with all of her passion for him, all of her love for him. Oh, dear God, it was true. She had thrown all caution away.

It was just a pretense, this silly trying out. She couldn't give in. Not yet. Somehow, she knew that she needed to wait a little longer before surrendering her hand.

He had to understand she would not always do as he wanted, that he could not have whatever he wished just because he was a duke. That she would defy him.

But she laughed to herself. Because with every day, her desire to defy him disappeared, and she longed to be one with him.

In this room, here in the night, in the dark, she allowed herself to turn about, to let her fingers drift through the air, to move her limbs with grace and ease.

And with each movement, his eyes followed her.

His face relaxed. She could feel his breathing change.

And she knew deep in his heart, deep in his soul, that he needed her.

That, out of all the world and all the women in it, she was the one for him, and he would throw himself into her with everything he had, just as he threw himself into all his work.

She would have to tell him yes, wouldn't she? Surely she would! But not yet. Not quite yet. It was so close.

But she feared...

No, she would not think of it. She would not think of how she could not change him, how she still feared that perhaps he was driving himself hard towards something she didn't understand. He had said the doctor told him to rest, and yet he could not.

She slid towards him. "Let me help you rest."

He shook his head. "No," he said, "I must have you."

"Please," she whispered, "listen to me."

He took her hand, slowly turned it, and kissed her palm. "I will listen to you, but if you are going to insist I rest when I have so much to do, then perhaps..."

"What?" she asked softly, her voice hitching as a wave of trepidation traveled through her.

He shook his head.

"Say it," she insisted.

"There's nothing to say," he replied, and instead of saying whatever doubts danced through his head, he pulled her into his arms.

Callum refused to think of the note his doctor had so presumptuously sent him. He refused to think of the bout of illness that had teased him a few weeks ago. It had been nothing, and he had no patience for hysterical physicians.

Not when he was courting the woman of his dreams. And Cymbeline was the stuff of dreams.

The way she moved, the way she slipped through the room and used her body as if it was music? It unraveled the hard parts of him and made him wish to forget everything for a few moments and just have her.

So, as he pulled her into his arms and down across his lap, he reminded himself that while he was a guest in the Duke of Westleigh's house, and while he and Cymbeline were unmarried, he could not take this all the way.

No matter how much his cock demanded he do so.

No matter how much his inner voice demanded he make her his.

Instead, he wished to awaken her longing for him. And there was certainly no ignoring his need for her.

The taste of her lips was pure heaven. He had not known he had been denying himself so much bliss. He'd thought he'd been a happy man. But how could he be happy without her? Whatever it took, he'd win her.

Just as before, he began the slow, necessary seduction of her body. He took his time, coaxing her flame to burn brightly. Ever so slowly, he kissed her, trailed his fingertips over her clavicles, her breastbone, between her breasts, and then over her stomach through her night rail.

A low growl of need slipped past his lips, and she swallowed it, winding her hands into his hair.

She tugged ever so slightly as her hunger for him grew, and he smiled at her passion. Then he easily lifted her, stood, turned, and placed her down into the chair.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Sampling what will be mine.”

“You’re very confident.”

“Are dukes anything else?” he teased.

She gazed up at him with trust and wonder and his heart—his damned heart—slammed against his ribs.

She was so clever, so cheeky, yet here, in the quiet night, she was so vulnerable and beautiful, and he adored both sides of her.

Slowly, he lowered himself to his knees before her. Patiently, he worked her night rail up her legs, and then he tugged her to the edge of the seat.

As he gazed upon the apex of her thighs, a low moan of approval rumbled in his throat.

She studied him carefully before he lowered his mouth to her sex, tasting her sweet, wet folds.

She cried out with surprise. Her response was going to drive him half mad. She was so perfect, so delicious, so passionate.

Patiently, he circled his tongue over her, circling until she grabbed hold of his shoulders, and he felt her core ripple in climax.

Her entire body tensed for a moment and then she gasped for air.

“That’s it, my love,” he whispered. “That’s it.”

“And you?” she murmured. “What about—”

He shook his head, even as his sex begged for her attention. He stood slowly, his blood pumping, then swept her up in his arms and took her to his bed.

“When it is time,” he whispered as he laid beside her, stroking her back, “nothing will stop me from enjoying you, Cymbeline. But it isn’t time.”

And he waited until she drifted off to sleep, safe with him. Then he looked to the work awaiting him on the desk and stood, always ready to do what needed to be done.

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If Callum had thought there was going to be any sort of real difficulty with the Briarwoods, he had been incredibly mistaken.

The last two weeks had flown by with remarkable speed, and he was certain that at any moment, Cymbeline was going to take him aside and tell him he had passed muster.

She certainly had.

In his opinion, they both had.

Not only had she kept pace with him, but he had also managed her family. Though, if he was honest—and he'd hidden it—it had been surprisingly frustrating. He'd been so certain that the Briarwoods' sense of fun and playfulness would make them ideal.

He had not counted on the amount of time they spent with each other...doing nothing.

Or at least, to him, it was nothing. They seemed to think they were accomplishing something essential when they lounged about together at night, with the summer breeze floating in through the windows as they pored over various texts.

And sometimes, they did nothing but sit and converse about the meaning of existence and what they each thought this life was for.

He did not need to sit about contemplating this. He already knew the answer. Life was for action, not lounging!

The truth was he found it wearing, grating even, to spend so much time with so many people who wished to know him deeply.

He wasn't accustomed to that. He flew through his life, darting in and out of events, saying hello to people, having conversations but never actually needing to show any of the deeper layers of himself.

No. No one needed to know the way his mind truly worked, like a bunch of bees continually buzzing for him to move and to accomplish.

Besides, he was always too busy for such nonsense. That said, he did admire them. The Briarwoods were the best family of his acquaintance, even if they were not exactly what he had imagined.

In truth, he admired the Briarwoods because they actually did live with passion. Most people, as far as he could see, were sleepwalking through their lives with no awareness of who they were or what they wanted.

He knew exactly who he was, and he knew exactly what he wanted.

It seemed that every Briarwood did too.

Yes, despite the strain of finding ways out of evenings sprawled on chairs, it had been an excellent set of days. Though he had balked at the idea of staying at Heron House, all had gone exceedingly well.

No one seemed to mind that he had a parade of men coming in and out to do work.

No one seemed to mind that he wished to go out every single night.

With Cymbeline, of course. She had never flagged or appeared tired.

No, she had been delightfully game. They had gone to balls.

They had gone to the theater. They had gone to museums. There had been only one moment when he had been truly concerned, and that was when they had all suggested going down to the country.

He did not go down to the country. The country was a terrible place for a person like him because if he was in the country, everything got rather quiet.

And then the beast that was in his brain would wake itself up, and then he had to contend with his own demanding thoughts but with no outlet for them.

And one of the things that he had discovered many years ago was that it was incredibly important that he not be left entirely alone with his thoughts, unless he had something to do.

Nights were hard. But he'd long ago learned not to waste a moment or let his brain rule. No, he had no problem pacing his chamber in the middle of the night as long as he was working on a bill.

But if he was simply still, if he was simply quiet, well, that was something else altogether. It was actually painful to him.

No, he needed to constantly be on the move, which was why this ball was so particularly splendid. He had already danced with Cymbeline once, and he was waiting to get to dance with her again.

He did not wish to cause a scandal, and so he was not asking her to dance over and over again, though he wished to. If he had his way, he'd dance every single dance with her.

He had danced with all of her cousins who were out this Season. That had been a delight, since they were all interesting and amusing young women. He had even spent time with her male cousins, drinking brandy and discussing politics.

Yes, so far, all was going well. She was going to say yes. A full, hardy yes.

Still, there was a general tension to the air because it was an inescapable fact that Napoleon had invaded Russia. The Continent was roiling with it. No one knew exactly what was going to happen next.

England had been fighting the man for years, and he was indomitable. The only person, perhaps, who would be able to stop him was Wellington.

And there was a certain edge to the Briarwood family now because several of the youngest men, adopted sons of Lord Achilles, were fighting abroad.

Octavian and Calchas were still in town, but he had a feeling that they would soon be gone as well. Soon, there would be a last-ditch effort to secure the world against the French tyrant who wished to dominate Europe.

Callum was rather amazed by Cymbeline's male cousins.

None of them had to fight, but they had all volunteered.

At the same time, he worried. He worried for them and he worried for Europe, which was why he had to act unceasingly.

Really, he needed to go home and spend less time on wooing a bride.

He needed to spend more time winning a war.

Still, he was so close.

He was certain Cymbeline would be his wife any day now.

As he crossed the ballroom, the crowd parted for him, a thing that was always done for dukes—he knew it was not just limited to him—and headed towards her.

Cymbeline was so beautiful that sometimes his whole being ached with it.

She stood in a gown of pale rose silk. It skimmed her delicate ankles and the scooped shoulders bared her beautiful ivory skin. She was talking animatedly to one of her cousins. He dearly loved how she managed to make every conversation feel as if every word mattered. And every person too.

She'd be a great duchess.

Callum approached, stretched out his hand, and said, "Will you give me this dance?"

She turned to him and beamed. "I will because it's a leaping waltz," she teased.

He laughed. A leaping waltz! It was such an amusing thing to say, but he rather liked this kind of waltz as well. Sometimes, the slow waltzes, made so popular in Austria, were rather difficult to bear, for his mind would go rioting in the slow moments between beats.

Doing things slowly was not something he particularly enjoyed, even if he did enjoy embracing her. Her cousin smiled at him and took a step back, allowing the two of them to head off to the floor.

The well-lit ballroom was packed with lords and ladies and officers too. It almost looked as if a military parade could commence at any moment.

There were so many red coats and naval uniforms about them.

It gave the festive air a certain danger that couldn't be fully escaped, nor could it be ignored.

'Twas as if they were all walking on the edge of a blade because, while it might feel as if England could never fail or fall, there was always the possibility that something could go terribly, terribly wrong.

Rumors were always persisting of French troops landing on the coast.

They still remained essentially untouched, as opposed to the Continent. That place had been ravaged, and the stories slipping out of France about the conditions of the peasants was appalling. War was expensive, and the people of France were paying for Napoleon's endless ambition.

It was all the more reason to live fully and all the more reason to never stop working because if one stopped working, well, Napoleon might find a way to win.

He gazed down at her. "Are you happy?" he asked.

"Of course I'm happy," she replied.

"With these last two weeks?" he queried as the music began and he dipped his hand to her shoulder blade. Bloody hell, he loved to touch her.

One day, and soon, he would be able to strip her of her gown and touch every bit of her.

How he longed to do it, but not yet. Before he could truly claim her, he had to make her his wife.

Though he knew she would have ventured further into carnal delights with him, he wanted to wait, to make her hungry for him.

To have her and never let her go.

They began the sprightly dancing pattern, which was much more exciting than the typical waltz, and slipped about the room in arcing patterns.

“These last two weeks have been quite a revelation,” she confessed as she gazed up at him with shining eyes. “I enjoy your company very much, and I admire the fact that you have tried to fit into my family. I can tell it is not always easy for you... Though I thought it would be.”

He winked, determined to keep this light. “Well, there are so many of you,” he teased. “I think it would be challenging for anyone at first, no matter how effervescent they were.”

She laughed, her delicious, bright laugh as if the world belonged to her and always would. “I suppose that is true. Do you think you and your mother shall be able to handle being part of the Briarwood crew? We adore Christmas. You will have to come down to the country with us.”

He frowned and said before he could stop himself, “We’ll have Christmas in the city.”

She balked at that. “But I have such a large family. Surely, it would make more sense for you to spend Christmas with us.” She wagged her brows, clearly certain he must have been teasing. “Do not fail me now, Your Grace, since I was about to tell you that I think the wait is over.”

The idea of Christmas in the country filled him with horror, but the rest of her

declaration eradicated his concerns, and he smiled slowly as he gazed down at her.
“Have I proved myself to you so quickly and so easily then?”

There was nothing easy about it though. Not really.

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But perhaps, for him, the only easy thing would have been a wife who had no interest in him or what he did. A wife who only cared for hats and table settings. And he'd never be able to bear that.

"Prove yourself?" she breathed. "I could laugh at myself, Your Grace. I was always going to say yes. I know that now. Being with you, well, it makes me happy."

"It makes me happy too," he replied.

And the truth was he did love being with her. She was like a breath of fresh air, the female version of himself, and he had not realized how much he needed that.

Oh, how he had loved all the kisses that they had exchanged over the last weeks. He desperately wished to go further, but he'd not allowed himself to because he had been certain that such a thing would cause her family, no matter what she said, to turn on him, and he would not let that happen.

No. He was going to achieve his goal, just as he always did, and that was marriage to Cymbeline Briarwood. And he had succeeded.

Yes, waiting to take her to bed had been wise. Because he knew she hungered for him too. But he did not wish to be merely a lover. He wished to be the man she chose forever.

And she had chosen him.

He'd known she had the night they met, and he was relieved she was finally

admitting it now.

They turned and bounced about the room, laughing and enjoying the lilt of the music.

“All right,” he said. “Christmas in the country it is. Somehow, I shall manage it. Perhaps we can import in all sorts of entertainment.”

She looked at him, her brow furrowing. “Do you always need to be entertained, Your Grace?”

“Of course,” he said. “I always need something to keep my mind engaged or else I go a bit mad.”

She tilted her head to the side, which caused the flowers in her hair to shimmer in the light. “Well, I suppose I can understand that,” she ventured, “but don’t you think rest is important?”

A muscle tightened in his cheek.

“After we are wed, perhaps we could go to the coast. We could promenade by the sea, lounge upon the beach, thinking of nothing but the clouds crossing the sky, and we could look out to the water and then go swimming.”

“Swimming is an excellent idea,” he said, wondering how to tell her there would be no such trip after their wedding. He did not take such trips. “Lounging is not for me. I won’t be able to do it. But I’m sure one of your cousins would be delighted to go with you.”

She frowned. “I see.”

A wave of concern swept through him. “Does that bother you?” he asked suddenly.

Perhaps he had said too much. Perhaps he had he revealed the wrong thing about himself.

He studied her face.

Perhaps he'd made a terrible mistake. This was, of course, what he'd always feared. That he would go too far. That he would reveal some part of himself that was impossible for others to understand. For her to understand.

And this was why he usually always kept things on the surface. How was he to make her understand that he simply would never have the time for such endeavors?

"Of course it doesn't bother me," she rushed, a smile returning to her lips. "You are who you are, Your Grace. But sometimes it's good to pause and actually look at the world."

"Oh, I do look at the world," he countered, turning her quickly about the waxed floor. "I just look at it faster than most people, you see?"

She tilted her head to the side and pondered him. "I suppose I do. And I suppose I actually admire you for it. You are a wonder."

He inclined his head. "Thank you."

And as the waltz came to an end, he took her hand and guided her outside. He felt they were on the verge of something, of an understanding. Perhaps a moment under the moon would help that along.

When they paused on the veranda, the scent of summer flowers wafting on the air, he turned to her. "You are suddenly not certain, are you?"

“Can anyone be certain of anything?” she asked as she took his hand, walked along the veranda, then descended to the path that wound to a pavilion covered with climbing roses.

“I want you to feel certain,” he said. “I don’t want you to ever look back and regret that you have chosen me.”

“I refuse to pretend anymore.”

He tensed. Dear God. What did that mean?

“I never should have made this preposterous condition for me to say yes,” she murmured, framed by the roses. “I did it to protect myself, as if I could protect myself from making the wrong decision. But you have always been the right decision. You were always going to be the right decision.”

He sucked in a breath and stepped towards her, his boots skimming the hem of her skirt as he swallowed her up in his embrace. “I felt it too. When we met.”

Her lips parted, and she trembled in his arms as she nodded. “I’m done fighting it. I’m done trying to be reasonable. Perhaps you have your flaws, but I have mine too. And I want you. My soul wanted you from the moment you crossed the room of that club and made comment about Mark Antony.”

He trailed his fingers along her jawline and tilted her head back. “Then you’ll be my wife?”

She nodded. “I will.”

He wanted to melt with relief. He had not realized how tense he had been.

How deeply he longed for her to be the one who said yes.

When he'd picked her that night, he'd not realized how much he wanted her.

He'd tried to rely on logic and reason that, of course, she, a Briarwood who dressed as a man, was the best choice for a man who lived like he did.

But she was so much more than that.

Somehow, he knew in his bones that she was the key to his life. And now that he had her, all the doors would open.

It was terrifying, but he couldn't turn away from it. He had to be careful though. He had to make her understand that he would always be how he was. He knew he could be impossible, and so he had to give her something in turn.

"Now," he rumbled, "it is my turn to have a condition."

"Oh?" she breathed, licking her lower lip.

"I want you to come to Parliament and watch me speak."

"Ladies like me aren't allowed—"

"After the wedding, I want you to come dressed as a man and sneak in by my side, right under everyone's nose, slip up to the gallery, and see what I do, so you will understand why our lives will be—"

She lifted her fingers to his lips. "You do not need to apologize for who you are, Callum. You see, I think I can understand you, all of you. How you cannot rest, how you can barely sleep. I won't ever recriminate you for not slowing down, for not

resting as my uncles and my cousins wish to do.

You see, I don't believe that a wife should wish to change her husband.

So since I am saying yes now? I'm also saying I'll never try to change you.

Because I want to marry you. Not who I think you could be. ”

His heart swelled at that. It was what he wanted more than the world, to be accepted for exactly who he was and, dear God, he found himself falling in love with her for that.

“Now, I think you must come to Parliament even more. I do not want you to forsake who you really are either, Cymbeline. For that is who I want. Not a society lady. Not a pretty debutante. But you, Mr. Marlowe. The cheeky girl in breeches who gave as good as he got in conversation with a duke.”

Slowly, oh so slowly, he dragged his thumb over her lower lip. “You won't be the first wife to go in disguise.”

“Yes,” she said, frowning. “Caroline Lamb.”

He winced. She was who he was thinking of. Not everyone knew, but many did know that Caroline often came to Parliament in disguise so that she could hear her husband speak. But Caroline was a dangerous woman because she was in pain. She was a powder keg waiting to blow.

She was a legend already, but if she was not careful, she would be a pariah. The way she was acting with Lord Byron was hard to ignore.

As if she could sense his distress, Cymbeline stroked her hand up to his cheek,

cupping it. “Whatever worries you, let it go. I shall not be like her. After all, you and I shall be happy.”

He hesitated as fear whispered through him. The first fear he had felt since the death of his father.

Caroline Lamb and her husband had been happy too for a good long time, and then it had all gone wrong. And he thought about what his manservant Shepard had said—that marriage always went wrong.

He swallowed. He would not allow himself to entertain the thought of Cymbeline and him falling into such ruin. He would not think of the pain of the future. Life was full of hills and valleys, of pain and joy. Whatever came, he would defeat it. He always did.

Heron House

There were not many men like the Duke of Baxter, men who drove themselves to ruin while seeming completely happy on the outside.

Sylvia, the Dowager Duchess of Westleigh, had known a very few of such mettle.

They were a specific breed of men.

Men who did not know how to be at ease. Men who could not bear their own thoughts for too long. Men who could not bear silence. There was something unique about them, and she was convinced they were born that way.

Some people found continual activity to be very difficult. Not these men. For these men, the act of stillness was the battle. She knew broken men. She had a special fondness for them, and she had a special fondness for men who were different than the rest.

But there was one thing she was absolutely certain of.

The Duke of Baxter was not broken. Not yet.

But he was going to break. She'd been watching the boy these last two weeks.

He had been going just as his father had.

There was no real surprise there, but it seemed to be an even more intense breakneck

speed by which the boy devoured life.

He was not really a boy, of course. He was a full-grown man, that she understood, but to a woman of her years, someone so young felt like a boy, like a child. And she wished she could reach out, take his hand, pull him aside, and tell him that if he did not change his ways, it would all come apart.

But she knew better than most that sometimes one could not intervene.

Words would not change anything, and the truth was the Duke of Baxter, whether he understood it or not, was heading towards calamity.

The real question was whether she was willing to watch her granddaughter be on that path with him.

She was no fool. She did not think she could stand in their way if they chose each other.

It was all the more reason that she stood outside the Duke of Baxter's chambers. Dawn was approaching, and the man had not yet gone to bed. She knew it because she had stood outside the chamber for some time, listening to him pace back and forth, trying to decide if she should indeed intervene.

At long last, she lifted her knuckles, her beloved jewels shining upon her fingers, and gave a single rap on the door.

She heard the steps stop on the other side of the door and then approach.

He opened it slowly, his eyes widened. "Dowager Duchess," he whispered, clearly aware that most of the house was asleep, even if he was not.

“I think, at this rate, you must call me Sylvia, my boy. Now step back and allow me to enter.”

He stared at her for a long moment and then said, “I am very busy. I have a bill that is incredibly important, and I will be speaking before the House of Lords this morning.”

“Oh, yes,” she said, waving her hand at him. “I am aware of it, but if I wait for you not to be busy, Your Grace, I shall have to wait until I am dead to speak to you, and then I think you will still be busy.”

He winced at that. “Fair point. Do come in.”

He stepped back and gestured for her to join him.

She slipped into the room and was quite amazed by the piles of papers on the desk.

He had taken up rooms in Heron House like a whirlwind.

He lived there as if he was in his own house.

In some ways, she admired it. He wasn’t afraid to be exactly who he was.

Well, no, that was not true. She’d felt a slight unease, the sense that he was afraid that they might all judge him for being exactly who he was.

She did not judge him. She admired him in many ways, but she could see his difficulty even if he could not.

“I think that you and my granddaughter have been having a marvelous time together. Is that not true?”

“It is true, Dowager Duchess.” He coughed. “Sylvia. But if you have come here to discuss that, perhaps it could wait. You see, it is essential that I drive home—”

“It cannot wait, Your Grace,” she cut in kindly. “And I don’t think that you are actually a man who likes to wait, though you might wish to push this particular subject aside. If you’re going to marry her, I think that I need some assurances.”

“You need assurances,” he echoed, as he crossed to his desk and began sorting through a stack of papers.

“Yes, that you’re not going to pop off and die.” She arched a brow. “The way you drive yourself, my boy, I wouldn’t be surprised if you were forced to your bed any day. The body does like to rebel. And that would be the best-case scenario.”

“Good God,” he sighed, “not this again. Your sons have had the same conversation with me.”

“To little or no effect,” she mused. “Don’t you think it’s because we care about you and that we like you that we keep pointing out that you seem determined to drive yourself to ruinous health?”

He put his papers down and braced his knuckles on his desk, appearing to gather his thoughts. “I think you care about your granddaughter, and you’re most concerned about her, which is a very admirable thing,” he replied. “But you mustn’t worry about me. I’ve lived like this my whole life.”

“Yes, that is the problem,” she drawled. “Did you sleep at all last night?”

He stilled. “Sleep is not necessary.”

“Sleep is necessary,” she returned. “Without sleep, humans don’t do well at all. Now,

I grant you, not everyone needs as much sleep as others, but there's something pushing you, dear boy. Something that is almost like a demon inside."

"It is not a demon," he replied with a surprisingly even tone. "But, yes, I do feel driven."

She sighed. "Have you ever just sat for a little while?"

"Why would I do that?" he said.

She let out a slow laugh. "All right, I see," she said.

He arched a sardonic brow. "Do you?"

"Yes, I do." She paused, then folded her hands before her, hoping that she was not about to choose a tactic that would prove a mistake. "You know I liked your father very well."

"I did too," he said softly, his lips curling with a sort of pained nostalgia.

She cleared her throat. "I must ask you a question."

"Yes?" he queried.

"How well did you know him?"

"Oh, very," he said.

"Did you?" she queried, her voice pitching up slightly with disbelief.

He nodded, clearly not hearing her tone. "Yes. He instilled in me the importance of

helping people. He was wonderful.”

“Yes, he was,” she allowed. For she had indeed known Baxter and thought he was one of the best men in the country and that it had been a great pity that he had been taken before he could truly do his great work.

“The people on his land, I think, admired him very much, and I certainly loved all of his writings. I read them all, you know.”

“Did you?” he asked softly, like a small boy eager for love.

“Yes, and I’ve read many of yours too,” she said honestly.

“It’s really a wonder that you have taken up so much interest in helping the people of England and not simply spending money as so many dukes do.

Impressively, you aren’t gambling away an entire fortune, though, of course, I know that you do entertain yourself.

Still, how much time did you actually spend with your father? ”

“A great deal,” he stated.

She pursed her lips. “Truly? Real time. Time when he was not distracted by his work.”

He paused. “Well, when you put it like that, I don’t...” He hesitated and he thought back. She could see him trying to remember.

“I wonder how little time you actually did spend with him, my dear boy.”

“He was very busy,” Callum defended.

“Yes,” she said gently. “I’m sure he was and so are you. Will you spend time with your children?”

“Of course I will,” he replied, his tone hot with indignation at being asked.

“How much time?” she asked, refusing to be deflected.

“As much time as...” His voice died off.

“You wish to be exactly like him, don’t you?”

“My father?” he queried.

“Yes.”

“Yes, of course I do,” he breathed. “He was the greatest man I knew.”

“He was a great man,” she agreed. “And you got to spend very little time with him. Don’t you think that’s sad?”

He tensed. “No, I don’t. It was a sacrifice that my mother and I had to make so that more people could be helped. He wasn’t born a regular person. He was born a great man and great men must act thus.”

“Must they?” she queried softly, without mocking, but a touch of tiredness hit her.

She was more tired lately. For the truth was people so often did the worst things for themselves rather than the best. And she feared that Callum Royce, Duke of Baxter, was no different.

And worse, that he would not be easily convinced to give up what was harming him.

“Yes,” he affirmed, clearly wishing he could ask her to leave but knowing he could not.

“I see.”

He narrowed his gaze and then closed his eyes. “Are you going to try to convince your granddaughter not to marry me because I will be...so busy?” he asked.

“No, I would never try to convince Cymbeline to do anything, and if I did, it wouldn’t work,” she replied simply, understanding now, after so many years, that one could nudge and hope and suggest, but one could never actually change another if they did not wish it.

At least not without doing potentially great harm.

“She will do exactly as she pleases, despite what her father and her uncles and her cousins might say. She has a mind of her own, that one.”

He opened his eyes, and his lips turned in a bemused smile as he thought of her.

And that single look gave Sylvia hope. Hope that all wouldn’t be lost if Cymbeline married him, for he loved her. It was clear as day upon his face. And that love just might save him too.

“Yes, she does,” he said, clearly proud of that.

“It’s why you like her so well, isn’t it?”

“It’s why I...”

“You love her, don’t you?”

“Yes,” he admitted. “It’s a bit...”

“Frightening?” she queried, her own heart warming deeply for the boy who would soon be her family.

He nodded.

“Because it’s something you can’t control, is that it?”

He nodded. “I’ve never felt anything like it in my whole life.”

“Good,” she said. “You need to feel that. It’s important to feel deeply, you know.”

“It’s not a problem,” he suddenly rushed, “my feeling deeply.”

“Is it not?” she queried, hoping that he would unburden himself.

He hesitated, but in the dark hours of the very end of night, just before the first light of dawn, he whispered, “I feel very, very deeply, and it’s sometimes...”

“Unpleasant?” she suggested.

His knuckles whitened as his fists tightened on his desk. “Yes. It’s very unpleasant.”

“So you race about quickly and never pause to feel it.”

He stared at her and the spell was broken. “I’m sorry. Why are you here?”

“I am here because I want my granddaughter to be as happy possible.”

“I promise I will make her happy.”

She tilted her head to the side, then shook her head. “Such promises are made by men who do not actually understand what happiness is, but I thought I would come here and at least try.”

“Try what?” he asked.

“To make you see before you get married what will happen.”

He tensed. “And what will happen?”

“Cymbeline will marry you. You two will seem happy, and then she will have children, and you two will drift apart because her world will become the world of children. And you will continue doing as you do, but you will not be able to slow down. You will not be able to be still. You will not be able to enter the world of your children because children need someone who can pause, who can stop always doing what needs to be done in the world of adults.”

A strange, pained look crossed his face. “Are you suggesting that I will be a terrible father?”

“That’s not exactly what I said.”

“Isn’t it?” he demanded quietly.

She pressed her lips together, wishing this conversation had turned out differently. But he was committed to his path. “I think it will be entirely up to you, and I think it will be entirely up to you if you take care of yourself and are there for them, as your father could not be there for you.”

“I think you should go now,” he said.

She smiled sadly. “I think you are right, but I want you to know something. I like you, Callum. So, don’t think I’m here saying these things because I don’t like you or think you shouldn’t marry Cymbeline.

As a matter of fact, I like you very well.

That is why I’m standing here now. We don’t want to be denied your company, you know. ”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he said. “Nothing is amiss. Everything is fine.”

“Of course it is,” she replied, nodding, though her heart ached for him. “Your wedding shall be marvelous. I shall wear my very best gown, and I shall tell everyone what a wonderful grandson you shall be.”

He sucked in a breath. “I never thought about that,” he said.

“What?”

“That I shall be your grandson.”

“Oh, yes, of course,” she said, laughing softly. “You’re about to be brought into the fold and you know what that means, don’t you?”

He shook his head warily.

“Your life is going to change.”

“And what if I don’t want it to change?” he asked.

“Then you shouldn’t get married,” she said. “At least not to her.”

And with that, Sylvia turned and slipped out into the hall.

Her heart longed to sink, but she did not allow it to because in her experience, giving in and giving up were not possible.

There was always a way, and she felt certain that even if the Duke of Baxter could not see it, there was something on the horizon waiting for him.

A moment in which he would have to choose the past and how he had always been, or a future where he could actually be happy and actually be loved and actually be alive.

Because one thing she knew for certain. The Duke of Baxter did not realize it himself, but the truth was he had not actually been living for a very long time. He had been running from himself, his pain, and peace all his life. And perhaps he always would.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:13 am

“There’s nothing for it, Papa. I am going to marry him.”

Standing before her father, watching his face, Cymbeline wondered why she felt so trepidatious. Usually, she always felt so empowered and confident in his presence.

No doubt her nerves stemmed from the fact that she had assumed all her life that her marriage would be a simple affair, and there would be no conflict.

She would find a handsome young man who interested her, and who she interested, bring him to her parents, and all would be well.

But now, as she stood before her father and her mother, she felt herself wondering if they were going to be angry with her. A circumstance she really wasn’t prepared for.

“Are you certain?” her father replied tightly, as if the words caused him pain. This big man that so many were so afraid of, in her experience, was the softest and kindest of all people. “Will you be happy—”

“Papa, that is not a helpful question. How can I know—”

“I was certain about your mother,” he rushed in. “Almost from the moment I—”

Winifred touched his arm. “My dear, you are simplifying the past.”

He ground his teeth together.

“You do not want to stand in the way of this, my love,” her mother said gently.

He looked down at his wife softly, pulled her to him, and said, “I am so grateful to have you as my guide, my darling, so I don’t trounce that young duke into sense, but you know that I only feel this way because...”

Winifred squeezed his arm, then looked to her daughter.

“Yes, Mama?” she prompted.

“Parents are always going to be afraid for their children,” her mother said factually but kindly. “Not all parents, of course, but loving ones. Your father and I love you so dearly.”

Her mother drew in a deep breath, then pronounced, “Baxter is a wonderful man.”

Her father snorted.

“He is, Ajax,” her mother retorted with a tsk.

Her father snorted again.

“Stop that!” her mother castigated, batting at her father’s muscled arm. “He’s one of the best men in England, and that’s what you are afraid of. You are afraid he’s going to drive himself into an early grave, and that’s why you don’t want her to have him.”

Cymbeline sucked in a shuddering breath at these words that everyone, save her future husband, seemed to understand. “Then we help him.”

“Some people don’t want to be helped,” Ajax ground out. “You better be aware of that.”

“I am,” she said, surprised by her father’s intensity and yet also touched by his love

for her. “I don’t wish to change him, but that doesn’t mean that I have to stop trying to help him.”

Her mother looked at her gently. “You’re right, of course, and anything can happen. But it is best that you let him take his time and see how our family lives, and perhaps, eventually, that will do the trick.”

She thought of how he’d reacted to the idea of Christmas in the country. Would he be willing to be with her family enough once they were wed? Surely, yes.

“Thank you, Mama,” she replied. “But do you agree to the marriage? You know I need your approval.”

“Marry him anytime you choose, my love,” her mother encouraged. “I don’t think we could ask for anyone more suited to you.”

Ajax snorted again.

“Stop that, darling.” Her mother sighed.

“I don’t know if I can,” he said. “Surely, there has to be someone better.”

“Now, Papa,” Cymbeline said, crossing to her parents and taking her father’s big hands in hers. “I appreciate the fact that you think I am worthy of another great man. But he is the great man I want.”

Ajax blew out a sigh that sounded as if he was being tortured upon the rack.

“Yes, fine,” her father begrudged, softening. “I do agree that he’s as worthy as my brother Leander, your uncle, the duke. But still, I can’t stop him from working himself to death. You can’t either. None of us can. He thinks it’s some sort of badge

of courage, of honor.”

“He does,” she agreed, though it dismayed her. “I wish I could stop that too, but I think that I need to admit that I must simply enjoy him for the time that I have him.”

Her father let out a bleat of sound at her realism.

But her mother smiled. “Your father is both proud and infuriated that you are so young and yet so wise.”

“Would you wish me to be foolish for a good many years, Papa?”

“Perhaps,” he huffed before he tugged her into an embrace.

“You’re right though. If you do love him, and it seems that you two bloody do love each other, though you’ve known each other such a short time.

Your mother and I were the same. I cannot stand in the way of love.

So, you’re right, if he continues to willfully burn his candle so intensely at both ends, you must enjoy the fool for as long as he’s around. ”

“Thank you, Papa,” she said, tears stinging her eyes.

“Now, we shall have a wedding then. A great one. A large one,” her mother gushed. “I’m sure that’s what he wants.”

She searched her father’s face, hating that she was bringing worry to her parents, but unable to turn away from the man she loved. “But is a big wedding what you want, Papa?”

A sheen filled her father's eyes as he raised his hand to her cheek and gently said, "Is it what you want? Because I want what you want, come what may."

She beamed at him and then her mother through burgeoning tears.

She had no reason to be afraid. Whatever she wanted, they would want it too.

And they would always be there to support her.

She wondered if Callum had ever truly known that.

His mother seemed kind enough, but had anyone really been there to challenge him, and to push him the way that her family had with her?

Maybe that's what he needed. Maybe she could provide that.

Maybe she was ridiculous, but it didn't matter.

She now could not imagine her life without him.

No one alive at present felt more relief than Callum as he stood outside St. Paul's Cathedral in the most lavish suit that he had ever owned.

This was what he had been striving for since the moment he set eyes on Cymbeline.

He knew it now. There was no questioning it. This was what he had wanted. And finally, he had it. There would be no going back.

The steps of St. Paul's were full to the brim with people from every walk of life, hoping to get a glimpse of the Duke of Baxter and his soon-to-be bride, who was to arrive soon in a bridal coach that he had made certain was decorated in garlands and

flowers that would be the envy of a queen.

The cathedral within was packed to within an inch of its life. There was a chorus. The notes of its song soared up towards the dome as the guests waited for the wedding to begin.

The wedding itself would be as grand as any royal affair. He had not arranged the wedding.

His mother and the dowager duchess had, with the help of Lady Winifred. It had been decided that their wedding would be the most wonderful wedding of the century.

So many of the Briarwood weddings had been small affairs, and this time it seemed that they were going to do their utmost to have a union that was larger than ever—a sign that, despite the difficult times, life was to be celebrated. And he adored that.

As he strode down the nave of the cathedral to take up his place, he did not bother looking right or left.

He knew that he was surrounded by the most powerful people in the land. They had all come to witness his wedding. They had all come to witness him celebrate being alive. For that was what a wedding was.

He could not stop smiling. This was exactly what life was about, people all about him, feeling excitement, making things happen. And this was definitely making something happen. A wedding was one of the greatest and most important events of a duke's life.

When he reached the spot just before the altar and took up his position, with Cymbeline's cousins standing there waiting, he did not feel as if he needed to be worried.

No, this was the beginning of his life, the next phase of it. The most important phase. The phase where he secured his legacy, and would no longer have to worry about...

No, he would not think about that. Once he had a son, he would not have to worry at all. He would not have to worry about slipping away from this world too soon, as his father had done. It was the only thing that had ever given him pause, that he could exit this life without having produced a son.

Yes, the truly great work of a duke was not just in the land and in the government, but in making a family. And he would. He would have a large family with her, of that he was certain.

Calchas stood staring at him. He was Callum's groomsman. It was an interesting choice, but he felt it was the best idea to choose the most suspicious of the cousins to stand up next to him. The others, Octavian and Laertes, were in a line behind the naval man.

Calchas stared at him with a hard, ball-crushing energy. "You mess this up, and you know what will happen to you."

"Yes, yes, I'm aware of the field—"

"No, no, I have a ship," Calchas said under his breath. "I will tie you up, put you on it, attach an anchor to your legs, and drop you out in the Atlantic. Quite cold, quite deep. It will be an interesting descent."

"Your family is really very violent, considering how much it seems to adore the concept of love."

"Look, old boy," Calchas said with a slightly frightening but merry sally, "sometimes one needs motivation. And it's clear to me that you do. I'm still not a fan of all of

this. I felt it was a dangerous thing that she dressed as a man, and I think it's a dangerous thing that she's marrying you."

"I promise I'm not going to hurt her."

"All men say that," Calchas drawled, unimpressed. "Many of the men of my family have said that. But you know what they do? They still hurt the people they love, because it is the inevitability of humans to do so. You're going to hurt her. My question is, once it happens, what will you do?"

He stared at Calchas, nearly at a loss for words. "I don't know."

"Exactly," Calchas drawled. "That is what makes me nervous."

And then the organ of the cathedral started. It's pure, reverberating notes flew through the air. The congregation stood. And then there she was.

Cymbeline stood at the towering doorway of the nave, her beautiful soft pink gown glistening with jewels. It was a resplendent costume, worthy of a princess.

Her hair was coiled softly atop her head, decked with pearls and pink roses.

She strode down the aisle slowly, with her father guiding her. For a moment, he was certain that Ajax, much like Calchas, was going to give him a stare that equaled death.

But Ajax did not stare at him as if he wished him death. No, quite the contrary.

Ajax gave him a stare as if he wished him not just life, but a very long life. And it did something to Callum. It struck him hard in the heart and the soul, and he did not like it. For once again, that boundary that he had set up so long ago felt like it was shaking

under a stare like that.

He shoved the consideration away. He was being a fool. Lord Ajax merely felt sentimental on the day of his daughter's wedding.

Of course he did.

Who would not, with a daughter as beautiful as she, who was so good, kind, and intelligent?

When Ajax placed Cymbeline's hand into Callum's, he felt it a moment that transcended time, that transcended all of his life to this point. And he knew that this was bigger and somehow more important than anything else, despite what he usually told himself.

She lifted her gaze to his and smiled.

His heart nearly stopped at that smile.

Ajax did not say anything, but his hand rested over their twined ones for a long moment. Callum felt the benediction of a powerful man. And his throat tightened. Suddenly, he wished... Oh, how he wished that his own father was here, giving his blessing, watching him wed.

His father had missed most of the important moments of Callum's life, not because he had died, but even when he'd been alive... He'd been too busy, as the dowager duchess had pointed out.

But it had been worth it, surely, all the sacrifices that had been made for the great duke.

Yes, of course, those sacrifices were all worth it. The sacrifices that were coming would be worth it too. And so he shook off the strange sensation roiling through him and turned towards the bishop.

Cymbeline was his. That's what mattered.

He had finally found a family that would be perfect for him, because when she was alone, she would always have her family to go to when he was too busy, when he was hard at work.

She would never be alone, not as he was.

No, this was perfect. This was everything that both of them needed.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:13 am

At long last, they were wed, the wedding breakfast was done, and they were winding their way through the London streets to Callum's home next to St. James's Park.

But he was not going to wait until they were there. Oh no! They had been waiting for this, the both of them, for long enough.

He took in his beautiful wife. Bloody hell, he'd had no idea he could become so emotional. He'd always loved life and lived to the fullest, drinking every drop of it, but here, with her, he understood that he'd been somehow missing something.

She was the missing piece of his life. He was sure of that.

"Come here, wife," he teased with a playful command as he took her slender hand in his and pulled her across the coach.

A laugh burst past her lips at his enthusiasm, and as he cradled her atop his lap, his arms about her, he gazed down at her and said, "I am the luckiest man in the world."

"We are both lucky," she replied. "Now kiss me."

"Anything to make you happy," he replied.

"I am so glad to know you shall undertake such a hardship to gain my pleasure."

He waggled his brows at her. "Oh, indeed. Herculean labors and all that." But then he let his gaze soften. "Your kiss, Cymbeline, is the stuff of heaven."

He kissed her then, no holding back, no determination to control himself. And the kiss burned through him. Before long, he felt utterly wild.

Her hands roved over his coat, tugging at him.

But before he could be a total fool and start to make love to her in a rolling coach in broad daylight, the coach stopped, and they quickly righted themselves.

But he didn't wait for the coach door to open. No, he jumped down, turned back, and swept her up into his arms so that he might carry her over the threshold.

"It is quite impressive," she breathed as she stared up at her new home with its Greek columns and large square.

"Does that mean you approve?"

"I approve of anything that is yours," she returned.

He beamed down at her and all but vaulted up the steps, through the open door held by his butler.

Shepard stood waiting and called, "Everything is as you requested, Your Grace."

"Good man, Shepard," he returned.

His man and the line of servants awaiting them all looked pleased as punch.

"Should I stop to greet them?" she whispered, her cheeks flushing.

"Later, my dear. Later. I cannot wait another moment," he growled as he made for the stairs.

Grateful that he was an exceptional specimen who couldn't be brought down easily by illness, he bounded up the steps and strode towards his chambers.

The door was already open, and he swept her in, then he slammed it shut with a solid kick of his booted foot.

She gasped with delight.

There was wine, lemonade, strawberries, chocolates, and bread...

The bed linens were a beautiful pale blue and had already been pulled back.

A dressing gown of soft pink silk, embroidered with roses, awaited her.

He studied her face, eager to see her pleasure.

"It is wonderful," she breathed. "Are you anticipating we shall never leave this room?"

Oh, he would. He had to. His life had not stopped because he had wed, but...

"This will be our sanctuary," he rumbled. "Our place. And I shall join you every night. But now..."

He lowered her feet to the floor.

She bit her lower lip, then began to work at the ribbons of her gown.

"Allow me," he said.

Much to his surprise, he was so full of passion for her that his fingers fumbled for a

moment before he was able to work her free of her gown.

When she stood in nothing but silk stockings, ribbons, and shoes, he began to work at his own cravat.

It took him only moments before they stood before each other naked, as they were meant to be.

They touched palms, silent, drinking each other in.

Her cheeks were a bright pink and her lips were parted.

“Are you nervous?” he asked.

She nodded. “Are you?”

“I am,” he replied.

“Why?” she blurted.

“Because I want this to be perfect.”

“Because it is us, it will be perfect,” she replied.

Those words washed over him, and he closed the distance between them. She melded to his body, and the feel of her silken nakedness against him was nearly his undoing.

But he held strong, determined to show her what their life would be like.

Cymbeline could hardly believe that this moment had finally arrived. She had long known about what happened between a man and a woman. Her cousins and their

spouses, and her aunts and uncles, all adored each other.

Heron House was full of kissing, cuddling couples. And she was eager to join that club.

So, when he guided her to the bed, laid her back, and gazed down at her as if she was the most beautiful thing in the whole world, tears stung her eyes.

For this was what she had been waiting for.

Slowly, he kissed her from the line of her throat, down to her breasts, letting his tongue taste the peaks. He kissed each of her ribs and the places between. He kissed the soft curve of her stomach, then feathered his way down to the V at her thighs.

She arched towards him, eager.

His gaze met hers, and he dipped his fingers into her sex.

Oh! How he knew what to do! Even now, she was growing wild for him. Hungry for more. Hungry for all of him.

As he kissed and nipped gently at her hips, he stroked her folds, then as he had before, he slipped another finger into her core, as if preparing her.

Just when she thought she could bear no more, he pulled back. "I want us to go together."

"Together," she breathed.

He braced his long, hard, perfect body over hers, and he stroked the head of his sex along her opening.

Her mouth parted with surprise, for this was so new.

Then, in one gentle go, he thrust forward, and he had so readied her that there was no pain, no resistance, despite the fact he was so large.

Callum took his time, allowing her to get used to his size, and it did feel like too much at first. But then, with each moment, it became better and better until she wanted more.

And when her breathing changed back from uncertainty to desire, he rocked his hard sex into her body over and over, creating a rhythm that built in pitch and tempo.

This was different than before. This was more! This! This was what she had always needed. Him, all of him.

And when they both raced to their desire and their souls intertwined, just as their bodies did, in bliss, she knew she was lost to him forever and ever.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:13 am

Cymbeline had never been so happy. Not in her entire life. Every day with her husband was a new adventure. And she dearly loved an adventure!

He took her out every night. They went to countless art openings, to plays, to readings, to philosophical discussions. She had learned more about science and anthropology and archeology than she had in her entire life, which was saying something, given how much the Briarwoods loved knowledge.

Because of Callum, she had a newfound fascination with Egypt and the things that had been discovered there, though she really did frown on the idea of taking mummies into her house.

She would not allow that. Worse, she'd realized that many people seemed to think that mummy powder was a medicine.

That did give her the shivers and made her rather wary of apothecaries.

Yes, every day was something new with the Duke of Baxter, and as the Duchess of Baxter, doors had opened before her that she had not even known existed, and she came from one of the most powerful families in the land.

People sought her out. They asked for her opinions.

Every day, there was a line of people coming to his house—her house now—petitioning for her help, for her sponsorship and her patronage, and she had begun to see just how insanely busy her husband was.

She'd thought she'd known before, but she'd been mistaken.

How her Aunt Mercy, Duchess of Westleigh, had managed to handle it all, she did not know.

But there seemed to be something even more about being the Duke of Baxter's wife than the Duke of Westleigh's.

Perhaps it was the way that Callum worked so unceasingly as the chair of so many committees, as the sponsor of so many endeavors.

Her husband did not sleep. Not the way she did.

This was something that she had realized, and this did give her grave concern because as happy as she was, she still did need to sleep at night. And surely, such extensive sleeplessness could not be good for the heart.

But every night, after they made love, he would kiss her, make certain she was covered and warm, and then slip to his study and work ceaselessly through the night.

She did not know how he did it. At most, he slept perhaps four hours, and often he did not lay down to do that at all. No, he sat in his chair before his massive desk, covered in papers and books.

He was working as if at any moment his life could be taken away from him. It was both a magnificent and terrifying thing to behold. Yet, he seemed to suffer no ill effects.

So unlike her family, she could not censure him for it. As a matter of fact, he seemed more vital than almost anyone she knew. So how could she tell him what he did was dangerous? Surely, he was the one who knew what was best for himself.

And so when he presented her with a beautiful box wrapped in silk, tied with a blue ribbon, she found herself smiling because he had all but bathed her in presents throughout the last few weeks. Anything that he thought that she'd enjoy, from fans to books to artifacts, had found their way to her.

Anything that piqued her interest, he immediately bought for her, and she adored that.

She adored being made to feel so special, and yet she knew she was not the center of his world, but nor did she wish to be.

The center of his world was his ducal power and she now, like the rest of the world, was a planet orbiting that.

When she opened the box, she felt his stare upon her, waiting to see her smile. And she gave him that smile. Oh, how she did, because when she pulled the tissue back, she saw the beautiful clothes that had been folded with care.

“Your measurements were given to me by your mother, and these should fit you perfectly so that you can come with me,” he said, his voice deep with excitement.

“I want you to get dressed immediately. I would suggest Shepard help you, but that would be too much of a scandal,” he teased. “So I shall do it.”

The gentleman's clothes were beautiful and perfect in every way.

He pulled her up from the bed and immediately helped her into them, one step at a time. He then helped her tuck her hair under a beautiful and sumptuous wig. A wig that any gentleman would be proud to wear. Then he presented her with a hat.

“There you are. The perfect figure of a young man who can come with me to Parliament.” He held his hand out to her. “Are you ready to at last see me at work?”

“I am,” she declared. “I thought you had forgotten what you said that night out under the roses.”

“I will never forget anything that is between us,” he said, his voice a low rumble. “That is how my mind works. I don’t forget things.”

“It is marvel,” she said. “Most people cannot do what you do.”

“I am aware that most people cannot do what I do,” he said. “But I’m grateful that you admire it. Most people find it slightly frightening or upsetting.”

“There’s nothing about you that’s frightening or upsetting, Callum,” she assured.

With that, he led her down to the foyer, turned to her, and said, “All right, let’s see your best man.”

And then she did what she had done before she met him, when going out on the town as a young buck. She struck a pose and remembered what it was like to be the way her mother had trained her to be.

“Too good,” he cheered, applauding. “Too good. Don’t be too fiery or someone might challenge you to a duel.”

“Oh no, I’m a pacifist, good sir,” she teased, pressing a kiss to his cheek before adding, “I have no desire to fight. Surely, we can have a battle of wits instead of a battle of fists.”

“You will always win then,” he returned.

They went out to the ducal coach and rolled down towards Westminster. Soon they were entering the halls of power. He pointed her in the right direction, so that she

could go up to the gallery and watch the debate at play.

When she took her seat and stared down at the place that was the seat of England's government, where great history had been made, she found herself aglow, especially when she spotted her husband.

Waves of pride crashed over her.

He was hers! This magnificent man who stood and began to speak, and speak powerfully, on the subject of laws that would abolish children being sent to work in mines below the earth for hours and hours a day with no breaks and no safety whatsoever.

Callum spoke with such vigor and such passion, she understood why he did not sleep at night. He had every detail memorized. He had every fact at his fingertips, and he spoke with so much determination that she could have sworn there would not be a single heart unturned.

When he reached the end of his speech, he was met with thundering applause, and she stood too, applauding her pride for him. When he was done and Parliament was dismissed for the day, she expected him to slip out to go to his offices, where she might be able to meet him, but he did not.

He was surrounded by a crush of well-wishers and those seeking a word with him. Man after man approached him, and he gave each one special and individual attention, listening and making notes.

As she took this in, Cymbeline realized that this was a normal day for her husband.

From the moment that he got up to the moment he gave himself a small amount of rest, he was always doing this.

He was always helping people. He was always taking in more information and remembering it and willing himself to do something about it.

Tears stung her eyes and she blinked rapidly, for she could not appear too feminine in her garb. Femininity was not approved of in a man. Not these days, at any rate!

She sucked in a breath, prouder than she had ever been. But suddenly she did feel the fear of her father and her uncle...and the whispers she'd heard from her family when they had stayed at Heron House.

How could a man live like this for years and years and endure?

She wouldn't let herself think of it. She shoved the thought aside. It didn't matter. She wouldn't let it.

She couldn't wish him to be different than he was because he couldn't be anyone else and anyone else would make her simply unhappy.

And so she reminded herself that she had to accept him exactly as he was.

She raced down the stairs, headed through the hallway, hoping to see him, to tell him of her own pleasure at his speech, but he did not come to meet her.

No. He turned and spoke to another lord, then another, and then another, and they rushed him down the hall, almost as if he had forgotten that she was there.

Perhaps he had, and she could not recriminate him for it.

He was not there to receive her approval.

He was there to make England a safer and better place.

She walked down the hall until she spotted him standing in a small circle of powerful men. She heard the words Napoleon , Russia , and troops , and her breath caught in her throat because whatever they were discussing would no doubt affect her family.

Many of her cousins were now heading back out to war.

Octavian, no doubt, would be gone soon. Calchas would go back to his ship.

Things were progressing fast now, and there would be no turning back because Napoleon, like her husband, was working at a fever pitch to achieve his dream of becoming the most powerful man in the world, and only men like her husband and the great army led by Wellington could stop him.

How could she get in the way of her husband? How could she ask him to slow down and think of his health? Of his future? She could not. This was a moment in history that required much from men.

Yes. It would require her own sacrifice. Though it hurt, she understood that she would never be first in his life, that she could never dissuade him from doing all of this. All of this was who he was.

He turned and looked at her. He gave her a slight smile, and then he lifted his hand to his mouth and began to cough. His great shoulders bowed, and he coughed again. He pounded his chest and laughed, making some light comment to the powerful men he was talking to.

He looked back over at her and smiled again, reassuring her.

“A bit of coal dust,” he mouthed.

She nodded, relieved.

The cough had been quite strong, but she wasn't going to be afraid of a little cough. He was the Duke of Baxter. He was the most powerful man in England. A little cough meant absolutely nothing.

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It was Cymbeline's turn to pace.

Usually, every evening after coming home from whatever social engagement that she and Callum had, they would spend time in each other's arms. But today had been very different.

Something had changed drastically in Callum's behavior, and here in his beautiful ducal mansion in West London, near the park, she felt as if the ground was being ripped out from underneath her feet.

It did not matter that it was a beautiful ground, a polished wood floor with an Axminster carpet woven in blues and greens beneath her slippers.

Her dressing gown was wrapped tightly about her, as were her arms, as if she could ward off her concerns.

Some hours ago, she had come up to bed. He had not followed. As a matter of fact, he had gone to his own personal work chambers not long after they had come back from Parliament.

He had looked pale, a strange thing for such an active man, and there had been a sheen of sweat on his forehead that she had not seen before.

His conversation had also been listless, and she had not been able to drive how unlike himself he had been from her thoughts.

And now as she strode back and forth between the empty fireplace—because the

summer weather was so beautiful—to her door, she felt a chill travel down her spine.

She should go and check on him. She was his wife.

She knew that she should, and yet he did not like to be disturbed when he was working because he was so absorbed.

Even at night, sometimes he had people coming in from all parts of England and London to bring him information and to help sort things out. Oftentimes, those people did not wish to meet anyone but Callum.

But she could not shake the notion that today was different, that today she had to take matters into her own hands. And a terrible thought slipped through her, recalling the night that she had danced for him, the night when he had said that the doctor had advised him to rest.

And he had refused. And when she had pushed...

No, she would not allow herself to live in fear.

The feelings racing through her were merely her making something out of nothing! She was letting fear get the best of her because she had finally found the man of her dreams. Some strange part of her must be convinced it couldn't last. Which was ludicrous!

But perhaps because she had always had so much happiness and had gained even more of it with her marriage to Callum, she was afraid it might suddenly be ripped away from her.

But it was the cough that truly frightened her.

In the coach, he'd started coughing, and coughing hard. When she'd tried to help him, he'd pushed her away.

She'd always known that he pushed himself too hard and did not value his own health. Or he believed that his health would not be affected by how much he worked.

She'd married him knowing this. She had known that she could not dissuade him from acting thus. She'd defended her decision not to confront him about it by telling herself that she was accepting who he was.

Now, her stomach was sinking and waves of regret were crashing over her.

Something was not right.

So, as she slipped out of her room and methodically made her way down the stairs to where his study and office were, she willed him to be fine... Even as a voice inside her grew and grew, telling her that he was not.

She forced herself to go step after step, even as she felt her heart grow cold in her chest, her body becoming heavy with dread. Each step became more measured as if dread dogged her heels. She forced herself through the dark hallways until, at last, she came to his study door.

Holding her breath, she waited to hear his footsteps. She waited to hear any sound at all. But there was none. She knocked on the door because she knew that disturbing him at a crucial moment could be difficult. There was no reply. She swallowed, waited a moment, then knocked again.

Perhaps he was not in there. Perhaps he had gone for a walk. She knew that sometimes he did walk the city at night to think and clear his head. But she was not taking any chances. So she put her hand to the door handle, turned it, and pushed the

panel open.

She slipped into the quiet room, filled with desks and tables and chairs. Each surface was stacked with files and books, but her eyes scanned over those items quickly, since she was looking for him.

When she spotted Callum, a cry of fear burst from her throat.

He was slumped in a chair by his desk, his head tilted to the side and resting on the table.

Her hand flew to her mouth, and her heart slammed in her chest. She was terrified he was on the verge of death, for he did not appear to be in regular sleep.

No, he appeared to be in great distress.

His chest was straining as he struggled to breathe. His throat and lungs rattled as he drew in air.

It was the most terrifying sound she'd ever heard.

She raced to him and placed her hand on his shoulder. He let out a low moan, and she nearly cried out when she felt the heat radiating off of him.

"Callum," she called. "Callum."

She tried to help him sit up, but he was so heavy.

She pressed her hand to his forehead and was shocked to find that not only was he hot, but he was also sweating profusely, and his skin had turned a most horrifying, sallow color.

His clothes were drenched through, as if he had been running for hours.

“Callum, my love. Do you hear me? Do you hear me?”

He made no reply, but a moan slipped past his lips. She raced to the fire and pulled the bell pull, desperate to get him help, desperate to save him.

She could not believe that she had allowed this to happen. And she knew she had. This was her choice. Her fault. She had let him keep working!

Her family had seen these consequences.

Apparently, his doctor had too.

Oh, what a liar she was. She had seen the consequences too, but she had chosen to ignore them, accepting him as he was, afraid to lose him if she confronted him about it.

And now, because she had not forced him to rest, to make him see?

Now, they were going to pay the price.

He would be fine. She tried to convince herself of that as she raced to his side, watching his back struggle to expand as he breathed.

He was strong. Of course he would be fine. But tears filled her eyes, and she knew in her heart that he might not be.

The butler raced into the room, and what he saw caused his face to turn white with horror.

“Please,” she called, “send for the duke’s physician at once and send word to my family. They are needed immediately. We must take care of him.”

But she was terrified... Terrified she was about to lose him. For illness did not care if one was a duke or a peasant. A fever like this? Lungs struggling like this? Such conditions had stolen the lives of thousands in mere hours.

Suddenly, she knew that Callum was standing at a door to a place she could not follow, and she prayed that he did not walk through.

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Callum had no idea how he'd moved from his chamber to his bedroom, but he had.

He woke in shadowy fits and starts. His entire body ached as if he had been beaten in a back alleyway by a group of London toughs, an experience he had avoided once or twice.

The light burned his eyes. He tried to shield them, but his hand would not obey him.

He let out a small sound, which he had thought was going to be a roar of frustration, but it was the barest of moans.

"Callum," a voice called him. "Callum."

It was his wife, his Cymbeline.

He tried to say her name, but his lips refused to obey. She was pressing a cold cloth to his head, and he could hear the doctor whispering fervently.

He shivered. He was freezing and his body would not stop shaking. Agony traveled through him and he wished... Dear God, he wished he could stop shaking.

And he coughed then. Bloody hell, how he coughed.

It racked his chest, and he could not stop. Cough after cough tore through him, and he realized he could not breathe. He tried to suck in air, but his lungs were like two watery graves. He winced and groaned and coughed and coughed again.

Cymbeline tried to help him sit up, but he fought against her.

His mind felt wild, unattached to reason, to anything or anyone.

He needed to be alone to brace himself on the bed.

And he didn't want her to see him like this.

He didn't want anyone to see him like this, but the doctor was whispering frantically to her.

And they were trying to get him to drink water, but he didn't want water. He simply wanted to feel better. Surely, he would feel better at any moment.

It was just a little cold. If they would but leave him alone, he would be fine.

"Your Grace," the doctor said, "you are most seriously ill."

"Balderdash," he somehow got out between coughs that burned his whole body. "It is nothing. It is a trifling cold," he managed.

"It is not a cold," Cymbeline returned, taking his hand in hers. "My family is coming, and we are going to take you down to the country as soon as you're well, so that you can rest and recover." Desperation filled her voice.

The sound sent a note of fear through him.

She was afraid... Afraid he was not going to recover. She was trying to hide it, his beautiful, strong, brave wife. But he knew her. She could act as much as she wished, but he could hear the fear under her claim.

There was a longer pause from the doctor, and suddenly Callum realized just how ill he must be because another coughing fit rattled through him, and he felt as if his body was made of icy snow.

“Blanket,” he begged.

“No, Your Grace,” the doctor said.

“Blanket,” he roared.

And then Cymbeline said fiercely, “No. You are burning up, and we must get your fever down, Callum. No blanket.”

He sank against the bed.

He ached. He ached as he had never ached in his entire life.

“Callum,” she called, “please, my love. You must fight this. Fight with all you have.”

Fight? Of course he would fight this. He had been fighting his entire life, and he would not stop now. He wasn’t going to suddenly cease, but the weakness of his body shocked him.

His body had never betrayed him before, but it suddenly occurred to him that perhaps it wasn’t his body that had betrayed him.

It was he who had betrayed his body. There were all the times he had never listened to it, all the times he had ignored the exhaustion, the aches, the warnings.

All the times he should have gone to his bed when he was sick but had pushed himself to get work done.

And over these last weeks, he had taxed himself even further, making certain that he spent time with the woman he loved, the woman who made his life worth living, as well as doing all the work.

The sacrifices had seemed worth it.

Had it been too much to try to love her and do his work too? No. It couldn't be. He wouldn't allow it, but he felt weak.

Dear God, he felt weak. And suddenly, he felt as if his entire life might be slipping away from him, as if suddenly that companion which he had been so certain he was not afraid of had come into the room.

Death.

He let out a shout of defiance. "Go away!"

"Callum, are you all right?" Cymbeline asked.

He began to shake his head. No, no. Death was not coming for him. It was too soon. His father had had until he was forty-five, and Death had come suddenly, taking him immediately with a little bit of pain, but this felt different.

This felt as if Death had slipped into the room and was laughing at him, laughing at him for believing that he could mock Death, control Death. He had not thought he'd been trying to control Death by living the way he had, but now he realized Death might come for a fellow in many ways.

His father's heart had stopped, and he'd been gone instantaneously.

But what if Death came as an illness? An illness that racked his body and left him

weak and ruined him, not just for himself, but for the woman he loved and also for all the people he was supposed to help.

What if Death had come to take him in a long, agonizing struggle because he had not listened to all the warnings? He was the Duke of Baxter after all.

No one could warn him.

Not even his wife.

And now, he feared he was going to lose her. He was going to lose it all.

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Cymbeline did not care if her husband was infectious. Everyone around her seemed to be alarmed and worried that perhaps she might get ill, but she did not care.

As the doctor stared at the large Briarwood family congregating downstairs in the Duke of Baxter's home, he looked as if he was facing a firing squad.

Her grandmother, the dowager duchess, smiled gently at him. As gently as anyone could when someone in the family was dying. "Doctor," she said, "please do not worry about how we take it. You must tell us how exactly things stand."

The physician nodded, his silvery hair shining in the morning light. "He is gravely ill," the doctor said, "but I am not surprised. His Grace has been avoiding his precarious health for some time."

Cymbeline tensed. "What do you mean?" she demanded.

"He was ill not long ago," the physician said. "I warned him that if he did not rest and take care of himself, he would be risking a much larger illness. As a matter of fact, I think this one is a secondary illness to the one that he had about a month ago."

"A month ago," she gasped. "He was so ill a month ago?"

They had known each other but a month, truly just a few weeks, and it seemed a shock to realize that something so catastrophic could have happened to him just before they met. And he'd never once let on... Except for that note.

The doctor gave a nod. "Yes, he was ill with a fever and a cough, and I advised him

to go down to the country to walk, to rest, to take in good air. But, of course, being the Duke of Baxter, he insisted that he could not go.”

“Which is my fault,” Callum’s mother said from the corner of the room.

Cymbeline’s grandmother crossed to the Dowager Duchess of Baxter and took her hand in hers.

“No, no, my dear. Your son is a particularly stubborn fellow. Not a single one of us Briarwoods could convince him, and the doctor could not either. There is no blame to be laid here. We must now simply decide how best to save him.”

Save him. Those words cut through Cymbeline like a knife. She felt the room whirl about her. “Doctor, how grave is this?”

The doctor looked at her. Without hesitating, he said, “I was not in jest when we spoke in his chamber. I do not know if His Grace will survive the night...or the next few days. The illness is severe, the fever is extreme, but more importantly, the cough is dire. His lungs are working against him and filling with fluid. We must combat that. At first, I was afraid that he was showing signs of consumption last month, but I don’t think that’s it.

I think this is pneumonia. I think that he has been going about, pushing himself far too hard since his last illness, and his body was not ready for it. He never let himself actually recover.”

“He never did, not even when he was a boy,” his mother said, tears filling her eyes.

“His father would not tolerate illness, you see. Whenever his father fell ill, well, he would ignore it. He worked through all sickness and he taught Callum to do the same. His father assured him that a little illness could never truly do him harm. But it’s not

true. ”

And suddenly the Dowager Duchess of Baxter began to cry, as she realized she could lose her son as she had lost her husband, through the same sort of stubborn belief.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. “What have I done? How could I let my boy be raised thinking that?”

Cymbeline’s grandmother cradled Callum’s mother in her arms. “Now, now, my dear, we must not be afraid. He shall make it. He is made of stern stuff.”

“Indeed,” Cymbeline declared, even as her own heart was dark with dread, for she had seen how her husband looked.

But she would not give in. She could not.

She had to fight for her husband. She had to have another chance.

And she had to make up for what she had done too.

How she had let him work himself nigh to death.

“We cannot allow Callum to think that we will let him slip from us.”

Unable to stop herself, she drew herself up and gritted, “I am going to go now, and I’m going to tell him that if he dies, I will never forgive him.”

“Well said, my dear,” her mother declared.

And her father, the one who had feared this the most, crossed to her and met her gaze. “You can do it, Cymbeline. And so can he. We will all be here willing him to live. Do

not believe this is the end. Not yet.”

“Not yet,” she whispered, her eyes filling with tears at her father’s words. He could have been full of anger or full of arrogance, reminding her of his warning.

But instead, he took her into his arms. “We love you. Come what may, we love you.”

“I love you too, Papa,” she whispered and before she could fall apart, she steeled her heart, turned, and charged up the stairs.

Even as tears threatened to break free, she rushed into Callum’s bedchamber, strode to the bed, climbed up on it, and grabbed him. “Wake up,” she demanded.

Callum’s eyes flickered. “Stop,” he groaned. “L-leave me.”

“Never,” she ground out. “Never.” She gripped his arms, arms that had once wrapped her up in their strength.

“Now, you listen to me, Callum Royce, Duke of Baxter. You better not die, for if you do, I will haunt your grave every day, and I will rail at you. Do you understand? I will not do whatever your mother and you did when your father died.”

His eyes darted under their lids, as if he did indeed hear her, even as he was drifting away.

Her heart wailed with fear, but she pushed herself to be harsher, to yank him back.

“Somehow, you turned your father into some sort of mythical hero, and you thought that’s how you should live.

But you’re not a mythical hero. You’re real.

And you're mine. I will not pretend you were some sort of saint.

I shall come to your grave every day and castigate you for leaving me.

"She shook his big body as furious tears slipped down her cheeks. "Do you understand?"

But he said nothing, and she dropped to his chest, despair crashing over her. "Oh, Callum. I have made the worst mistake of my life."

He sucked in a shuddering breath and at last managed, "Marrying me?"

"No, Callum, marrying you was the greatest thing I have ever done." She pressed her face to his shoulder, willing him to feel her love.

"The worst thing I ever did was trick myself into believing that you treating yourself so poorly was you being who you are. What a lie. It is true," she lamented, "that you are passionate and strong, and that you believe in the work that you do. That is who you are. But the rest of this? The way you abuse yourself? The way you do not sleep? The way you push yourself? And even the way you have passionately loved me at the expense of yourself? Well, I will not stand for it anymore. Do you understand? Do you understand?" she demanded.

But he said nothing, and his eyes flickered shut.

And she feared that it was all far too late and that she had let him down.

She had let the man she loved more than anything in this world down because she had let her false belief that the passions they shared, the way they had burned themselves out these last weeks, had been noble.

There was nothing noble about the way that he had scorched himself for her, for society. Not if he died, not if he was gone.

What a ridiculous girl she had been to believe that they had time. How foolish to convince herself that they had any sort of time.

One never knew.

She'd thought that she would be perfectly alright to take him for the little time she might have with him, but she never could have guessed it would be this short time. She grabbed Callum's hand. She lifted it to her lips. "Don't leave me, Callum. You must not leave me."

She whispered it over and over again, as if she could convince him to stay and perhaps convince death to go.

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C allum did not know if it was night or day. He felt as if he had been trampled by horses, which was a slight improvement from having felt like he'd been beaten up by London toughs.

It took him a moment to realize that light was peering in through the curtains.

He blinked slowly. He wanted water. His mouth was dry. He lifted his hand, hoping that someone might see, someone gentle, someone like the love of his life. Someone being Cymbeline.

“She’s not here,” a voice drawled.

He blinked slowly. “Calchas?” he croaked.

Calchas Briarwood, dressed in his naval uniform, sat in a chair beside the bed. He snapped his book closed, sat up straighter, and said, “Well, at least we know your mind’s not gone. The fever hasn’t taken that.”

“What are you doing here?” he demanded, his voice not nearly as commanding as he was accustomed to.

“She needed rest, and I came to sit beside you because I’ve been thinking.”

“Thinking?” he echoed, feeling slightly dazed.

“I should get Cymbeline at once. But you and I must speak first.”

A wave of unease slipped through Callum. He wanted Cymbeline, to tell her he loved her, to thank the heavens that he was still here. With her.

But the intensity in Calchas's voice couldn't be ignored.

Quietly, Calchas poured Callum out a glass of water, and then, much to his shock, helped him sit. As if it was the most natural thing in the world, Calchas brought the cool drink to his lips.

Calchas was patient. He actually held him with kindness. And he thought that anyone who was Calchas's friend was remarkably lucky.

Calchas then guided him back onto the pillows and adjusted them. Then he put the glass of water down. "You look like hell."

"I feel like hell," Callum said, the drink having done him a world of help.

"Good."

"What?" he asked.

"Good," Calchas repeated. "I'm glad you feel like hell. You deserve it."

"I deserve it?" Callum demanded.

"Indeed you do. You wanted this, didn't you? You were willing to have a dance with Death, all in the name of being the Duke of Baxter. And now you've had it, what do you think?"

He shuddered. "This is not at all what I wanted."

Calchas's mouth tightened for a moment, then he sighed.

"No, you were arrogant enough to think you would go exactly like your father, weren't you?

One quick apoplexy or heart failure and then off you'd go, leaving everybody behind.

But no, it never occurred to you that it could be something like this.

"Good God, man. What if you'd been paralyzed?

Or struck blind from illness. We all would have taken care of you, of course, and Cymbeline would have stayed lovingly by your side.

But your illness happened out of a sheer willfulness to never let up.

That's not strength, old boy. That's severely misguided stubbornness.

And you've been married, what, a few weeks?

If you'd died, you'd be gone from her life, a failure on every front because you don't have any children.

What would that mean for the great Duke of Baxter? "

He ground his teeth and yet...he couldn't argue. Not really. "Calchas, you are being a devil."

"No, I'm not being a devil," Calchas countered.

"I'm being a realist. I think someone needs to show you reality.

You've been living in some bizarre story where you made yourself a martyr.

And I don't have time for martyrs because real death, real pain, real killing is happening every moment.

Not here, not in this house, but on the battlefields of Europe, on the oceans of the world, and quite frankly, Callum, all around you in England. And you know it better than most."

Calchas leaned forward and leveled him with a merciless stare.

"People are genuinely struggling every day. You fight for them! And yet you torture yourself on purpose. People would give anything to be able to rest, and you have the means to take care of yourself. Most people in this country don't.

They get up and they must labor from the moment they wake to the moment they can drink gin, pass out, and start it all again.

But you! You can see the best doctors. You could go to Bath, or you could go down to the country.

You can sleep in a bed that is fit for kings.

You have the best food. And yet you refuse to take care of yourself because you see it as some sort of noble endeavor to push yourself into an early grave with work.

Are you trying to punish yourself for the good life that you have? "

The words crashed down on him over and over again. "No, I don't think I am."

"Then what is it," Calchas demanded, "that makes you act this way? Don't you

understand why my sister wants you in her life? Why we all do?"

Callum blinked. "You want me in your life, Calchas?"

"Bloody hell," Calchas drawled. "How obvious must I be? Of course I do. You're family. And my friend. It may not seem so, but I like you. I'm a prickly sort of fellow."

Callum didn't know what to say. He couldn't find words. All of this was so much. He'd faced death, and now he was alive and faced with a choice, and he knew Calchas was trying to help him make it.

But he felt lost and like a disappointment. He'd nearly lost his wife.

"Listen," Calchas began, his voice rich with sincerity.

"We don't want you in our lives because you're the great Duke of Baxter.

As a matter of fact, Callum, you quite remind me of my father, another duke.

The two of you have much in common, actually, and I adore him.

But I don't adore him because he's the Duke of Westleigh.

And Cymbeline doesn't love you because you are the Duke of Baxter. "

Calchas drew in a long breath, leaned forward, and locked gazes with him.

"Callum, the world needs you, not the Duke of Baxter. And I'd wager this.

Even if you weren't the great Duke of Baxter, you would do great things because of

the sort of man you are.

Cymbeline doesn't love a duke or coronet.

She loves you. And if you martyr yourself to that coronet, well, the world will be left behind wanting.

Didn't you miss your father when he died? ”

Callum swallowed. “Yes, but I couldn't let myself. I had to convince myself that he'd died for all the right reasons. Perhaps he had. But I haven't let myself think or feel how it could have been different.”

“No, you haven't,” a voice said from the door.

He blinked and spotted the Dowager Duchess of Westleigh.

“Come to gloat, have you?” he asked sheepishly.

“Gloating is the last thing that I wish to do, dear boy,” she returned, arching a silvery brow.

“I feared something like this would be coming for you, and it did. Believe it or not, it doesn't make me happy to be right.

Now I want to know what you're going to do.

But you just said something that gives me hope. ”

“Hope?” he croaked.

The dowager nodded. “When last you and I talked privately, I realized that all these things that you’ve been doing are wonderful, of course.

But you’ve had to run your whole life so that you did not feel the aching loss of your father: a father who was, well, lionized in your mind.

I don’t even know if you knew the real man well. ”

He winced. “Perhaps I did not,” he whispered, though the confession pained him greatly.

“And is that what you want for your children, to not know you well?”

“You’ll be lucky if you have children,” Calchas drawled. “If you keep going as you have been, you are going to be dead. And you know what that will do to my cousin? It will destroy her.”

His throat tightened. “I don’t want to destroy her...”

Calchas was silent for a long moment and then he said, “Do not make me wish that she’d never married you. You cannot keep going as you have always done. Can you change? Do you even want to?”

The words lacerated him. This felt like all too much after his illness, and yet he understood why this was happening. It had to. He couldn’t ignore this. Not now.

“Because that is the only thing that matters, dear boy,” the dowager duchess said as she crossed to the bed, “if you want to. Because, quite frankly, up until now, up until this very moment, it’s been clear that you don’t want to.

But now that you’ve gone through this door, will you be willing to actually live? ”

He ground his teeth. It was quite an accusation to suggest that he hadn't truly been living all this time, that he had been running away from the death of his father, trying to avoid the thoughts and the feelings that came with it.

But when he really made himself pause, he realized they were both right.

And the pain of it, dear God, the pain ripped through him so intensely that he wished they were gone and that he was still battling the illness that had gone through him. He sucked in a shuddering breath.

"I have been holding tight for so long," he ground out.

"We know," the dowager duchess said gently.

"You don't need to hold tight anymore. We will take up the rope," Calchas said.

"And now I think it's time I drag you down to the country and force you to get better: for your sake, for my cousin's sake, for the family's sake.

Do you understand? You're not alone anymore.

You are not ever going to have to face the world alone. "

Callum shook his head, struggling. Struggling to respond as they wished. "That's what I don't think you two understand. I've always liked not needing anyone. I've always liked being the one who was needed. I'm not afraid of being alone," he ground out.

Calchas let out a slow, pained breath. "Oh, I see," he said.

The dowager duchess sat on the bed, and instead of castigating him, she nodded.

“That takes a special kind of person. And I’ve always known that you were special.

To be someone who’s not afraid of being alone takes a great strength.

But here’s the thing, and perhaps this is where it truly lies, Callum.

Other people need you, and you need to allow them to need you.

Do you see? We need you. Cymbeline needs you.

And so you must take care of yourself so that you can stay with us, so that you can stay with her. ”

“Stay with her,” he whispered. “How could I not?”

But what were they asking? They were asking him to give up who he had always been? Could he do it? Could he give it all up, the way he’d always worked, the way he’d always driven himself. For love?

For Cymbeline?

For himself?

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:13 am

Sitting in a chair in the sunshine, doing nothing, was driving Callum mad.

But he supposed madness was better than the alternative.

He was not dead. He had met Death, had a chat with him, and sent him on his way.

It wasn't at all how he thought it was going to go, and there was one thing that he was quite certain about.

He would not be allowing Death to visit him again anytime soon, not if he could help it.

He'd been so certain when he was a young man, standing before his father's grave, that he and Death were good friends. But now he realized that he wished Death to be a distant acquaintance. One who might come around eventually, but who would not exactly be welcomed.

The estate of the Duke of Westleigh was beautiful. He supposed he could have gone down to his own, but the Briarwoods had insisted that he be surrounded by tender, loving care.

His mother had come too, and she made a point of sitting with him and reading for hours each day. It reminded him of when he was small, and actually, they both found it to be wonderfully soothing.

He didn't know quite what to make of the large crowd of Briarwoods, all reminding him to do nothing but enjoy the beautiful countryside.

He had never had such a fuss made over him in his entire life.

And he found that, actually, he rather liked it.

But there was one thing he did not like—his wife's condition.

She fluttered over him, caring for him, but with a look upon her face that was so painful and so upsetting that he had yet to have a moment of peace.

Where was the vivacious, passionate, beautiful young lady who he had fallen in love with?

And he began to fear that he had done this to her. His passion, his zest for life, for her, and his unwillingness to live in a healthy way had broken her. After his illness, she looked as if she had aged years.

Yes, she looked as if his brush with death had almost stolen her too.

And for that, he did not know if he could ever forgive himself.

She crossed the lawn to him and tucked the blanket about him.

He hated feeling like an invalid, but he knew that he had to allow it.

If he did not allow it, well, the family would be in an uproar because it would just be more evidence that he could not or would not change.

He was trying to change. It was no easy thing.

Even if he was growing to like being cared for so thoroughly.

But if he changed, and she was not well herself, what would it be for?

And so, as she stared out to the horizon, Callum took her hand and pulled her down atop his lap, determined to feel close to her again, to awaken that in her too.

“You seem upset,” he said.

“I do?” She frowned. “I did not mean to be,” she said quickly. “I’m so sorry. I thought I was...”

“You do not need to hide your feelings,” he said gently. “You’ve been taking such good care of me, and you read to me, and you talk to me, but there’s something wrong, something deeply wrong, Cymbeline. Where have you gone?”

Slowly, she lifted her gaze to him. “I cannot forgive myself for what I did.”

“What did you do?” he asked, shocked.

He thought it was himself who needed to beg forgiveness, and he was ready to do it. But now, his heart began to hammer in his chest, afraid.

Her face twisted with sorrow and self-recrimination. “I almost let you die.”

He blinked. “Did you not call for the doctor?”

“Of course I called for the doctor,” she retorted with a bit of her old feisty nature. “That’s not what I mean.”

“What do you mean?” he asked gently.

She licked her lips, folding her hands in her lap. “I let you run headstrong at throwing

your life away. How could I let you do that?"

He sucked in a sharp breath as he began to understand. "Because I'm a grown man?" he said.

"No. No, that's not it," she protested. "Do not make excuses for me. I told everybody that I was choosing you and that I was letting you be yourself. But the truth is," she whispered, as if she was horrified, "I had resigned myself because I wanted you so badly, because I was so passionate about having you. My passion, Callum, burned so brightly for you that I would have you in any way. I should have stood up to you before I said yes. I should have told you that I could not and would never marry you if you were going to drive yourself into an early grave. I should have held my ground on that."

"But you loved me," he reminded, longing to sooth her hurt, longing to take all blame away from her.

She let out a soft laugh. "Yes, I did, but apparently not enough to tell you the truth. I must have been so afraid to lose you because I clearly did not think you would change. And I am ashamed of that."

"So, what would've been the point in telling me?" he said. "I still wouldn't have changed, and we would have been denied all those delicious hours together."

She gaped at him and then she laughed, because deep down, she knew he was right. "Oh, you are so stubborn. As stubborn as a goat," she said.

Her laugh filled him with relief and hope. For he would not have her take the blame for his arrogance and his wounds.

"Goats have their purpose," he replied, wagging his brows at her.

“They do, but I will not have this happen again.” She turned her body towards him.
“Do you understand?”

He nodded swiftly. “I don’t want it to happen again either. I never thought that I would lose you as soon as I had found you, Cymbeline.”

She swallowed. “Neither did I. All my life, I’ve been waiting for the one, the famous Briarwood expectation of finding the one.

And I knew that he would come this Season, and you did, but I never imagined that you could be ripped away from me as quickly as I had found you. And I was a part of almost losing you.”

“Stop,” he insisted.

“No,” she protested. “My mother warned me. My father warned me. My cousins too, in their own way, and certainly the Duke of Westleigh. And even my grandmother tried to tell me the truth. But I didn’t listen to them.

I merely nodded, and I let you wreck yourself because I loved our passion together.

And I did not think of the consequences.

Maybe I have been blinded, blinded by being in a family that is full of love all the time, and I came to believe that it always works out. ”

She grabbed his hands and held him with a ferocious grip as she rushed, “But the truth is that it does not always work out, Callum. You almost died. What if it doesn’t work out? What if you cannot stop? And what if you do leave me? What great love is there then, and what was the point of it all?”

Her pain and fear spilled over onto him. He had done that. He had dimmed her effervescent hope. Part of him wanted to hate himself and retreat. But then what would all the pain be for?

No, he could not retreat. He had to advance.

And so, he pulled her against his chest, cradling her. “On our wedding day, Calchas warned me that if I hurt you, he would drag me out to sea and drop me to the bottom of the ocean. And I did hurt you. Luckily, he has not taken me out to sea.”

“Yet,” she pointed out, her lips curling in a rueful smile.

“Too true. Not yet.” He drew in a shaky breath and confessed, “I don’t really know how to change. But I want to. At long last, I want to. You’ve made me understand something, your whole family has.”

She tilted her head back. “What?” she whispered.

He paused, trying to find the powerful words that could convey the shift inside him.

“That I am worthy. Just myself. My worth is not in the actions I do. Or in the title I was born to. You want me. You don’t want my deeds.

You don’t need me to always be doing the next great thing.

And your family has taught me that I can actually only do the next great thing if I am well.

I cannot have children if I am not well, and I desperately want to have children with you, Cymbeline.”

A tear slipped down her cheek and that cut him to the quick. But he couldn't stop. There was still so much to say. "I told your cousin that I would not hurt you," he repeated. "And he told me that of course I would. And yet you are the one asking forgiveness."

She opened her mouth to speak, but he shook his head.

"It is I who must ask your forgiveness because it is I who almost threw us away. All because I couldn't see the value in slowing down, of choosing the small moments with you, with your family, with myself.

And I couldn't understand that those small moments, like this one here, where we are doing nothing but feeling together and being together, are the most important.

"He slipped his hands to her beautiful face, cupping it, as if she was the most precious jewel in the world.

Because she was. "Unless I help myself, unless I let you help me too, I will never help anyone else. Not in the way I wish to."

Another tear slipped down her cheek. "Callum," she rasped. Then she said his name again, only this time, it rang with joy.

And suddenly the years seemed to slip from her, and her youthful vivacity came back. And she leaned into his embrace. "I don't want you to ever leave me again. Not until we're both terribly old and wrinkled and sitting together watching our children's children play. Do you understand me?"

"I understand, my love," he said, stroking her hair. "Will you teach me how to live? To really and truly live? Will you show me how it is done?"

“Yes, of course. Of course I will.”

And now their passion would change. It would no longer just be a passion for doing things or even for each other. Their passion would transform into a passion for the life that they could make, the family they would create, and the little, slow moments around which their entire world revolved.

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Heron House

Five years Later

Not everyone could change, and certainly many people never did.

But Callum? Callum changed almost overnight.

It was not easy. As a matter of fact, it was quite brutal.

Some days, it was absolutely agonizing. Some days, the voice in his head commanding him to leave the house and go to Parliament, or to stop being with his family and wife and find something to occupy his brain and body, was so intense that he was sometimes certain he would go mad with it.

But he was nothing if not focused, and so he had and still did surround himself with the Briarwoods every day, all day, as best he could. He had even gotten his manservant, Shepard, to take part, and Shepard had been positively delighted.

The man followed him about, chirping, "It's time to rest, Your Grace."

And Shepard, having been given full permission in advance by Callum, did not leave him be until he did.

There were days when he wanted to punch Shepard in the nose. Well, not really. He was deeply grateful for the optimistic, stubborn fellow.

And the truth was he loved the way Cymbeline would arch a brow at him and give him an unyielding look.

Whenever he spotted the look, he would know that he had to stop, that he had to pause.

But nothing gave him more reason to pause than the twin little girls and the little boy who had come into his life.

Now that he had children, little souls to teach how to be in this world, he was determined that they did not feel they had to chase and churn and always be proving their worth, because the truth was those little souls were worthwhile simply by being born.

And he was going to be especially careful with his son, the future Duke of Baxter. Because he would not allow his son to, like he had, and his father before him, break himself in the name of a dukedom.

And so as he did now, and almost every summer night, instead of going out to balls and card parties, talks and events, he laid out on the lawn behind Heron House on the grass with his two little girls and his little boy tucked in his arms. Cymbeline laid with them, the guiding force of their family.

The scents of summer flowers filled the air, a gentle breeze wafted along the ground from the Thames, and the night sky shone overhead, a blanket of jewels that sparkled with such iridescent magnificence that one realized they were but a speck in a vast universe.

And yet, despite the fact that they were a speck, a moonbeam, a tiny bit of dust floating in a huge, ongoing play, they were still glorious, important, and needed.

His eldest little girl, with her soft curling blonde hair teasing her cheeks, let out a

gleeful exclamation as she pointed up at the sky and spotted a constellation.

Her twin sister pointed her small hand at another constellation with a delighted cry.

And their little brother laughed and clapped his hands.

As they marveled at the firmament, his wife leaned in and kissed him softly on the cheek.

“This is heaven,” she said.

“Yes, it is,” he replied simply.

It had taken him many, many years to understand that while good deeds were important, actually being with those one loved was the most important thing of all. And to understand that they were just a brief moment in a span of time that they could not comprehend.

But as he, his daughters, his son, and his wife sprawled out on the lawn of the magnificent house that had brought peace and joy to so many, Callum understood that the stars overhead had shone for thousands of years.

Thousands upon thousands of people had looked upon those stars.

He understood that countless others—thousands and millions more—would also look upon those stars.

But all that actually mattered was just this moment, with the gentle feel of his children in his arms and his wife beside him.

The End