



The Duke's Sister's Absolutely Excellent Engagement (The Notorious Briarwoods Book 11)

Author: *Eva Devon*

Category: Historical

Description: Lord Nestor Briarwood has years and years to find a wife! But when he meets Lady Margery Barret, he finds his soul aching to bring her the joy she's never known. After all, his family knows the art of joy like no other. When he asks her to marry him, knowing her smile will make his heart soar, he's astonished to find that society, furious that he is off the market so soon, is eager to tear her down. But Nestor will not stand for that. Not for one single moment.

As a child, Lady Margery Barret knew loneliness intimately. The only friends she was allowed were picked by her parents. Her brother did all he could to shield her, but now, on the marriage mart, with her parents long gone, she wants love and family and affection. Lord Nestor Briarwood has the kindest family she's ever known. And whenever he walks into a room, she cannot deny the love she feels for him and his bright view of the world. When he offers to marry her, she can't resist. But deep in her heart, she fears that society is right. He has picked her out of pity, and she will never know true love.

Total Pages (Source): 20

1796

Heron House

“He must not see me like this,” boomed the Duke of Westleigh. His voice shuddered off the walls.

“He must see you like this,” his wife, the duchess, countered as she stood before him, a soothing presence in the study.

The subject of their discussion, much to their ignorance, stood just outside the room, peering in through a gap between the door and the jamb, his heart palpitating wildly.

What must he not see?

Nestor’s father paced wildly before the fireplace. The room was mostly dark, and shadows danced upon the silk-covered walls and ornate furniture. For a moment, Nestor felt as if this was some scene from a play, as if they were no longer upon the Earth, but in some other world where a demon had got hold of his darling papa. Or that his father was putting on a performance.

His expression had transformed into one of intensity. His body seemed to crackle with an energy that Nestor had not felt or seen before, and he was frightened.

What were they trying to protect him from?

Yes, this all seemed like a scene from one of the plays his dear grandmama loved so

very much. He loved plays too, and he prayed beyond all hope that this was exactly that—a scene from a play. But deep in his soul, he knew it was not true. Something was amiss with his papa.

His mother, his darling, beautiful, wonderful mother, strode forward and took his father's hands in hers.

“My love, it is perfectly all right.”

“It is not all right,” his father countered. “It is never going to be all right.”

“Yes, it is,” she said calmly. “We’ve always known this day would come. It is time to let him see you as you are.”

“But this is not as I am,” his papa protested. “This is some other thing.”

“It is who you are, and we love you just the same,” his mother cut in, not harshly but firmly.

His papa pulled his hands free of his mother's, and for a moment, Nestor was afraid. Afraid that something terrible was about to happen. His papa seemed so frantic.

And then his father, the great duke, turned from her, placed his hands over his face, and a shuddering sob escaped his father's throat.

“I wish I wasn't like this.”

His mother's face was soft and kind. “But you are, my love, and it is quite all right. You know that this will pass. This feeling will last for a little while, and then it will pass, like clouds upon the sky or a season upon the Earth.”

What would pass? Nestor wanted to call out. What would happen? And suddenly it hit him deep in his soul. If there was something wrong with his father, was there something wrong with him?

“My darling?” a voice said softly.

Nestor jumped and turned and spotted a specter floating in the hallway, silver-like. He blinked rapidly as the figure drifted out of the dark shadows of the hallway. He let out a sigh of relief. It was his grandmother.

“Grandmama,” he called.

“Whatever are you doing, my boy?” she asked.

“There’s something wrong with Papa.”

A strange look danced across his grandmother’s lined but beautiful face, and then she slipped towards him, her grand skirts flitting over the elaborate carpets of the hallway. Quietly but intently, she knelt down beside him and took his small hands in hers, a strange mirroring gesture of what his mother had done for his father just a moment ago.

“There is nothing wrong with him.”

He shook his head, his own voice a rough whisper. “There is. There is. He is not acting like himself.”

“Yes, he is,” his grandmother replied gently, patiently.

He frowned. “I don’t understand. That is not how he acts with me.”

She paused as if trying to decide what she needed to say. “That is true, and he has not had an episode like this in some time. But it’s important that you see him exactly as he is, for all that he is.”

“What is wrong with him?” Nestor rasped, tears stinging his eyes.

“Nothing,” she said firmly and kindly, stroking her thumbs over the backs of his hands. “He is your father. He is my son, Leander, he is the Duke of Wesleigh, and he has grander feelings than most.”

“Grander feelings,” Nestor echoed, swallowing back his fear, and sniffing back his tears too.

His grandmother nodded, her silver curls shining in the moonlight streaming in through the tall hall windows. Her face was easy, unfazed, as if this was normal. Was it normal? He did not know, but suddenly the palpitations of his heart slowed, and he did not feel the fear he had just a moment ago. All because of her steady nature.

If his grandmother was not alarmed, perhaps he should not be either.

He licked his lips, then blurted, “But what is happening to him? He is usually so jolly, so calm, so lovely.”

“He is, and he is still lovely, but right now, he is intense and full of emotions, and he will be until it passes. And then he will be very tired, and he may feel a great deal of remorse for having been so wild in his feelings. But your father would not be who he is if he did not experience those things.”

“Does everyone act like that?” Nestor asked softly, even though, in his heart, he already knew the answer.

Slowly, his grandmother shook her head. “No. No, most people do not act like that at all. But it is what makes your father so beautiful, and so unique, and why we all take good such care of him.”

He swallowed then, his throat tightening. “Will I be like that?” he asked.

His grandmother lifted her wrinkled hand to his face and smiled gently. “I do not know. Are you scared you’ll be like that?”

He thought about it for a moment. “I don’t know,” he replied.

“‘I don’t know’ is a very good answer, my darling boy. But I should tell you this. You might be. Leander’s father was not, but his grandfather was like him. But it is the greatest power in the world, my love, to feel things so intensely, and we will love you for it if you are like your father. And we shall accept you just as you are, and you will never ever be alone.”

Nestor drew in a rough breath because, in that moment, he realized that he had felt alone in the dark hall, watching his parents, and he wondered if his father felt alone too. But then as he looked again through the crack between the door and the jamb, and spotted his mother and his father, he realized his father was not alone.

Then, slowly, his grandmother stood and pushed the door open.

“There is someone here,” she said.

His father slowly turned to Nestor. There was a wildness in his look, an almost animalistic gaze. A look of pure horror crossed the Duke of Wesleigh’s face as he caught sight of his son and heir.

“I’m sorry, my boy. I’m sorry,” he rushed, his voice taut. “Did you hear all of that?”

Nestor nodded, but then he replied, “There is nothing to be sorry for, Papa. Grandmama has explained it all to me.”

“Has she?” he asked, choking on his emotion.

“Oh, yes. There is no need to be afraid,” he declared, straightening his shoulders. “It is what makes you, you, isn’t it? It is what makes you so loving and so wonderful and caring. Your...grander feelings. And she said if I am like that too, well, I shall never be alone. And you are not alone.”

His papa was shaking, and his mother, his wonderful mother, slipped her arms around his father.

“You see, my love?” she said.

The duke nodded, hugged her back, and then crossed quickly to his little boy and knelt down.

“I cannot change how I am,” he began swiftly, his dark eyes shining. “And I would not change anything about you for the world. So however we are, I will be there for you,” his father said, even as his powerful body seemed to shake.

Nestor looked up at his father, full of love. “And I shall be there for you.”

“We shall all be there for each other,” his mother said.

“As we always have,” his grandmother added without question.

Standing there, Nestor promised himself that he would not be afraid. He would never be afraid because he was the Duke of Westleigh’s son. He was his grandmother’s grandson. He was his mother’s child. He would never be afraid. Not of this. Not of

anything.

An entirely different part of England.

Some years later...

Lady Margery Barret danced about the salon. Oh, how she had loved the performance at the French princess's house in Cornwall. It had been a whole other world compared to the dreary old parties of England. Though she had been too young to attend, her mother and father, the duke and duchess, had wished her to meet the exiled royal.

The house had been the brightest, loveliest of great houses, simply reveling in its Frenchness.

Oh, she did love England, of course, but her mother and father were so staid, so determined that everything should be perfect and dignified, that nothing could ever sparkle and glow like a French princess's life did.

That strange but magnificent house she had visited, with its beautiful performance by French ballet dancers, had filled her with such joy. And now that she had come back to her rather joyless house, she felt the need to instill her own heart with happiness. And so, she leapt about, attempting to imitate the dancers she had watched.

How she had adored sitting in the audience, surrounded by beautifully dressed people, watching the dancers in their various costumes.

The temporary theatre in the great house had been gilded and magnificent, a feast for the senses! And so, Margery mimicked those dancers, longing with every fiber of her being to be one herself. Oh, she knew that she could never be a dancer. Such a wish

was perhaps foolish, but wasn't wishing always foolish? Wasn't it good to be a fool sometimes?

Surely, she was allowed to dare to have just a little bit of foolishness in her.

And as she pirouetted and twirled her skirts, swirling them about her legs, she smiled and caught a glance of herself in the room's long mirror framed with gold. She looked beautiful and she adored it. She beamed at herself and lifted her arms. Then she turned again as her ribbons flounced about her.

"Cease!" her governess cried from the doorway.

Margery's heart chilled, and ice slithered down her spine. All freedom slipped away from her at that single harsh word, and she stood still on the spot.

"Whatever are you doing?" Miss Brown demanded.

"Dancing," she said, her insides twisting with apprehension.

"That is not dancing."

"It is," she replied. "It is what I saw at the princess's house."

"This is not a French house." Miss Brown sniffed, striding forward, her pale hands clasped before her, her gray skirt swishing in the morning light.

The woman was the perfect picture of austerity and economy in all her movements. She was immensely dignified in her speech. It was why she had been chosen by Margery's mother to try to tame Margery's wild spirit, and her spirit? Well, in truth, it had been tamed for years, ever since she was quite small, but every now and then, a bit of that spirit would burst out.

She'd thought she was alone. How very silly of her to think as much. But despite her apparent silliness, she lifted her chin. "It makes me happy."

"Dancing like that makes you happy?" her governess challenged, as she made her way around the ornately upholstered chairs and beautifully polished tables.

Margery nodded.

"Then you are on the path to sin," Miss Brown replied most seriously.

She swallowed. "What do you mean?"

"Women who dance like that are sinners. This is not Versailles. Versailles fell due to its decadence. You are not French. You will not behave like the ladies of the French court. You are English, and you will remember it."

She flinched. How could she ever forget?

"I like how the French behave and how they dance," she said, daring to defy her governess for a moment, knowing that she might pay for it later.

The governess crossed to her slowly. "Then we must teach you how to dance properly."

"I don't want to be taught that," she snapped.

"What don't you want?" a voice called from the doorway.

If she had felt icy before, now she felt terror. Margery's mother was there in her beautiful silk gown, her hair coiled atop her head, and disdain dripping from every word.

She almost never saw her mother.

Much like her father, they were always out, always entertaining, always doing the work of a duke and a duchess. And the work of a duke and a duchess was not to raise a daughter. No, that work was given to an army of servants.

“Mama,” she rushed. “I—”

“Are you defying Miss Brown, girl?” her mother demanded coolly.

“No,” she denied.

“You are , and now you are a liar ,” her mother returned.

“I only wish—”

“It does not matter what you wish.” Her mother’s eyes narrowed and she pointed to herself. “It matters what I wish, what your father wishes, and you will do as you are told and behave as we see fit.”

Her mother arched a brow. “And Miss Brown is correct. You will not dance like a loose opera girl. We took you to meet the princess so that you could see a bit of culture and see what the world was like. The French court brought its own demise about with its vanity. Now, it seems we shall have to lock you up for a while, until you come to your senses, and I think the governess is right. We shall have to teach you how to dance properly . Get ready to do your minuet.”

“But...” Margery felt most confused. She loved the minuet. It was graceful and wonderful and made her feel free. She’d always loved dancing. She’d always excelled at it. How could this be a punishment?

So, warily she nodded and crossed to the large carpeted area before the imposing fireplace. Her governess crossed to the pianoforte, sat down, and began to play. And, as instructed, Margery began to dance her part of the minuet.

As always, it was easy and she felt light. She beamed as the joy of the quite demanding but beautiful dance slipped through her.

“Stop,” her mother ordered.

The governess stopped playing, and Margery stopped dancing.

Margery froze, confused. “What is it, Mama? Am I not dancing beautifully?”

Her mother’s look was cold. “ Too beautifully. With too much emotion. You dance as if you have sin in your soul, as if you were meant to be in the theatre. Well, you are not meant to be in the theatre. You are the daughter of a duke. No more smiling. No more emotion. Simply dance as if it is beneath you, as if this is merely something you must do, not something you enjoy.”

Margery swallowed, but she did enjoy dancing. She loved it with every part of her body. She started again, trying to be a bit more staid, but the music filled her soul and made her body feel as if it was soaring again as she made the pattern of the minuet.

“Stop,” her mother called more coldly than before.

And then she realized that this was her punishment.

Her mother made her start again and again and again, until she was nothing but a wooden doll going through the motions of the dance.

As the joy of the dance was sucked from her, tears stung her eyes and her body began

to ache. Her limbs hurt as she repeated the movements over and over until she danced, not like a living, loving girl, but like a dead thing, hitting each note, hitting each step perfunctorily.

The music came to an end, and she prayed that her mother would say they were done.

Her mother remained standing, unyielding, judging. “Better,” she called. “Do it again.”

Margery let out a cry. “Please, Mama. I wish to stop.”

“Not until you can show me that you can dance without becoming emotional. I don’t wish to see a single feeling cross your face. Not even now. Look at you! You are ruled by your emotions still. You must never let what you’re feeling cross your face. You must be cold because that is what it means to be a duchess. That is what it means to be a powerful woman, to take anything that is done to you and not let the world see how you feel, to not betray your inner life. And I do not wish to see a naive, foolish girl gamboling about the salon ever again, and I will certainly never see it upon a ballroom dance floor. Do you understand?”

No more feeling? No more passion? Not in life? And certainly not in dance? Could she do it?

Margery lifted her chin, blinked the tears out of her eyes, and said, “Yes, Mama. I understand.”

“Good. Now, dance again.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:02 pm

Lady Margery Barret had done a very unfortunate thing. She had fallen in love with Nestor Briarwood, Viscount Huxton, heir of the Duke of Westleigh.

It was extremely unfortunate for many, many reasons.

Nestor Briarwood was not yet twenty-one years of age and was destined to be a duke. He was also painfully handsome and beloved by all who were around him.

Such gentlemen did not marry young, and they did not marry ladies like her. Well, that wasn't exactly true. She had an extremely large fortune, and she was the sister of a duke herself. She was actually excellent marriage material, but Nestor Briarwood was an exceptional catch.

A veritable god, so to speak. So far above most mere mortals that they could only ever dream that he might take note of them.

There was no question about it.

He was an Adonis. All of London, not just the aristocrats, loved him, but no one expected him to marry for years. Possibly a decade.

And why should he?

He had no need. He had a twin brother. So there was no pressure to produce an heir, and gentlemen were not expected to marry at twenty years of age. Young ladies, on the other hand? That was a different story entirely.

At eighteen, she was in the full swing of her first Season. A Season that had suddenly gone in a very different direction than she had expected because she had been adopted by the Briarwoods. It had changed her life. Oh, not because her brother, Rufus, the Duke of Ferrars, had been a bad chaperone. Not at all. Her brother was a marvelous man, but both of them had been shaped by rather unpleasant parents and a life that had been absent of joy.

Now she'd been tossed into joy as if it was a pot of delicious jam, and she was swimming about in it, sticky and happy, and often slightly astounded by her situation and luck.

Yet she could not imagine Nestor Briarwood ever falling in love with her. As he sat atop his absolutely stunning stallion, the beautiful beast's black mane flying in the air, its sleek muscles glinting in the sun, she fought a sigh of pure bliss as she looked at Nestor.

For he too was sleek, muscled, and his dark hair flew in the wind.

The rider was as magnificent, if not more so, than his Arabian.

Now, the Briarwoods were all mad.

Everyone knew that.

Notorious, wild, crazed, fantastic. They were absolutely her favorite people in the whole world. And while she had not been born a Briarwood, she was now at least adjacent to the family because her brother had married one.

Said lady, Portia, stood beside her, looking ever so slightly queasy as her cousins raced around the backyard of Heron House.

She was two months with child and besieged by morning sickness that seemed to last all day. All the ladies in the house proclaimed this as good news, saying it meant the baby was very strong indeed.

Portia looked as if she was on one of her cousin Calchas's naval vessels in stormy seas, all the time. Green and exhausted but happy, Portia refused to give in. So, she had dragged Margery outside for fresh air and sunshine and to witness her cousins being absolute nincompoops, lest she feel too sorry for herself.

Or so said Portia. For Margery could never imagine her sister-in-law ever feeling sorry for herself.

The young Briarwood men were practicing martial activities, since several of the cousins were either in the Army or the Navy, and they had to keep their skills up after all. And the horses raced across the green, tearing up the grass in a way that would no doubt leave their aunts and grandmother clucking with frustration, for they did all love the gardens.

They would never censure the young men though, for all the aunts dearly wished to see the boys return safely home from the war with Napoleon. So any activity that would keep them safe would be approved of.

Margery loved the way Nestor Briarwood looked atop his horse, his white linen shirt open at the neck, his curly black hair flying about his face like a raven's wing. He was stunning and fully alive like no one else she knew.

And she let out a sigh of pleasure before she could stop herself. How she wished she could have him, but such a thing would likely be impossible. And so she would have to set her sights on someone entirely different.

Still, she could enjoy the view.

Portia linked arms with her. “Are you excited for the outdoor ball this evening?”

She nodded as she was expected to. “Of course. Of course,” she said.

But she was not. She did not enjoy balls. She did not enjoy dancing. She hadn’t in years. She was quite good at seeming as if she enjoyed balls, but she was never very enthusiastic about them. Long ago, she’d learned that the only appropriate response for a lady of her standing was to look vaguely pleased about the events transpiring. She was not allowed to look too excited.

After all, one must not appear overeager when one had the sort of power that she did, or at least that’s what she had been taught. And even after years of living free of her parents, it was hard to shed all that training.

Nestor Briarwood raced towards the straw dummy at the other side of the field. He lifted up his gleaming saber and prepared to bring it down in a piercing arc.

Her breath caught in her throat as he leaned forward, perching upon the stirrups, and sliced the saber clean through the dummy’s shoulder.

His cousins let out a cry of approval and took off, and then Nestor’s brother, Calchas, took off on his dappled gray stallion, following in his cousins’ wake.

Each young man, Maximus, Calchas, and Octavian, took turns flying down the course, taking different positions from which to attack the enemy .

Now, it was likely that Calchas, who was a Navy man, would never need such a thing atop a horse, but they were all excellent swordsmen.

Margery adored watching them practice, though she hated the fact that they would all be in danger. Except, of course, Nestor. He could not go fight on the Continent or on

a ship, not as the heir of a dukedom.

After they had passed several times, Nestor rode his stallion round, sheathed his saber, and jumped down from his horse.

A groomsman raced forward and took the animal, eager to walk the animal down and put the stallion away for the afternoon. Nestor thanked the boy, then crossed to the long table set out with lemonade and other light refreshments.

It seemed that at all Briarwood gatherings, whether they be formal or informal events, there must be something to be consumed and enjoyed.

He poured himself a large glass of lemonade from a cut crystal pitcher, lifted it to his lush lips, and began to drink.

Margery watched, agog. He was indeed like a god. He drank the liquid greedily. His face transformed with bliss, and his black lashes were crescents upon his hard cheeks. His throat worked as he swallowed, and then he drove a hand through his tousled, damp hair and crossed to them.

“Good afternoon, ladies. Being lazy, are we?”

“Lazy?” Portia called before patting her still slender middle. “How can you say such a thing of my industrious self? I am making a person.” Portia pursed her lips. “And Margery here? It is hard work watching all of you acting like silly nitwits.”

“Silly nitwits?” Nestor echoed.

“Yes,” she said. “Racing up and down, trying to stick a sword into a bit of straw.”

“I personally find it quite fascinating,” Margery said, clearing her throat, knowing

that it was perfectly acceptable to offer dissenting opinions here. Though she still found it difficult after years of being trained to be either silent or biddable.

“Of course you do. Even I do,” Portia said with a laugh. “But you must learn to tease them. It will do them no good to praise them. They get praised far too often. They need someone like me to keep them in their place,” Portia said, her lips twitching with mirth.

Margery let out a self-conscious laugh, for her laugh was a bit odd. She couldn’t even imagine beginning to try to put the Briarwood cousins into their place.

Then Nestor turned his dark, captivating gaze towards her. “Do you have a few moments, Margery?” he asked.

She swallowed. Moments? For him? “I suppose I do. What are you in need of?” she asked.

“I need to practice my waltz.” He leaned down towards her and whispered conspiratorially, “Apparently, I’m not in very good form.”

Her breath froze in her throat, and for a moment, she was certain that she would never be able to make a reply.

At last, lest she seem a dolt, she forced a smile and replied, “Oh, I’m sure Portia is a much better dancer.”

“No, she’s not. I’ve seen you dance,” he returned.

“Steady on,” Portia tsked. But then she stroked her stomach and looked even greener. “The outside has done me good, but the idea of turning in circles to the count of one, two, three is most dismaying. And you are better than me, Margery.”

“You see,” Nestor enthused. “I think you could get me back into line in but a few moments.”

Get him in line? She, Margery Barret?

Her heart began to beat wildly against her ribs. He wanted to dance with her . He wanted her to teach him how to dance the waltz properly. Surely, that made no sense. She was a perfunctory dancer. She was not...

“Come now,” Portia encouraged. “He could use your skill, lest he keep dancing about like a stick.”

“I say, I’m not that bad,” Nestor quipped.

Portia arched a brow.

“And then she shall teach me,” Calchas announced as he strode up to them.

“Yes, and me,” Maximus said as he joined them.

And then Octavian, Maximus’s twin, stated, “We shall all form a line. You can instruct us one by one on how to match the music as perfectly as you do.”

Nestor put a hand over his heart. “You are the only one in the family who can dance the waltz properly.”

Margery swung her glance from tall man to tall man. They were all exquisitely perfect specimens. She was the only one in the Briarwood family who could do the waltz properly? It was absolute nonsense.

She snorted, then sucked in a shocked gasp at her own behavior. She drew in a quick

breath and rushed, “You are all ridiculous, and I am beginning to fear you are making fun of me.”

Nestor locked gazes with her, those dark eyes softening to an almost amber hue. “We would never make fun of you, Margery. We know that you have not been raised to banter and, therefore, we shall not tease you mercilessly. Not yet. Not until you can tease us mercilessly in turn.”

Her heart skipped a beat at that. She longed for him to tease her so. She wanted to be able to tease him back too, but she had no idea how.

He stretched out his large hand to her. “Come. Come,” he said. “Teach me.”

She glanced around, taking in the formal walled gardens and the long patch of green leading to the woods, and exclaimed, “Here?”

“Is there any better place to do it than out here in the summer air, where the ball shall take place this night?”

Soon, a host of servants would descend to transform the gardens.

The cousins, sensing that they would have to wait their turn and were clearly parched, sauntered to the table, pouring themselves lemonades.

Portia abandoned her and headed over to them.

Though she loved to be with Nestor, she nearly yelped at being so alone with him, for it was no easy thing to hide her love for him.

Nestor looked down at her. “Am I so very appalling?”

“Not appalling at all,” she returned, her voice a little higher than usual.

He smiled at her. “Good. Glad to hear you can stand me just a little. I can’t get it quite right, you know, the turns. And I don’t want to be accused of getting a lady too close to me. Mustn’t cause a scandal.”

“I thought the Briarwoods specialized in scandal,” she breathed.

“Not with unmarried ladies,” he returned. “I will not be getting anyone into trouble this Season. Or any at all, if I can manage it.”

“Will you not?” she whispered, unable to imagine what trouble with Nestor might be like. How wonderful it could be. Though she could never allow such a thing. Not with her upbringing.

He tilted his head down. “Whatever are you thinking about, Margery?” he asked. “Your cheeks have gone the same shade of pink as the roses in Grandmama’s favorite walled garden.”

She blinked and had to stop herself from raising her hands to her hot cheeks. “I’m thinking about how best to teach.”

“Good.” And he stuck his hand out towards her again, though this time more slowly, as if time might stop for them and them alone.

Margery slipped her hand into his, and he led her out across the lawn.

He chose a quiet spot in one of the gardens surrounded by roses and flowers.

And then, instead of allowing her own instincts to teach him, she remembered all the dancing master’s instructions.

She lifted her chin, shoved all passion aside, and said, “Are you ready? Let us count.”

“I don’t wish to count,” he murmured, his hair teasing his brow most playfully. “I wish to feel it. For the waltz is done through feeling, is it not?”

She blinked, trying not to flinch, though a long-repressed part of her ached to sway, full of feeling with him. “No,” she corrected. “If you wish to do it well, you must feel nothing.”

“Feel nothing?” he countered. “Well, then I shall be very terrible at it indeed. And you are a liar ,” he said.

She gasped. “What?”

“A liar , Lady Margery,” he said softly, his lips curling in a dangerously tempting smile. “For I can see it in every ounce of your body, whether you are willing to admit it or not. When you dance, you feel the music like no one else does, and I want you to teach me that .”

What should have been a compliment crashed down upon her, causing a wave of panic to throttle through her stomach and into her throat.

Suddenly, she could not think or breathe.

“Margery?” he prompted, his face changing, his jaw tensing with alarm.

“I... I don’t feel well. You have seen something that you have imagined, my lord. A Briarwood trait, I think.”

And before her mother’s voice could begin to build in her head, she took a step back and turned from the man she loved with all her heart, walking swiftly through the

perfect summer garden. And she did not fear that she might cry.

For she never cried. Not even when her heart was breaking.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:02 pm

Some days, Lord Nestor Briarwood, Viscount Huxton, eldest son and heir of the Duke of Westleigh, felt mad.

Some days, he even acted as if he were mad.

After all, if he was honest, like his father, there were days when he was a trifle mad, a wee bit unhinged. Adrift, as it were, from the commonplace actions of all of society. But he did not recriminate himself for it. No. He loved it about himself.

He had found out quite early in life that he was different, quite odd and unusual. Again, he loved this about himself. While some people might berate and shame their souls over such a difference, he had been raised with such love and acceptance and encouragement that he had no fears about the sort of person he was on certain days. His father still did struggle, sometimes needing to go down to the country when his slightly mad and unhinged days came.

But once those days were done, his father returned in perfectly good health, ready to face the world and change it, as all Briarwoods wished to do. Nestor was no different. But he, well, he had decided that instead of trying to hide away when he felt mad, he would face it head-on. And he was certainly supported by an army of cousins at his back, ensuring that even when he acted his most odd, well, he was protected.

It was the greatest thing about being a Briarwood, the protection and the ability to do what one wanted. As the eldest son of a duke, well, what couldn't he do? Except he had such care for society that he found himself not wanting to do wild things at all. Rather, he wished to improve the lives of those around him.

And Lady Margery was such a person whose life he wished to improve. He did not want to change or alter her. Oh no!

He did not think she needed righting. She needed aid.

He saw that her soul had been so diminished over the years, crushed by unkind parents, that he longed to lift her up out of the mire and polish away all the dreary cruelty which had dimmed her. He longed to shine the light of the Briarwoods upon her and...help her own light shine from within her.

He'd seen it the moment he'd spotted her, when her brother had come to court his cousin Portia. Something had lit in him when he'd spotted Margery. The deep desire to make her happy had seized him with undeniable and inarguable force.

But now as he stood opposite her outside of Heron House, he realized he had possibly miscalculated in his wish to assist her. She was eyeing him with great trepidation. As a matter of fact, her entire face had changed wildly in but a few moments. She had gone from appearing rather eager to assist him in learning how to dance, which was what he had wanted, to looking as if he was a shrieking demon straight from the depths of hell. And not the kind that ladies seemed to love in romantic novels.

It was all going quite off plan.

He'd wished her to feel validated, capable, important. He'd wanted to highlight one of her great skills—dancing—and show her how he had noticed it.

But he'd said something deeply amiss. Perhaps it had been the comment about passion. He often forgot that what was normal for a Briarwood was not at all normal for others. And, well, despite her brother's union with Portia, Margery was still, in the minds of most, an other. The truth was that she had been brought into the family, and she seemed to love it. But whatever he'd said had caused her face to become

grim with apprehension.

As a matter of fact, she did a quick curtsy, pivoted on her heel, and mumbled some words he could not quite take in because he was so stunned. Something about his imagination.

And then she left him, racing across the grass at a speed that shocked him and would have been the envy of any horse at Newmarket.

“Good God, man. What did you say to her?” his twin brother Calchas asked as he sauntered up beside Nestor, his golden epaulets shining in the sun.

Nestor scowled, thinking back. “Well, roughly, I simply told her that she was a marvelous dancer and that I didn’t want to learn dancing from counting the beats. I wanted to dance with the same sort of verve and passion that she does.”

His cousin Maximus, who had been born Marcus but used his second name because he was the eldest cousin of them all and because he lived life larger than most, strode up to him, clapped him on the back, and declared, “Bloody hell, I’ve never seen anyone make a lady run for the hills quite so excellently. What the devil did you do?”

“Exactly!” Calchas declared. “That’s what I asked him. And he said that he mentioned her passion.”

Maximus let out a groan. “Oh, badly done. Badly done, old boy. You never tell a lady who’s unwed and virginal that she’s passionate.”

“You don’t?” Nestor asked, perplexed.

Maximus gave a shake of his dark-haired head. Nestor’s older cousin, though only by about a year, did have a great deal of experience with the ladies. He was fast

becoming a rake, living hard when home from battle.

His cousin Octavian joined them, tugging at his shirt sleeves, eyeing the young lady who was now in the shadow of the house. “I’ve never seen a flight so fast. You didn’t tell her about your frustrations around MacBeth, did you? It’s exhausting, that.”

Nestor scowled. He did have a pet theory about the Scottish play, but he did not share it because people got quite funny about witchcraft. But the truth was he would never forgive Shakespeare for writing such horrific anti-witch material in a time when normal people, especially women, were being killed as suspected witches.

For such a brilliant playwright, it had been terribly irresponsible of him.

Nestor rolled his eyes. “My opinions about MacBeth are far superior to your claims about Hamlet —”

“My theories about Hamlet are perfectly sound. I—”

Maximus let out a bleat of alarm. “We are not starting a debate about the Bard. We can do that later with Grandmama present, and she can decide who is right.”

Octavian scowled. “Just because she has performed in every Shakespeare play doesn’t mean she is always—”

“Grandmama is always right, you dolt,” cut in Calchas.

Octavian sighed. “Yes. She is. I just wish that sometimes she’d let us do Hamlet.”

Nestor laughed. “Never. Unless we let her play Hamlet. She never got over the fact that she couldn’t have that role.”

Maximus blinked. “We are not discussing Hamlet , MacBeth , future family performances, or Grandmama. We are dissecting how Nestor drove Margery away.”

Octavian nodded his dark head enthusiastically. “Right. Exactly.”

Calchas arched a dark brow and contemplated his twin brother. “Nestor, you don’t usually drive the ladies away. They usually flock to you.”

“Well, she’s different,” Nestor pointed out.

“Well, that’s obvious,” said Maximus. “Otherwise, you wouldn’t be interested in her. So when are you going to marry her?”

“What?” Nestor popped out.

“That is what you’re going to do, isn’t it?” Calchas asked, eyeing him carefully.

“I’m not old enough to get married,” Nestor blurted.

Maximus stared at him, started blinking, and let out a booming laugh. “Oh, do you need to go back to the nursery then?”

“Should we call for the nursemaid and the governess?” Octavian teased.

“He needs skirts again and leading strings, I tell you. Alas, he has not yet become a man,” added Calchas.

“Stop that,” Nestor said, feeling a bit befuddled. Could he marry? He could. But it had never occurred to him. Ladies were launched on the marriage mart quite early, but men were never officially launched, so to speak... Not in the search for a wife.

Had he found his? Already?

“It’s clear to us that you like her,” Maximus said, smiling.

Octavian shook his head dramatically. “If you don’t marry her this Season, man, someone else will.”

He blinked. Then he blinked again. The statement rattled through him, as strong as one of the punches of the famous fighting legend, Hartigan Mulvaney.

“Oh, God,” Nestor groaned. “You are right.”

“Of course we are,” Maximus said. “Briarwoods are always right. You, on the other hand, need to be dragged into reality. It’s quite obvious you are smitten with her.”

Any other family would be telling the heir of a dukedom to wait a good decade. And the fact was a man like him was not expected to marry until he’d sown his wild oats, gone off to the Continent for years, and done all sorts of things. The truth was going to the Continent now was almost impossible. Napoleon was making life there hell on earth. And the Briarwoods were very fortunate that Maximus, Octavian, and Calchas were home at all. It was very odd that the three of them had managed to have a leave together, but they were here, and Nestor was grateful.

“Marriage,” he breathed, the idea taking root. And the more he thought about it, the more he liked it. Briarwoods loved marriage! Why would he be any different? He would just get there first, before his male cousins. Being first could be quite appealing! “What an excellent idea.”

Octavian waggled his brows. “We only have excellent ideas.”

“Frankly,” Calchas observed, “I’m shocked that you’re not the one who suggested it.

The idea must have not yet come to fruition in your brain, but we see the way you are with her. You'll be very upset if she marries someone else."

"I will marry her," he exclaimed. The truth was he hadn't even thought about that. But now that it was in his head, the idea of Margery— his Margery, the lady he planned to make happy—in the arms of some oaf, who would likely only make her life even drearier and wouldn't understand her, appalled him. "And you know why?"

Maximus cocked his head to the side and considered him. "Why?"

"Because," Nestor began, "if she marries someone else, they're going to make her miserable. She'll never be fully herself. She needs someone like me. To make her happy."

"Very arrogant," Calchas drawled before his eyes danced. "I like it."

"Life should be lived confidently," added Octavian.

Maximus nodded. "Ladies like Lady Margery need a Briarwood. It's true. If she marries anyone else, she'll never break entirely out of that shell."

And it was true.

Lady Margery had already emerged a bit from the quite extensive walls of protection that she had put up as a girl. But she needed to be totally freed.

When she'd come to Heron House to stay and come under the protection and education of his grandmother and his aunt, Lady Juliet? Well, it had been a very good thing for her. Her brother, the Duke of Ferrars, was an excellent fellow, but the man had been terribly scarred as a child. And though he had done everything he could for his sister, both of them had been deeply, deeply hurt by the cruelty and strictness of

their parents.

How Nestor wanted to soothe that hurt from Lady Margery. How he wanted to lift her spirits and show her how beautiful the world could be. How beautiful she was, and not just in face, but in spirit.

He knew that she did not think she was beautiful at all. No doubt, years of being molded by a mother who did not care for her, and a host of servants who had no wish to protect her from a duchess or a duke, for that matter, had led her to believe that she, as a person, was not important. No, Margery had been taught to believe she had one purpose. To make a great family alliance and unite her wealth with another's powerful title.

Many gentlemen were pursuing her, but her brother had denied them all because her brother had, under the influence of his wife, decided that his sister deserved far more than a dutiful marriage.

He was bloody grateful to Ferrars that he hadn't let the first earl with a fortune marry Margery.

Nestor wanted to show Margery that she was marvelous and interesting without her wealth and title, and she didn't have to just be a vessel to carry on a family line. But he wasn't entirely certain how to go about it. He'd thought he'd been doing a good job. He'd always made certain she had a glass of lemonade or a slice of cake or a pink macaron. But now, he'd discovered that asking her to dance and teach him had been quite a mistake.

He ground his teeth. "I think I'm going to have to come up with a new strategy."

Calchas's eyes widened. "You? Change your strategy?"

Octavian let out a cheer.

Maximus smiled a wicked smile. “Excellent. Let us come up with a battle plan.”

“Oh, I’m not interested in winning a battle,” said Nestor.

“No?” Octavian asked, quite disappointed.

Nestor smiled slowly, beginning to understand the next great adventure of his life had already begun. “No. If we’re talking in those terms, I’m interested in winning the whole war. I clearly just lost the battle. So, let’s assess. What is the best way to win her?”

“Win who?” his cousin Portia asked as she crossed over to them, sucking in a long breath of air, as if to steady her nerves. She looked a bit green. She was with child. And those first months, as he’d been told by his aunts and his mother, were rather tricky. And Portia seemed to be negotiating it fairly well, but she had to spend most of her time outside, often in a chair, and often on the verge of casting up her accounts.

He and Portia had played like wild things all their childhood, and he was rather amazed at how different it was for her as a woman. But she was strong and wonderful. And he thought her a wonder.

“How do I win Margery?” he asked honestly, for the cousins did not keep secrets.

Her eyes lit with joy, and she clapped her hands together. “Oh, good. Finally, you’ve come to your senses. You are going to woo her, aren’t you?”

“Portia?” he exclaimed. “Is everyone aware that I—”

“Well, the whole family hoped .” Portia laughed. “We saw the way you were with

her. The moment you saw her, you took her under your wing, as if you could shield her from any unkindness.”

He gaped. “Is everybody watching me all the time?”

“Of course,” Maximus said. “You are the heir to the dukedom.”

He ground his teeth. “Is that the only reason?”

His twin pounded him on the back. “Don’t be absurd. Of course not. First, you’re family. Second, you are great fun to watch, Nestor. You’re the oddest of us all, and we never know what you’re about to do.”

He laughed at that, which turned into a half-groan. “Glad to provide entertainment.”

And he did take it in such a way. He didn’t take offense that he was slightly unpredictable. It was what made him great at things. It was what made his father great at things too.

And he would never apologize for that.

Now, he would just have to use his unpredictability to win Lady Margery over.

If admiration for her passion wasn’t the way to convince her, what was?

He turned to Portia, who knew Lady Margery very well. “And what way do you suggest?”

“Honestly?” she asked, pursing her lips.

“Honestly,” Nestor repeated.

“Just tell her the truth.” Portia leaned towards him and gave him a cheeky wink.

“I know our family is honest, but that’s far too simple,” Maximus said, scowling.

“No, it’s not,” Portia countered. “Men always overcomplicate it. Sometimes the simplest way is the best. No need for elaborate plans. Nestor, just tell her you wish to marry her. And then she’ll say yes.”

Nestor cleared his throat. “Are you sure?”

Portia wagged her brows. “Oh yes, very.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:02 pm

Margery paced the beautifully appointed long salon, shaking her hands and trying to make herself composed again. She was not succeeding.

How she adored Lord Huxton! Adored. It was a ridiculous word. She loved him. There was no getting around it. How he made her feel was wonderful. And the fact that she had abandoned him so quickly when he'd asked her to teach him to dance the way he hoped?

It sent the most terrible waves of apprehension through her.

She forced herself to stop in the center of the long room, with its elaborate ceiling and striped silk furnishings, and draw in a breath through her nose. But it went out so shakily, she was forced to start pacing again.

What a fool she had been. She had missed her opportunity to be in his arms, to dance with him outside in the beautiful garden, in the summer air with the scent of flowers wafting around them.

Surely, that was every girl's secret wish. To be in Nestor Briarwood's arms with flower petals floating about like in a dream.

In theory, she had never experienced anything so romantic in her life. It didn't matter that he didn't think of her that way. Of course he didn't. No gentleman like Nestor would ever think of her in such romantic tones.

She was for practical, powerful, important things. Not romance.

She had high hopes for a man with a title and an extensive fortune and a lot of land. A man who wasn't terrible.

It was the most she hoped for, though her brother, Rufus, was encouraging her to pick a man she liked or to delay marriage until she did. She appreciated this, but she'd never find the love that Rufus had with Portia.

Their mother had removed it from her, like a surgeon with a blade.

Except... Except once upon a time, when she had come to Heron House, the Briarwood family had urged her to envision the sort of man that she actually wanted. And when she had cited all the details of what she secretly longed for, she had cited all of Lord Huxton's characteristics. That was the truth of it.

It was as if she had painted him out of the air.

To their credit, they had not laughed at her, though it was astonishing to think that she could have someone like that. Perhaps she could in her dreams. And oh, how she had dreamed of him every night. It was ridiculous.

"My dear?" a voice said from the doorway. "You look most pensive."

She jumped and spotted Lord Huxton's grandmother, the Dowager Duchess of Westleigh.

"Oh, forgive me, Your Grace. I was lost in thought."

"You didn't appear lost," the dowager replied ruefully, lace dripping from her cuffs as she gestured towards her. "You seemed most driven. You've been wearing a hole in the carpet pacing up and down."

“Have I?” she exclaimed. “Do forgive me. I...”

“No, my dear. No,” the dowager tsked. “We don’t need to forgive you for anything. As a matter of fact, I like seeing so much emotion in you, even if it is agitation. I fear that you often suppress it. And you know, my dear, that will make you quite ill.”

“Will it?” she gasped, folding her hands together, worrying them slightly. “I was always told by my governess and my mama how incredibly important it was to be composed at all times.”

“Ha!” the dowager exclaimed, all but sailing towards her, her gorgeous gown shimmering a cool mint green in the summer air drifting through the house. Warm light poured through the tall paned windows, causing the dowager’s jewels and silver hair to glow. “I knew your mother. Bless her. She was not a very happy person, and all that suppression of emotion did the most terrible things to her countenance. It often looked as if she had been sucking upon lemons. I know I shouldn’t speak ill of the dead, but I think we should be truthful about the situation.”

Margery coughed, shocked. “I beg your pardon?”

“I’m sorry. Have I given you offense?”

“Oh no, not at all,” she rushed, finding the truth to be oddly refreshing. “It’s just no one has ever said such a thing about my mother, as if her... Well, as if all of her virtues were not virtues at all. But...”

The dowager let out a rather dismayed sigh. “Your mother was a martyr to your father. She did everything she could to please him and failed every day because your father could not be pleased.”

She blinked. “You really are quite blunt, Your Grace.”

“I know. It is one of the greatest attributes of being a dowager duchess. A woman of my advanced years, having grown up in the East End, and, of course, having married the man that I did, made it possible to be... Well, me. My husband, the duke, adored me just the way I am and asked of me that I stay the way I am.” She gave a little shrug of her shoulder as her lips curved in a smile. “So I am blunt. I speak the truth, and I revel in my own personality.”

The dowager duchess did revel in her own personality, and everyone seemed to adore her for it.

So why couldn't Margery? The truth was she didn't really know who she'd be or even who she truly was. She closed her eyes for a moment, and for that single moment, she recalled the ballet, the dancers, and their beautiful costumes as they traced gracefully across the stage. Oh, how that had transformed her and made her so happy. She'd longed to appear as if she was floating through the air too.

“My dear, where have you gone?”

She shook her head. “Oh, forgive me. I... Well, I was recalling a memory, you see.”

“It appeared to be a pleasant one.”

“It was a pleasant one,” Margery admitted.

The dowager cocked her elaborately coiffed head to the side. “And what was it?”

“Do you mind if I don't tell you? Part of the memory... What happened later was not pleasant.”

“Of course you don't have to tell me, but I think that your brother has done such a wonderful job of letting go of the past that it is time you do the same.”

“I thought I had,” she said softly, her heart sinking.

The dowager duchess tsked. “Oh no, my dear. You’ve just begun your journey there, and that’s quite all right. We can’t do it all at once, you know? Or can we?” the dowager duchess queried with a wicked grin as she took Margery’s hands in hers. “We are here for you. You are as one with the family.”

“Thank you,” she said. “I have felt happier here than I have in all my life.”

And it was the truth. As much as she loved her brother, Rufus, because he had done the very best he could when their parents died to give her some affection and kindness, their lives had been terribly cold and austere. It had not mattered that they’d had more wealth than anyone could ever hope to have, and more power too. They had not known how to enjoy life, and she was learning that now bit by bit, day by day.

But the truth was that her memory, that longing to dance and then the subsequent consequence of it with her governess and her mother? That was what had caused her to feel so awful when Nestor had told her he loved her passion when she danced.

Her mother had called her a liar.

Then, though teasing, Nestor had said liar ... And combined with his suggestion that she danced with feeling?

She had tried so hard to eradicate any sort of feeling when she danced. Had she failed so terribly? Had she not learned her lesson?

And then it suddenly occurred to her that if she had not learned it, that was a good thing.

Margery lifted her chin. Her mother and her governess had not crushed her spirit.

“Oh, good heaven,” the dowager exclaimed, squeezing Margery’s hands. “My dear, in but moments, you have had quite a transformation. Your face! You have gone from looking quite aghast to suddenly looking as if you are free. Has a miracle occurred? Have you let go of the past in an instant? Most never can, but are you freeing yourself?”

“I don’t know,” she rushed simply. “But the truth is I realized something.”

“And what is that?”

Margery swallowed, then gathered her courage. “I should like to learn how to dance.”

The dowager duchess laughed. “My dear, you dance beautifully.”

“Thank you. That is what Lord Huxton told me.”

“Did he?” the dowager duchess asked, her eyes twinkling.

“Yes, but then he suggested that I danced with passion, and it made me feel terrible.”

“Oh dear. Why ever so?”

She huffed out a breath and pulled her hands back gently. “Because ladies like myself are not supposed to feel emotion or passion when they dance. We are supposed to be quite methodical and feel nothing.”

“Ridiculous,” the dowager duchess said.

Margery squared her shoulders. “I agree. I will not allow my mother nor my governess to control me anymore.”

“My dear, I salute you,” crowed the dowager. “Living with us Briarwoods has truly unleashed something in you. We shall engage a dancing master at once, though I think you could teach him.”

“Not just any sort of dancing master,” she blurted.

“Oh?” the dowager duchess asked, her brows rising.

“A ballet dancer.”

The dowager duchess coughed. “A ballet dancer?”

“Yes, please.”

“Of course,” the dowager duchess said without hesitation. “I think it’s an excellent idea. Perhaps the whole family shall take up ballet. After all, the vast majority of us already put on performances of Shakespeare. Why not add a bit of ballet? Versailles adored it. Though I confess, I do sometimes find some of the rather slow movements slightly boring. What with my attention? I must be distracted quite frequently.”

Margery let out a laugh. “Well, then we shall just have to wear excellent costumes. And they shall keep you present.”

The dowager duchess cocked her head to the side. “My dear, better and better. You are very wise. I adore this for you. Ballet dancers must have had a very profound impact on you. We English do not hold it in as high esteem as the French court did.”

“I saw a performance at an exiled princess’s house once, and it made me happier than I have ever known. And when I was small, dancing made me happier than anything else. But then I had to push it all aside, and Nestor, well, he made me feel...”

“Yes?” the dowager prompted.

“It doesn’t matter. He is not looking for a wife,” she said quickly. “I know you’ll find me a very good husband this Season. I’m very, very grateful for it.”

The dowager duchess looked at her for a long moment as if she wished to say something, but she did not. And then, after a moment, she said, “My dear, I shall find you exactly who you require. As a matter of fact, the whole family will.”

She sucked in a breath. “I’m so grateful to have you.”

The dowager duchess linked arms with her. “I’m grateful to have you, my dear. As a matter of fact, so grateful that I don’t think I’m ever going to let you go.”

Margery let out a laugh. “You shall have to. I shall have to marry one day.”

The duchess smiled a smile that showed the beauty of her heart and the mischief of her soul. “Yes, you shall.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:02 pm

The Duke of Westleigh hurled a dagger across the room with lightning speed and precision.

The blade planted itself dead in the center of the target, vibrating as it came to rest. And the duke stood, his feet perfectly placed apart, his shoulders pulled back under a dark linen shirt, his head tilted up, and his entire body crackling with satisfaction.

“Is this an unfortunate moment?” Nestor asked from the doorway, knowing that his father always had time for his sons, or any member of his family, for that matter. But he couldn’t help adding, “Will you be killing anyone I know?”

His father drew in a deep breath, swung his gaze to Nestor, and his eyes, which danced with intelligence, caught sight of him. Those dark eyes transformed from hard obsidian fraught with frustration to ebony full of warmth and excitement. “My son, do come in.”

Nestor strode into the study, the very room where he had witnessed his father having an episode all those years ago. The memory was still as vivid as if it had happened yesterday, but there was nothing about it that upset him.

No, it still empowered him.

“Will you have a cup of tea with me?” his father asked.

“Of course, Papa. What are you drinking today?”

“Need you ask? Green tea, of course!”

His father had become a connoisseur of teas, drinking the beverage imported from many different parts of the world. At present, he was particularly in love with a fine green tea. He said it made him feel calm and well.

His father went to the silver teapot over by the fire, took up a strainer, and began to pour out.

Now, some might have found it an incongruous image, the mighty Duke of Westleigh with his Herculean shoulders and raven-black hair pouring out tea. But Nestor was so accustomed to it that he waited for his cup eagerly. His father was a master at pouring tea, far better now than Grandmama or even his mother.

The duke extended a simple black porcelain cup painted with gold and blue flowers. It was a bit ominous, that cup, like a summer storm. But so could his father be, so Nestor felt he could be too.

Nestor took the cup and saucer easily, eager for this conversation, and yet... His stomach hummed with nerves. What would he say?

“Now, my boy, what can I help you with?” his father asked as he busied himself in pouring out his own cup.

Nestor drew himself up and replied confidently, “I’m getting married.”

The duke tensed for a moment, but then he swung back to his son and exclaimed, “How marvelous. To whom?”

“Oh, Papa,” he observed, both relieved and full of love for the father who had guided him from boyhood to manhood, “you know that you are a singular fellow, don’t you?”

“I do. It is sometimes trying and other times liberating. But why do you say that in this moment?”

“Because you don’t protest. You don’t get upset. You don’t ask why I didn’t beg for your permission.”

His father crossed to the crackling fire, and despite the warm summer evening, he paused before the flames, clearly enjoying the heat.

“Why in God’s name would I do that? You are my son, and I trust you implicitly,” his father said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “You’d never ask someone to marry you who would make you miserable or the family unhappy, so I offer you my felicitations. Now, again, may I know the name of the lady?”

His father waggled his brows, and for a moment Nestor was certain that his father knew his answer but was being polite.

“You already know, don’t you?”

His father stared enigmatically. “Well, perhaps I have considered a name,” he replied, his lips curling in a smile, “but I could be completely mistaken.” The duke’s eyes grew merry, then his smile turned rueful. “Now, my mother and my wife, your mother, seem to have some ideas about a lady they think you favor, and they are usually never wrong. Still, I’d like to hear you say her name.”

Nestor could not stop his own smile from spreading across his lips. “Lady Margery.”

“Brilliant, my boy. Brilliant,” his father all but crowed in that booming, intense voice he had. “She is an excellent choice. She already fits in quite well with the family, and she’ll only grow in confidence and courage over the years with you and the rest of us by her side.”

A wave of relief traveled through Nestor as he realized he would meet no resistance. “That’s what I thought too,” Nestor agreed.

“Shall we sit before the fire?” his father asked. “Would you like to discuss it?”

“No,” Nestor said honestly. “I have too much energy. I am full to the brim now with excitement at your approval.”

“Good!” his father replied, his face full of pride. “I don’t feel like sitting, in truth, but thought you might prefer to discuss such details like two old parliamentarians.”

Nestor laughed. “You will never be an old parliamentarian negotiating before the fire.”

“I pray not,” his father said softly. “As it is, I have spent too much time sitting at my desk today, going over bills, wondering how I’m going to refrain from strangling several of the lords who have determined that our recent laws around slavery are a mistake. I don’t really understand those people, but money will make people do the worst of all possible things, no matter how much they have of it.”

“And yet,” Nestor returned, “money can also be the most glorious thing, can’t it, Papa? Look at what you do with it.”

His father nodded again. “Very wise, Nestor. It is all about what one does with money. We’ll never run out of it, you know, because we love it so well. And we take care of it and aren’t terrified to lose it... For we will not try to keep it or make it at any cost.”

“And we know what to do with it,” Nestor put in.

“Exactly. Well said,” his father praised before he took another drink of tea, looking as

if the day's stresses were slipping away with every moment of their conversation.

Nestor loved that he helped his father relax, that their time together wasn't a burden. He knew so many young lords who did not give a damn about their fathers. And fathers who only cared about their sons for the line they carried on.

His father looked to the dagger still embedded in the target on the wall and sighed. "Once I have dealt with the idiots who long for slavery, I shall turn on those fellows who insist that children and women go down the mines and work for paltry wages. It is an ever-going battle, and I don't know if it shall ever be won."

"But we must continue to try," Nestor said. "We cannot give up."

"Exactly, my boy. No doubt you shall take up the mantle of the fight when I am long gone from the world."

"Please don't say that," Nestor urged, his hand tightening on the fragile cup.

"Say what?" his father returned. "The truth? It is the truth, and one day it will be time, just as I took up the mantle from my father. None of us wishes to lose our fathers, Nestor, when the father is good. The death of a father has quite the impact. Sometimes, when a man has a brutal father, it has a terrible and lasting effect."

"Like Rufus?" Nestor queried, hating this talk of death but knowing his father was right.

His father's hard face softened with sympathy. "Yes, like Rufus, but now he has us. Lady Margery has us. So there are no concerns on that point. I say you two marry this summer."

"You're not going to suggest we wait?" Nestor rushed.

“Why would you wait?” his father countered. “I don’t believe in waiting. If you have a good idea, you should engage and act upon it.”

Nestor cleared his throat. He shouldn’t have been surprised. “I thought perhaps…”

“Yes?” his father prompted as he finished his tea and put the cup down. “That was just what I needed. And your company too.”

His father’s brow furrowed, and he pointed to Nestor’s cup. “You take a drink, boy. You look a bit tense.”

Nestor took a drink of his tea, then asked, “Do I?”

He gazed about the room. He’d never hesitated in telling his father anything. Why would now be any different?

“Are you worried that I was going to censure you or berate you for knowing your own mind?”

A deep laugh tumbled past Nestor’s lips. “When you put it like that, my fears sound ridiculous.”

“Fears often are. What concerns you?”

“Some might say I am being impetuous or passionate.”

“Good,” his father intoned, growing serious. “Passionate is wonderful. Sometimes impetuous is even better. I have seen so many men throw their lives away, thinking about what they should do rather than doing anything at all.”

To waste a life only thinking of what one would do, never doing it, seemed a tragedy.

And Nestor would never let that befall him.

“Now that that concern is assuaged. Why else do you think I might delay you? Is there something wrong with the lady?”

“Of course not,” Nestor returned swiftly. “She is only to be admired.”

“Then there is no need to hesitate,” his father said with easy finality, as if the matter was now done. “I would rather you were happy now than wait for ten years because society says a young man should sow his oats and see the world. If you have found your lady, do not let her go. But I will ask... What is the matter?”

Nestor hesitated.

“Oh dear, here is the first rub,” his father observed. “You already have my approval, but tell me why you want to marry her?”

Nestor hesitated again, part of him unwilling to put the truth out into the world. “When I saw her, I knew I had to have her and not because of lust. There was something in her that spoke to me, something I knew that I had to soothe, something that I knew I was to play a role in. I could see she had a sorrow that is my role alone to fix.”

His father gave him an odd look then. “There you must be careful, my boy, because no one wishes to be fixed. Is that all you want her for, to fix her?”

“Of course not,” Nestor protested, realizing how terrible that might sound, “but I long to see her happy.”

“Ah, another rub,” the duke sighed. “You must be careful. If you are basing this marriage on changing her, then I fear for you. She may never change, you know.”

Nestor frowned. His father had to be wrong. With the right and proper care, Margery would blossom and be happy, and he would be able to give her that.

“Right now, I’ve said my piece,” the duke said gently. “I will not spend any more time trying to dissuade or encourage you because you said what matters to me most.”

“And what is that?”

“Oh, you said what all we Briarwoods know whether we admit it or not.” His father folded his arms across his chest and leveled a powerful stare at him. “You saw her and something in you recognized that she was for you.”

“Papa,” Nestor scoffed. “You don’t really believe all that nonsense, do you? That stuff that Grandmama goes on and on about?”

His father was quiet for a moment. “You don’t believe it, Nestor?”

“Of course not,” he said simply. “It’s nonsense, magic, all old wives’ tales.”

The duke merely nodded, then winked at his son. “Whatever you say. You are far more knowledgeable, no doubt, than me. Young people always are.”

“Papa, you are speaking as if you are a grandfather.”

His father laughed, a deep, warm sound. “Perhaps I will be this time next year.”

His father’s eyes lit with joy and hope and anticipation. “Can you imagine so many generations of Briarwoods living in the same house?”

Nestor blinked. “I never thought about that.”

His own father tilted his head to the side, the fire causing his dark hair to glint like dark embers. “You never thought about becoming a father?”

“No, I confess not.”

“Well, that is part of marriage, old boy. And, of course, being my heir.”

“Yes,” he said, his whole view suddenly changing. He was choosing to become a husband and quite possibly a father. Those were the greatest roles he could ever hope for, and he only prayed he would be as excellent as his father.

“It will be wonderful, won’t it?” His father spoke as if this was his greatest achievement. A loving family that would continue to grow. Oh, he had passed some of the most important bills in English history, he had conversed with the king and the most powerful men for the last three decades, his voice often being the most important in the room.

And yet his voice and his gaze were full of the most pride and love when speaking of his family.

“You’ll have a great deal of energy if you start having children now. You’ll play with them wonderfully,” his father said, a surprising sheen touching his eyes. “And I cannot wait to see it myself.”

The love remained in his father’s eyes, but something else suddenly joined it. Something as hard as steel. “But you must tell her the truth.”

Nestor frowned, stunned by his father’s sudden statement. “What?”

“The truth, Nestor,” his father stated. “About me, about you, about your great-grandfather, and about the possibility that your children could be like us.”

“She won’t care about that,” he replied quickly, wanting to assure his father before he grew agitated about it. “It’s not important.”

“It is important,” his father returned, “because it’s up to her to decide whether she wants to love someone like you or me.”

At his father’s words, Nestor’s heart ached, and again that memory of his boyhood came back. “Papa, why do you judge yourself so harshly?”

“I don’t, my boy,” his father said, even as his voice lowered with emotion. “It is you who fails to understand because you have grown up surrounded by this family. You think that it is normal the way we are.”

“I know it’s not normal,” Nestor said calmly. “I’ve seen how cruel the rest of the ton can be.”

“I would not wish you to know the suffering that most of the ton knows,” his father replied, “but I will not give you consent unless you tell her the truth. And you do need my consent because you are not actually old enough to marry without my say.”

Nestor narrowed his eyes. “I could run off to Scotland,” he said.

His father laughed. “I love you, my boy, how I do. Nothing will stop you, and I admire that. Or you could go to America, your mother’s land, and defy us all. But I don’t think you will. I think you’ll do exactly as I ask because you know it’s the right thing to do.”

Nestor let out a sigh. “I just don’t see how it’s as important as you think, Papa, but of course I will. I think you’ll be surprised by her.”

“By Margery?” his father countered. “She could never surprise me. She’s better than

most. I can tell you that. She should have been born a Briarwood.”

“Well, I’m glad she wasn’t,” Nestor teased, “or else I couldn’t marry her.”

His father crossed the room and clapped him on the back. “I’m happy for you. And Margery? She will accept you as you, but she deserves all the facts.”

“What’s transpiring?” his mother called as she bustled into the room, several manuscripts in her arms.

“Our son is going to be wed.”

His mother’s eyes widened with pleasure, and she thunked down the massive stack of parchment. She let out a cry of delight. “I knew it! Are we to be grandparents soon?”

“Mama,” Nestor exclaimed.

“Oh my dear, do forgive me,” his mother replied, unable to hide how happy she was at the turn of events. “I shouldn’t assume that you and Margery have gone off in a corner, acting as young people ought. Especially those who wish to marry each other.”

Nestor groaned, unsurprised by his mother’s comments and yet... “I don’t think it ever would’ve occurred to her to be a bit rebellious like that, Mama. Nor would I so risk a young lady’s reputation, in truth.”

She crossed to him and patted his cheek. “I am very proud of what a good man you are,” she said, before crossing to her husband and stepping into his embrace.

It was a fact. And his mother’s pride was warranted.

He'd never attempted to seduce a young lady, no matter how he might have wished to. It didn't matter that he was a notorious Briarwood. He'd just never felt compelled to put any lady at risk when he did not wish to marry her.

But the idea of doing what young people ought with his future wife in every corner of the great house, well that was quite appealing indeed.

"So you give your permission too then, Mama?"

"Of course, I do. We both do," she said firmly, squeezing her husband's arm. "We've been waiting for this day for months."

"What?" Nestor asked.

"I saw the way that you took her under your wing and knew that she wasn't just a friend. No, Lady Margery has always been destined for you. And your father agreed."

"There's that nonsense again," Nestor sighed, wondering at the madcap nature of his parents and his aunts and uncles. "You all believe in pure magic."

"Ah," Mama said merrily. "Magic. I think it is around us all the time, whether we want to admit it or not."

"Mother, you're supposed to be a pragmatic American."

"I am," she said. "So, why should I deny what we can clearly see?"

Of course, she was right. Magic or not, he was determined to make Margery his.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:02 pm

“I need to speak with you,” Nestor declared, just as a fire-eater swallowed a burst of flame.

The entire back gardens of Heron House had been transformed as only his grandmother and his aunts could do in the space of a few hours.

Having been in the theater, or raised around the theater, for all their lives, they knew how to put on a good production, and Heron House had been changed into a veritable magical land.

Elaborate lamps had been positioned all throughout the gardens. Potted plants with roses and exotic blooms were strewn about the green. A special fountain had been installed and dancers dressed as Greek goddesses frolicked from lily pond to lily pond. Then they posed in various tableaux from famous myths.

A trapeze artist walked a tightrope back and forth across the long garden, and another swung high above from a set of wires.

Jugglers went about, and the entire guest list of very powerful lords, politicians, soldiers, academics, and artists were thrilled.

Gasps filled the air, and every now and then, without warning, fireworks burst across the sky. For Nestor’s grandmother did not believe in the concept of a fireworks show.

No. She said the evening needed to start out with bursts of excitement and grow until there was a great conclusion at the end.

Food of the most delicious varieties went about on silver trays carried by footmen in costumes from various Greek myths, and the guests were delighted by the elaborate nature of it all.

They also delighted in the champagne and punch that flowed freely as they traversed the gardens of Heron House, a place that all wished to visit, though not all were admitted.

The Duke of Ferrars turned to him, arched a dark brow, and said, "Speak to me about what?" He frowned. "I need to go to my wife. I've made an appearance, and now I should go. She's feeling rather poorly today and needs my support. I'm only here because your father convinced me that my presence was necessary to convince a few annoying old lords to vote on the bill coming up tomorrow. I've spoken to them, and I think we might succeed."

Nestor clapped the older man on the back. "Glad to hear it. Glad to hear it. Now I have something that I must ask you."

He'd asked his own father for permission... Now, he had to make certain her brother would approve, for he liked and admired the man and wished it all to go smoothly.

"Be quick about it," Rufus said as he stood there, folding his hands behind his back as he surveyed the company with what some might think was disdain but was, in fact, shyness.

Now, as he stood beside Rufus, who was an imposing person, Nestor considered retreating. After all, Rufus could say no. Margery could say no. Unlike Portia, he was actually not convinced of the yes that his cousin seemed so certain would occur. After all, he was young. He had not achieved any great noble acts and, unlike his brother and cousins, he had not fought in any battles. He was, as it were, a man in waiting.

Oh, he had several charities that he took care of, but he was not in Parliament. Not yet. He did not have the ability to make truly great changes. Not yet. And he wished his father to live for as long as possible, which meant he wouldn't have significant power for decades.

He was waiting in the wings, as it were.

And, frankly, he was...inexperienced. But surely, he made up for all of that in other important ways.

Perhaps Rufus would tell him to go to the devil. The only way to find out, of course, was to ask.

"I wish to marry your sister," he declared with as much confidence as he could.

Rufus coughed loudly and then grabbed a glass of punch from a silver tray traveling by, which almost dislodged all the other glasses. Rufus professed a quick apology to the servant and downed the punch glass in one go.

"You wish to do what?" Rufus asked.

"I wish to ask for Lady Margery's hand in marriage."

Rufus's brows drew together, and he let his gaze linger on the company. "I've noticed you've been kind to her. I've been deeply grateful for that. Whenever she comes into a situation, you are always there to protect her, to assure her that all will be well, and I cannot ignore that."

This did not feel like the precursor to a yes.

"But, Nestor, you're not yet twenty-one years of age. Why in God's name do you

wish to marry?”

“Because she needs me.”

“Needs you,” Rufus repeated.

“Yes. I can’t explain it, but from the moment I saw her, I knew I had to protect her. I wish to make it official.”

“That is very...empathetic of you.”

“So, you understand,” Nestor replied.

The marriage between Portia and Rufus hadn’t started out as a love match, at least not for Rufus, or even for Portia, for that matter. Nestor had been amazed at how quickly Portia had fallen in love with her husband. It had taken Rufus a little bit longer to allow himself permission to fall in love. He had seen her potential to be a great duchess, and the truth was Lady Margery would be a great duchess too.

His family adored her. She would be kind. She would be gentle. She would be an excellent mother to his children, and he could make her happy. She deserved to be happy.

Rufus scowled. “This is a surprise. And you haven’t mentioned love.”

“It shouldn’t be,” Nestor replied. “And love will surely grow. How could it not with your sister?”

“You admit you don’t love her.”

Nestor frowned. “I don’t know what I feel, but I know that I wish to make her mine.

And I like her a great deal.”

“Yes, it is obvious that you like her, but I thought it was as a friend. She doesn’t seem to have any of the attributes that Briarwoods would typically desire.”

“Of course she does,” he returned, slightly offended for Margery.

“Forgive me,” Rufus said. “I did not mean to be rude about my own sister. She’s wonderful. But to put her in the view of society as the future Duchess of Westleigh... Well, you’ve seen your grandmother. Margery is nothing like her.”

“Margery is only nothing like my grandmother because no one has allowed her to be, not even you. Though I know you have done your best,” he quickly amended.

Rufus blinked. “I never really thought about that.”

“Why would you? She’s the perfect young lady in every aspect, except for the fact that she doesn’t really allow herself to be free. And why would she? She’s been schooled not to. Most young ladies are schooled not to. But if she’s my duchess, Rufus, she won’t have to stay in the prison that was put up around her as a girl. I know you broke her out of that, but she still seems...”

“Lost,” Rufus said softly.

“Exactly, and I want to make her happy and shield her from all the unpleasantness of the world.”

Rufus swallowed, his throat working, and much to Nestor’s astonishment, a sheen of tears crossed the formidable man’s eyes. The duke was a fortress, and yet here he stood, on the edge of tears. It was a new thing for him, emotion.

Nestor had witnessed it begin to occur, and he was quite proud of his cousin-in-law. He had been an instrumental part of helping Rufus see how important his love for Portia was and that he could let all the pain go, that he could let his past go, that he could let the way his father had controlled him go. And Nestor wanted the same thing for Margery.

“Well, I can’t tell you no, Nestor. Tempting though it might be. You are the son of a duke. She could not hope for a better marriage.” Rufus was silent for a moment, but then he cleared his throat. “I just hope you know what you are doing. Young men don’t often know what they truly want.”

“Balderdash,” Nestor countered without hesitation. “Young men are full of purpose and passion. They’re the ones who lead revolutions. They’re the ones who make change. The old men are the problem. That’s the truth.”

Rufus let out a long laugh. “I suppose I can’t contradict you on that. So, you wish to be a young man who makes decisions and leads. Then you best start, Nestor,” he said. “I’m glad you’re happy, and I’m glad you want to make her happy, but the world is on fire. You can’t escape that here at Heron House.”

“Of course I can’t,” he replied tersely. “I see my cousins and my brother going off to war.”

Rufus winced. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you. Of course, it must be very difficult watching them go off to war when you cannot.”

“Even Maximus has gone,” Nestor bit out, “and he’s the heir to an earldom. But there are two more heirs, so he can go, but I can’t because Calchas is in the Navy, and well, the Westleigh dukedom cannot risk the loss of all its heirs.”

“You know your duty and that is good,” Rufus said. “You wouldn’t want it to pass to

some terrible cousin out there who has entirely different ideas than you.”

Nestor shuddered. “Apparently, there is a branch somewhere off in Scotland that are quite puritanical. We couldn’t have that, could we?”

Rufus laughed. “That horror must never be allowed to occur. So, without going to war, you have to find a way to make great change at home. Without the risk.”

Make great change without risk? Such a thing sounded impossible.

“But you’ll permit the marriage?”

“Permit?” Rufus suddenly grinned. “Since I’ve met you Briarwoods, I understand that such a word is ridiculous, but I give you my approval. How could I not? Without you, my world would be a dismal one indeed. I just worry that you’re so young and that you don’t really know who you are either. Not truly. Both of you...could be a bit lost, looking for yourselves, and that is a frightening thing.”

“We’ll find ourselves together then,” Nestor declared.

“The wisdom of the Briarwoods,” Rufus replied softly, “is an astonishing thing. So I wish you the best of luck, and I hope she’ll say yes.”

“She may not,” Nestor allowed.

Rufus laughed. “I think you’re the only future duke I know who doubts a young lady might say yes.”

“Arrogance,” Nestor began, “though my cousins champion it, isn’t actually all that helpful. It’s good to be confident, but it’s also good to be realistic.”

“Realistic,” Rufus mused. “You’re the first Briarwood I’ve ever heard use that word.”

“Oh, but, Rufus,” he said, “every Briarwood is a realist far more than most. We just choose to be optimistic in the face of all of it because cynicism is...”

“The route of those who have given up,” Rufus finished.

“Yes, that’s right. And Briarwoods never give up.”

“There’s too much beauty waiting in the world to give up. So, if you can free Margery in a way that I’ve never been able to as her brother, I applaud you, and I wish you the best of luck. But if you hurt her, Briarwood or no...”

Nestor nodded. Rufus didn’t finish.

He didn’t need to.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:02 pm

Margery's heart beat so quickly against her ribs that she feared it might try to make a sudden escape from her chest. Something had happened to her this afternoon in the dowager duchess's company, when she had realized that she could ask to learn ballet and that she didn't have to be who she had always been.

It seemed rather ridiculous that she was only learning it right now, especially since Rufus had clearly learned it with his new wife. And Margery had assisted in that learning, helping Portia to understand exactly what her brother needed to heal.

But the truth was life was quite strange and full of oddities, and nothing ever progressed quite the way one thought it would. She was a young lady in her first Season, and she was determined to enjoy her life. If living with the Briarwoods had taught her anything, well, what would it be if not to enjoy life?

So, she crossed the green under the light of the flickering lamp lights, doing something absolutely shocking.

She homed her eyes in on Nestor. She was going to do it. She could. She absolutely would. And as she crossed swiftly, she was ready to do exactly as she wished, which was to ask him to dance, so that she could show him that, yes, she did indeed dance with passion.

And just as she was about to reach him, a mama thundered in with her young daughter. A beautiful young lady with perfect blonde hair, perfect blue eyes, a perfectly pert form, and a laugh that was lovely.

Margery knew her laugh was not lovely. Her laugh was loud and quite unique, which

was why she didn't laugh very often in public. Her mother had made certain of that.

But Margery had no idea what the young lady could possibly be laughing at. Nestor hadn't even said anything. Nestor looked quite astonished too, in his beautiful black evening kit. She lingered just beside them, but she was completely ignored, as if she was an unnecessary bit of baggage, or perhaps a shrub outside in the dark gardens, lit only by lanterns and the occasional burst of beautiful fireworks.

"Oh, Lord Nestor," proclaimed the mama as she fluttered her fan and her turban trembled atop her sausage curls. "It is such a shame you are not yet ready to wed. It will be such a treat when you are hunting for a wife. How wonderful you would've been for my dear Magnolia here."

A strange look crossed over Nestor's face, and Margery rather thought of an animal caught in a trap as he realized that there was no escape. She felt terrible for him, actually, for this was just the beginning. A man like Nestor, well, he was going to have to face a horde of hopefuls, who would corner him and do their very best, if not to convince him, then to bludgeon him into believing that their daughter was the very best for him.

"Yes." Nestor cleared his throat and folded his hands behind him, which only emphasized his perfect form. "I'm sure Lady Magnolia will make an excellent wife."

"Oh, do you think so?" cut in the mama, with a gushing tone of excitement. "Perhaps you should—"

"Oh, there you are," Nestor exclaimed, catching sight of Margery just a few feet away. His eyes shone with relief and desperation. "How clever of you! You knew that I was coming to find you for our dance, didn't you?"

Margery felt a hint of hesitation. This was not at all how it was supposed to go.

Granted, as she had thought earlier, life did not usually progress as one expected, but she had been the one who was going to ask him to dance—a revolutionary act, especially for someone like herself. Now, she was the escape route.

She didn't like being an escape route.

He was using her as a means to elude Lady Magnolia and her mama. How terribly rude of him. And yet she began to laugh, quite loudly and awkwardly, as she always did. It was a sound that was a bit more like a trumpet than a harp, and the mama and Lady Magnolia swung their astonished gazes back towards her.

“Oh, Lady Margery,” the mama exclaimed. “I did not see you there.”

“No,” Lady Margery sighed, “people often don't pay attention until they hear the sister of the Duke of Ferrars is nearby.”

“But I spotted you immediately,” Nestor proclaimed. “And thank goodness too, for if I wasted another moment, half the dance would be done, and what a shame that would be. Good luck to you, Lady Magnolia,” he declared grandly as he swept forward, seized Margery by the arm, and said, “Thank God you've come.”

“Well, that's really quite rude to Lady Magnolia,” she teased. “Can she be so very terrible?”

“I'm sure Lady Magnolia is perfectly fine, but the poor thing will be on performance for her mother, and her mother will watch every single beat.”

Margery bit back a laugh before she pointed out, “Her mother is still watching. Every single beat. She's quite astonished that you would choose me over Lady Magnolia.”

“Why?” Nestor asked quite honestly.

She laughed again, that trumpet-like sound, wishing she had a more delicate laugh. “Oh, Nestor, are you truly that innocent? I didn’t think you were.”

“Innocent?” Nestor seemed to flush. “Perhaps a touch,” he said. “Though it is hard to believe that any Briarwood could ever be accused of being innocent.”

“There are all sorts of innocence, Nestor,” she assured. “Now, are you really going to dance with me?”

“Of course I am. If I don’t, it will be a scandal.”

She laughed. “Not dancing with me will be a scandal?”

“Yes, because Lady Magnolia’s mother shall profess to all the company that I avoided her. And my mother and Grandmama will never forgive me for such bad manners. We’re supposed to just buck up and get on with it, you know. We can be blunt, but we can’t be rude,” he said rather grimly.

“Oh,” she began grandly, hardly believing herself, “the sacrifices you must make for wealth and power and the beauty of Heron House.”

His brows drew together, and he looked at her anew. “I say, have you drank some magical potion? You’re not being yourself. You’re teasing me.”

She winced. “Perhaps I am being myself. Perhaps I’m finally being me. You don’t like it?”

He grinned at her. “I like it exceedingly well,” he said. “Now, let’s head to the floor.”

He took her hand and guided her to the wood floor that had been assembled and polished until it gleamed. “I upset you earlier. I didn’t mean to.”

“I was upset, but it wasn’t you that upset me,” she said. “You were honest. There’s a difference.”

“Yes,” he said, “there is. And I’ve been encouraged to be even more honest with you, if you must know.”

“More honest? Oh dear, whatever will you tell me?” she asked, as the notes of the waltz continued and she swept up the train of her ivory gown.

How she longed to one day wear the vibrant colors of a married woman. She could not wait to wear ruby and emerald, sapphire and topaz, and wear whatever she wished in her hair, and dance however she wished too. That? That was the promise of being a married woman. And how she wished it could be Nestor who was her husband. But he would not marry for years.

She tried not to let her spirit sink as he swept her hand into his gloved one, and then they began to circle.

“You are such a natural,” he sighed as he danced acceptably, though without flair.

“Thank you. I was drilled continuously from the age of eleven years old until, well, recently. Even after Mama died, my brother ensured that I had a dancing master, you see? So I could learn the fashionable dances.”

“Yes, but you do it so much better than everyone else.”

“And apparently passionately,” she allowed, though the word nearly caught in her throat. It felt so daring.

“Yes, that was ill-done of me. I shouldn’t have said it.”

“Why not, if it’s true?”

He winced. “You forgive me then?”

As they made their way about the floor perfunctorily, and she savored the feel of his hand upon her waist and her fingertips in his palm, she said, “Not only do I forgive you. I thank you, Nestor. You’ve made me understand something.”

His brows shot up as his locks tumbled playfully over his forehead. “What?”

She tilted her head back, drinking in the wonderful feeling of being in his embrace and dancing to the perfect music, played by the best musicians in Europe. “I love dancing. I’m not going to hide that anymore. I’m not going to be silly about it.”

“Good,” he said with a sigh of relief. “Then I shan’t be silly either. I’ll come straight to the point. I’d like to ask you to marry me.”

As he spoke, the music came to an end, and she stood frozen in his arms, locked in his embrace, certain she had lost her wits. And yet...he looked as if he had flung himself off a cliff and was waiting to find out if he would fly.

“You wish to marry me?” she breathed, her insides twisting with emotions she could not name or understand. “Pardon me, I don’t feel at all well.”

And with that, and much to his astonishment, she turned and swept away. Again.

Was he mocking her? She’d never thought he could be cruel. But to say such a thing! When he had never courted her. Or started a marriage contract between his father and her brother! Surely, he was jesting.

Struggling not to come apart with the thoughts rioting inside her, she headed out into

the deeper garden. As she paced away from him, she realized she was doing it again. Twice in one day, she'd left Nestor Briarwood standing there astonished, and again it was after discussion about dancing. But this was really beyond the pale. She would not be made fun of.

It wasn't funny. She had been truthful with him. She had exposed her feelings, and she had risked telling him the secrets of her heart in regard to dancing and her hopes for herself, and then to say—

“Stop,” he called, racing after her through the hedgerows.

She did not stop. She kept marching on, even as he came up beside her.

As she charged on, she tried to ignore him, mumbling, “Rude. Anybody would think that I was a foolish girl. A gullible twit. I cannot believe you would be so unkind, Nestor, after you have been—”

As they slipped into the shadowy, distant part of the garden, his hand grabbed her elbow, and he whipped her around, pulling her against his chest.

“I'm not being unkind,” he stated.

She was shocked at the power of his embrace, the feel of his hard body up against hers.

He was young, but he had the body of a powerful man. Broad shoulders, a hard jawline, sharp cheekbones, dark hair. His entire body was made lean through the practice of fighting with his brother and his cousins.

“Then what are you being?” she demanded.

“Truthful!” he exclaimed. “Isn’t that what we should be?”

“You don’t wish to marry me,” she countered. “I am not for you because you are too young.”

“Too young?” he bit out. “Tell that to Romeo.”

She let out a guffawing laugh, not like a trumpet. More like a donkey’s irritated bray. She winced at the sound. “Look here, Nestor. I wouldn’t be putting Romeo about as a good example of youthful marriage.”

“Perhaps not,” he allowed, chagrined. “But the truth is that people used to get married quite young all the time, and I don’t see why I shouldn’t marry you. It’s not as if I’m a juvenile. I’ve lived a strong, good life, and I want you.”

She swallowed, hardly daring to believe her own ears. “You what?”

He pulled her tighter to him, bowing her back, arcing her into his frame, his youth making him all the more passionate. “I want you, Margery. From the moment I saw you at that outdoor party in the afternoon here at Heron House, and you had that pink pastry, I’ve wanted you. I’ve wanted you every day since then, and if you haven’t noticed, I’ve paid a great deal of attention to you.”

“I have noticed,” she breathed.

“Well then, there should be no surprise,” he growled, his voice now a low rumble as he splayed his hands along her back.

“Of course, it’s a surprise,” she argued.

“Why?” he challenged.

“Because I’m me.”

“Yes, you’re Lady Margery Barret,” he ground out. “Sister to a duke. Daughter of a duke. No doubt you have a fortune almost as large as my own.”

She frowned. “No, that’s not possible. Even you know it. But yes, I have a great deal of money, a great deal of land, but that isn’t enough reason to cause someone like you to marry me.”

“Why not?” he scoffed. “And that’s not why I want to marry you, but you certainly would be considered an excellent candidate.”

“Men like you wait decades to get married. Sometimes they wait until they’re fifty.”

“I’m not waiting until fifty to have children,” he declared. “And I’m not like other men, so stop comparing me to them.”

“Even so,” she replied, and then suddenly she rather thought that the idea of having children with him would be quite interesting. But she did not allow herself to think overly on that. She couldn’t. She dare not. Did she?

She certainly had dreamt of his kisses while alone in her bed.

“This has to be a jest, Nestor,” she ground out. “Twenty-year-old heirs to dukedoms don’t—”

“When have the Briarwoods done what everyone else does?” he whispered softly.

She sucked in a sharp breath. “Never,” she admitted, suddenly realizing he was being earnest. And that realization caused her world to spin so thoroughly she could not breath, nor think.

“So please believe me when I say I’m not trying to make fun of you.” His gaze narrowed and lowered to her mouth. “I remember the crumbs of the macaron on your lips. I knew what I wanted to do then. I know what I want to do now,” he said, lifting his hand to her mouth, stroking that soft skin as if he could still feel the morsels there.

His gaze grew hooded as if he wished to taste the macaron upon her lips.

“Say yes, Lady Margery. Marry me.”

She swallowed. “I don’t know if I should.”

“Why not?” he asked.

“The risk.”

“What is this life without a bit of risk?” he said. “Your brother said I needed to start taking risks.”

“Are you asking me to marry you because of my brother?” she demanded.

“Quite the contrary,” he said. “He wasn’t certain you’d say yes. I wasn’t certain you’d say yes. So if you want to tell me no and marry someone else, fine. Go marry some suitable person this Season. But I promise you that I am suitable, and I shall make you happy. I shall spend my entire life making you happy, Lady Margery.”

His words thundered through her, but it was their meaning that stole all her doubt and all her fear away in that moment. It was the clearest she had ever been in her life about what she must say. “Then how could I ever say no?”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:02 pm

Nestor pulled the small blue velvet box from his pocket. She was still pressed against him, and he didn't want to let her go, but this moment was momentous.

"This is for you," he said softly. "I asked Grandmama to take it out of the family vault. I wanted something as magnificent and unusual as you are."

She stared at that blue velvet box and sucked in a gasp. "You really were planning this."

"Yes. With my family," he added.

"The whole family knows and they approve?"

He nodded. "Of course. One doesn't just marry a Briarwood," he said. "One marries all the Briarwoods."

She shook her head, amazed. She knew that. It's exactly what had happened with Rufus. And she had been included in that family. Now, she would be even more so. "It shall make me so very happy to officially be part of your family," she said.

"From the moment you entered our house, it was clear that this is where you are supposed to be. It's one of the pieces that made me know that I should ask you to marry me. Now, open it," he said softly.

She tilted her head back, gazing into his face, completely amazed, it seemed, by the turn of events. But then she took the box from him and opened it. Her eyes widened.

“Do you like it?” he asked.

She slipped the pink diamond surrounded by small white diamonds from its velvet spot. “How could I not like it?” she whispered.

“It belonged to a very powerful lady,” he said, and then, without hesitation, as if he wished to bond them to each other, he slipped it upon her finger.

“Truly?” she marveled. “It fits perfectly,” she said, amazed.

“It was meant for you. All of this was meant for you. Grandmama knew too and she agreed with me that this, out of all the family rings, was the one.”

“Whose was it?” she asked, her voice a whisper of a promise that he could not wait to know.

“The lady that made the Briarwoods great,” he replied, his heart alight, as his world completely changed. For Margery would be his, and the ring upon her finger was a symbol of that, and he wanted her to know just what he saw in her. “She was not royalty. She was not titled. But she caught the eye of the king, and he loved her. They had a son, and he gave her power, wealth, and the title of a duke for that son. She was witty, charitable, strong, vivacious... And she did not let anyone crush her. You remind me of her.”

“I?” she asked, her mouth dropping open before her brow furrowed. “Never. Such a thing is not possible. She would have had to have been fierce to hold a king.”

“Oh, I see it in your eyes,” he mused, tracing his finger along the line of her jaw, barely able to contain how he loved the feel of her body so close to his. “It is there, waiting to be unleashed. I felt it the moment I was in your presence. Maybe nobody else sees it,” Nestor said softly, “but I do.”

He clapped the box shut and slipped it back into his pocket and pulled her tight into his arms. “But...”

“But?” she echoed, her eyes twin pools in the darkness, as if she feared what came next. “That doesn’t sound good, Nestor. Don’t say but . You’re making me terribly nervous now. You’re not going to take it back, are you?”

“How could I take it back?” he asked, appalled, but his brain was now muddled with the feel of her, the promise of her curves pressed into his hard lines. “Don’t be—”

“Silly? I shall be as silly as I wish to be. This is all so impossible. No one would have expected you to ask me to marry you.”

“Don’t say that,” he growled. “I don’t want to ever hear you say it again.”

“All right, then I won’t.”

Then his conversation with his father came to him, and he closed his eyes and lowered his forehead to hers. What had he done? He’d made a mistake. A serious one. He had promised his father that he would tell her everything. But the conversation had gotten away from him. His desire and emotions had taken charge.

“There’s something I must tell you. And after I do... You might change your mind.”

“It’s too late for that,” she declared, pressing her palm to rest above his heart. “What kind of person would I be to tell you no?”

“A reasonable one,” he said. “Because I have to tell you all of the truth. I’m...odd. You know that. Everyone does.”

She laughed again. He loved the fact that she was laughing, and oh, dear heaven, how

he loved her laugh. It was not that delicate, ladylike nonsense that so many young ladies were forced to do because it was what they had practiced.

Hers was loud and odd and unique, and when she allowed herself to laugh? It was full of life.

“My behavior,” he began, suddenly feeling nervous in a way he could not recall ever having felt before. As a matter of fact, he held on to her now, held onto her so tightly he feared she might instruct him to let go. “It can sometimes be erratic, powerful, a bit more than what people might expect.”

“You mean like a Briarwood,” she said, melding into his embrace rather than resisting it.

“No, no, not just like a Briarwood. It’s more. It’s...simply...” He had promised himself that he would never be afraid. And he was dangerously close to acting afraid. “It’s true. I understand the Briarwoods are all powerful and eccentric, but what I mean is stronger than that. This is something that seems inherent in me. You see, I have a great deal of uncontrollable energy sometimes, and sometimes I have no energy, which verges on deep melancholy, and it’s something that I...”

“Inherited from your father?” she said quickly.

He blinked, her almost blithe reply so matter of fact that he was certain he had misheard her. “What?”

“You inherited it from your father,” she said again factually.

He shook his head, amazed. “You have deduced this?”

“Of course I’ve deduced it,” she said, gaping at him as if he had merely declared that

he was male. “I’ve been living with you all for weeks upon end now. You’ve just described your father exactly, and there have been times when he goes off to be alone. Times when he clearly feels that he is about to spill his wild nature upon the family. He protects everyone when he doesn’t trust himself. And why should that give me any pause or dismay? Your father is a remarkable man. He is kind. He is loving. He saved Rufus from so much pain. And I’m glad that you’re like him.”

He swallowed. “I’m glad I’m like him too,” he replied, his voice rough with emotion. He had always accepted himself, but now he knew she would too. “But I thought I should be utterly transparent with you. For such a thing could give you pause.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said. “It doesn’t give me pause at all.”

“Good,” he said with a relieved sigh. “My father can be embarrassed about it, you see. I’m not. I like it. I’ve embraced it. My cousins have helped me embrace it. Most of society really has no clue. You’d have to live with me to know, and that’s quite all right,” he said. “But sometimes I can seem a bit...irrational.”

She gazed up at him, acceptance in her eyes. And something else. Something intense. “I think that I’m ready for a bit of irrational behavior,” she professed. “This world is far too rational, and I think it’s gotten us all into a great deal of trouble. My father thought he was rational. My mother too. They controlled my brother and I with their rigid view of the world. I’ve lived my life by the rules, and I’ve been miserable for it. And I’m ready to throw that life away,” she said. “And start a new one.”

Overwhelmed now with the promise of her beautiful soul being entwined with his, he stroked a lock of her soft hair back from her face, savoring the growing intimacy between them. “I’m happy to supply it for you,” he assured. All doubt lifted from him then, leaving him feeling as if he was soaring, like an ember sparked from the fire, slipping up into the heavens.

He felt his heart swell, feeling quite good. For her words confirmed that he had chosen rightly. That he had been correct in his intuition about her. And though he did not wish to truly admit it, because he'd never really been worried about the sort of person that he was or the fact that he was like his father, he was genuinely happy that she had not judged him.

Someone like Lady Magnolia and her mama? He doubted they would have been kind or understanding. They would have been appalled and cruel and perhaps suggested a doctor to fix him. Or an isolated chamber in Scotland, to keep him away from society.

He knew his father had been desperately worried about that for years. That someone in society would deduce that sometimes he was not what everyone else considered sane. He'd been so worried that he had hid it, lest his power be seized from him.

Yet, Nestor had had the privilege of freedom from such fears. Some might say it was the way his grandmother and his mother and all of his aunts and uncles treated him and his father, caring for them just as they were.

But Nestor knew it wasn't that alone.

It was the fact that he had his father, who could lead him and show him the way through those dark days. Because his father had experienced all of that first.

Whereas his father had not had that. From what Nestor understood, his grandfather had not experienced such intense shifts in emotion or intensity. Nestor's father had had love and acceptance from his family. But no guide.

And because Nestor had that guide? He knew there was no need to be ashamed or to hide himself away when he became different.

For he saw that the difference in his father, as his grandmother had helped him see,

made him kind, it made him empathetic, and it made him willing to help people in a way that many aristocrats simply were not willing to do.

Nestor was glad he had inherited it, though sometimes it did cause him a great deal of pain. The days in which the energy left him and he felt as if he were stuck in the darkest of caverns surrounded by the most awful of feelings were not really welcome. But what was life without the bitter to the sweet and the dark to the light? Nothing.

He refused to pity himself.

He knew that his own suffering was one of the reasons he had longed to help Lady Margery when no one else had, for he could see far beyond the facade that she had presented to the world.

Yes, he could see the lady longing to be freed.

He tilted her head back with his hand, determined that she was absolutely sure. “So you have no reservations?”

“In marrying you? Aside from you being young?”

“Good God!” he exclaimed, not out of annoyance but out of joy because she was teasing him. And oh how he loved to see her feel safe enough to tease! “You make it sound as if I am two years old,” he said.

She grinned, but then her brow furrowed. “We should be honest about all things. For a rake, you are very young to be married.”

“I’m not a rake,” he said.

“Aren’t you?” she asked, batting her lashes.

“No,” he confessed.

And the truth was he wasn't. Not at all. He was good with ladies, but he had not gone on the town like his brothers, and it made him a bit nervous because he was not as experienced as his older cousins. Actually, he was quite inexperienced.

“The truth is, Lady Margery,” he said softly, “you will be a mystery to me.”

“That sounds rather vague. I don't understand what you're saying. Are you trying to say that ladies are a mystery to men?” She arched a brow. “Because that doesn't sound like you at all.”

“No, no,” he said. “I understand ladies quite well, I think, because of all the wonderful women in my life. My cousins. My aunts. But in terms of romance...”

He swallowed, gathering the courage to say what he must aloud. “You will be my very first.”

“First,” she breathed, clearly not following.

He winced. “I should have realized that you might not have the education to—”

But then her eyes rounded and she cut in, “You mean the very first?”

He nodded. “Can you accept that?” he said. “I know that young ladies often prefer someone with carnal experience.”

She tilted her head to the side and pressed her hand over his heart again, as if she could somehow soothe all his doubts. “You keep offering up all the reasons I should suddenly retract my acceptance of your proposal. Do you really wish to marry me?”

“Oh, indeed I do. But I wish you to have all the facts.”

“What can I say?” she said softly. “You and I are about to go on an adventure together. We will both be young and inexperienced. Instead of you knowing all and teaching me? We shall teach each other. How could I not wish that?” she breathed.

“May I ask why you did not go on the town like all the other bucks?” she asked gently.

He let out another sigh of relief. He had not realized how tense he was. But now? What was there to worry about? Nothing. And her question was perfectly reasonable. So he replied, “Unlike so many young men, I never understood the point of racing after fleeting pleasure for the sake of it. I want something deep, something meaningful, something powerful, and I can have that with you. I can give myself entirely to you. I don’t have to engage in petty nothings as so many do. That’s not for me, Lady Margery. Not at all.”

She gave him the strangest look then. “You really aren’t like anyone else, are you, Nestor? And it’s why I...”

“Yes?” he asked.

She shook her head quickly. “It’s why I’ve always admired you so much.”

He stroked his hand along her back, awakening again to the feel of her, the warmth of her, and the fact that she was going to be his. “I’m glad to hear you admire your future husband,” he said.

He cleared his throat, his gaze slipping to her lips. “There’s something that I think we should do.”

“Oh, yes?” she said.

“Yes.”

And then he dared himself to do it. He dared himself to kiss her. He was not accustomed to seduction. He had no idea how to sweep a young lady up into passion. But he wanted this. More than anything. And he wanted her to enjoy it too.

It was a bit awkward at first as he angled her to take his kiss, and he slid his hand into her coiffure. His fingers tangled for an instant in her curls, and he felt a fool. He thought perhaps he should step back and abandon it altogether. But then he felt her hands slide up to his shoulders, pulling him closer, and he realized she did want this as much as he did.

Softly, gently, they learned each other. They teased and explored each other's lips in hot touches and caresses of mouths and tongues and breaths.

They gave themselves to each other.

Swift passion swallowed them, and he felt as if the entire world spun upside down, leaving him suspended and entirely lost to pure heaven. Entirely lost in her.

And he hoped that he would never ever be found.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:02 pm

“I cannot believe you have convinced me to come to the opera on my night off,” trilled Estella, the dowager duchess’s sister.

“Do you not like the opera?” blurted Margery.

Estella arched her elegant brow, adjusted herself in the golden chair, whipped open her fan, and began to wave it oh so slowly, which caused her elaborate curls to drift about her stunning face. “The opera is full of ridiculous nonsense. I can appreciate the genius of Mozart and his sense of humor, but it is nothing like Shakespeare, my dear. Nothing like plays.”

Margery smiled, trying to make sense of Estella’s world. “I have had so little occasion to go to the opera that I shall have to take you at your word.”

Estella tsked and gestured down to the stage where an elaborate set awaited the start. “All those singers and dancers, prancing about in silly costumes, singing silly words to silly songs. There’s nothing of the emotional depth of the great playwrights, my dear, which I would assume you know now, since you have seen so many plays in my own beloved theater.”

The dowager duchess was watching both of them, amused.

Margery nodded. She had seen more plays in the last three months than she had seen in her lifetime. And she loved the theater, the magic that unfolded, and the people that came to fill the space. “I do adore the theater now and especially your excellent interpretations, which seem to have particular intensity. So often I shiver with anticipation, on the edge of my chair, desperate to know how it shall unfold, even

though I have read the plays before!”

Estella inclined her head, pleased. “Well said. You do know how to praise. A characteristic every duchess should have.”

Margery folded her hands over her silk skirts and replied honestly, “If I had been born to another life, I would have been an actress, I think.”

“Ah, are you certain?” cut in the dowager duchess. She turned to her sister and gave her a knowing look. “Our dear Margery here wishes she was a dancer, in truth.”

Estella’s eyes widened, shining with intrigue. Their glimmer matched the flash of her emeralds. “Indeed? Do we have someone who wishes they could tread the boards?” Estella patted her sister’s hand. “You keep collecting such interesting family, my dear. Are you trying to convert them all into thespians or performers?”

The dowager duchess threw back her head and laughed. “Why ever shouldn’t I? It’s the best life. I only left it for my darling husband and his wealth and his lands.”

Margery’s mouth dropped open, then she swiftly shut it when she realized the dowager duchess was teasing. She was such a fascinating woman, who loved to speak grandly, dramatically, but then sincerely.

Then the dowager grew more serious. “No, I would not go back. My beautiful, wonderful family that keeps increasing is better than any stage.”

The dowager duchess reached out and took Margery’s hand. “Estella has recommended a ballet instructor for you.”

“You have?” Margery asked, astonished. It had sounded just a moment before as if Estella did not know of her interest in dance. The sisters were quite interesting, and

she realized that they, like most of the Briarwoods, enjoyed playing with situations rather than being boring or drab about them.

“Thank you,” she exclaimed.

Estella inclined her head. “I know a very good fellow, absolutely entertaining, and he will have you twirling about in no time, my dear. He’s a bit of a taskmaster as all great artists are. And if you wish to take to the stage—”

“I won’t,” Margery rushed, shocked that such a thing could even be said. “I won’t. I don’t think a duchess dancing in a ballet would be...”

“You are right, of course. Perhaps a home performance?” Estella suggested as the orchestra began to pluck strings, warming up. “While you might not wish to perform at the opera... Yes, that would cause quite a scandal, but I don’t see why you couldn’t do so in the privacy of your home among select guests. After all, half of Versailles did. Marie Antoinette herself adored singing and performing—”

“And look where that got her,” the dowager duchess groaned. “Though our family still does private performance for our friends, I do feel as if we are on a fast road to Puritanism again.”

“How awful.” Estella shuddered, causing the rich rose of her gown to catch the light of the chandeliers hanging overhead. “I don’t disagree with you, my dear. People seem to be growing more boring every day. I fear for the future of your grandchildren. They’re all going to have to put up with a great deal of silliness and terrible ramifications if the dowdies get their way.”

Margery swung her gaze between the two women. “Whatever do you mean?” she inquired.

Estella drew in a long-suffering breath. “Well, my dear, as society grows more and more serious, there are usually more problems, but they are papered over and no one speaks of them out of fear.”

“Truly?” she asked, astonished. She’d never heard such a thing. Her father and mother had been most strict in their beliefs.

“Oh yes. Alas, I think you shall see it.”

The dowager nodded. “Shakespeare wrote quite scathingly of the approaching Puritan wave in his own plays. And then what did you see? Within fifty years? Revolution and austerity. You know they banned Christmas celebrations when Cromwell was in control, don’t you?”

“What?” Margery gasped. “That isn’t something our governess taught!”

Estella snorted. “Yes, well, people do like to leave out how nonsensical such fellows can be, my dear, and Cromwell really did wish to control everyone.”

The dowager added, “I can’t like or forgive anyone who closed down the theaters. Thank goodness his son was such a fool.”

Estella hesitated, then held her painted fan in such a way as to hide what she is saying. “Everyone is staring at us, and I don’t think it is for the usual reasons.”

Margery, who was not accustomed to having people staring at her at all, was astonished by Estella’s correct observation. Surely, the lady was used to everyone looking at her as one of the most famous actresses in London. And, of course, the dowager duchess had to be accustomed to it as well.

But Margery dared to look out toward the boxes across from theirs. They were

beautiful, lined with gold and velvet, and filled with the wealthiest members of the ton.

And she realized that Estella was quite correct. There were many, many ladies, and even a few gentlemen, staring at them behind their fans or with spyglasses. They did not look pleasant.

As a matter of fact, some of them looked as if they wished to tear her apart.

Her.

Their animosity was definitely homed in on Margery. But why? For they were not looking at Estella or the dowager.

“Whatever is going on?” she asked, suddenly feeling quite apprehensive. She snapped her own fan open as her palms began to sweat.

“They all must’ve had a bad bit of beef. Or they’ve drunk bad champagne. One must never drink bad champagne. It is horrible for the constitution,” the dowager duchess said softly, giving her sister a warning stare. Then she looked back to Margery. “Pay no mind.”

“That’s not at all true, and you shouldn’t say such things to Margery. She’s a very capable young lady, and you should tell her the truth.”

“Tell me what?” Margery asked, her throat tightening.

“Margery has had to contend with a great deal all her life. She doesn’t need any—”

“I do,” Margery cut in. “I don’t wish to be lied to. Has something happened? What is amiss?”

“Well, my dear,” Estella began with surprising firmness, “if my dear sister doesn’t have the courage to tell you, I shall. I have been hearing the gossip now for days, ever since your marriage announcement. By the way, a full announcement in all the newssheets? Simply splendid, my dear. I am personally delighted that Nestor is telling the whole world how eager he is to be your husband. It shall be a grand wedding, of course. St. Paul’s, is it?”

The dowager duchess nodded. “Yes. We’ve secured it because the families are so equally powerful.”

“Oh, yes, everyone will come,” Estella agreed, but then she lowered her voice and added, “to throw tomatoes.”

“Why would they throw tomatoes at me?” Margery exclaimed.

“Because, my dear,” Estella explained, leaning forward, her eyes gleaming and her lips pursing as if she had the greatest bit of information possible, “you have landed the greatest marriage like a coup. You came in, you conquered, and no one even knew there was something to conquer.”

“What do you mean?” Margery asked, blinking, not following and feeling quite at loss that she was seemingly so out of her depth.

“No one even thought that Nestor was on the marriage mart. So, no one bothered to pursue him. Not really. That’s what all the great ladies are saying.”

“Well, there was that one lady,” Margery said, frowning. “Her daughter is Lady Magnolia.”

“Oh. Yes. Hortensia,” the dowager duchess said. “Despite her lack of conversation, she is quite the optimist. I must admire her for it, for attempting to rouse my darling

grandson's interests. But the truth is," the dowager confessed with a sigh, "not everyone is pleased about the union."

"Why?" Margery said, her spirits sinking.

Was she to be so disliked? Could she never be admired? She'd never had attention before, and now the attention she was gaining was going to be negative. Her heart. Oh, her heart sank.

Maybe all of this was a terrible mistake. Maybe she should not be marrying Nestor at all if the response was so negative.

But then she stopped herself and squared her shoulders. No. She would not let such preposterous thoughts into her head.

Nestor wanted her, and she wanted him. That had to be enough, didn't it? She'd never been liked by society. She would not allow that to upset her now, would she? But as she again dared to look at the faces staring at her, as if they could somehow make daggers pierce her bosom with their furious gazes, she found herself growing a bit reticent.

This was not good.

This was not at all what she wanted for Nestor. Or herself. Surely, he wished to be praised for his decisions, and he should have been. He had picked a girl from a family that had a dukedom. Their collective anger was utter madness.

Estella gave her a sympathetic cluck. "Do not give them another moment of your attention."

Margery pulled her gaze back to the enigmatic ladies beside her, though it was no

easy thing, and quite frankly, a part of her wished to flee.

“I think, my dear, everyone is a bit upset that you caught them all unprepared,” the dowager said. “I think they all assumed that my grandson would be a great prize to catch in some years to come. Many of them likely had their strategies to get him when their daughters came on the market at that time.”

Estella’s face lit up with glee and she said merrily, “And you have taken him off the market before he was even on it.”

“He asked me,” Margery pointed out.

The dowager gave her a kind look, a defiant look, as though she cared not a whit for society’s sour grapes. “Yes, my dear. And we’re so very thrilled.”

Estella nodded. “I’m so pleased it’s you. Stars above. All the silly twits that are out there? The possible duchesses he could have chosen?” Estella pursed her lips and declared, “You will love him and take care of him, and he shall love and take care of you, and it’ll be a tremendous success. But, my dear, you are going to have to grow a very thick skin soon.”

Margery paused, a strange sort of strength suddenly taking root in her. She unfolded her hands and smoothed them over her skirts before she lifted her chin and replied, “I have a very thick skin. It would be a mistake for you to think otherwise. Perhaps I appear soft. Perhaps I am too quiet. But that does not mean that I have not taken many blows.”

Estella mirrored her behavior and lifted her chin, clearly impressed by the reply. “Oh my. Have we unearthed a tigress? How terribly exciting.”

The dowager duchess nodded. “Margery is no simpering miss, nor will she be a

pushover. She has known a hard life. Harder than many. I think what astounds me, my dear, is that the world assumes because you grew up with so much abundance, so much wealth, that you should have nothing to complain of, that everything has fallen into your lap. But it is the opposite, isn't it?"

Margery looked at her soon-to-be grand-aunt-in-law and grandmother-in-law and drew in a long breath. How could she explain it to ladies who had known cruel upbringings in the East End and climbed to power and wealth? She knew they would understand if she could but articulate it correctly.

"Oh, yes," Margery agreed. "I was surrounded by golden objects, fripperies, and wealth, but it was all held just out of my reach, you see, and I was punished over and over again. All the abundance you speak of? It was kept from me. Despite the grand house I grew up in, I was kept in fairly terrible austerity to make certain that I always fit the mold that my mother and father wished. If I dared to want anything but what they wanted, my life became a terrible one. Not very different from Rufus's, really. I was punished, scolded, isolated, and shamed. Abundance of every kind was all around me, but I was not allowed to have any of it. My parents believed that an austere life, full of physical discipline, would make me an obedient daughter and eventually the sort of duchess who would make England strong.

"So, when you speak to me of Puritanism, I understand it better than most, even if I didn't know that Cromwell banned Christmas celebrations. And I can tell you that I agree with you. Control like that is cruel, and it wishes freedom for no one, and joy is stolen in every moment in a life like that."

Estella snapped her fan shut and applauded. "Well said, my dear. Well said. You would make a fine orator. Rufus is wonderful, but you should have been born the duke. What a speaker you are. You would have changed every mind in the House of Lords."

She laughed at that. “Rufus might agree with you, actually. He hates speaking in public. He hates being in public at all. He’s so shy. But he is wonderful, and he’s a good man, and he did everything he could to make my life better when my parents were alive. I can still remember the days when I was shut in my room. Rufus would come and sit on the other side of the door. He would talk to me, encourage me, and tell me that I would get through it all, that one day we would be free. God took our parents so much sooner than either of us ever thought possible. It was terrible, of course, but at least Rufus and I no longer suffered daily at their hands. Perhaps that is scandalous to say, but it is also true. And then Rufus did everything he could to make me happy, even though he did not know how to make himself happy.”

Margery was astonished to see that tears shone in both Estella’s and the dowager’s eyes.

This caused tears to prick her own eyes. She blinked rapidly, feeling safe and cared for and supported by these magnificent women.

She sucked in a fortifying breath and announced, “So, I will not be cowed. I refuse.”

“Good,” Estella said, reaching out and taking her hand with her jeweled one. “And we shall teach all of these fools that you are the one who should most certainly be his duchess one day, and there was never going to be a competition to begin with. For none of them could ever compete for Nestor’s heart.”

He had given it so quickly, so easily, and Margery wondered for a brief moment if he would ever regret it. People changed. People grew. Would he one day look back and regret that he had married so young? She would not think on it. She could not.

The curtains of their box swayed, and Nestor strode in, his dark hair perfectly styled, his cravat pressed to perfection, and his dark coat cut to his perfect body like an embrace.

“My God,” he drawled, “the company is dour this night. I’ve just overheard the most ridiculous drivel.”

“And what is that?” Margery asked.

He leaned down and waggled his brows at her as if this was all an absurd game. “Oh, only that if they had known that I was seeking a wife, that Lady Magnolia would’ve had me.”

He snorted. “I can’t stand most people in society,” he said. “Thank God Rufus brought you to us. It saved me a great deal of suffering.”

She tensed but forced herself to say lightly, “Is that what I am? A prop against suffering?”

She hoped to God she wasn’t a scapegoat for him, an escape as she had feared. No. He’d made her feel so, well, special. She would not allow herself to think otherwise. She couldn’t, because if she did, that would be allowing her mother and father to win.

But instead of some grand argument, Nestor gave her a curious stare, took her hand, and then raised it to his lips.

“A prop? Margery, you are the antidote to suffering.”

Then he lowered his mouth to her knuckles as the entire ton watched, and she forced all of her fears to retreat.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:02 pm

A laugh slipped past her lips as they strode into the grand ballroom, and the conversation paused for a long moment, then burst into a flurry of words.

“They hate me,” she said with cheer, as if she could use that cheer as a shield. “Indeed, they do. I have never experienced anything like it. Before, they just ignored me for the most part.”

Nestor wanted to seize the entire ton and shake it until it saw sense. How could anyone give his darling Margery such a difficult time? Worse, the very thing that he thought was going to make her happy was now causing her difficulty! Namely, marriage to him.

Frankly, he wanted to go and wipe the looks off of all the faces of the mamas at the ball. This ball had been arranged specifically by his family to welcome Margery and to declare to the world that she was to be his viscountess—and one day, his duchess.

Oh, it was true that the announcement had already gone out, and they had been to the opera together. But this ball? This ball at Heron House was meant to show the world that she was approved of by the family and incredibly important.

The house was decked out as only his grandmother and his aunts could manage. There was finery everywhere, the servants moved with perfect steps, champagne flowed, and the finest musicians had been brought in from Austria. They were one of his grandmother’s favorite orchestras. The ballroom was full to the brim with all of the most important people, in clothes that were rich and beautiful to the eye.

Every invitation had been accepted.

Everyone wanted to come to Heron House whenever there was a ball because it was considered to be so exclusive. But today he feared that everyone had accepted their invitations, not just because a ball at Heron House was exclusive, but because they wished to stare menacingly at his soon-to-be wife.

It was mystifying to him because he had never experienced such vitriol, and he was shocked that people could not hide it.

“I know what we will do,” he said.

“What?” she asked, her smile brittle.

“Let us show them just how wonderful you are, what a great duchess you’re going to be, and how I will be there at your side every moment. Let’s show them just how much I adore you.”

“All right. Let’s,” she exclaimed. Though her voice shook a bit, she was facing all of it with great bravery.

He held out his hand, and she placed hers atop his. Then they charged onto the ballroom floor. The musicians struck up a sprightly allemande.

“Are you ready to dance?” he asked.

“For you? I am yours to dance with whenever you desire,” she said.

His blood sang at that, for how he wished to dance with her and feel her limbs move so beautifully against his own.

He took her hands in his and they began the twirling, quick movements of the dance. Soon dozens of other couples took to the floor, but they were certainly still the center

of attention.

For Margery was such a magnificent dancer, as was he with her. He adored the fact that they would be unstoppable together. That was what he was certain of, in any case, though she might not see it yet.

As soon as the music came to a pause, he applauded the orchestra and she gave him a deep curtsy. The room erupted in what he could only assume was more gossip because then he took her hand, lifted her from her curtsy, gazed down into her eyes, tilted her chin up, and contemplated kissing her before everyone.

But he knew that would be a scandal too far. But oh, he wished to kiss her. He wanted to kiss her every moment of every day. And if he could have, he would have. So, instead, he tucked her arm into his, waggled his brows, and said, “Let us go find a nook where I can show you my appreciation further.”

She laughed. “Such a thing is not possible, my lord. Not at all. This ball is far too important for me to abscond with you.”

And so he relented. “Shall I hand you off to my darling Mama then?”

“Yes, please,” she said. “I think that will do nicely.”

With that, he took her slowly over to his beautiful mother, the American who had stolen his father’s heart and who ran a publishing company that was the most popular in England.

“Mama, the lady needs your protection.”

“I do not,” Margery tsked, her brows shooting up. “I will be fine amongst all these crows.”

His mother smiled. Her dark hair was arranged in a beautiful coiffure with jewels tucked into the waves. She shooed at him. “Go on then, my dear. Never fear. I shall take very good care of her, even though she says she does not need to be taken care of.”

He inclined his head and headed off, leaving them to chat, eager to tell every lord in the room how perfect his match was. Perhaps that was one way to ensure that Margery was met with more kindness.

“My goodness, you are causing quite a stir,” Nestor’s mother said.

“It seems that way,” Margery agreed.

“Well, you’ve done what they can’t,” his mother said simply.

“And what is that?”

“You’ve captured a future duke.”

She fought a groan. It seemed that Duchess Mercy was in agreement with the dowager duchess and Estella. “Capturing a future duke is probably overrated unless he’s a Briarwood.”

The duchess leaned in towards her and whispered conspiratorially, “I couldn’t agree with you more. Most dukes are stuffy, boring, and have no charm to them. They don’t have to have charm, after all, since they have so much power, land, and money. Thank goodness for all the good blood that the ladies have brought in.”

Margery shook her head. “My blood is not particularly good in that way. My blood is ancient.”

“Ah, but there’s something unique about you,” Mercy pointed out, contemplating her. “And your brother too. There’s no questioning it. Despite your ancient lineage, the both of you seemed bent on rebellion.”

The duchess winked and added, “Like me. Now you must call me Mama, if you like, or Mercy if you prefer.”

Margery’s breath caught in her throat at the sudden emotion that raced through her. In all her life, she had only had her own mother, someone who was unkind, someone who had made her feel terrible. Someone who had...

“Are you actually happy that I’m marrying your son?” she blurted suddenly.

The duchess blinked, her long dark lashes batting. “What a question. Of course I am. Why would I not be?”

Margery pressed her lips together, hating to have to articulate arguments against her own happiness, but no matter how she tried to push it away, the fear that she was unworthy of love kept slipping into her heart. “Because—”

Mercy stopped her right there. “I have no wish to hear about any recriminations against yourself or doubts about Nestor’s wishes. My son is a strong young man of good mind. And if he wishes to marry you, that’s the end of it. And you are lovely, Margery. There’s no question about it. So put any concerns you have aside.”

Margery glanced at the crowd. “I’m trying,” she said. “But they are all determined to make me feel it.”

The duchess paused, unable to deny this. “It’s true. They weren’t overly fond of me either, you know. An American coming in and taking one of their prizes. So you and I do have that in common, though I think they’re particularly awful to you. Still, I

know what will fix that.”

“And what is that?” Margery asked, slightly wary.

“Your grand wedding, of course,” the duchess said simply with a shrug of her elegant shoulders. “Yours shall be the biggest, the most extravagant wedding of this century. Even bigger than your brother and Portia’s. We will invite every single person who would dare to hope to come, and we shall parade the streets with poems celebrating the two of you! I shall have a pamphlet written and...”

“No, no,” Margery cut in suddenly, and then she swallowed as a realization hit her. She knew exactly what she wanted, and it wasn’t what the duchess was describing. “Forgive me. I must go and speak to Nestor.”

The duchess gave her a quick nod. “Of course, my dear.” But then a strange look crossed her face. “I haven’t upset you?”

Margery dared to take the duchess’s hand and squeeze it. Oh, how the Briarwoods made her feel bold. Even when that feeling couldn’t hold, she loved how it sparked in her with inspiration now, encouraging her to act. “No. As a matter of fact, you have freed me from expectations.”

Without another word, she bustled through the crowd.

Mama. Yes, that was what she would call the duchess, and a warm emotion filled her heart. Her own luck was simply impossible. Yes, people were being cruel and envious. But that was because she had won a coveted spot in the Briarwood family.

Now, Margery knew exactly what she wanted. And that did not include rubbing other people’s faces in her triumph. She did not wish to give them the time or such power.

Just as she was about to turn out into the hall where she'd seen her Nestor disappear, a voice, not far off, whispered to another. "I can't believe he's marrying her. She has no charm, no conversation, and she's plain as..."

"What?" Margery demanded fiercely, turning swiftly, knowing that they had intended for her to overhear, though they had assumed she was going to walk past because she always did.

She always had. For she had not believed in herself enough to stand up to such unkind envy. And she realized then that all the ladies had always been envious. Margery was everything they wished they could be. Wealthy, powerful in her family's title, and certain of a great marriage. She did not have to play games as they did. No, she could be plain and simple and she was still guaranteed the best.

"I know I look like a wilting violet," she said to the lady in question, who had dark brown hair and brown eyes. "But I am not," she declared. "So, say what you said again, but this time say it to my face."

The lady stared back, her face turning a terrible shade of white. "I... I do not know what to say, Lady Margery," she said.

"That didn't seem the case just a moment ago," Margery replied, and then a hand took hers and slipped it into the crook of a strong elbow.

"Oh, I see you have made the acquaintance of Lady Annabelle. And this, of course, is Lady Wilhelmina."

Lady Wilhelmina had red hair and freckles, and her cheeks burned bright red. They were shocked that they had been caught by the future duke and called out by his future duchess.

“Hello, my darling,” she said quite dramatically, as if they had been in love for years. “I wanted to talk with you about our wedding.”

“Of course, my dear,” he assured in his rich deep tones before sweeping her away as if those two ladies were nothing but buzzing flies.

A wave of sheer joy rushed through her. She was no longer standing along silk-covered walls, afraid, quaking, fearing company. No, with Nestor and his family, she was now coming into the power she’d always possessed but had not known how to wield.

“What is it?” he asked, guiding her into a curtained nook.

“I want to run away with you,” she rushed, turning towards him. “Immediately. Can you obtain a special license?”

He gazed down at her face, the crush and music now a distant murmur beyond the velvet curtain as he took both of her hands in his.

“A special license,” he echoed before his brow furrowed with confusion. “But we’re going to get married at St. Paul’s. It will be a grand wedding, and it will show everyone—”

“I don’t want to show everyone,” she said quickly, holding onto him firmly, as if she could will him to understand through her grip. “I only want to show you and your family and my brother that we are meant to be together. I don’t wish to take jealousy into our wedding. I don’t want hundreds of people staring at me, wishing me malice and wishing they could be me. I don’t want to think of anyone but you,” she insisted, suddenly feeling alive. Truly and completely alive.

She leaned into him then, tilting her head back. “That’s all I want. I don’t need any of

them. I need you,” she said.

His eyes warmed. “Say it again.”

“I wish to run away with...”

“No,” he murmured. “The other part.”

“Oh,” she whispered, smiling. “You. I need you.”

“That’s it,” he breathed before he lowered his head and took her lips in a wild, possessive kiss.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:02 pm

“T his seems like utter madness.”

“Perhaps it is, Rufus,” Margery said as she and her brother stood on the moonlit steps outside the beautiful chapel near Heron House. “But isn’t it wonderful madness?”

Rufus towered over her, a man of incredible strength and endurance, and his throat worked as if he was facing a battle of so many feelings. “Can madness be wonderful?” he prompted, clearly feeling fear for her future happiness. “This is all happening so very fast. Even faster than how I wed.”

“Think of how our lives have been for so long, and in just a few months, everything has completely and totally changed,” she exclaimed, as she lifted her hand and touched her brother’s cheek.

“But I thought you were going to have a proper wedding,” he protested, still clearly stunned by the quick change of events. “Everything was planned out, wasn’t it?”

She gave him a kind, patient look. For she knew he knew better. “A wedding like that would take weeks to plan. Of course, it wasn’t all planned out,” she returned. “I don’t want a proper wedding anyway. That’s what you wanted.”

“I did what I was supposed to do as a duke,” he explained as he took her hand in his, trying to explain.

“Well then, good,” she said softly. “I’m glad you did what you wished. But Nestor is not yet a duke, and I’m not going to be a duke,” she teased.

Rufus rolled his eyes. “Now you’re just being ridiculous.”

“Thank goodness,” she exclaimed. “Isn’t it wonderful that, at last, I am being ridiculous, frivolous, full of life?”

Rufus stilled. He was such a good man, who had been rigid in his actions for years. He’d had to fight to tear down the prison their father had made for Rufus. His face softened.

“Yes, it is,” he said, his voice full of emotion. “All my life, I longed for the day that you could be free of our parents’ cruelty and that you could be playful, silly, full of life.”

His face creased with emotion. “You were not allowed to be a child, were you?”

She leaned forward, pushed herself up onto her toes, and gently kissed his cheek. “No, nor were you. We both struggled as best we could. We both tried to survive, and we both did. And now look at us!”

She opened her arms wide and gestured all around and then to the chapel nestled like a jewel in the landscape. “We are free and we are happy, and we have found the most wonderful sense of belonging in the world. We suffered, and now we are to have our reward.”

Rufus eyed her carefully. “Yes,” he agreed. “And no one deserves it more than you.”

She cocked her head to the side. “I don’t know about that. All of London seems to think that I don’t deserve him.”

“And you?” he prompted. “What do you think?”

She swallowed as a summer breeze danced through her hair, leaving the scent of wildflowers on the air.

She couldn't tell him the truth. She couldn't tell him that even after all of this, even after all of Nestor's kindness, she feared he was marrying her for some purpose she couldn't completely understand. Oh, he liked to kiss her. There was no question. But did he love her? Did he feel grand passion for her in that way? Did he feel terribly romantic about her?

She feared not. It was something else. Something she couldn't quite put her finger on.

A part of her, an old part, feared that he was marrying her much as London suggested—that he had only picked her out of pity. Now, how could one pity the sister of a duke with a fortune as large as hers? But she had never had friends. She had never truly belonged. She had always been on the outskirts of those who belonged and had only been admitted to those circles because of her power and wealth.

No one had wished to speak to her. No one actually wished to dance with her, for her own sake. But she was getting better, and she would get better every day. And she would prove to Nestor that she did deserve him and that she did deserve to be a Briarwood and that she deserved his love.

She could work at it, and she would show him.

“Are you quite all right? Your face has gone funny,” Rufus said. “The thoughts that just flitted through your head, I should like to know them.”

He might not like it, but she wouldn't share them. She couldn't share them.

“I don't know what I'm worthy of,” she replied to his earlier question. “Does

anyone?”

Rufus let out a long sigh. “That is a very artful reply, but I fear you do not feel worthy of all of this because of what our mother and father did.”

She bit her lower lip and worried it, hoping to distract him from the core of what he was truly asking. “I’m doing exactly what they wanted, aren’t I? Isn’t that ironic?”

He let out a soft laugh. “Yes, I suppose it is. You’re making one of the greatest marriages of the century.”

“There you are,” she said with a nod. “So, they would be pleased at last, don’t you think?”

“I don’t think they could ever be pleased,” he returned, a muscle tightening in his jaw. “And I would not try to please them ever again. And please, Margery,” he said, “be careful. Don’t try to please everyone else. Try to please yourself for once. As a soon-to-be duchess, you can do that. And Nestor wants you to be yourself, more than anything.”

“I see,” she breathed. “Then that’s who I will be.”

Even as she said the words, they felt strange. She was trying so hard to be herself, but she realized in that moment that, as a child, she had tried to be whatever her parents needed. So, it was very, very hard to know exactly who she truly was.

But she would find herself. And then nothing would get in her way.

Rufus leaned forward and took her hands again. “Nestor will help you.”

She swallowed.

That was it then, wasn't it? Why Nestor had married her. To help her. It stung for a moment, but she wanted him, and she wasn't willing to let go of him. Even if he didn't love her, she loved him. And that had to be something. Didn't it?

Rufus had not loved Portia when he married her, and look what had happened. They were the happiest couple she knew, surely.

"Come then," he urged, turning them towards the ancient opening of the chapel. Slowly, they went through the doors, over the tiled floor, and as soon as they stood at the top of the nave, organ music began to play.

Despite the fact that the chapel was not anywhere as grand as St. Paul's, she knew that it was the perfect place. For it was full to the brim with Briarwoods.

There was laughter and chatter and joy.

But as soon as the organ music started and she made her entrance, all eyes turned to Margery.

Her gown was simple. She didn't wish it to be elaborate. It was a beautiful, striped silk of pale ivory, and flowers had been put into her hair. Her brother took her by the arm and began to lead her quite slowly down the aisle as if each step held power to it. As if each step was a mark in her journey from girl to woman.

As they made their way, she couldn't stop herself from noticing the large family that was about to truly be hers.

The pews were full of all the Briarwood aunts and uncles and their children and their adopted children too. Estella sat at the front with the dowager duchess.

Because of the children, all brought from the house despite the impromptu, fast

nature of the wedding with its special license, there was much laughter and poking and pulling at each other. She and her brother had never been allowed to do such things. And she smiled as she caught sight of one little boy tugging at another little girl. The little girl picked him up and cuddled him and gave him a better view.

“She’s lovely!” the little boy exclaimed.

And Margery’s heart leapt at that because all society had been so determined to tear her down. Yet here, one small Briarwood child could say such a kind thing about her without jealousy, without an award. No, he was just being kind. She caught the little boy’s mischievous eyes and smiled. He gave her a gap-toothed grin as she and her brother carried on down the aisle.

As they crossed up to where the vicar and Nestor waited, her heart beat so quickly and so intensely she felt almost as if she was a bird, wings aflutter in open air.

His cousins all stood beside him: Calchas, Maximus, and Octavian. Three strong men. But she only had eyes for the man who had asked her to marry him.

Nestor held out his strong hand, and she slipped her fingers over his. As if in a dream, she stepped up beside him.

This was it.

This was what she had wished for and declared just as she had been told to do months ago in the Briarwood house, when she had been told not to settle but to declare the sort of man she truly wanted.

How she remembered that day when Rufus had pursued Portia.

Was it magic? How had she made this happen with those words she had spun into the

air within Heron House? Had the Briarwoods made this happen? Were they all creatures of magic? She did not know.

But if they were magic, she loved that magic, and she hoped everyone could know it in their life.

Nestor looked down at her and whispered, “You’re beautiful.”

Somehow, this felt different, and her heart again leapt to her throat. But she wondered if he was telling the truth. She wasn’t really beautiful. She wasn’t exactly plain, but her features were not those of a diamond.

And for a moment, she hated the fact that he had called her beautiful because it didn’t feel true. But then he squeezed her hand again and insisted, “You are, Margery, so stop it.”

“Stop what?” she whispered back.

“I don’t know what exactly,” he murmured, leaning ever so slightly down towards her. “But the thoughts running around your head are written all over your face. You are not plain. You are better than all of the diamonds in the whole world. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” she breathed.

This time, her heart did not leap out of fear. Her heart leapt out of being admired for who she was and that he found beauty in her, even if she was not a beauty in any classical sense.

They turned to the vicar, who opened his book and began reading apace in a voice that was surprisingly enthusiastic, as if weddings were his very favorite thing.

In fact, the vicar paused and bestowed upon them a beaming smile as if he was positively thrilled by this wedding. Then he was off, the marriage ceremony tumbling out of his mouth.

Margery did not hear a thing, not really. All of it was a blur. So fast. So hard to believe! But it was true. Nestor, who she never could have imagined would be hers but a few months ago was putting a ring upon her finger. They murmured their vows.

Everything felt larger than life. The colors, the scents. She felt almost as if she was not there at all, but up above herself, watching.

It was heaven. She only prayed that it never became hell.

Surely, she had suffered enough in this life. All would be bliss now.

No, her marriage to Nestor could never go ill. Not like her mother and father's. For her mother and father had not married each other because they had liked each other or been honest with each other. Their marriage had been arranged on paper. They had barely even met beforehand.

Nestor had picked her, not because of a dukedom, but because he liked her and wanted her for a reason she did not need to understand.

And she had picked him because she had fallen in love with him the moment she had seen him. So, when she smiled, she let the joy flow through her, certain that she would never know suffering again.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:02 pm

The lush tent had been set up like some mystical abode from a novel.

Under the stars and bright summer moonlight, positioned beneath the arms of old oak trees, it was beautiful and whispered of the decadence of a life of adventure.

Tassels dangled from the corners and its peak was high. Both of them were full of curiosity and excitement as Nestor guided Margery inside and closed the silken curtains behind them, tying them shut, sealing out the real world, immersing them in a place meant only for pleasure.

On the inside, the massive tent was no rustic, spare space.

Oh no, it had been made up with every need that one could think of.

His family amazed him, though they shouldn't have.

This was exactly the sort of thing that his family would do.

Somehow, they had made it happen very quickly, understanding that the newlyweds might not wish to engage in newlywed behavior, surrounded by such a large family, knowing exactly what was transpiring.

So, as Nestor understood, his father had had this set up like some fairyland out in the middle of the forest near Heron House.

They both took in the silken walls, beautiful carpets, and flickering colored-glass lanterns that bathed the space in multihued light.

Low chairs and rich pillows were strewn about everywhere.

“I have never seen anything like it,” she gushed. “Certainly nothing from my childhood would’ve caused me to anticipate this for my wedding night.”

“Nor I, if I am honest, but it’s perfect. It is like we are stepping outside of time and reality, and there is nothing but—”

“Us,” she said.

“Is that what you wanted?” he asked, wishing her to be thrilled.

“Yes, nothing but us,” she affirmed.

Then she boldly closed the distance between them, daring to link her arms about his neck. He loved this part of Margery. This beautiful part kept coming out, as she showed her boldness and what she truly felt inside.

Though she was bold, as he stood in her arms, he felt a wave of nerves. The conversation with his father had been most intriguing, extensive even. Oh, his father had discussed intercourse with him many a time. His mother and father both believed that ignorance was not a good thing for anyone. So, at quite a young age, they’d educated him on the basics of it all.

Nestor had understood the anatomical aspects of intercourse, and then later his father had described more to him and how wonderful the union of a man and woman could be.

And, of course, he had read extensively, quite extensively. There had also been pictures, drawings, and, of course, paintings of beautiful, naked figures. He wasn’t ignorant, but he was without experience, and he was desperately afraid of failing

Margery.

His father had been patient with him, giving him instructions on how important it was to be careful, to be gentle, and not be lost in the excitement of it all.

Impulsivity and lack of control were likely to occur in a young man who had not experienced this. He dreaded that. He couldn't let that happen.

"Are you quite all right?" she asked.

He cleared his throat. "Of course I am," he said, "but I don't want to get this wrong."

"Can we get it wrong?" she queried as her brow furrowed.

He blew out a slow breath, bringing his hands to her hips, then letting them travel lower. "I think we could, yes. So, I must be very careful."

She cocked her head to the side, her eyes shining with desire for him. "I don't want you to be careful," she whispered. "What I want is for you to be you. Let us shed all of our fears now."

And then he thought of the little boy he'd been so many years ago, who had been determined never to be afraid. And here she was, his wife, urging him not to be afraid.

It actually felt perfect.

He had chosen the right partner. He understood better than most that the choosing of a spouse was the most important decision of one's life. His whole family knew that, and he knew, standing here in the ornate tent that was as grand as any prince's chamber, with her arms about his shoulders, encouraging him to believe that there

was no way that he could disappoint her or get this wrong, that he had chosen truly.

He let out a low growl of hunger. He had been starving for her for weeks now. It was so hard not to gobble her up. “I do not know how long I will be able to speak coherently.”

She smiled. “Coherently?”

He bit his lower lip and nodded. “Right now, it feels as if all my thoughts are rushing out of my head because I desire you so.”

“I’m glad you desire me,” she murmured. “Quite honestly, I never thought I’d be the sort of woman who you would desire. You could have anyone.”

“I don’t want anyone. I want you,” he whispered, determined to show her exactly how much he did desire her and no one else.

He was a young man who had had many opportunities to explore desire. Young ladies of many different stations and married women had offered to be his tutor and guide. He had not been interested. Not truly. But now, he knew he’d been saving himself for her.

She was meant to be his tutor, his guide, as he was hers.

They were a true partnership, one in which no one was superior. They were equals. He smiled down at her and ventured, “Should we have less talking and more doing?”

Her smile transformed into one of invitation. “That sounds very reasonable to me.”

And so he lowered his head and kissed her. There should be a great deal of kissing, he remembered. A great deal of touching. So, he did exactly as he had been

instructed. He kissed her slowly, almost reverently.

His body urged him to speed up. The head of his cock already pulsed with need. His limbs already hummed with a need to tear her clothes off, take her to the bed upon the carpeted floor, and make love to her swiftly. Though he'd never forgive himself if he did that. That would be the most terrible memory he would carry for the rest of his life. As would she.

So, he forced himself to go slowly. Forced himself to feel her so that he would not get lost and take the wrong route.

He kissed her cheeks, eyelids, and chin.

He took her head to the side and worshiped at her throat, and then, with trembling hands, he began to undo her gown.

In all his life, he'd never felt so much excitement. He was about to see her without her clothes on, and it was thrilling. Quickly, even though his fingers did not feel nimble, he worked at the ties. He fumbled. Wordlessly, she moved her hands to help him, without judgment, without recrimination. Then her clothes whisked to the floor.

His breath caught in his throat as he took her in. It was almost too much. She was too beautiful, too perfect. His eyes traveled over her pale body, from the gentle curve of her shoulders, to the perfect swell of her apple-sized breasts, to her pink nipples. His gaze descended to the hourglass curve of her ribs and hips, then down to her thighs and the apex between her legs. He lingered on the soft curls there, staring.

She stood naked before him, her expression one of hope.

"In all my life, I have never seen anything as magnificent as you," he managed.

And then her face transformed with bliss, and his own joy at having said just the right thing raced through him.

Without hesitation now, Nestor pulled her to him. But she playfully held him back.

“We are both new to this, and I wish to see you,” she breathed.

Now it was her turn to work at his clothes, and it was his turn to help her undo the buttons, untie his cravat, and work to remove his clothes.

After a few imperfectly perfect moments of struggle with his breeches, they both stood naked together, observing each other, amazed by the beautiful bodies that they had both been given.

Slowly, they came together, entwining.

He brought her to lie on the soft bed. Quietly, they laid in each other's arms, staring into each other's eyes, full of wonder.

He wanted her to enjoy this, but it was becoming hard to wait. He stroked his fingers all along her body, and then between her thighs. He drew his fingers into her wet, slick heat. The feel of it nearly undid him.

He felt his cock bob with eagerness to take her, but he had to do this. He wanted to make her feel bliss. So, he watched her face carefully as he stroked her. When her face brightened and her lips parted with shocked pleasure, he knew he had found her special spot.

Margery gasped and arched.

“Guide me,” he murmured as he studied her. “Tell me what you truly like. Do not

hold anything back.”

And he began to circle his fingers.

She moved ever so slightly, and he realized she wanted him to move his fingers a little bit. “Like this?” he asked, for he wanted them to always be truthful with each other.

She nodded, and then he inserted a single finger and then another into her core.

She arched against his hand and a cry of pure pleasure came from her throat. She gripped his arms, and then her breathing slowed. It was time now. He knew this from the way her cheeks had crested pink and her body had tightened.

He moved over her awkwardly, nervous, but ready. Oh, so ready.

Nestor gazed down into her eyes. She nodded that she was ready.

He licked his lips and, with slightly shaking hands, he parted her thighs and positioned himself at her opening. There were no words to describe his feelings in that moment. It was tempting to close his eyes, but instead, he focused on her and then pressed forward.

The perfection of it, the bliss, was so much that he almost lost himself in that single second, but he did not because he knew that he could hurt her.

He was careful as he rocked forward into her tight sheath. He groaned at the effort as he met her maidenhead. She tensed for a moment, gritting her teeth. But then, as soon as he pushed through her barrier, she relaxed, pulling him close to her.

Nestor rocked his hips slowly back and forth, and then instinct took over. He could

no longer hold himself back. He thrust in and out.

She cried out his name, and for the first time in his life, he knew that he had never understood what bliss was. Bliss was Margery.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:02 pm

Could life get any better?

Margery did not think so. Marriage to Nestor was perfection. If she did not have other needs, she would have spent day after day in bed with him, rolling about in linen sheets, learning every bit of him as he learned her.

Luckily, she could do that already for a great deal of the day. But she and Nestor were both energetic people and needed entertainment and exercise. Exercise that was upright.

Her cheeks burned with excitement, thinking of how much exercise of the other kind they had engaged in during the last days.

No doubt, they would soon engage in it again, for he was insatiable! As was she. At long last, Margery felt beautiful. Really and truly beautiful, with Nestor.

But now? It was time! Her most longed for wish as a child was at last coming to fruition.

Her ballet tutor had arrived. Monsieur Georges strode into the salon as morning light spun through it. The chairs and tables and chaise longue had all been moved back earlier in the morning so that they would have adequate space.

The ballet instructor was dressed unlike any gentleman of the ton! He wore bright, elaborate colors, as if Beau Brummell had never been born, and his hair was curled as if he thought Lord Byron had the right of it. He strode with firm, well-shaped legs as if the world belonged to him, and he had no apologies to be made. Ever.

A thrill went down Margery's spine at the sight of him. She was ready to finally dance.

"Ah, my lady," he exclaimed, throwing his arms out, the gesture somehow elegant and enthusiastic at once. "It is my pleasure to teach you. I have been selected by the dowager duchess to show you the art of ballet because apparently ballet is your dream."

"It is," she rushed, all of her usual reticence disappearing under his sunny and grand disposition. "I saw a performance when I was a child, and I was captivated by it. I think everyone should learn ballet."

His brows rose as if he had just discovered a rare find. "You are clearly a very wise lady and a connoisseur of fine art. Louis XIV adored ballet and unlike here in England, in France, over the last century, ballet became its own revered art form, loved for its sake alone and not just as a part of operas."

"Isn't it wonderful?" she gushed. "I hope to see more of that!"

He gave her an elaborate bow then, his fingers nearly scraping the ornately woven carpet. "You are a lady after my heart. Now let us see how you move."

"Room for a few more?" a voice called from the doorway before Nestor strode into the salon. Followed by what felt like an army of young men, though it was only his three cousins.

"Ah, my lord, bien sur!" exclaimed Monsieur Georges. "Your grand-mère did not tell me that you and your cousins were going to take part."

"What?" she breathed, quite surprised but not appalled. Still, she didn't quite understand what was taking place. "I don't understand."

“Do you wish me to go?” Nestor asked, hesitating, looking unsure for a moment.

Maximus, Calchas, and Octavian stopped behind him, all surprisingly with bated breath as if awaiting a verdict. Could they stay or must they go?

All of them were dressed in long linen trousers and open white shirts.

“You wish to learn?” she asked, surprised.

“Whatever is important to you,” he breathed, “is important to me.”

Tears stung her eyes. For it was so very different than all those years ago. What was important to her, as a child, had been ripped from her.

Now, not only was it hers, but her husband wished to be a part of it too.

“You must stay, of course! How could you all miss such a chance?” she said firmly.

Monsieur Georges looked very pleased indeed. “What grand men who understand that movement is power, like Louis XIV, the Sun King, who was an excellent ballet dancer himself.”

“Exactly,” Nestor exclaimed, clapping his hands together as his face lit with confidence. He teased, “These brutes here need a bit more instruction with dancing than I do.”

“Brutes, you say?” Maximus demanded. “I have an excellent ankle.”

And Maximus presented his powerful leg with surprising skill.

Nestor rolled his eyes. “Yes, Maximus, we all know your name suits. You are the

greatest at everything.”

“Glad you can acknowledge it, old boy,” Maximus said.

“You shall soon see, Monsieur Georges, that my wife is an incredible dancer,” Nestor continued. “You will not need to do much with her.”

“That’s not true,” she protested. “Ballet is a unique and special art form. It should take me much time to learn it.”

Monsieur Georges gave her a grand bow again, twirling his wrist. “I already adore you, my lady,” he said. “You are complimenting me and yet you are humble. How can I not admire such a thing? Do you truly think we should allow these gentlemen to participate?” The dance master arched a warning brow. “I do not think they are here to make fun.”

Maximus let out a bleat of horror. “Never. If we came here to make fun, my grandmother would tie me to a tree, pour honey on me, and then unleash one of the bears that is kept by Lord Pankhurst.”

Monsieur Georges blinked. “An interesting proposition, my lord. Yes, the dowager duchess is known to be quite a woman. Glad to know that there will be severe consequences for you if you step out of line.”

Calchas groaned. “It’s true, but we are actually here because we want to be. You see, perhaps you don’t realize this entirely yet, Margery, but we all actually love the theater and performing and dancing. We’re just not quite as good at dancing as you. So, we thought we’d take the opportunity with Monsieur Georges here too.”

“To add to our repertoire, as it were,” put in Octavian.

She let out a laugh. “How could I deny you? You are all my dear cousins, and of course my dear husband’s, and I should like to see you all galloping about.”

“Good,” Monsieur Georges exclaimed, then clapped his hands firmly. “We shall waste no more time. All of you come.”

And then a little figure peeped around the doorframe. “May I join?”

“Cymbeline?” Margery asked, beaming at the young lady. She rarely saw this cousin, for she was often doing her own interpretive work with theater pieces. “Of course you must.”

And suddenly Margery’s heart all but burst with happiness because long ago, when she’d been a little girl, she would’ve dearly loved her mother to hire a ballet instructor. And now she could share it with Cymbeline, who was about sixteen years old and would have her own Season soon.

Cymbeline rushed forward in her beautiful, light pink gown, her hair tumbling down her back. “Thank you,” she exclaimed. “Besides, you need another lady in here. You’re surrounded.”

“It’s true,” Margery returned. “Thank you for being my ally. We shall have to be very careful indeed with all these gents about.”

“I say,” Calchas retorted with faux offense.

Octavian tsked. “As if we could ever mean you all any harm.”

“I’m not afraid of you meaning harm,” said Margery.

“No,” Cymbeline said. “But you are a bunch of boys, and you’ll likely act like fools,

except for you, of course, monsieur.”

Monsieur Georges placed his hand over his heart. “Ma petite, I much appreciate you coming here to protect me and your darling Lady Margery from these big men.”

And with that, he clapped his hands together again, as if bringing a room of unruly school children to order. “Now, in a line, please, tout de suite.”

They all got into line without question.

“Do you call that a line?” Monsieur Georges protested, gesturing up and down. “And two of you are military men and one of you is a naval man! That is not a line. That is some sort of strange wavy abhorrence.”

They quickly corrected themselves into a line that garnered a nod of approval.

Clearing her throat, she found herself terribly excited by Monsieur Georges’ directness.

She had never had this sort of opportunity before. Her dancing masters had been good, but none of them had been like this. None of them had been full of enthusiasm and passion for what they did. No, they were likely doing it because it was the only way they could earn a wage. Whereas it was clear to her that Monsieur Georges was in love with ballet and very excited to pass that love on. Though he looked as if he was expecting them all to be very terrible indeed.

“Now, my students,” he began, “we will warm up our limbs. We shall walk about the room in a circle so that we are limber.”

“But we’ve just got in a line,” Calchas pointed out.

Monsieur pursed his lips. “Ah, you are intelligent, monsieur. I’m so glad you can tell that you are in a line, but you can go from a line to a circle, can you not?”

Octavian fought a grin. “You really set yourself up for that one, Calchas.”

Calchas looked chastened.

“Madame Margery, please take us around the room,” Monsieur Georges instructed.

And with that, Margery did.

“Ah, magnifique,” Monsieur gushed. “You can all walk. How marvelous. If you can walk, I am not so afraid about your dancing abilities, and none of you are walking with odd gaits or bad posture. This is very good. Now come back into line.”

Once they had done so, slowly, carefully, he began teaching them how to stand in correct form.

“In ballet, it is incredibly important that we turn our feet out from our hips. This has been long thought important in ballet, since before the time of Louis XIV. Now you will stand like this.”

And she did exactly as he showed her.

Then, with each passing movement, she learned another piece and another piece and she quickly realized how difficult it was going to be. But she was thrilled from the top of her head to the tips of her turned-out toes because this was something she’d never been allowed to have.

She sneaked a glance at Nestor, who was struggling with his balance, but Nestor sneaked a glance at her and smiled.

“Are you happy?” he mouthed.

She lifted her brows and then she replied, “I’ve never been happier.”

“Of course not,” Monsieur Georges called. “Because you are with me. And Lord Huxton too! The way he looks at madame? Parfait!”

She blushed.

Monsieur Georges walked between them, contemplating the two of them as though they were doing a step, and he observed, “The viscount is a marvelous man, and you are a marvelous lady. All of London should be like you.”

“Like us?” she asked softly.

“Yes,” Monsieur Georges said sincerely. “Open to joy.”

Joy. That was true. That’s exactly what was happening. She was full of joy.

And then Monsieur Georges took them through a few more simple steps. “Bravo, bravo, ladies, gentlemen, you are not a bunch of mules. It is very exciting for me to see. Your priorities are heartening.”

Octavian wagged his brows. “Monsieur Georges, I think it is incredibly important for a gentleman to know how to move. One can’t make the ladies happy if one doesn’t know how to move.”

Monsieur Georges let out a sigh that sounded quite approving. “Mon Dieu! Alas, for women, there are few gentlemen who understand that. But I can see now that my talent will not be wasted in this room. We shall have a great deal of fun together. Shall we put on a performance at Twelfth Night? The country house of the duke

would be most suitable, non?"

"Twelfth Night?" she yelped.

Monsieur Georges shrugged his shoulders. "Well, you have engaged me to come to teach you to dance every day."

"That's true," she admitted, even as her stomach coiled with nerves. "Let us do it."

"Shall we do it in conjunction with a Shakespeare play?" Calchas asked. "We all do love a play."

The ballet master groaned a bit. "We must always work in the theater, I suppose," he said.

"Is the theater so very terrible, monsieur?" Cymbeline asked, batting her lashes, perplexed, for she loved plays very, very much.

"No, ma petite," Monsieur Georges assured kindly. "It's just ballet, in this country, has been in the shadow of theater for so long. But I know this family. They love Shakespeare, don't they? So of course we shall make the world merry with dance and theater. It's dark enough out there sometimes, non?"

Margery was astonished to hear this last part spoken by the dance instructor, but he was right. The world was quite dark, and as she danced these steps with her new teacher and her husband, who wanted her to be happy, and her cousins, who seemed to delight in being with each other, she felt a moment of trepidation.

She felt as if they were standing in a golden moment like that last light that bathes one right before night falls, and a shudder traveled through her.

She was wrong. She swallowed and shook her head. She had to be. She took her stance again, ready to dance some more, ready to pretend as if night would never fall.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:02 pm

The luxurious green-lacquered coach rattled through the cobbled streets of London, heading from Heron House, far on the outskirts of the city, deep into the newest areas which were developing every day. Once, there had been considerable distance between the west of London and Heron House on the river.

Nestor felt certain that with the way the city was growing, one day Heron House might be a part of the great city itself.

Instead of looking out at the new houses and squares and greens that filled the west of London, he focused on his wife and thought of where he was taking her.

Nestor had a very particular place in mind. He was going to take her to one of the oldest parts of the city, one in which his grandmother and grandaunt, Estella, had reveled and still did in many ways.

How he loved London! How could one not? It was a city that was vital, thriving, and beautiful. Some might not say so. Some might say that Paris was the most beautiful city in the world, but he could not agree with that. Over the centuries, London had evolved, surviving fires and plagues and wars. The city had been nearly destroyed by fire under the reign of Charles II. But it was after those flames that many of the most beautiful buildings and churches had been put up. It was a testament to his family's ideas about life. That out of suffering, beautiful things could come. And he was about to invest in that theory both emotionally and physically. Yes, with her approval, they were going to bring to life something that had been almost abandoned long ago.

“Where are we going?” she asked, her face alight with anticipation. Ever since they had wed, it felt as if her happiness had been increasing daily.

“It is a secret,” he whispered playfully. “Though perhaps if you kiss me, I’ll tell you.”

“You are a rogue!” she said, even as her cheeks turned a delicious pink and her lips parted.

“I know, but you love it.”

“Well, that’s because you are wonderful at kissing.”

He grabbed her hand and pulled her across the coach to sit upon his lap. He linked his arms about her and nuzzled her neck. “I did not imagine that anyone could ever be as happy as I am now,” he said.

“That has to be a lie,” she replied, tilting her head back so that he could kiss the line of her neck.

“What?” he exclaimed. “How could you say such a thing to me, your husband?”

She tugged on the lapel of his fine great coat. “Because I have met your entire family, and they are all ludicrously happy. So, of course you know that such happiness exists. I’m the one who should say such a thing.”

“And are you?” he queried, his breath catching in his throat.

Was she happy? Was he succeeding?

“Yes,” she said as she traced her fingers over his cravat, tracing the stick pin. “Though I confess, it is a rather new thing. Part of me fears that you’ll be seized at any moment and taken from me. I was accustomed to suffering for so long.”

Gently, he took her chin between his thumb and forefinger. “You’re mine now to take

care of and nothing shall harm you ever again.”

“Oh, Nestor,” she said. “You are truly a knight on a white horse, aren’t you?”

His lips twitched. “Well spotted. I used to dream that I was one of the knights of the era of chivalry.”

“You would have looked magnificent on a charger,” she replied.

“Why, thank you, but the truth is, the reality of those knights was quite different than the fiction. They were all a bunch of brutes, terrorizing the countryside, and then in stories, they sang songs and recited poetry to the women they loved.”

“What a conundrum,” she breathed. “Humans are such odd creatures.”

“I cannot argue with you on that point,” he said.

The coach rolled to a stop. His hands tightened about her. “Are you ready for your surprise?”

“You leave me quite mystified.” She glanced out the window. “It’s not Bond Street. So you haven’t brought me to buy any clothes or jewels.”

“Do you need more clothes?” he asked, ready to take her shopping after this visit should she require it.

“No,” she exclaimed. “You have made certain that I have everything that I could possibly need. And honestly, if I have to have another visit to the modiste, I shall expire under a pile of fabric and hats.”

A laugh rumbled out of him. “Well, we wouldn’t want to have such a death on my

hands, would we?”

“No. It would be far too tragic,” she teased as he reluctantly helped her off his lap. How he wished to make love to her. But it would have to wait. He wanted to make love to her all day long, every day.

It amazed him how making love to her did not make him feel satiated. Oh no, he longed for more of her. And she was very generous. They were as one on that score. Later, as soon as they arrived home, he would have to sweep her away to their retreat in the woods and show her just what sitting upon his lap could do to him.

The footman opened the coach door, and Nestor pulled himself together, stepped down quickly, turned, and offered her his hand. She slipped her lace-gloved hand into his and carefully stepped down. He made certain that she did not step into any of the mire that was on the London street and guided her towards the pavement.

“Where are we?” she asked, glancing about. “This looks a great deal like Covent Garden and the area near Drury Lane and your grandaunt’s theater.”

“You are not far wrong,” he said, keeping hold of her hand, mindful of her delicate leather boots as they traversed the pavement. “We are very close to my grandaunt’s theater. Now, I suggest you look up.”

She blinked and pressed a hand to her pink straw bonnet. “At the sky? It’s becoming gray. It will rain soon.”

“Yes. The end of summer is fast approaching,” he agreed patiently, feeling like a boy on Christmas morning, for he was so excited. “We shall all have to go to the country soon. Do you mind?”

“Not at all,” she replied, the ribbons on her bonnet dancing ever so slightly. “I should

love to see where you spent so much time as a child.”

“Good. But I think you should see this before we head out to the estate.”

“What is it?” she queried, her brow furrowing with confusion.

“This,” he said simply. “It’s yours.”

“Mine?” She shook her head and laughed, clearly enjoying the outing but still not sure of what he meant. “What’s mine? London?” she teased.

“No,” he murmured before turning and gesturing before him. “The building.”

“The building?” And then she looked confused again.

“The Duke Theater,” he exclaimed.

Her jaw dropped, and she tilted her head back, taking in the once-stunning facade as his words began to register. “A theater? For me? Why?”

“Because,” he said playfully, “of what can happen inside a theater.”

And with that, he pulled out a large key and opened the door. They slipped inside the dark space. It was musty and full of dust and broken furniture. The foyer had once been truly grand. It had been built in the days of Charles II. It was a beautiful theater, meant to host the most important of Londoners and the lowest as well. So that everyone could have entertainment.

“Come,” he urged. “Let me show you.”

He led her to where the audience would have sat so long ago, and he and Margery

gazed at the stage, which was bare now. The curtains hung ragged, but when she looked up, she let out a gasp.

“How beautiful,” she breathed.

Celestial beings were painted on the ceiling and old chandeliers drooped, like once great dowagers who had lost their shine. Spiderwebs had left their long-ago lace-like veils amongst the crystal and along the walls.

“Why is this for me?” she asked, lowering her gaze back to him.

He was silent for a moment. It was a large gift. Perhaps a ridiculous gift. But he hadn’t purchased the theater to impress her. He had bought it for the little girl she had once been. So, he replied simply, “Because you love the ballet.”

She stilled. “You know I can’t perform here, Nestor.”

“You could if you truly wanted to,” he said, “but I understand that might be a bit much even for us Briarwoods. Yet, here you could see the ballet thrive in England. This theater will be different than all the rest in London, if you wish it. We can refurbish it, and you can make it a dedicated theater for dance. What do you think?”

She turned about slowly now, as if seeing the aged building anew, seeing the spirit that longed to be reborn. “You can’t possibly be serious, can you?”

“I am.”

“You’re giving it to me?”

He crossed to her, standing just behind her, loving how close she felt as she gazed at the stage again. He wound their hands together and whispered, “Yes, though I’d like

to help you run it, if you don't mind."

She swallowed. "You wish to run a theater. With me?"

She suddenly shivered.

"What is it?" he asked, suddenly nervous. "Have I done something wrong?"

"No." And then a laugh, so pure, so full of joy, bubbled up from her. It bounced off the walls and ceiling and seemed to echo through the building. "I swear I just felt my mother and father roll in their graves. They would have been horrified by such an idea. Me running a theater? Me hiring dancers and performers and supervising productions? They would have hated it."

"Do you hate it?" he asked, barely able to contain his hope that he had found her just what she needed. All his aunts and uncles had causes they supported, but he had not known what he should do beyond his usual charities. But Margery's deep love of ballet had been evident in the way she never missed a lesson with Monsieur Georges.

And so this had seemed the perfection solution. The world needed more beauty, more art, more dancing.

"Hate it?" she breathed. "I love it. Somehow, you have seen my dream, the one I had as a girl, and given it to me, Nestor."

His heart melted at that. How could it not? And the triumph he felt was the most powerful thing he'd ever known. "You can do as much or as little as you'd like," he began. "You can ask for the expertise of my grandaunt and my grandmother. Or you can never have a Shakespeare performance on this stage and dedicate it to dancing alone, for we do not need to care if it turns a profit."

“You don’t need to care if it turns a profit?” she asked, agog.

He smiled at her, pulling her into his arms. “No, it is for our pleasure. Not for our purse. And if our lives are full of pleasure, our purses will increase.”

She slipped from his embrace for a moment and began to walk forward. She drew her fingers over the broken seats, turned slowly, crossed up to the stage, and let her hands hover just over the boards. For a moment, he watched her as if she was lost in another world. He could swear that she was envisioning future performances of dancers leaping across the stage, turning and pirouetting in grand costumes, telling stories that would fill the hearts of Londoners.

“Nestor,” she said, “this is not what a duchess is supposed to do.”

“You are not a duchess yet,” he reminded, following her to the stage. “And even when you are, it won’t matter,” he replied.

“Why not?” she protested, whipping around to face him.

“Because,” he said without hesitation, “my grandmother became a duchess. She was one of the greatest actresses on the London stage. She raised herself up.”

“Wouldn’t it be seen as though I am descending?” she lamented, her voice barely more than a whisper as if she couldn’t quite give herself permission to have all of this.

“No,” he said. “When you are one of us, you can do whatever you wish, and I wish you to actually do what you wish. And it’s clear to me that you have loved dancing since you were little, and you’ve begun to claim that desire back bit by bit. But now I want you to seize it. Without apology or hesitation.”

“Oh, Nestor,” she exclaimed and rushed into his arms.

They were quite alone in the theater. It was still and quiet, ghost-like. Almost as if they could feel the presence of the hundreds and hundreds of people who had come here night after night, witnessing stories told on the stage. He could almost feel the spirits of the performers too, their souls and lives spent entertaining those who had come to this place for near a century.

“The king came here, you know?” he said softly, tracing his hands along her back. “Charles II loved the theater. As did his dear mistress, Nell Gwynn. It’s said they came here together.”

“Truly?” she asked, her eyes alight with enthusiasm.

“Yes,” he affirmed, eager to share all the stories he knew. Eager to see that look in her eyes only increase. “And David Garrick is said to have performed on the stage. One of the few places he performed that wasn’t the Garrick Theatre. And I think that this old place deserves a second chance, don’t you?”

She slipped her hands up to cup his face. “I think everyone and everything deserves a second chance if they once had goodness in their heart,” she said softly.

“Then we shall resurrect it?”

“We shall,” she said. “Monsieur Georges will be so pleased. Would you mind terribly if I appointed him as the ballet director?”

“I cannot imagine anyone else.”

The truth was Monsieur Georges had been adrift for many years, being only a tutor and sometimes dancing for the theater or the opera. Monsieur Georges had once been

one of the most renowned dancers in Paris. But he had had to leave all of that behind, fleeing because he had been too close to a member of the royal family. And he had also apparently felt he could no longer live with people who killed so wildly and cared so little for the happiness and lives of others.

“Yes,” he said. “This would be the most wonderful place for him.”

“For us,” she said.

And he took her into his arms, but then she gently smiled and said, “There is something I must share with you.”

“I am with child,” she said softly as she gazed up into his eyes, searching for his reaction. She had suspected it for a week, but she’d finally sought out an answer and had gotten it this very day.

“I beg your pardon?” he blurted, his eyes wide, his face astonished as if she had spoken Greek rather than English.

“The doctor confirmed it this morning,” she explained. “He came when you were out on your morning constitutional with your cousins.”

“You are with child,” he said simply, as if her words were finally being absorbed.

She nodded, swallowing. She’d never expected to feel so nervous. But she did. “Are you pleased?”

He let out a cheer of triumph and his face shone with pure happiness as he picked her up in his strong arms. “How could I not be pleased?” he all but crowed. “This is the greatest wish of any man!”

“I don’t know if that’s true for everyone,” she said, her own nerves now easing, replaced by joy at his reaction. “But it certainly is true of your family!”

“This is the best news I have ever received,” he continued happily. “You have given me so much!”

His pleasure filled her with bubbling satisfaction. All her life, she had tried to please people and to see how much joy she’d given her husband was an utter triumph!

After he twirled her around, he set her down.

They slowed, gazing into each other’s eyes, and she at last felt as if she had found her purpose. She had fulfilled the role she’d been born for. This was the pinnacle of her life.

Nestor kissed her fully, powerfully in their empty theater. She knew that he was going to make love to her now, and she wanted that. She wanted to feel completely unified with him in this moment.

So, without ado, she urged softly, “Make love to me.”

His smile turned wolfish, that male look of satisfaction that she had come to recognize and adore. For it meant that he was about to take her into pure ecstasy.

“I love this side of you,” he growled before kissing the curve of her neck, just above the collar of her spencer.

If she was honest, she did too. Once, she would’ve been far too reticent to do something like this—something so wild—but with him, she was capable of anything. Capable of being totally free.

He had helped her to give herself permission to take what she desired.

As Nestor shrugged off his great coat and laid it out on the floor and lowered her down, she bit her lower lip, anticipating what was to come.

He stretched out beside her, caressing her body through her gown, and then he began to inch up her skirts.

She looked up at the fresco upon the ceiling and studied the celestial beings as he began to kiss his way up her limbs, pausing on her inner thighs.

He kissed and kissed until he parted her legs and found her most secret place. Over the weeks, he had gotten better and better at this, because he paid so much attention to what she actually liked.

He took her folds into his mouth and licked her, teasing his tongue over the petals. She wound her hands into his hair, gasping, arching at the perfect feel of his mouth taking her to heaven.

She could scarcely think now as she stared up at the beautifully painted figures overhead, so lost was she in the magic that he could work upon her body.

And then he slid one finger and another into her, teasing that miraculous spot inside her body.

She had never even known that it existed until him, but now she was keenly aware of it as he teased it over and over again with his fingers.

As his mouth worked over her sex, and she felt herself tossed wildly into her need for him, he pressed his tongue against the apex of her folds.

A wild moan rumbled from her throat as bliss pulsed through her and her world spun about.

Nestor swiftly undid his breeches, then thrust into her hot, welcoming body.

He paused for a moment, connecting with her as he always did. For this was never about just one of them. He always made it about them, their union, their shared joining.

Margery's heart expanded then. If she had thought she'd known love before, she realized it had been a pale imitation of what she now felt for this man. She wrapped her legs about his powerful waist and urged him home.

Their gazes locked, and as if only they existed, they melded into one. One being. One heart. One storm of perfect passion.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:02 pm

Several Weeks Later

Like a rare plant finally given the attention it deserves, Monsieur Georges was thriving in the countryside.

They had brought him with them to the famous estate of the Westleigh name. After all, they had much to do to renovate the theater, and Monsieur Georges was going to be a part of the design process. There was also the fact that Margery didn't wish to stop dancing, even though she was with child. And Monsieur Georges seemed to like the idea of getting away from London for a little while.

She had always disliked her own family's estate. After all, she'd been allowed to enjoy so little there. She had not taken to the gardens or enjoyed the forests. But here, oh, bliss! Oh, heaven.

Perhaps that sounded trite, but the fields and streams and forests upon the estate filled her soul with a peace that had long eluded her. It was like finally, truly coming home to herself.

Here, she felt as if she had finally been transported into a place where she could be one with herself and the world about her. The countryside was so beautiful. She could at last understand why some people spent their whole lives dwelling out of doors or committed entirely to the beautification and preservation of nature.

The house, well, castle really, was magnificent, and here she felt entirely free to roam and discover all the old place's secrets and histories as her middle began to grow.

Portia's grew too.

It was absolutely wonderful to have a companion in this experience.

The first weeks had been quite difficult. She had sipped tea and drank beef broth, and she understood why Portia had looked so very green most of the time, but she was now beginning to feel completely and totally alive. Exhausted but alive.

And she danced every day with Monsieur Georges to keep her spirits up and her body in good health. When they were not dancing, Monsieur Georges was either dancing in his own personal chamber to keep up his physique, or he was going on long walks, or he was working on the miniature reproduction of the Duke Theater that they had assembled in the library.

It was like an elaborate doll house of the theater building that they could alter with several choices that the architect had supplied to them.

So, daily, she and Monsieur Georges got together and rearranged the miniature curtains, the chairs, the boxes to see what might suit best.

And then Cymbeline, who was also quite an excellent artist, would join them and sketch their plans so that they could be sent to London to inspire the architect and make the build possible. The theater would likely be ready for its first production in a year's time.

She wouldn't see the progress though, for they would now be in the countryside for months. And frankly, she was rather looking forward to just being with family, to just being with her husband, to watching her belly grow.

It was sheer perfection.

At their estate, the Briarwoods seemed louder than ever. One would've thought that in the city, they would seem the loudest, with all of them piled into Heron House.

After all, while Heron House was a large home for town, there were so many of them! Surely, they should have created a cacophony that would resonate off the walls.

But in the country, they shouted and laughed, played games, sang at the top of their lungs, and orated all day long. Margery did not ever have a moment alone. It was rather thrilling.

There were even more cousins who ran this way and that. All of the adopted children of Achilles and his wife, that they had taken in from Europe, thrived, playing games all over the green or taking lessons from their tutors.

The younger cousins also rushed about with a pack of nannies and nurses, ensuring that none of them toddled into ponds or down staircases.

It was hard to believe how many Briarwoods there were, but they all acted as a family. No one was made to feel as if they were different. It was such a shock to Margery, the way that everyone was taken in by the Briarwoods, and there was no differentiation between those who were Briarwoods by blood and those who were Briarwoods by choice.

Portia bustled out of the breakfast room and caught sight of Margery standing in the foyer. She was contemplating whether she should go for a long walk or go practice some of the particularly difficult steps that Monsieur Georges had tasked her with.

"Come along with me," Portia gushed as if she could read Margery's thoughts. "The day is far too fine to stay indoors."

Margery looked to the windows. It was true. The cold would come quite soon, the air would turn brisk, and then there would be rain. Heaps and heaps of rain. Rain would slash down from the sky, keeping them all indoors.

So, she nodded and said, "Let us go."

She and Portia linked arms, and they headed outside, down the elaborate, beautiful steps, out past the formal gardens, and they strode and strode, allowing the sunshine to spill down upon them.

"Do you want a boy or a girl?" Portia asked quite boldly.

"Honestly, I don't know," she replied. She worried her lip. "I suppose I want a boy, though I am loathe to admit it," said Margery. "It is my duty to bear an heir."

"Oh, duty," Portia huffed, but then she nodded her understanding and leaned towards her. "Yes, I suppose it's true, and I would be most disingenuous if I didn't say that an heir, of course, is important to a duke. The truth is, I feel the same," Portia replied.

"Do you really? I know Rufus would be terribly happy if you had a daughter."

"I'm sure he would," Portia agreed. "He's a darling, but he needs an heir too."

"It is very difficult being a woman, isn't it?" Margery asked, thinking of the many, many women over hundreds of years in this country who had felt the pressure to produce a male heir, loving husband or no.

"Yes, I think so," Portia said. "The gentlemen do their job, and then we have to make the babies, and we have to pray that they will come out with the right sex."

"Right sex," Margery echoed with a groan. "What a terrible thing, really."

“It’s true, but it’s the way English society works,” Portia lamented. “Only male heirs inherit. It’s not fair, and it’s not right. I know many young ladies who are far superior to their brothers who inherit the title. But until Parliament changes and gains some wisdom, it is how it is. Still, I suppose all I truly care about is a healthy child. I would hate it if something happened,” Portia said softly.

Margery gave her sister-in-law’s arm a squeeze. “Have you worried about that?”

“Only a little,” Portia confessed with a taut smile. “I try not to think any dark thoughts.”

“I feel the same,” agreed Margery. “You see, I knew quite enough darkness before. I don’t need any more.”

“Of course not,” Portia affirmed, her smile nervous but determined. “And besides, I agree, you surely shan’t have any more since you have already had your fair share of suffering.”

Except Margery wondered if that was how life really worked, that one could have their fair share of suffering. She wasn’t certain.

They headed out farther along the stone-fenced fields, looking at the glorious countryside covered in ancient oak trees, verdant hills, and lush lanes. “England is so beautiful,” she breathed. “We really are quite lucky to live here. It’s so sad that my parents were both so terribly miserable.”

Portia nodded, rueful. “Yes, because their misery compounded and was passed on. Thank goodness you and Rufus will never do that to your own children.”

“No,” she said firmly, her heart pounding. “Never.”

What a chance it was to fix the past! To right the wrongs her parents had done. She would never hurt her child. Oh, she could not wait to hold her baby in her arms and bathe it in love. Her child would only know love and be surrounded by people who did not have a bitter bit in them.

As they continued to walk, she tilted her face back and enjoyed the sun, and she ignored the strange little twinge in her left side. But then, as it grew and became more intense, she forced herself to admit her discomfort. “I think we should head back. I’m not feeling particularly well. I think I’ve gone too far today.”

“Well then, of course we must,” Portia said gently, and they turned back.

She looked and spotted the castle far in the distance, its roofline beckoning like some fairy tale apparition. Her lips tilted into a smile. She truly had found everything that she was meant to, every bit of happiness.

Pain stabbed through her lower back.

And that’s when she realized that, of course, it was all going to be taken away, for the twinge increased and pulsed through her lower body.

“Portia,” she rasped, instinct taking over.

“Mmm?”

“Something is wrong,” she bit out.

“What is wrong?” Portia asked, still not quite realizing the gravity of the turn of events.

“Something...” she said. She couldn’t articulate it, but she was suddenly afraid, and

her entire body felt clammy and cold. A chill raced through her. “We need to get back to the house at once,” she said.

Portia’s eyes grew wide with alarm, and her hold on Margery’s arm turned into a fierce grip. “Of course.”

But now, every step she took was one filled with pain.

“What is amiss?” Portia asked, though the fear in her eyes told Margery that she had a suspicion.

“My belly,” she whimpered. “It shouldn’t feel like this.”

Portia’s face grew white. “Everything will be fine. You must not allow yourself to give in to worry, Margery,” she said, as if she was trying to convince herself too.

“Yes, of course,” Margery replied with a forced smile that felt like a grimace. “I shall see a physician and have a little rest and a little bit of beef broth. Then I’ll put my feet up, and all shall be well.”

But even as she said the words, terror shot through her. It was a terror so intense she could scarce breathe or think, and her heart beat so fast she felt as if her body was burning.

She had not let herself think about how dangerous childbirth was. After all, why would she? She’d found her fairy tale, her happy life, where nothing could touch her. Marrying Nestor had meant that, hadn’t it? Nothing could hurt her anymore. Even he had said it.

But now, she realized that it had been an entire illusion. Death still happened. Illness and poverty still plagued the masses. The world still careened with injustice, and war

still raged on the Continent. Reality crashed in upon her, fantasy departed, and her body began to rebel.

“It hurts,” she moaned. “I don’t know if I can keep going.”

“You must,” Portia all but begged. “We are close now. I would carry you if I could, but—”

“No, you mustn’t, Portia,” she soothed, even as tears began to fill her eyes at the pain. “I wouldn’t wish anything to happen to you as well.”

So together, arm and arm, they stumbled back towards the castle until they spotted a figure in the distance.

Nestor.

He was standing, as if awaiting their return.

The moment she spotted her husband, her whole soul cried out for him. He would save her. He would make this all right again. It was what Nestor always did.

“We need help!” Portia cried. “Help!”

Nestor tensed for a single moment, then charged across the fields. Within what felt like moments, he swept Margery into his arms, cradling her against his broad chest. “My love,” he called, “whatever is it?”

“The baby, Nestor,” she whispered, wishing she did not say it. Wishing she could pretend it was anything but this. “I feel something is wrong.”

Portia began to race towards the house. “I shall let Grandmama know and send for a

physician.”

Nestor nodded. He said nothing as he carried her towards the castle. They crossed into the foyer.

This was so very different than when she'd met Portia before their walk. There was no happiness or joyous anticipation of a day in the sunlight or an afternoon dancing. No, Nestor rushed up the many wide staircases to their bedroom. He did not look back. He did not look side to side. He did not even look down at her.

In one deft move, he opened the door and strode to the massive four-poster bed. He laid her out gently on the goose-down mattress. Then he sat down beside her and took her hand. He looked into her eyes.

“Everything will work out just as it should, Margery,” he said.

But terror was on his face. He was trying to convince her that he was not full of fear, but she couldn't be tricked. No, he was humming with alarm.

“That is what I'm afraid of,” she murmured as she slowly began to feel the strangest thing... As if all this wasn't real. The pain, the knowledge that death was standing at her door, eager to come in.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“My life has always been suffering, Nestor.” Tears slipped down her cheeks, but she scarcely noticed them. Oh no, for she was confronting reality now. “What if it always will be?”

“Don't say that,” he begged, his voice rough with emotion.

“But what if it’s true?” she bit out.

And then pain so intense there were no words for it burned through her and she cried out—a wild, fierce sound that pierced the castle.

And from the look on Nestor’s face, his heart.

She grabbed Nestor’s hand so hard, she knew her nails were biting into him, and all the happiness she thought she’d found began to slip away. She’d lost it. She knew that she had. She’d lost her future, her joy, and her purpose.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:02 pm

Nestor stood helpless as he watched the life literally slip out of his wife. She was on the bed, writhing in pain, where they had spent so many happy hours. No, that wasn't quite true. Writhing was not the correct word. When all this had first started, she had begun to arch and cry out in agony.

Nothing could soothe her.

No one could help her.

Her brow broke out in a sweat. Her hair was now soaked and her sweat coated the pillows.

His aunts all rushed into the room with linens and towels. His uncles and male cousins were waiting, not down in the study, but out in the hall, quiet, supportive, waiting for any news. And when this was all over, Nestor knew they would be waiting to help him through this.

His mother was sitting beside her at the top of her head, stroking her hair, telling her what a good girl she was.

Nestor choked back tears. He did not think he could do this. But if she had to endure it, he certainly would. He would never leave her alone. Still, as he stood there, the only male in the room besides the physician, he felt alone. He felt so entirely alone, he did not know what to do.

He was a man. Surely, he could do something. He had power. Surely, he could do something. He was the heir to a dukedom. Surely, he could do something. He had

more money than most could ever hope to comprehend. Surely, he could do something. But as he stood there in the elaborate chamber where they had danced together, read together, dreamed together, he knew that there was not a damn thing he could do except ask God to save her.

But she was growing weaker and weaker by the moment.

It was clear. Her eyelids kept fluttering shut. Her face was as white as her night rail and the embroidered pillow beneath her dark hair. And he knew by looking at his mother that things were very bad indeed.

If he had thought all of this was going to turn out well, as he had tried to assure Margery it would, that notion had been disabused by the pure terror on his mother's face. His mother was not a woman who was easily shaken, but she sat beside Margery whispering over and over to her how wonderful she was and how she was doing such excellent work.

From his mother's intensity and the way she was holding Margery, he knew that at any moment, they wouldn't just lose the baby that had been within her, but Margery too.

His mouth dried as the physician lifted the linen from Margery's legs to re-examine her.

The sheets were all stained crimson with blood at the bottom of the bed. The physician's shoulders sagged.

An hour ago, the baby, which had been so very small, had been taken away quickly, without a word, wrapped up in a linen sheet.

A sob choked out of Margery's throat.

She was still awake, still conscious enough to know that she had lost her child.

Mercy looked to him and nodded.

He needed no further encouragement. He crossed over to her, sat on the side opposite his mother, and took his wife's hand in his.

"My love," he said, eager to give her comfort, any comfort at all.

She turned her eyes to him. "Am I dying?" she asked softly.

"Of course you are not," he rushed, though he was afraid he was lying, and it was all he could do not to rattle apart.

"You keep calling me 'my love,'" she breathed, her eyes glassy. "It cannot mean I am doing well. You've never said that before."

He closed his eyes for a moment, hating himself for not saying it sooner. Hating himself for not realizing it sooner. "Margery, I say it because I do love you."

She looked at him as if she could not believe his words. Her lashes fluttered. "You don't need to say nice things to me right now. It's not important," she said, and then her face creased with agony. Not the physical kind, but the sort that makes one coil and curl up on oneself because one's soul is being twisted with despair. "The only thing that was important has gone away, and I cannot bear it. I think..."

And then her voice died off as her body convulsed, and she let out a wild cry of pain.

He held tightly to her hand. "Margery," he begged, his voice raw to his own ears, "don't you leave me. Don't you dare leave me. I will not allow it. Do you understand? You must stay here with me, my love."

The physician looked up then at the duchess and at him and gave a shake of his head. “It doesn’t look good. If she doesn’t stop losing blood, then I will not be able to save her. I am so sorry about the child, Your Grace and my lord, but this is a serious situation. She should make her peace.”

Peace? Peace?! It was all Nestor could do not to let go of Margery’s hand, cross to the physician, and throttle him. If the physician thought he’d let his wife go so easily, the man was greatly mistaken.

But he did not let go of his wife’s hand and, much to his relief, his grandmother swept into the room. It was not her usual sort of sweeping. She was not the grand actress now. No, there was something else there. Something far more dangerous and far more steely.

“Thank you, physician. You’ve been extremely helpful.” The dowager gave the man a kind look, for he likely had done all he could. “You may step out of the room now.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” the physician said without question, but before he left, the two exchanged a glance, almost if they knew what was about to transpire.

“I have brought someone to help her,” his grandmother said softly. “Nestor, Margery needs help.”

Nestor nodded his head swiftly. “Whatever you think.”

“The physician can do no more,” his grandmother said, her voice heavy. “He has made that plain, and so there’s really only one chance left and that’s Mother Hannah. She’s a local midwife. She often helps our physician when his own knowledge fails. And she has been delivering babies for years and years and years. She actually advises many of the local physicians when things are not going well. At least the intelligent ones who will take the advice and sense of a woman who has been doing

this because her mother did this, and her mother before her.”

After these serious words, his grandmother turned to the bed and leaned down. “Now, my darling girl,” the dowager duchess said, reaching out and gently stroking Margery’s hair. “You must listen to Mother Hannah, do you understand? And you must do exactly as she says.”

Margery let out a cry. “I don’t want to listen to anyone. I just want to go to sleep.”

“No,” Nestor said. “You mustn’t. You must not...”

“Nestor, please,” Margery cried, her spirit broken. “Just let me go to sleep.”

“No,” his grandmother countered, her body brittle with the danger of the moment. “Your husband is right, Margery. You cannot go to sleep. Do you understand me?”

Nestor heard footsteps and turned to see an older woman slip into the room. Her gnarled hands and wizened face were assuring. As if she would remain calm, as if she would stand true, no matter the force of the storm.

She was not frightened. There was not even a mark of resignation about her like there had been with the physician in those final moments.

Mother Hannah seemed perfectly calm, rational, and at ease as she strode slowly in in her woolen shawl and woolen skirts, a basket on her arm.

“My goodness, it seems as if a great battle is taking place,” Mother Hannah said kindly. “Now, there are too many soldiers and too much fear. Everyone needs to step back and take a breath. And we won’t be losing our young woman here.”

She crossed over to Margery, looked at her face, then looked at her hands and her

feet.

“Margery,” the old woman prompted.

“Y-yes, Mother Hannah?” she said.

Mother Hannah began to dig in her basket. “You know the truth of it, don’t you, my girl?”

Tears slipped out of Margery’s eyes, but she nodded.

“The baby has died, but you have done a wonderful job of bringing it into the world as best you could, and it shall be given a very proper burial, and it will be there waiting for you when it is your time to cross over. But you must not go join it now. Do you understand? You are needed here.”

“Was it a boy?” Margery suddenly asked.

There was a long quiet pause.

“I cannot say,” Mother Hannah said softly.

Another sob wracked Margery’s body, a wild cry.

“Yes, my darling girl. That’s it,” his mother encouraged. “You tell the world of your grief. You let us all know how much suffering it is, how much pain it is. Do not hold back. Show us that you are alive.”

“I don’t want to be alive,” Margery ground out.

Nestor squeezed her hand, completely lost, completely unable to feel grief for the lost

child because he was standing before the yawning abyss that longed to swallow up his wife.

“You do, my love. You do. You cannot leave me here. You cannot leave me to face all of this alone. Stay. Stay for me.”

Margery turned to him then, her eyes softening. “You’ve never been alone, have you?”

He shook his head. “No, and I won’t know what to do if you leave me alone. I don’t care if that makes me selfish.”

“But you wouldn’t be alone,” she said, licking her dry lips. “You would have all your family.”

“You are my family,” he cut in. “What is my family without my Margery?”

And then he could not look at anything but his wife’s face as Mother Hannah began to work with her salves and her tinctures. She gave Margery something to drink.

“That will calm her,” she said. “Soothe her. The agitation is not helping. All of you, please do assure her of your love for her and how important and necessary she is here. Believe it or not, thoughts and words can help a great deal, and we must turn hers.”

She pulled Nestor aside. “I will do my best to stop the bleeding, my lord, but you must not stop. You must tell her how important it is that she stays. Over and over. I will also tell the same to your grandmother and your mother. Your wife wants to die and be with her child. It is very normal for a mother to feel this way. Women become so attached to the child that is growing inside them. It doesn’t matter how young that child is. And in a way, I’m quite grateful that it was early on. If it had been further

along, saving her life could prove more complicated. Even so, we are on very difficult ground. We shall hopefully know by morning, unless, of course, a fever takes hold. And if fever takes hold, there will be nothing that I can do for her. Nothing will help her then. Not anyone. Not anything. She will be in the hands of God. Do you understand me?"

Nestor nodded. He could not speak. His voice was twisted.

"I understand it is hard to talk now," Mother Hannah said, gently placing a wrinkled, kind hand on his arm, "but you must. You must go to her side, and you must talk to her all through the night. You must never cease. Do you understand? Because she will be tempted to go, and you cannot let her give into that temptation."

"I understand," he said, drawing himself up.

Nestor crossed to the bed, ready to do all that was required to keep his wife here in this world with him. Alive. For he could not bear the idea that she might leave him, because it was true what he had said. He loved her. He thought he was supposed to make her happy. What a fool he had been. It was she who had made him happy.

And if she left, she would take that happiness with her, and he would never ever know happiness again.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:02 pm

“Why did you marry me?”

Nestor blinked, slowly emerging from a fitful sleep. He'd been sitting beside the bed, his head resting on his hands, which were pressed into the goose-down mattress.

Dawn pooled through the tall windows of the bedchamber, spilling its soft light over the woven rug, onto the bed, and over him. Her voice, his beautiful, heroic wife's voice, slipped through that light and penetrated his heart. But there was no light in that voice. That voice was full of darkness.

Despite this realization, he was so grateful that he was hearing it.

“You're awake,” he whispered, his hope growing. “You're awake.”

She had finally drifted to sleep late into the night, when Hannah had deemed that it was safe for her to do so. The bleeding had stopped. The universe, the creator God, had shined its light upon Margery and kept her in this world. And his gratitude was so strong that as he lifted his head from his arms and looked at her, he did not at first see how she truly was.

No, he was full of such intense happiness to still have her here that he rushed, “I love you.”

“No, Nestor. That is not what I asked,” she said, her voice deep with shadow. “You need to answer my question.”

He frowned, his own mind muddy with lack of sleep and fatigue from the events of

the night.

She was pale and weak upon the bed. Her hands were limp. Her hair dark with sweat that had dried long ago.

“Your question?” he prompted.

“Why did you marry me?” Her eyes were two dark pools, not of sorrow but of emptiness. The pain had transformed into something else, and for a terrifying moment, he feared that though she had not died, her spirit had departed.

“I married you because I wanted to make you happy,” he admitted quickly.

The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them, but something about her had compelled him to speak the utter truth.

She narrowed his eyes then, her face hardening like a steel blade. “To make me happy?” she echoed. “And why did you want to make me happy?”

A hard edge tinted those words, and he felt a wave of trepidation.

“Because I saw how much you had suffered,” he confessed. Whatever he had hoped those words would instill in her, they did not.

Her mouth turned into a straight line, and she looked away from him. “You pitied me,” she spat out.

“What?” he gasped.

“You pitied me,” she repeated. “That’s why you wanted to marry me. You felt sorry for me. You didn’t love me, Nestor, not like I loved you. From the moment that I saw

you that day at Heron House, my heart fell in love with you, not with some version that I thought you could be. I knew at that moment that you were the best and most beautiful man in the world, and I knew you were too good for me, too much, but I still longed for you.”

“And you have me, my love,” he insisted, a sort of frantic panic welling up inside him, but he willed it down. She needed him.

“Cease,” she said. “Cease saying that.” She was silent for a long moment, but then, like a judge reading out a death sentence, she intoned, “The ton was right. Lady Magnolia’s mother was right. Lady Wilhelmina and Lady Annabelle were right.”

“What do you mean?” he gritted. “They weren’t right about anything.”

She whipped her head back to him. “Yes, they were. You married me because you felt sorry for me, and you pitied me, and you thought you could transform me like a savior, a white knight on a horse. And I should be grateful. I am grateful. But you didn’t want me. You wanted who you thought I’d become if you saved me. And you did save me...” Her lips trembled and her eyes turned darker. She wound her hands into the sheets, gripping tight. “Nestor, I had only two tasks, to be happy for you and bear a child. I have failed. Failed you. Failed myself. Failed...”

At her words, his entire body railed at the heavens. “It is I who have failed you,” he countered.

She blew out a harsh breath. “You can’t make me happy, Nestor. No one can. Not ever again. Not after this.”

She sobbed softly. “Not after this. I want you to go now. Leave me. You never should have married me. This was always going to end in tragedy. My life is always going to be full of tragedy. I don’t deserve happiness. My mother knew that. My father knew

that. I am not worthy of it. They saw it from the moment I was born as a baby. They must have known. They had to scold and struggle and force me to be good, force me to be worthy of what I was born to receive. Which was a title and wealth. They must have looked at me and been ashamed, for that's how they treated me. Shame... That must be all that I'm worth. And you? You tried to give me joy and happiness and acceptance, and look what has happened? Our child..." Her voice died off and she turned her face to the wall.

"Go," she said.

There was a dark, frightened part of him that wanted to run, that wanted to leave her, to head out into the hall and escape the gnashing, ugly pain of the moment. Her rejection of all that he had hoped for, of her twisting of his intentions. But he refused to go.

"I can take it," he said firmly.

"What?" she whispered, confused.

"Your pain," he said gently but without relent. "Unleash it upon me, my love. I don't care what you need to say to me. I don't care how much you need to hurt me. I will not leave you. I am here for you. I will endure it. I am strong enough. I promise you."

Her shoulders began to shake then, and he climbed up onto the bed and pulled her into his arms. "I will never leave you. I will never leave you," he chanted over and over again. "I love you. I love you," he repeated.

He willed her to accept the truth, willed her to know that she was indeed worthy of love. He willed that the old story her mother and father had instilled in her from birth did not pull her back into that hell she had escaped from over these last months.

He kept waiting to feel her spirit again, to feel the Margery that he loved so well. But it felt as if he was holding a husk.

“I will never be worthy, Nestor,” she stated, her voice empty. “And I want you to go.”

But he could not, and he never would. But even as he held her, he knew that she might never come back. The Margery that he loved, the girl he had seen and had been determined to set free? Perhaps she had gone away over this hellish night, never to return.

And the thought terrified him more than anything in the world. He thought that the night had been the darkest time, but it seemed the morning was fraught with peril.

He would be patient. He had to be. They had time. They were young, weren't they? They could survive this, couldn't they? But for the first time in his life of being a Briarwood and an optimist, he felt doubt.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:02 pm

Nestor would not leave her, and the feeling was terrible. At long last, he loved her. He said that he loved her, and she believed him. It should have been joyous. It had only been a distant dream that he might one day utter those words and that she would be worthy of them. But she wasn't worthy, and she never would be, and she never had been, especially now that her body had failed her, and she had been unable to do the most important job that a wife was given, that a woman was given.

She had been raised with one purpose, to marry and bear a son. It had been instilled in her from almost the moment she could walk. It was everything she had been raised for, and now that was gone. The gaping wound of it? It filled her up with the most horrible poison, so intensely that she could hardly breathe.

Her chest felt heavy, her limbs dead. She stared at the wall, wishing Nestor would go, but he refused.

The door opened. Footsteps padded softly into the room, and a voice whispered to Nestor, "My dear, you must go and eat. I will stay with her."

"I don't want to leave her," Nestor said.

"Just for a little time. If you do not take care of yourself, you cannot take care of her."

Margery wished that everyone would leave her, that no one would take care of her, that they would just allow her to slip away. But no, they had insisted that she stay and fight. She didn't want to fight. She was exhausted. All through the night, they had talked to her, railed at her, insisted that they needed her. She didn't want to be needed now. She didn't want anything, except to be left alone.

Nestor slowly raised himself up. He pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I love you, Margery," he said again, as if repeating it would somehow heal her.

He was wise enough to say nothing else, but even those three words were like blows. Why did he love her, especially now? She couldn't contemplate it. She closed her eyes, trying to squeeze out the world, and she heard him drift out of the chamber.

Someone else sat upon the bed and a hand began to stroke her back. It was gentle, yet firm.

"Margery, soon you will need to eat as well. But for now, I want you to have a drink of water."

She heard water being poured into a glass. She shook her head.

"Please, if you drink, it will give me a great deal of peace."

"That is very manipulative," Margery ground out.

There was a soft laugh. "I know. I know that you like to please people. It's what you've been raised to do, so I am trying to use that part of you to help you. Cleary, I am a mercenary."

Margery turned slowly, her body aching as she did so.

"Go slowly," Mercy said.

Her mother-in-law gazed down at her softly, kindly, without judgment, and somehow that made it worse.

She wished Mercy would condemn her for losing her grandchild. Instead, Mercy

gently helped her to sit up on the pillows and gave her the glass, holding it herself, taking Margery's head as if Margery was but a little girl. Mercy helped her drink. The water was cool and filled her mouth, and much to her shock, her body took over and she began to gulp it.

"Slowly now. Slowly," Mercy warned, and then she took the glass away. "Mother Hannah has things for you to take later and salves we must use for your recovery. I'm so grateful that you're with us this morning. We weren't certain you would be."

Margery said nothing.

"I understand," Mercy said gently.

"You don't," she bit out.

"I do," Mercy said without rancor. "And I think that I should speak to you about it now so that you do not waste months in the dark."

Margery shook her head, confused, but unable to turn her mother-in-law away.

"There's a reason that I only have the twins," Mercy began, before letting out a slow breath, as if that breath was dearly needed to tell this tale. "I am so grateful that I have Nestor and Calchas. They fill my heart with joy. But I looked at my own mother-in-law, the dowager duchess, and I wanted what she had. When I married the duke, I thought that I would have eight children, ten, one a year! Why not? Everyone was so happy. All Leander's brothers and sisters love each other, so why would I not want that for myself? A big, merry brood. Nestor and Calchas were born," Mercy continued. "They thrived and were such beautiful boys. And two years later, I learned that I was with child again. The happiness I felt was so intense. I can't even tell you. But you know what it's like to be happy that a child is coming, because we have the wealth and the ability to take care of that child and love them. And we have such a

wonderful family to support us and our children.”

Mercy paused as if she had to will herself to continue. “The baby grew inside me. Month after month, my belly swelled and the time came for it to be born. What should have been one of the most joyous days of my life became the most agonizing instead.”

Mercy swallowed as if the memory coated her mouth with a bad taste. “Not just physically, for that was brutal too, but the baby was in the wrong position and refused to come. It was hours and hours,” Mercy managed, her face transforming with her grief, even after all of these years. “She was born, but not living. I held her in my arms, and I looked at her little face, and I mourned for the little girl she could have been. It was terrible, so terrible, because I had made so many plans about what I would share with that child.” Mercy’s voice shook. “None of those plans would ever come to be. We buried her in the churchyard, and I often visit her now, and I speak to her all the time.”

Margery wanted to beg her mother-in-law to stop. She did not want to feel hope that she could be happy again, as Mercy clearly was. But there was something in this shared secret, as Mercy then climbed onto the bed and pulled her into her arms, oh so gently, and held her almost as a mother does with a child.

Tears began to spill down Margery’s face.

Her own mother had never held her like this, had never comforted her in her suffering as a child. Now, in this darkest moment, Mercy held her and Margery cried.

She sobbed and whispered, “Oh, Mama, how I shall bear it?”

“Oh, my sweet daughter, it is an unbearable thing,” Mercy said honestly, her own voice full of tears. “But I promise you, though you may not wish to hear it, time will

do the strangest things. It will feel like forever and a day at once. It will feel dark, even if there is some sunlight. But then, one afternoon, you will emerge out into the light, and you will realize that your life means something, that you matter for yourself alone, not for who you can be for other people, and that you are deserving of love again.”

“I do not think I will ever be worthy of love,” she sobbed against Mercy’s shoulder.

Mercy stroked her hair. “My brave girl, you already are, and I know that you cannot see it, but Nestor and I and every Briarwood in this house will walk with you until you can see it too.”

“Oh, Mama,” Margery cried, “it hurts. It hurts so much.”

“Yes, it does,” Mercy agreed, “and I will bear it with you, as will Nestor, if you will but let him. He will never truly understand. No man can, because they do not carry the child within them. But he will also mourn with you. He wants to. Let him in, my love. Let him in. Do not fade from us. Do not take the beauty of your soul from the family that loves you so well.”

Tears continued to slip down Margery’s face. She let them flow. She had no words, she had nothing, as her mother-in-law held her. But she no longer wanted to disappear. No, she wished to be with her family, with those who loved her even though she could not yet love herself.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:02 pm

The days passed slowly and, dare Margery say, agonizingly. She roamed from room to room in the castle, but she was not lost on the seas of her emotion because wherever she went, Nestor followed her, her anchor, keeping her tethered to this world and away from the true darkness that grief could bring.

He did not try to stop her tears. He did not try to soothe away every hurt. As a matter of fact, he let her crash upon him like a wave on the cliffs in her agony and pain, and then slowly, slowly, she began to realize that this castle was still full of people.

She was not isolated or adrift as she thought. No, the rooms were full of the laughter of children. It did not matter that all the adults understood her grief and were giving her the sort of kindness that one would expect. The truth was she could not escape the fact that life did indeed go on, though she wished in many ways that she could stop it.

The children, in some ways, caused her pain to increase because her child should have grown and filled these halls with laughter, but the halls were full of laughter and joy despite her own loss and suffering.

With all the sounds of those games and innocent voices, Margery knew Mercy was right. There was a promise that one day she would step out of this darkness.

She headed into the library, Nestor following her quietly, and she spotted what she had come to see.

The miniature reproduction of the ballet theatre had been forgotten. But now she crossed to it and studied the tableau that Monsieur Georges had set up. They had picked a beautiful, themed pattern for the theater, choosing the goddess Artemis to be

the main thread running through all the decorations.

The walls were painted with the goddess's figure. Her lithe form, with her dog and the moon, were everywhere.

It was terribly ironic.

Artemis was the goddess of childbirth. It was almost as if they had known that Margery would need the reminder, that everyone needed to be guided through her life, through pain.

She picked up a little figurine and studied it. Monsieur Georges had chosen a fairy tale for the first ballet that they would produce. Fairy tales. The real fairy tales did not always end happily or with joy, and she still secretly feared in her heart that she would not have a happy ending either.

Nestor watched her silently as if he would wait for her to re-emerge. Wait forever, if necessary.

And then to her shock, finally, at last, he whispered, "I feared that the girl I fell in love with disappeared, and I was right."

Her hand stilled on the little figure, and she froze.

His voice was deep, quaking with the power of his emotions, with his devotion. "She disappeared that night, the night our child died, and that frightened me, but it shouldn't have."

Lifting his hand and gently placing it on her shoulder, slowly he turned her to him and she allowed him to do so.

“You have emerged as someone new,” he whispered, his gaze full of love and so much more, as if he had somehow faced his demons and was about to come out on the other side but had not yet made it. “Someone more, someone so much more. Out of your suffering, out of our suffering, I see this new you,” he said. “I always saw you, but now, my beautiful darling Margery, I want you to understand how much I love you. I love you, the woman you are right now, who doesn’t do everything she can to please, to win me over, to prove to the family that you are worthy of us. Because you are worthy of us. You always have been worthy. You always will be worthy, and I love you more now than I ever did before.”

“Nestor,” she whispered, tears filling her eyes, “I don’t know what to do.”

He sucked in a sharp breath. “That is the most wonderful thing I have ever heard.”

“What?” she gasped, mystified and yet relieved that he did not try to solve her suffering.

“I don’t know what to do either,” he confessed. “I don’t think anyone ever truly knows what to do. I think this life is a great mystery, and we are going through it like children in the dark, hoping to find lanterns, but I will be your lantern,” he said. “Will you be mine or will...? Don’t leave me in the dark, my love. I will wait for as long as it takes, but I want you to know that I will always be there glowing, lighting your way. But I hope you will want to light mine too.”

For the first time since the night her life shattered and she felt cast into the abyss, it hit her what Mercy had said. He would be in mourning too, and that he wanted to mourn with her if she but let him.

She had been going through this castle as if she was alone, but she never had been. He had been by her side every moment.

She took his hand then. “My beautiful light,” she said to him. “Of course, I will. I will always be your lantern as you have been mine. Together,” she whispered, even as her voice trembled, “we will endure this.” She swallowed and lifted her chin, realizing that he needed to be rescued and loved too. “We will more than endure this,” she said. “We will triumph over it.”

And though the words felt foreign, she meant them. Every single one.

He pulled her into his arms and gently kissed her. “I love you, Margery.”

“I love you too, Nestor.”

Tears spilled down her face, and this time they were not tears of agony or mourning, but tears of wisdom. They were tears of understanding that this whole life would not have some perfect happy ending.

There would be darkness, and there would be light, and there would be terror, and there would be joy, but that didn’t matter. No, none of that mattered. Not truly. Because all of it would pass, but in that passing, there would be one constant, and that one constant was their love.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:02 pm

Five Years Later

“Toes out, feet together, mon petit chou.”

Monsieur Georges’ voice filled the beautifully refurbished empty theater that was filled with an excited audience every night of the week to watch the ballet.

But it was later afternoon now. There was no audience.

Lights had been placed along the foot of the stage, and Margery’s daughter, Minerva, Minnie to everyone, stood in a beautiful pink gown. Her slippered feet followed the movements of Monsieur Georges as they practiced for their performance later that night.

It would be a private performance in the theater, of course. Only the most special guests would be invited.

Monsieur Georges clapped his hands in time, and Minnie smiled, her beautiful pink cupid’s bow lips tilting in a merry grin. Her blue eyes glinted with mischief and joy as she danced easily. The little girl’s dark curls bobbed about her elfin face, and she moved with the sort of pure grace that only a child could fulfill.

Margery stood near, swaying back and forth, holding her little boy in her arms, drinking in the scent that only babies had. Soon he would learn too, for Monsieur Georges seemed to adore teaching children.

“They are not afraid to try things,” he often exclaimed, delighting in Minnie.

Not afraid to try things. It was the greatest compliment that anyone could ever give her daughter Minnie, because it meant that Minnie was not afraid of life or anything in it. Minnie would never be afraid. Not like Margery had been.

Oh, Margery was still afraid sometimes, but she had Nestor beside her and so there was nothing to fear.

Her husband crossed up behind her, having made the final arrangements for this evening's performance. He kissed the top of their little boy's head and then kissed her lips softly.

Minnie danced merrily as Monsieur Georges counted out the measures.

"It is time for your parents to join you," Monsieur Georges called.

"I cannot believe that I am going to be performing a ballet," Nestor said, smiling as if there was nothing more wonderful in the world, despite his teasing words.

"I can," Margery replied.

"Oh? And why is that?" Nestor queried, placing his arm about her waist.

She tilted her head back. "Because you love me," she said. "Isn't that what all of this is about? Has always been about? You dancing with me in this theater, even now? It has always been about your love."

Nestor gazed down at her, the answer in his eyes. Their family was everything he ever could have dreamed of, and his love for them and for her was boundless.

Minnie raced up to her father, and he picked her up easily, tossing her into the air.

Minnie's bright, full laugh bounced off the walls of the theater, full of life.

Margery had been so afraid that she wasn't worthy.

What a silly thing. How foolish. She had been born worthy, and only the cruelty of miserable people had made her feel she wasn't. She felt sorry for her parents now because it was clear to her how broken they both had been, and they had never had the chance to heal.

Now, Margery knew what Nestor had known from infancy. She was always destined for this. Minnie was always destined for this. Her son was always destined for this. Love. Love everywhere. Love all of the time. Love that knew no limits.

The End